Code Switching and Interaction

Summary A

Annela Teemant & Stefinee E. Pinnegar

Richard Tucker provides a description and explanation of code switching. Judit Moskovich provides a classroom perspective on its usefulness. As you read these quotes, think about how code switching might support children in classroom interaction helping them to use all their language resources to learn academic content and develop language. How might code switching be regarded by a teacher creating optimal conditions for second language acquisition?

Richard Tucker (Carnegie Mellon University)

Code switching takes different forms in different situations. Children, in particular, who are in language contact situations where they're adding another language to their repertoire, where they speak a different language at home, frequently find themselves in situations where they will interchange. They'll insert segments of language 'x' in an otherwise continuous stream of language 'y'. Why do they do that? Well, in some cases they do that for emotional reasons. In some cases they'll do that because they want to emphasis a particular point. In some cases they'll do that because they lack lexical access. They know a term in language 'x', but they don't know that term in language 'y'.

We know code switching, sometimes called language mixing or switching, typically occurs for principled reasons. It's usually not random behavior, when you actually examine the typescripts or the transcripts, from children who have been speaking spontaneously, and you notice that there's a flow of information in English and then there's a switch into Spanish, then going back into English. One of the things we know is that these points of transition don't seem to be random. They appear to be principled. As I said, sometimes the research suggests that children will do this certainly because of a lack of lexical access. They don't happen to know the word for a concept in English that they've used in Spanish, or vice versa.

In some cases, they'll do it to signal solidarity in group membership. It's a complicated phenomenon. It's not a bad phenomenon; it's a natural occurrence. It's something that's important in terms of a child's identity. It's something that's important in terms of the person's ability to express himself or herself, oftentimes misunderstood. There's sometimes a feeling that a child who code switches at some point will never develop control of so-called, standard English or so-called standard Spanish. Not necessarily true at all. There are very principled reasons why children do that; in the same way, there are principled reasons why adults do that.

Judit Moschkovich (UC, Santa Cruz)

What I'd like to move from is thinking of either language as an obstacle—to both languages as a resource. For example, one useful strategy is that if you're trying to explain something to somebody and you try it in one language—let's say you try it in English—and the other person doesn't understand. A very useful strategy, if you're bilingual, is to then explain it in the other language. That's a resource— that's not an obstacle. That's something that students do: they switch languages and they say, "well, which one works to get this person to understand the mathematics that I'm trying to get at?"

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Annela Teemant is Professor of Second Language Education (Ph.D., Ohio State University, 1997) at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Her scholarship focuses on developing, implementing, and researching applications of critical sociocultural theory and practices to the preparation of K-12 teachers of English Language Learners. Specifically, she has collaboratively developed and researched the Six Standards Instructional Coaching Model and pedagogy. She has been awarded five U.S. Department of Education grants focused on ESL teacher quality. She has authored more than 30 multimedia teacher education curricula and video ethnographies of practice and published in Teaching and Teacher Education, Urban Education, Teachers College Record, and Language Teaching Research. Her work describes how to use pedagogical coaching to radically improve the conditions of learning needed for multilingual learners. She has also taught adult intensive English in the United States, Finland, and Hungary.

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A St. George native, Dr. Pinnegar graduated from Dixie College (now DSU) and Southern Utah State (now SUU). She taught on the Navajo Reservation then completed an M.A. in English at BYU. She taught for 5 years in Crawfordsville, Indiana. She then completed a PhD in Educational Psychology at the University of Arizona (1989). She was faculty at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, before coming to BYU. She helped develop and now directs the TELL program. She is Acting Dean of Invisible College for Research on Teaching, a research organization that meets yearly in conjunction with AERA. She is a specialty editor of Frontiers in Education's Teacher Education strand with Ramona Cutri. She is editor of the series Advancements in Research on Teaching published by Emerald Insight. She has received the Benjamin Cluff Jr. award for research and the Sponsored Research Award from ORCA at BYU. She is a founder of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices research methdology. She has published in the Journal of Teacher Education, Ed Researcher, Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice and has contributed to the handbook of narrative inquiry, two international handbooks of teacher education and two Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices handbooks. She reviews for numerous journals and presents regularly at the American Educational Research Association, ISATT, and the Castle Conference sponsored by S-STTEP.

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