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Using Japanese to Learn English: Codeswitching in the EFL Classroom

Sandra S. Fotos
Senshu University

(key words: bilingualism, codeswitching, language acquisition, learner strategies, sociolinguistics)

It comes as a shock to monolinguals (such as most Americans and Japanese) to realize that much of the world is bi- or multi-lingual and that language alternation– that is, using the grammar and vocabulary from two or more languages within the same utterance–is common and acceptable. Such language alternation is called codeswitching. In the past it was assumed that codeswitching was random and was the sign of someone unable to speak fluently in either language. However, there have been many recent studies of this phenomenon and it is now acknowledged that such switches are grammatical and serve a number of social and personal functions. Analysis of what items are switched shows that, although noun switches are the most common, fluent bilinguals often switch between sentences or clauses. However, even people with low levels of proficiency in their second language codeswitch, although they tend to switch non-grammatical items such as tags or idiomatic expressions.

What motivates people to codeswitch, especially those with low proficiency in their second language? As mentioned, sociolinguistic research suggests that at the group level, codeswitching functions in the establishment and maintenance of social relationships within multilingual societies. At the individual level, codeswitching serves as an important communicative strategy to organize and enrich discourse.

EFL teachers in Japan often hear their students switching back and forth between English and Japanese during communicative task performance, even when the students have been told to use only English. Is this codeswitching? If so, what items are they switching? Are the switches grammatical? And what functions do the switches perform in the EFL situation? My presentation addresses these important questions and attempts to add new information to the currently very limited body of data on Japanese-English code switching in different settings.

Seven hours of task talk by 53 Japanese university EFL students performing three interactive grammar problem-solving tasks were analyzed both quantitatively, to see which items were switched most frequently, and qualitatively, to see what

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function the switching performed in the conversations. The results indicate that switching was grammatical and followed the general pattern reported for codeswitching between English and other languages. Significantly more items were switched from English into Japanese than from Japanese into English, suggesting that the students were speaking mainly English, and that English was being used as the matrix or dominant language–an encouraging result for English educators!

Another interesting finding was quite different from the results of other reports. This was the very low number of nouns switched from English into Japanese. Whereas most of the switches were of single items (a common tendency in the codeswitching literature), only 14% of these were of nouns. The rest were Japanese discourse managers such as *wa*, *dakara*, *de*, and *ja*, and exclamations or interjections such as *nanda!* Analysis suggests that use of these forms was an active discourse strategy for focusing attention on the important English task content. For example, *wa* often appeared after key words in entirely English utterances. In this case, the switch served to emphasize the preceding English word. The use of discourse markers such as *dakara* or *ja* before giving necessary task information in English similarly served to focus the listeners' attention on the important utterance to follow.

These are examples of codeswitching for a particular discourse function. In general, there are five functional areas where codeswitching is particularly useful: switching to show a topic shift, switching for emphasis or for clarification, switching to attract and hold attention, and switching to express personal feelings within objective utterances. In this report, codeswitching into Japanese for emphasis was common and functioned to call attention to essential task information in English, as did Japanese statements repeating or clarifying previous English utterances. Another discourse function was switching into Japanese to signal that a mistake had been made in the previous English utterance and that a repair would follow. Again, this served to call attention to English language usage.

As a conclusion, I would like to suggest that when we hear our students speaking Japanese during task performance, such use of the L1 may not always have a negative impact on English language acquisition. In this report, codeswitching was successfully used as a learning strategy to enhance and call attention to input from the target language. Here, L1 use enhanced L2 acquisition. Such a role for codeswitching in the language classroom definitely needs to be investigated further.

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