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Code Switching "as a Bilateral Tool" in Cameroonian ESL/EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study discusses teachers and students' views regarding the practice of code switching in Cameroon English as a second language/English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms at the tertiary level. It also addresses the role of code switching to students' L1 (French to Francophones and English to Anglophones) in their ESL/EFL classrooms, and looks at whether it expands interaction in these classrooms. This study falls within the framework of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics specifically in second/foreign language teaching and learning. It was conducted in the University of Yaounde I – Cameroon - mainly in the Department of Bilingual Studies -, it involved ten randomly selected bilingual lecturers and 219 students. Data was collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, interviews and classroom observations. The findings generally reveal that code switching is employed by both lecturers and students to perform various functions in the ESL classroom. It was observed that code switching by the lecturers is used mainly to translate difficult notions and to explain part(s) of the lesson students have not understood; even though they try as much as possible not to code switch. Code switching is also used by students as a learning strategy to compensate for their limited competence in the target language.

Keywords: Code switching, French, English, *Camfranglais*, second official language (SOL), first official language (FOL), English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL), classroom interaction, bilingualism, mother tongues

Introduction

Various definitions of code switching have been offered by various linguists over the years. This is certainly so because it targets so many sub-fields including sociology, linguistic anthropology, sociocultural analysis and sociolinguistics as discussed by Nilep (2006:1). Richards and Schmidt (2010: 89) define code switching as a 'change by a speaker (or writer) from one language or language variety to another one'. They add that it can take place in a conversation when one speaker uses one language and the other speaker answers in a different language or a person may start speaking one language and then change to another one in the middle of their speech, or sometimes even in the middle of a sentence. According to Myers (2008: 43), code switching is 'a linguistic term usually used when learners of a second language (L2) includes elements of their mother tongue in their speech'. Often, there is a great confusion between code mixing and code switching. Myers-Scotton (1997) in Selamat (2014: 1) draws a clear distinction between code mixing and code switching by saying that *code mixing* is 'the use of words, affixes, phrases and clauses from more than one language within the same sentence' and *code switching* is used to describe instances when bilinguals alternate between two languages during interactions with other bilinguals. By and large, code switching is a phenomenon that is widely observed especially in multilingual and multicultural settings. In English language teaching and EFL classrooms, code switching instances seems to be found in lecturers' and students' speech at different levels. Although code switching faces a lot of opposition and disapproval mostly by many monolinguals (like the case of *Camfranglais* in Cameroon as quoted in Biloa, 1999a; Ebongue and Fonkoua, 2010), it is somehow inevitable and sometimes subconscious. Whatever the reasons, it is good to understand the functions of switching (in the Cameroonian context) from one first official language to another or to Pidgin English, or Camfranglais or mother tongue or

vice versa. Understanding this may provide Cameroonian language lecturers with a heightened awareness of its use in classroom discourse and will obviously lead to ameliorate instruction by either eliminating it or dominating its use during the foreign language instruction.

2. Literature review and background to the study

2.1 Literature review

This section will briefly review the perception of code switching in ESL/EFL classrooms and browse previous investigations as far as code switching is concerned first at an international level and second in Cameroon. Many recent works have been published as far as studies in code switching, code mixing, code alternation, etc. are concerned. Because with the advent of globalization languages stopped having frontiers, more and more communities do not only switch from one but two, three, four and even more languages. We will try to bring out in this section some works in different parts of the world by different authors in code switching before we narrow down to the specific case of Cameroon. We will also look at the linguistic background of Cameroon.

Lin (2008: 273) defines classroom code switching as the alternating use of more than one linguistic code in the classroom by any of the classroom participants (teacher, students, teacher aide). Studies conducted on classroom code switching do not agree on whether code switching is positive or negative in the teaching and learning of a second language. Some linguists argue that it is beneficial for many purposes in the classroom (Youkhana, 2010; Muin, 2011; Magid and Mugaddam, 2013; Bensen and Çavusoglu, 2013). Greggio (2007) and Abad (2007) quoted in Muin (2011) say code switching is used in teacher-learner interaction to facilitate interaction among classroom participants, to facilitate foreign language learning or to understand difficult or complicated concepts. Bensen (2013) suggests that, when teachers encourage negotiation between languages by reinforcing the practice of code-switching, students' understanding, which leads to participation and motivation, is enhanced. Other linguists affirm that code switching only has negative consequences in a classroom. Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez (1972) quoted in Youkhana (2010: 5) claim that people think that those who switch codes make a mess out of the conversation and cannot speak the language properly. Shay (2015: 466) quotes Chaudron (1988) and Lightbown (2001) who argued that "the target language should be taught exclusively and teachers should focus on creating a pure foreign language environment, as they are the sole linguistic models for the students". They also claim that learners must not understand everything said by the teachers as code switching might result in negative transfer in foreign language learning.

Bensen and Çavusoglu (2013) *investigated the acts of code switching by lecturers in EFL classrooms in the English preparatory school of a private university in North Cyprus.* The results of the analysis suggest that regardless of the lecturers' linguistic backgrounds, all of the participants in the study code switch in their classrooms despite the general principles of the English Preparatory School banning this act. Although the recent literature on English language teaching discourages the use of L1 in language classrooms, it appears that lecturers do in fact make use of code switching in language learning classrooms for purposes such as clarifying meaning, saving time in their teaching and motivating students. The participants also strongly believed that it is for the benefit of the students in this specific context where the aim of the students was to pass a specific language proficiency exam focusing on grammatical points within a limited period of time.

Magid and Mugaddam (2013) addressed the role of code switching to students' L1 (Arabic) in their ESL classrooms and whether it expanded interaction in these classrooms found in the Sudan and Saudi Arabia. They found that lecturers had an acceptable belief in the various pedagogical uses of Arabic (L1) to ameliorate interactions among students in ESL classrooms, that is, explaining meaning and new vocabulary, guiding interpretation, transmitting lesson content, illustrating grammatical rules, organizing classrooms and praising and encouraging students. Code switching, then, is a teaching strategy in EFL classrooms for the different functions it serves in teaching a foreign language. Consequently, students' L1 (i.e. Arabic) should not be devalued or underestimated in second language learning classrooms.

Nordin et al. (2013) analysed learners' reactions towards code switching in Malaysian classroom settings. They came out with the results that a majority of the learners perceive lecturers use of code switching as a must in their ESL classroom. Also, majority of the learners agree that the use of code switching by lecturers helps learners learn English better. Students agree that they would best benefit from various occasions of the use of code switching by lecturers in an ESL classroom setting and lastly that there is a significant relationship between students preferring that lecturers switch codes in explaining differences between first and second language than students preferring that lecturers switch codes in helping students feel more confident and comfortable.

Koban (2013) discussed the intra-sentential and inter-sentential code switching in Turkish English bilinguals in New York City, U.S. He found that a positive but non-significant correlation exists between intra-sentential code switching and language competency in both Turkish and English. This means that the more the speakers report their language skills to be good, the more intra-sentential CS they use in their utterances.

Ayeomoni (2006) investigated code switching and code mixing as a style of language use in childhood in Yoruba speech community. He concluded by saying that code switching and code-mixing correlate positively with the educational attainment of individuals. As shown also, both phenomena have their merits as well as demerits in the speech repertoire of their users. One only hopes that English language lecturers would now devise the means of preventing the demerits from adversely affecting the language acquisition process of the child.

In Cameroon, many investigations have been carried out on code switching mostly in secondary education and in the administration.

Emoh (2009) investigated to what effects John Nkemngong and Alobwed'epie' use code switching and code-mixing to convey their message and depict the society on which their respective works are based. The findings reveal that the characters in both novels switch and mix codes for various reasons. Some of the reasons include the author's attempt to paint or to depict the multilingual landscape in which their novels are set and to parody some of the vices and tendencies that characterize the Kamagola and the Ewawa societies, such as racism, mockery and anger.

Tanyi (2008) discussed code switching as a communicative strategy in a multilingual society, a case study of Kenyang-English speakers in Yaounde. The investigation was conducted at the level of communicative intents, causes, consequences and types. His findings revealed that 75% of Kenyang's speakers switch codes when communicating in Kenyang. Some of the causes include the inability of speakers to use a particular term in Kenyang or to quote another speaker in his exact words. This results in a linguistic dynamism in communication among speakers and the non-mastery of Kenyang language.

Fokou (1999) examined the speech of 3rd year bilingual students of the University of Yaounde I in 1997/1998. He analysed the different types of code switching and interference identified in their speech. He found that students use interference because they do not master the two official codes. That explained why some stuck to one language while they were being addressed in the other official language.

2.2 Background to the study

Cameroon, from *Rio Dos Camaroes* (The river of Prawn) after the passage of the Portuguese sailor Fernando Po (15th century), is a highly multilingual country. With about 248 national languages (Biloa 1999b:62), 2 official languages (French and English) a major lingua franca (Pidgin English) and a new French language variant used mostly by the Francophone youths in towns (Camfranglais). If Pidgin English was used by the British traders and indigenes in the 19th century mostly for the development of free trade and the dissemination of the Christian religion (Kouega 2004: 2), English and French were adopted as official languages of the country in 1961 when East Cameroon which had French as its official language and West Cameroon which has English as official language re-united. After the reunification of the country in 1972, both English and French had to be implemented into the academic curriculum of young Cameroonians. English which used to be the medium of

instruction in Anglophone schools before Reunification was introduced into Francophone schools. Similarly, French was introduced into Anglophone schools. Both languages having the same status as reported in Article 1.3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon respectively, adopted by law No.2008/00 1 of 14 April 2006 amending and supplementing Law No 96/6 of 18 January 1996 amending the Constitution of June 2nd 1972. "The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status [...]"

2.2.1 Focus on the academic background of Francophone students

Francophone students follow the Francophone subsystem which is implemented through the French language. Like the Anglophone subsystem, it is divided into three namely nursery school which last for two years, primary school, six years and secondary school, seven years. There is a special bilingual programme (Programme d'éducation bilingue spécial) which was drawn up in 2012 and which has as main objectives to develop the competences that are regarded as essential for the learner of the new century: the ability to interact orally, the ability to process oral and written text and the ability to write texts (Minesec, 2014). When Francophone students enter the university, they are supposed to have already studied English for at least 7 years in secondary school and for some from primary school. In fact, the English syllabus for Francophone secondary schools (Mineduc, 2004) states that "the product of the system would have to use language to cope with the many varying situations and contexts in which they find themselves at all times. Language should be taught in such a way that the learners are provided with study skills and strategies to cope with an ever changing world. In other words, language is taught for effective communication." This means that Francophone students at the end of their secondary school curriculum are supposed to master some specific skills which the Syllabus enumerates as reading, writing, listening, speaking, pronunciation and the thinking skills. English is compulsory from *6e* (first year in secondary school) to *Terminale* (last year in high school) and a student who pursue the Cameroonian syllabus will write three certificate examinations at the end of *3e* (*Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle*), *Première* (*Probatoire*) and *Terminale* (*Baccalauréat*). It should be noted that the English Paper is compulsory in all three examinations.

At the tertiary level, Francophone students can go to the Bilingual department (with at least 14/20 in English in the 'normal' *Baccalauréat* in Arts or with a special bilingual *Baccalauréat*). Or they can choose any other department (French, Physics, Anthropology, Mathematics, Geography, etc.) with a compulsory course for all students from level one to level three often referred to as *Formation Bilingue* (a bilingual training language course). The choice of language use of Francophone students in the university varies. This is very much influenced by their first official language (French), their ethnic group (the use of Cameroonian native languages), and the region where their families live (whether from an English-speaking region, in this case they will readily use Pidgin-English for a majority and English for a minority or French-speaking region, in this case they will use French or *Camfranglais*).

3. Research questions

In a country that claims a long and rich history in bilingualism and multiple national languages, multilingualism must be felt in the classrooms due to the numerous linguistic origins of its students. The crucial question in this study is the role of code switching in an ESL classroom between lecturers and students in the acquisition of L2 in the Cameroonian context. This interrogation leads to subsequent questions like what do ESL learners think about code switching in the English classroom? When do learners/lecturers switch code? When does it serve its best functions in the English classroom for the ESL learners? Can it impact SOL proficiency? Does the fact that learners prefer that lecturers switch code when explaining some differences between first and second language correlate with helping them feel more confident and comfortable?

4. Methodology

This section presents, explains and justifies the research design and procedure adopted for this study.

4.1 For students

A total of 250 students and 10 lecturers were randomly selected for this study but yet only 219 questionnaires for students were returned. Data were collected through questionnaires and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were made with the help of some of the informants to gain more insights into their practice regarding code switching in ESL. This study was conducted in the Department of Bilingual Studies, University of Yaounde 1 (Cameroon). 141 students were female and 78 male. All the students were from the Francophone subsystem. Their age ranged from 16 to 26 years old as the table below shows:

Age	**Number of males**	**Number of females**	**Total**
16-18	*32*	78	110
19-21	27	46	73
21-25	19	17	36
Total	**78**	**141**	**219**

Table 1: Distribution of informants by age and gender

The questionnaires for students were structured as follows: question 1 to 5 focused on the use of the FOL (French) by the teacher, questions 6 to 8 on the use of the FOL by the students and teacher and question 9 the use of FOL and other languages in class.

4.2 For teachers

Ten (10) teachers of English accepted to take part in this research. 7 of them had English as their FOL and 3 had French as their FOL but they were all bilingual in English and French. They have been teaching English for 7 to 10 years at the secondary and tertiary level of education. 4 were female teachers and 6 male. Data was collected through questionnaires, individual interviews and semi-structured interviews. The teachers were explained the purpose of the study and each of them was observed in its language classroom for two hours while teaching and all occurrences of code switching was captured on a digital voice recorder and transcribed on a paper. The objective was to observe the natural use of language and interactions with students. The questionnaires mainly focused on sociolinguistic information like age, gender, teaching experience, first official language and the reasons that may push them or not to change code from the students SOL to FOL. The semi-structured interview was more detailed as the teachers had to provide details to their answers. In this semi-structured interview, they were asked to be more specific about when, why and how they used the students' SOL, the impact on the students as far as the proficiency in English of the students was concerned and the other languages used in class.

Data analyses were carried out using descriptive statistics and interpretive analysis to infer the uses of FOL in ESL classes. This in turn, helped to identify various types of FOL uses in ESL teaching. Tables have been used to show the number and percentage of respondents for each question. Some excerpts of interactions between teachers and students have also been spelled out to illustrate cases of code switching. Quantitative and qualitative methods were chosen for this study following Matthews and Ross (2010:141) as the study analyses data that is structured and can be represented numerically (quantitative) and that deals with the feelings, opinions and beliefs of the research participant (qualitative).

5. Findings and discussion

The findings of the questionnaires, semi-structured interview, observation and recording for students (a) and teachers (b) are discussed in turn in this section.

5.1 For students

Table 2: Functions of code switching

FUNCTIONS	FREQUENCY	ANSWER	PERCENTAGE
ENJOYING THE LESSON (Q.1)	Never	4	1.8%
	Hardly ever	43	19.6%
	Often	100	45.6%
	Most of the time	63	28.7%
	Every time	9	4.1%
UNDERSTANDING THE LESSON BETTER (Q.2)	Never	28	12.7%
	Hardly ever	54	24.6%
	Often	69	31.5%
	Most of the time	61	27.8%
	Every time	7	3.1%
FEELING MORE CONFIDENT AND MOTIVATED IN LEARNING ENGLISH (Q.3)	Never	4	1.8%
	Hardly ever	75	34.2%
	Often	81	36.9%
	Most of the time	52	23.7%
	Every time	7	3.1%
FOCUSING ON THE LESSON WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT UNFAMILIAR WORDS AND SENTENCES (Q.4)	Never	48	21.9%
	Hardly ever	42	19.1%
	Often	60	27.3%
	Most of the time	63	28.7%
	Every time	6	2.7%
PARTICIPATING ACTIVELY IN CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (Q.5)	Never	36	16.4%
	Hardly ever	66	30.1%
	Often	60	27.3%
	Most of the time	1	0.4%
	Every time	11	5.0%

The results show that the functions of code switching in a classroom vary depending on the situations. We observe in Table 2 that students are aware of the importance of code switching for they enjoy more, understand better, feel more confident and motivated, do not worry about unfamiliar words and thus participate actively.

To be more concise, 45.6%, 28.7% and 4.1% enjoy the lesson often, most of the time and every time respectively. Only 12.7% and 246% affirm not to understand the lesson better when the teacher switches to French. 36.9%, 23.7% and 3.1%, often, most of the time and every time respectively feel more confident and motivated in learning English. 27.3%, 28.7% and 2.7% (often, most of the time and every time respectively) claim they are able to focus on the lesson without worrying about unfamiliar words and sentences when the instructor takes up in French. 30.1% and 16.4% never or hardly ever participate actively in classroom activities when the teacher switches to French.

Questions 6 to 8 discussed students' preferences as far as the use of their SOL/FOL is concerned in class:

Table 3: Preferences for SOL

PREFERENCES	FREQUENCY	ANSWER	PERCENTAGE
EXCLUSIVE USE OF ENGLISH DURING LESSONS (Q.6)	Never	111	50.6%
	Hardly ever	88	40.1%
	Often		
	Most of the time	1	0.4%
	Every time	19	8.6%
MINIMUM USE OF FRENCH DURING LESSONS (Q.7)	Never	41	18.7%
	Hardly ever	47	21.4%
	Often	75	34.2%
	Most of the time	39	17.8%
	Every time	17	7.7%
USE OF BOTH ENGLISH AND FRENCH DURING LESSONS(Q.8)	Never	2	0.9%
	Hardly ever	17	7.7%
	Often	71	32.4%
	Most of the time	49	22.3%
	Every time	80	36.5%

As it can be seen in Table 3, most learners reject the exclusive use of English during lessons with 50.6% Never and 40.1% Hardly Ever. Question 7 focused on the use of French during lessons and 34.2%, 17.8% and 7.7% argued that the minimum use of French in a classroom should be Often, Most of the time and Every time respectively. Question 8 discussed the use of both English and French during lessons and 36.5% of the respondents said both languages should be used in class.

Some students also reported to use other codes like Pidgin English and *Camfranglais*. For the first case, they were mostly students who came from an English-speaking region (from either the North-West or South-West regions of Cameroon) and for *Camfranglais* from the French-speaking regions. We quoted some examples:

Pidgin English	*Camfranglais*
Please Madam, I fit go out?	*Je ne ya pas mo cette partie, c'est trop strong.*
Please, I get a question: Why we no fit put a comma?	*S'il-vous-plait je peux mbog sa ruler?*
I am sorry if I am late, na because of taxi…..	*Les ways de Phonology là sont trop strong.*
Please Sir, na which kind sign be that?	*Monsieur, please show me les answers.*
Sir, abeg I want another pen.	*Ma, me I no know votre grammar là.*
I no understand last time.	*Aaaah, ça c'est les ways ndolè !*

After analysis of students' questionnaires, it is obvious that a majority have positive opinions about teachers using code switching. Teacher code switching helps the majority to enjoy and understand the lesson, to feel more confident and motivated in learning English and to focus on the lesson without worrying about unfamiliar words and sentences.

5.2 For teachers

This section mainly focused on the functions of code switching in class by the teachers.

Table 4: Functions of code switching in an ESL classroom

FUNCTIONS	FREQUENCY	ANSWER	PERCENTAGE
EXPLAINING GRAMMATICAL RULES, DIFFICULT WORDS AND SENTENCES	Never	1	10%
	Hardly ever	5	50%
	Often	3	30%
	Most of the time	1	10%
	Every time		
CHECKING FOR COMPREHENSION	Never	3	30%
	Hardly ever	4	40%
	Often	3	30%
	Most of the time		
	Every time		
ORGANISING CLASSROOM TASKS, MAINTAINING DISCIPLINE AND STRUCTURING LESSON	Never	5	50%
	Hardly ever	3	30%
	Often	2	20%
	Most of the time		
	Every time		
CORRECTING PRONUNCIATION, PROVIDING PRAISE/FEEDBACK/PERSONAL REMARKS ABOUT STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE	Never	6	60%
	Hardly ever	3	30%
	Often	1	10%
	Most of the time		
	Every time		
ENCOURAGING STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION, REDUCING STUDENTS' ANXIETY AND INCREASING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION	Never	2	20%
	Hardly ever	1	10%
	Often	5	50%
	Most of the time	2	20%
	Every time		
BUILDING/STRENGTHENING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TEACHER AND STUDENTS	Never	4	40%
	Hardly ever	4	40%
	Often	1	10%
	Most of the time	1	10%
	Every time		

Table 4 shows it is clear that most teachers switch codes for various purposes: Never (10%) or Hardly ever (50%) when it comes to explaining difficult words, Never (30%), Hardly ever (40%) and Often (30%) for checking for comprehension.

As far as organising classroom tasks, maintaining discipline and structuring lessons is concerned, teachers Never (50%), Hardly ever (30%) and Often (20%) switch code.

They Never (60%) or Hardly ever (30%) switch code for correcting their pronunciation, providing praise/feedback/personal remarks about students' performance.

On encouraging students' participation, reducing students' anxiety and increasing students' motivation, we noticed that 50% Often, 20% Most of the time change code and only 20% and 10% Never and Hardly ever respectively switch from English to French.

For building or strengthening student-teacher relationship, 40% Never and Hardly ever switch code and only 10% did it Often and Most of the time.

These results are not far from Nordin et al.'s (2013: 485) conclusions who say that across languages, teachers switch codes for various reasons. The fact in the University of Yaounde I is that teachers do switch code mostly to encourage students' participation, reduce their anxiety and increase their motivation and to a lesser point to explain new notions to students so as to facilitate comprehension.

Also, the individual interviews revealed that teachers often code switch because, even though they were Anglophones, they had taught for long in the University which is located in the French-speaking part of the country and they could master French, at least to a certain extent. They highlighted the positive nature of code switching as it could enhance the motivation of students, and thus their attitude but they also pointed out the fact that it had a negative impact on their communicative skills as they still continue to use French or *Camfranglais* in class.

6. Conclusion

This study was designed as a case study to find out how and for what purposes teachers and Francophone students use code switching in their ESL/EFL classrooms in a French/English bilingual department. The findings revealed that students, even if they preferred a minimum use of switching during the class, reported switching codes helped them to enjoy and understand the lesson, to feel more confident and motivated in learning English, to focus on the lesson without worrying about unfamiliar words and sentences and to easily participate in class. Teachers, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds (French or English as FOL), admitted they tried as possible not to switch codes but will do so at times to explain grammatical rules, difficult words and sentences, check for comprehension, organise classroom tasks, maintain discipline and structure lesson, correct pronunciation, provide praise/feedback/personal remarks about students' performance, encourage the participation of students in classroom activities, reduce the anxiety of students and increase their motivation, build/strengthen interpersonal relationships between the teacher and students. Code switching (in this case switching from English to French) is a bilateral tool as it is a linguistic phenomenon used by both learners and teachers in the language classroom.

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