

Researching code-switching in teacher classroom discourse: Questioning the sufficiency of informant reports

David Chen-On Then

Centre for Language Studies Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Su-Hie Ting

Centre for Language Studies Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Abstract

This study examined the functions of code-switching in teacher classroom discourse using informant reports and direct observations to find out whether teachers were aware of their use and purposes of code-switching. The participants of the study were 18 teachers teaching Forms 1 and 2 in three Malaysian secondary schools. Non-participant observations were carried out and the lessons were audio-taped. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted to obtain the teachers' reports of their code-switching practices and reasons for code-switching. Analysis of the interview transcripts showed that code-switching was mainly for the purposes of addressing students' problems in understanding terms and instructions, either to avert or solve comprehension problems. Analysis of the teacher classroom discourse using Gumperz's (1982) semantic model of code-switching functions showed that explanations of unfamiliar terms involved quotations and proper nouns. For ensuring clarity when giving instructions, the teachers code-switched for reiteration and message qualification, and performed situational code-switching. These code-switching functions account for 84.15% of the 246 instances of code-switching identified in the ten hours of teacher classroom discourse. The mismatches from the triangulation of the informant reports and teacher classroom discourse provide empirical support for the notion that code-switching is largely a sub-conscious process. The findings point to the insufficiency of informant reports in researching how code-switching is used to facilitate students' learning.

Keywords: code-switching, teacher discourse, informant reports, direct observation

Introduction

Code-switching has attracted considerable research attention over the years. Code-switching refers to the use of more than one code or language in the course of a single speech event (Gumperz, 1982). In the educational setting, code-switching has been found to be useful for informational and interpersonal purposes of communication. Studies have shown that code-switching is used to bridge gaps in comprehension arising from the students' lack of proficiency in language classes (e.g. Greggio & Gil, 2007; Mahadhir & Then, 2007; Martin, 2005; Seidlitz, 2003; Ustunel, 2004) and science classes (e.g. Then & Ting, 2009). In the Malaysian context, studies also showed that science and mathematics teachers code-switched to Bahasa Malaysia and even sought the help of the English teachers when they encountered difficulties in explaining concepts in English (Pandian & Ramiah, 2003; Tan & Chan, 2003; Yahaya et al., 2009). Of the two languages, Bahasa Malaysia is the more familiar language because it is the medium of education in Malaysia. Switching to a language familiar to both the teachers and stu-