ABSTRACT: Four characteristics of language proficiency which are formal mastery, semantic mastery, communicative capacity, and creativity are best assumed to develop simultaneously from the start. They complement each other through the learning process. During the first stage of learning, the learner is preoccupied with language as a system of communication which is arduous and strictly limited. The learner is dependent on help both in learning and in using it for communication. This dependence phase ends as soon as the learner feels confident enough to use the language, however defectively, for his own purpose. The present study is an attempt to understand if code-switching conducted as a communicative strategy leads to earlier entrance of the students into communication phase and consequently to the establishment of early oral proficiency. The study was conducted on post-beginner female EFL subjects at a language school in Karaj, Iran. In order to have homogeneous subjects and to validate subsequent speaking test to be administered in the course of the study, a teacher-made achievement test was given to the subjects. After random assignment of the subjects to the control and experimental groups, the subjects were asked to deliver a five-minute description on a picture. The pretest was given to both groups to test their speaking ability at the beginning of the study and make sure that they belonged to the same population. In the posttest, which was run after giving the treatment to the experimental group, students took another speaking test with the same characteristics as the pretest. Comparing the means of the posttests indicated that the subjects in the experimental group had a significantly better performance in their speaking compared to the control group. It was concluded that the use of code-switching does improve the speaking skill of EFL learners and can be used as a technique to enhance this skill.

Keywords: communicative strategy, fluency, code-switching, lexical code-switching, classroom code-switching

The term code-switching was developed by Gumperz (1982, as cited in Zabrodskaja, 2007) and refers to verbal or non-verbal choices of forms within a communicative encounter which interlocutors recognize as
‘marked’ since they depart from an established or expected pattern of communication. Numan and Carter (2001) also define the term as “a phenomenon of switching from one language to another in the same discourse” (p. 275).

Although code-switching has attracted a considerable amount of attention for quite some time, the issue of linguistic switch in foreign language teaching has not been a major subject of scientific study. As Zabrodskaja (2007) points out whenever the topic of code-switching is touched upon in the SLA literature, it is either seen in terms of language transfer or as a compensatory communicative strategy. However, this approach seems to be too narrow.

Code-switching can be considered in relation to language acquisition particularly oral ability. Although switching languages during a conversation may be disruptive to the listener, when the speaker switches due to an inability to express herself/himself, it does provide an opportunity for language development. According to Skiba (1997) “language development takes place through samples of language which are appropriate and code switching may be signaling the need for provision of appropriate samples” (p. 3). The listener, in this case, is able to extract the message despite the translated piece which in turn will allow for a reduced amount of switching and less subsequent interference as time progresses. These principles may also be applied in the second language classroom. Code-switching may be integrated into the communication activities used for the teaching of a second language. Along the same vain Ife (2007) argues that code-switching provides further evidence of the value of enhancing target language input with other linguistic resources in the early stages of adult language learning. Nonetheless, Ife notifies that this is not an argument against maximizing L2 input in SLA, but an argument in favor of utilization of L1 as a resource in SLA learning. The systematic studies of learners’ code-switching by Arnfast and Jørgensen (2003) indicate code-switching may lead to a bilingual competence in learners within the first year of intensive training.

Proficiency movement has made us move away from the focus on accurate form toward a focus on fluency and communicative effectiveness which in turn has made the teaching of speaking skill increasingly important. Yet in spite of all attempts to flourish oral proficiency in EFL learners a large group of them are not able to communicate effectively even at the intermediate level. Knowing that as EFL teachers we have to investigate our own practices on our students as a way of bridging the gap between theory and practice, the researchers of the present study decided to investigate whether code-switching can lead to the establishment of oral proficiency at early levels or not.
Code-switching in general has been a subject of great scholarly attention in recent decades. Detailed accounts of individual cases of code-switching include those of Platt & Platt (1975) which deals with the multilingual situation in Singapore, Blom & Gumperz (1972) who describe the code-switching patterns in parts of Norway, and Hewitt (1986) who discusses code-switching among West Indian youths in Britain. Theoretical treatments of the purely linguistic aspects of code-switching include those of Woolford (1983), Di Sciullo, Muysken & Singh (1986), and Poplack (1980). They all draw on material from natural discourse, but quite a few studies have also been done on code-switching phenomena in the more formalized context of classroom interaction. During the 1970s and 1980s it was assumed that code-switching in the classroom was a counter-productive phenomenon, and the major concern was about how to prevent it and how to maximize the amount of time spent using the target code, and thus improve learning efficiency. It was not until the 1990s that the use of code-switching as a contextualization cue was studied. Using ethnographic observations, Merritt et al. (1992) explored the determinants of teacher code-switching between English, Swahili and mother-tongue in three Kenyan primary schools. Reasons for code-switching put forward include the socializing role of the teacher, the importance of variation and repetition, and the teacher’s linguistic competence and insecurity.


Other accounts include Martin-Jones (1995) who reviews research in bilingual education programs in the context of classroom code-switching.

Code-switching may be conducted in the second language classroom for the following reasons:

(a) Linguistic insecurity, e.g. the difficulty teachers experience in relating new concepts, discussed by Merritt et al. (1992),

(b) Topic switch, i.e. when the teacher switches code according to the topic under discussion. It might be suggested, for instance, that certain aspects of foreign language teaching such as grammar instruction are preferably expressed in the mother tongue of the students (Flyman-Mattsson, 1997),

(c) Affective functions, e.g. spontaneous expression of emotions and emotional understanding in discourse with students (Flyman-Mattsson & Burenhult-Mattsson, 1999),

(d) Socializing, i.e. when teachers turn to the students’ first language to signal friendship and solidarity (Merritt et al., 1992), and

(e) Repeating, i.e. when teachers convey the same message in both languages for clarity.
As pointed out above, most of the previous research on code switching deals with natural discourse, not with classroom interaction and we might expect classroom code-switching to differ in several important respects from code-switching in natural discourse. Speaking activities in classroom especially communicative activities help learners transfer learned language to acquired store. Communicative activities can act as a trigger for the students to think how best to express the meaning they wish to convey. According to Swain's output hypothesis (1995), input alone is insufficient to ensure that learners achieved high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. Swain argued that production (specially pushed output may encourage learners to move from semantic (top-down) to syntactic (bottom up) processing. Swain outlines three functions of output in second language learning: 1) the noticing/triggering function, 2) the hypothesis-testing function, and 3) the metalinguistic/reflective function. Besides according to Chastain (1988) one need not have native level of speaking skill to talk to, or with the speakers of a language. So it seems reasonable for us as EFL teachers to push our students to communicate from early levels leading to conversational fluency. In majority of cases we witness the students who are discouraged from initiating and even participating in communicative activities due to their shortage of lexical resources. As Au-Yeung, et al. (1999) point out dysfluencies on function words mainly occur when they precede content words where the plan for the latter is not ready for execution so the repetition of function words regains planning time for content words.

Being aware of this problem against development of oral fluency at early levels, the researchers attempted to investigate the significance of lexical code-switching as a productive technique that encourages active participation of EFL learners in communicative process from early levels rather than mere passive observation. Code-switching is believed to have certain features: it encourages risk taking from the side of learner, it makes teacher aware of linguistic needs of the learners, and finally according to Skiba (1997) it creates a barrier to interference since the code-switching learner will not try to make up their own variation of the word they are unable to say correctly.

Method
Participants
Based on pretest-posttest nonequivalent-groups design, 60 low-intermediate students from two intact classes in a language institute in Karaj, Iran, served as the subjects of this study. All the subjects were female and adult.
Instrumentation
In the current research the following tests were employed:

- To homogenize the subjects and in order to ensure that the members of the two groups belonged to the same population, a teacher-made achievement test was used. The test measured the subjects achievement with reference to their course book i.e., LET’S GO series which the subjects had successfully finished in previous terms. To assure that the test included representative linguistic items of the material covered in LET’S GO series and to specify the test content, a table of specification was prepared. This was a major step toward content validity. To insure face validity, the researchers had the test reviewed by three other teachers who were experienced in teaching LET’S GO series. The item type employed in the test was multiple-choice. After planning, preparing, writing, and reviewing stages the newly developed test was piloted, with a group of 40 students similar in their characteristics to the target group, to determine its item characteristics (the B-index and the difference index) and reliability. The test originally included 85 items in three sub-tests of function, vocabulary, and grammar and then was downsized to 60. Being aware of the possible underestimation of the NRT reliability measure, for the sake of convenience, the KR-21 formula was employed which yielded a satisfactory index of 0.85. Those whose scores fell within one standard deviation below and above the mean served as the subjects of the study.

- To be sure that there was no significant difference between the experimental and control group regarding the variable under investigation before and after the treatment, the subjects in both groups were asked to describe a picture that was chosen by the students. Each subject had five minutes during which she could think and describe the picture as she was asked to. The tape-recorded speeches of the subjects during the pretest and the posttest were scored by two scorers analytically based on the general spoken English marking scale proposed by Weir (1993, pp. 43-44). The average score of each individual was considered as their final speaking score in the pretest and the posttest.

Procedure
The present investigation was an attempt to find an answer to the question dealing with the effect of code-switching on the Iranian ESL learners oral proficiency. To that end the researchers went through the following procedure:
100 students took a 60-item, standardized teacher-made test, and those whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control. The two groups were compared through a t-test and it was proved that they belonged to the same population in terms of their language proficiency. Next all the subjects were given an oral test of picture description which was scored analytically by two raters. The speaking mean scores of the two groups were also checked using a t-test which once again confirmed the equality of the two groups at the beginning of the study.

The treatment lasted for 20 sessions. During each session the subjects in both groups were asked to participate in speaking activities, mostly picture description. It was forbidden for the subjects in the control group to use their L1, while the members of the experimental group were allowed to code-switch, as a communication strategy, whenever they came short of vocabulary. At the end of the term another picture description test was conducted as the posttest. The two scorers scored the posttest analytically based on Weir’s marking scale for general spoken English which was also used for the pretest. The collected data was analyzed to detect whether there had been any significant difference between the speaking performance of the two groups at the end of the instruction.

Results

Homogeneity of the Experimental and Control groups

From among 100 students who were given the homogeneity test, 60 students had their scores within one SD above and below the mean, and were therefore considered as eligible subjects of this study. With random selection of the subjects to the experimental and control groups, the number of subjects in each group added up to 30. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the two groups in the achievement test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>39.52</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>60.82</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>39.72</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>33.40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to test the homogeneity of the variances of the two groups, an F test was run. The observed F value of 1.82 was lower than the F critical of 1.87 at 0.05 level of significance which lead the researchers to conclude that the two groups were homogeneous and could be checked for the equality of their means. An independent t-test was then employed to test the difference between the two means for significance. Table 2 displays the results.
Table 2. t-Test of the Achievement Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T observed</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.16</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p&lt;0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The $t$-test verified that the two groups were homogeneous. The observed $t$ value was 0.16 which at 58 degrees of freedom was lower than the critical $t$ value of 2.02 at 0.05 level of significance. Thus it was concluded that the difference between the control and experimental groups was not statistically significant and the two groups belonged to the same population in terms of their language proficiency.

Pretest Data Analysis

With the experimental and control groups both at the same level of language proficiency, the researchers proceeded to the next phase of the study which was comparing the two groups in terms of their speaking ability. The inter-rater reliability of the speaking pretest was computed to be 0.98. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the speaking scores:

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Speaking Pretest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>48.75</td>
<td>15.91</td>
<td>252.98</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>53.11</td>
<td>17.55</td>
<td>307.92</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before running the $t$-test, the variances were checked using an F-test which through an F value of 1.21 showed that the F critical of 1.87 at 0.05 level of significance could not be exceeded. The following $t$-test revealed that the mean difference of about 5.5 scores was not significant with 58 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance (Table 4). It was safely concluded that the two groups were at the same level of speaking ability before the treatment started.

Table 4. t-Test of the Speaking Pretest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t observed</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.009</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p&lt;0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Posttest Data Analysis

At the end of the term, i.e. after 40 hours of instruction, the subjects took part in another speaking test with the same characteristics as the pretest. The inter-reliability index of this speaking test turned out to be 0.95. The results of the posttest revealed that the subjects in the experimental group had gained a higher mean score. Table 5 holds the descriptive statistics of the speaking posttest.
Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of the Speaking Posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>52.97</td>
<td>10.63</td>
<td>113.09</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>69.94</td>
<td>8.52</td>
<td>72.59</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To conduct a $t$-test, the two groups were once again checked for the homogeneity of their variances. The obtained $F$ value of 1.5 being less than 1.87 at 0.05 level of significance allowed for the method of pooled variances. The independent $t$-test on the speaking posttest means yielded the following results:

Table 6. $t$-Test of the Speaking Posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$t$ observed</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$t$ critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*6.84</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A $p<0.01$

A $t$ value as high as 6.84 could exceed the $t$ critical value of 2.7 at 0.01 level of significance, which meant that the null hypothesis could be safely rejected. It was concluded that there existed a significant difference between the average oral proficiency of the participants who code-switched and those who did not.

**Discussion**

According to Skiba (1997), code-switching means that the two languages are kept separate and distinct creating a barrier to interference. This is on the basis of the assumption that when individuals code-switch, they do not try to make up their own variation of the words they are unable to say correctly. Thus code-switching can prevent interference at a phonological level. Moreover, the lexical units of the language would not be used out of their grammatical context, and hence the language would not be subject to interference at a lexical level. As Butzkamm (1998) puts it, attempts to reduce code switching would hinder the acquisition of the second language. Code switching is a strategy that has several paybacks for second-language learners, since it provides a natural short-cut to content and knowledge acquisition. On the other hand, as Eldridge (1996) points out, there is no empirical evidence to support the notion that restricting mother tongue use would necessarily improve learning efficiency.

The results of this study indicated that lexical code-switching conducted as a communicative strategy increased the participation of the learners and their risk taking ability. It also helped them feel more secure in case of shortage of vocabulary recourses, and consequently kept their conversation going. One-word code-switching helped to bridge the gap in the discourse and functioned as a compensatory strategy. It reduced the rate of debilitating anxiety of the learners, increased their risk taking ability, and as such increased the rate of interaction in the class.
Conclusion
The results of this study indicated that the subjects of the code-switching group gained a higher mean score in their speaking posttest than the non-code-switching group which resulted in the rejection of the null hypothesis of the study. Hence it was generally concluded that code-switching as a communication strategy can have positive impact on EFL learners' oral proficiency. Code-switching used as a communicative strategy in EFL classroom can function as a productive learning strategy which can promote learner-teacher and learner-learner interaction. On the other hand, as Swain (1995) points out learners' effort at producing may make them aware of their linguistic limitations. This encourages learners to look for the solution in the future input. With regard to what Seedhouse (1997, as cited in Ellis, 2003) argues, concerning the very limited role of tasks in pushing learners to advance their interlanguages, it can be mentioned that code-switching strategy used along with communicative tasks can also enhance the quality of tasks and their pedagogical outcome.

The findings of this study can be applied in testing oral skill too. The students can be allowed to code-switch during speaking tests. This technique can reveal the testees’ ability to handle a conversation within their, what Vygotsky calls, Zone of Proximal Development. In other words, code-switching enhances learners’ ability to initiate, maintain, and close a conversation in spite of their shortage of the vocabulary knowledge. This may lead to taking off some points due to smaller scope of vocabulary; nevertheless, the testees’ knowledge in other aspects of speaking skill can be evaluated.

The way we treat code switching in the classroom is of central methodological importance and has massive implications for students and teachers. It is therefore crucial that we understand its causes, motivations, and effects. However, it should be mentioned that further and more detailed studies of different levels, ages, and types of educational setting will certainly be needed if we are to assess more fully the pedagogical effects of code-switching in the language classroom.

The Authors
Akbar Mirhassani, whose untimely departure earlier this year we still mourn, was a full professor in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Tarbiat Modarres University, with over 40 years of professional experience and many publications to his credit.

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References


