





CODE SWITCHING IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY ESL CLASSROOM: A PRELIMINARY STUDY FROM SABAH



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ABSTRACT

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The dearth of research investigating the use of code-switching (CS) in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in Sabah, Malaysia, has triggered the current study to examine this phenomenon at a secondary school in Tawau, Sabah. A qualitative approach was utilized by the present research through conducting classroom observations where data were obtained from three Form-Five ESL classes. Both teachers' and students' CS uses were analysed utilizing Sert (2005) functions of CS adopted from the framework proposed by Mattsson and Burenhult-Mattsson (1999), Eldridge (1996) and Cole (1998). Results revealed that teachers and students in ESL classrooms in Tawau not only use CS but they also use code mixing (CM). Furthermore, data analysis also showed that CS has different functions for both teachers and students. While teachers use CS mostly for *repetition function or switch*, students' use of CS is mainly for *floor holding and reiteration*. Further research may explore the use of CM in ESL classroom as this area of research has not been investigated adequately whether in Malaysia in general or in Sabah in particular, which would enable future studies to determine the functions of CM and examine the differences between CS and CM in ESL classroom.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of the very limited studies that have established a differentiation between the uses of code-switching (CS) and code mixing (CM) within a language learning context. Additionally, this research is also one of the few investigations to explore the use of CS in the Malaysian State of Sabah, particularly, in Tawau region.

1. INTRODUCTION

CS has become a topic of discussion in relation to the ability to speak or communicate more than two languages in a conversation. *The code* refers to a language or a variety of language (Wardhaugh, 1992). There are several definitions for CS suggested by many researchers. Gumperz (1982) defines CS as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems of subsystems. On the other hand, Brice (2000) states that CS is the use of complete sentence, phrases and borrowed words from another language (as cited in Hughes *et al.* (2006)).

CS is no longer a surprise for a multiracial country like Malaysia as this phenomenon widely spreads and extends to daily life and workplaces (Ting, 2002; Ting 2007, as cited from Then and Ting (2009)). As far as the

context of the current research is concerned, the State of Sabah, which is located on the northern part of Borneo Island, is considered different from the other Malaysian states forming Peninsular Malaysia (aka West Malaysia). In Sabah, there are countless indigenous ethnic groups with their own language and culture, hence the importance of investigating CS in Sabah.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Concerning the ESL teaching and learning, CS takes place in the educational settings where both teachers and students use CS as a tool to teach and learn English (Maya *et al.*, 2009; Lee, 2010; Joana, 2014; Sarasvathy, 2014; Ooi, 2017). However, the functions of CS may differ for both teachers and students. The next section reviews the functions of CS use by teachers and students.

2.1. Functions of Code Switching

Sert (2005) has investigated the functions of CS used by teachers and students in ELT classrooms. According to Sert (2005) there are three main functions of teachers' CS and four functions of students' CS which are as follows:

2.1.1. Teachers' Code Switching

a. Topic Switch

The teacher switches his or her language depending on the topic or theme. It is to connect the use of L1 to new content to make the meaning clearer.

b. Repetitive Function

The teacher repeats certain words in both L1 and L2 (target language) for clarity or students' understanding.

c. Affective Function

The teacher code switches to L1 in order to stimulate interest and create a supportive learning environment. It is also used to build a close relationship with students.

2.1.2. Students' Code Switching

a. Equivalence

Students use native lexical items due to their incompetence in lexical items in L2. It also functions as a defensive mechanism for students to continue the conversation when students are unable to give explanations in the target language due to a lack in their linguistic mastery. This kind of CS is when students actually do not know the word or sentence in the target language.

b. Floor Holding

The students use L1 in order to fill a stop gap. They use it in order not to break the communication. Floor holding is usually used by students when they are unable to recall the appropriate word or sentence while communicating, but they do know what the word means.

c. Reiteration

The students repeat the L2 term into their L1 to reinforce their knowledge. they code switch in this context because they feel that they are not clear enough, so they rephrase the word or sentence.

d. Conflict Control

The students use CS to avoid any misunderstanding of a lexical item in L2. This is to ensure that the correct meaning has been used during the communication.

2.2. Reviewing Related Studies

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the CS use and functions within the Malaysian educational settings.

Sarasvathy (2014) carried out an investigation to analyse the reasons and functions of CS in ESL classes at one of secondary school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Three teachers and 40 students were involved in her study. Sarasvathy (2014) findings reveal that teachers mostly use CS for *repetitive functions*, *topic switch* and *affective functions*. As for students, the code-switch mostly for *reiterations*, *floor holding*, *equivalence* and *conflict control*. Sarasvathy (2014) results also indicate that teachers and students code-switch in order to understand the word better, conduct the learning better, ensure students' understanding of the learning, make the learning interesting, and to avoid inferiority among students in the process on learning English.

Ooi (2017) investigated the multiple perceptions and views of practicing teachers about CS use in the Malaysian ESL classes, where ESL teachers reported positive views towards using CS in their classrooms as they feel that CS aids them to deliver the lesson better, saves time, and assists the instruction and giving an explanation.

Hanna (2006) examined the functions of CS between English and Finnish in EFL classroom discourse that involved upper secondary school students and teachers from two different schools in Finland. There are two sets of data in her study, one is from the seventh grade in secondary school in Jyväskylä and the other is from upper secondary school also in Jyväskylä. Hanna (2006) findings are similar to Sert (2005) functions of CS as her results showed that teachers mostly used CS for *repetitive functions* as the classroom environment would be livelier as students always give feedback.

Youkahana (2010) conducted a study in Sweden that involved 24 pupils from upper secondary schools to investigate why learners to code switch in EFL classroom. The study reported seven CS functions three of which categories belong to Sert (2005) functions of CS by students, namely, are *equivalence*, *floor holding* and *reiteration*, and the rest were suggested by Youkahana (2010).

Bensen (2013) study investigated the acts of CS by teachers in EFL classrooms in the English Preparatory School of a private university in North Cyprus. The study concluded that teacher's code switch to function as a *topic switch*, *affective functions* and *repetitive functions*, which also supports Sert (2005) functions of CS for teachers.

As seen from reviewing the relevant literature, very limited research has been done on the use of CS in ESL classrooms in Sabah. Therefore, the current study attempts to reduce this gap perceived in the relevant literature by investigating the functions of CS by both teachers and students in ESL classrooms in Tawau, Sabah. The study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. Is CS used in ESL secondary school classrooms in Tawau, Sabah?
2. What are the functions of teacher's and students' CS in ESL secondary school classrooms in Tawau, Sabah?

3. METHODOLOGY

The setting of this preliminary study in Malaysia, particularly in Tawau, Sabah. A qualitative approach is adopted by this study where classroom observation has been utilized to collect data from a secondary school in Tawau in August 2018. Three Form-Five classes were observed in this study, Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3, with 35 minutes for each class.

3.1. Participants

The participants were 110 Form-Five students (35 students from Class 1), (40 students from Class 2) and (35 students from Class 3), as well as three English teachers. Students from Class 1 belong to the Science Stream, while Class 2 and Class 3 are Art Stream students.

3.2. Data Collection

Prior to data collection, few procedures were taken by the researchers beforehand. A visitation was made to the school for the purpose of seeking a consent letter from the school principal to observe the classes. Following that, a teacher assistant was assigned to help the researchers arrange the classroom observations.

As mentioned previously, three English classes were selected for this study. Class 1 had a Vocabulary lesson, while Class 2 and 3 received a lesson on Reading. Researchers of the current study recorded and took notes on teachers' and students' use of CS in the above-mentioned classes. The classroom interaction was transcribed with pauses indicated by ellipses (...) and use of languages other than English was highlighted in italics. The transcripts jotted down by the researchers were analysed for CS functions using Sert (2005) functions of CS (refer to Section 2.1).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results attained by this preliminary study showed that both teachers and students in Malaysian ESL classrooms do use CS. Interestingly, findings also revealed the occurrence of code mixing (CM) within that context. CM refers to "all cases where the lexical items and grammatical features of two languages appear in the same sentence" (Muysken, 2000) e.g., "She is friendly and *baik*" as explained later. In other words, CM is the alternation of one language to another language within the same utterances or in the same written context (Bukhari *et al.*, 2015). Next sections report the data of both CS and CM as obtained from the classroom observations conducted.

4.1. Findings from Classroom Observation One

In Class 1, the teacher started the lesson with a discussion about students' previous reading comprehension questions, and referring to a reading text in their workbook. Each student was asked to share their answers while the teacher was giving her opinions and sample answers. The teacher then asked students randomly to read the reading text, and a discussion on the reading comprehension questions followed that.

Referring to the present study's Research Question One concerning whether CS is used in ESL secondary school classrooms in Tawau, few cases witnessed the use of CS by the teacher as well as the students, though the teacher conducted the class mostly in English as shown in Table 1.

Table-1. Example of CS and CM from Class 1 (Observation One).

Participants	Examples of CS	Function
Teacher : S1* :	How many friends does he have? Many friends... yakah? (really?)	Floor holding
Teacher : S2 : S3 :	What is the first part? How to ...? Itu bah...di tulis disana 'how to'. (That one. It's written there 'how to')	Floor holding
Teacher : S4 :	What are the characteristics? Characteristics... ciri-ciri ... She is friendly dan baik (noble)	Repetitive switch CM

*S refers to student.

Table 1 shows three utterances that exemplify the teacher's and students' use of CS in *Bahasa Malaysia* as follows:

1. Many friends...*yakah?*

2. *Itu bah...ditulis disana* 'how to'.
3. What are the characteristics? Characteristics...*ciri-ciri*.

In terms of CM, Class 1 observation also showed the use of CM. For example, a student said "She is friendly and *baik*". S4 is found to alternate her language from English to *Bahasa Malaysia* in one sentence. From the above findings, it is clear that teacher and students code switch and code mix between English language and *Bahasa Malaysia*.

Regarding Research Question Two dealing with the functions of teacher's and students' CS use in ESL secondary school classrooms, rare cases of *repeating* the question in *Bahasa Malaysia* were detected. Students, on the other hand, were found to use CS most likely as *floor holding*. The teacher's CS serves as a *repetitive switch* and students' CS as *floor holding* are shown in the examples below:

In this observation, the teacher used *Bahasa Malaysia* as a *repetitive switch*, where she translated the word *characteristics* to *Bahasa Malaysia ciri-ciri*. Thus, the teacher code switched and said *ciri-ciri* in order to familiarize the students with the meaning of the word *characteristics*. As such, the teacher repeated the lexical items or vocabulary in both L1 and L2 so that the students understand the meaning of the words or terms.

Observation 1 demonstrates that the students' CS most likely functions as *floor holding*. S1 said *yakah* to show that he was looking for confirmation and used it in order not to break the communication. The examples produced by S2 and S3 also served as *floor holding* where S2 responded in English. However, S3 interrupted S2 in L1 to avoid breaking the communication due to the fact that S2 remained silent for a while.

4.2. Findings from Classroom Observation Two

In Class 2, the lesson was conducted with the students randomly being picked by the teacher in order to read the reading passage based on their given worksheet. Each student was asked to read paragraph by paragraph. The teacher then asked about the meaning of certain vocabularies in that every paragraph with a few questions regarding the paragraph as well. Table 2 sheds light on the findings obtained from Observation Two.

Table-2. Example of CS and CM from Class 2 (Observation Two).

Participants	Examples of CS	Function
Teacher :	Where is your paper? <i>Mana kertas?</i>	Repetitive switch Floor holding
S1 :	<i>Ada.</i> (I have it).	
Teacher :	What is 'influence'? A noun or a verb?	Repetitive switch
S :	... (silent)	
Teacher :	What is the answer? <i>Apa maksudnya?</i>	
Teacher :	Tell me the meaning of 'thoroughly'. <i>Apa maksudnya?</i>	Repetitive switch CM
S2 :	Wash...very... <i>apa itu maksudnya?</i>	
Teacher :	Ok. Now what is the meaning of 'concern'?	Reiteration Repetitive switch
S3 :	<i>Risau.</i>	
Teacher :	<i>Risau</i> , what's in English?	
Teacher :	Tell me the meaning of 'outfit'?	
S4 :	<i>Pakaian.</i>	Reiteration

* S - (refer to student).

Results from Observation Two supported the results reported by Observation One where cases of CS and CM took place. Few examples show the use of CS by teacher and students which are:

1. Teacher: Where is your paper? *Mana kertas?*
S1: *Ada.*
2. What is the answer? *Apa maksudnya?*
3. Teacher: *Tell me the meaning of 'outfit'?*

S4: *Pakaian.*

The following example is a case in which there is a mix of language in student's utterance.

1. Wash...very...*apa itu maksudnya?*

In terms of the functions of teacher's and students' CS use, the teacher was found to use CS as *repetitive switch* and students use CS as *floor holding* as shown in Table 2.

During Observation Two, the questions *Mana kertas* and *Mana buku* following the question *Where is your paper?* showed that the teacher used CS to clarify the meaning of the question *Where is your paper?*. Additionally, the other phrase that is constantly used as *repetitive switch* was *Apa maksudnya?*. The CS used by teacher in Observation Two was a *repetitive switch* in which the teacher played a role to reinforce students with the language items repeatedly to make sure students were able to understand the context clearer.

4.3. Findings from Classroom Observation Three

In Class 3, the teacher asked students randomly to read the paragraphs and clarify the meaning of certain vocabularies, phrases or sentences.

Results from Observation Three also revealed a number of instances in which CS and CM took place as shown in Table 3.

Table-3. Example of CS and CM from Class 3 (Observation Three).

Participants	Examples of CS	Function
Teacher : S :	What is 'dripping'? <i>Apa itu 'dripping'?</i> (What is) Cair...cair (Melting)	Repetitive switch Floor holding
Teacher : S1 : S2 : Teacher : S : S3 :	What can you say about the hero? Amazing Hebat and cool. Yes. He is hebat and...Read the second sentence. Ayat kedua. ... Bergaya. (Stylish)	CM CM Repetitive switch Floor holding
Teacher : S4 : S5 :	'He believes that it was a gift '. What does it mean? The thing is like present. Hadiah.	Reiteration

* S – (refer to student).

As shown in Table 3, there are several examples of CS by teacher and students in Bahasa Malaysia some of which are as follows:

1. Teacher: What is 'dripping'? *Apa itu 'dripping'?*

S: *Cair...cair..*

2. *Bergaya.*

Findings from Observation Three also detected the use of CM by both teacher and students. For example:

1. Teacher: What can you say about the hero?

S2: *Hebat* and cool.

2. Yes. He is *hebat* and...

Like the previous two observations, the teacher was also reported to use CS as a *repetitive switch*, while the students used it as a *floor holding* and *reiteration*. Table 3 above shows the functions of CS by the teacher and students.

During Observation Three, *Apa itu* and *Ayat kedua* were used by the teacher to clarify the meanings of *What is* and *second sentence respectively* with the purpose of making the context clearer for students to understand. As for students, they used CS as a *reiteration* and *floor holding*. As an example, when the teacher asked about the meanings of certain vocabularies like *dripping*, the students responded by saying *cair*. This is an example of *floor holding* as the students stated the meaning in L1 to answer the question because they lacked the word in target

language. Students also used CS as *reiteration*. From the observation above, when the teacher asked the students to define the meaning of 'gift', S5 answered *hadiah* which means *present* stated by S4.

Thus, it can be concluded that the findings of the current study are almost in accordance with Sert (2005) functions of CS in language classrooms. As pointed by Sert (2005) teachers in Tawau code switched in their class as a *repetitive switch* of certain words to enable their students to understand the words better. Ooi (2017) states that the use of teacher's CS helps the teacher to deliver the lesson and provide further explanation. The results of the present research are also consistent with what has been mentioned by Sarasvathy (2014) who pointed out that teachers use CS for *repetitive function*. Furthermore, Sert (2005) also argues that students use code switching as *equivalence, floor holding, reiteration* and *conflict control*. However, findings from the students' observations showed that most students in this study code switched for *floor holding* and *reiteration*. Code switching occurred in their classes as they repeated the same words (*reiterations*) to get the correct meanings. The findings are also similar to Sarasvathy (2014) as in her study students use code switching as *reiterations*. Here, it can be seen that students checked their understanding through repeating certain words and they put some effort to improve their language skills. Due to their lack of proficiency in English, the findings showed that students use code-switching to fill the gap (*floor holding*) during the conversation. In all observations conducted, *floor holding* was found in all observations. Similarly, Youkahana (2010) findings revealed that students use CS for *floor holding* and *reiterations*. Based on the examples analysed above, Malaysian students in Tawau use CS as *floor holding* when they are unable to recall certain words or lack the specific item in L2, and therefore they use *Bahasa Malaysia* to continue the communication in order not to break the conversation.

In all English lessons conducted and observed by the present research, the teachers' main objectives were to deliver the content of the knowledge to students and to clarify meanings of certain vocabularies in order for students to understand the context of lessons.

5. CONCLUSION

The most important finding in this study revealed that CS does occur and is utilized by both secondary school teachers and students in ESL classrooms in Tawau, Sabah. The findings also reveal that CM does occur as well in ESL classrooms. This study replicated the findings of previous studies such as Sert (2005). His findings show that teacher use CS as *topic switch, repetitive functions* and *affective functions*. However, students use CS as *floor holding, reiteration, equivalence* and *conflict control*. The findings obtained by this preliminary study supported most of the functions by Sert (2005).

6. RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The current research is considered as one of the very limited studies investigating the CS use at secondary ESL classes in Tawau, Sabah. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct further studies particularly in Tawau Region to explore further the use of CS in this multicultural area that is different from Peninsula Malaysia. One of the related areas that has not been researched adequately whether in Malaysia in general, or in Sabah in particular is the use of code mixing (CM) which focuses on mixing two languages, usually within the same sentence without changing the topic. It is suggested that future research should further explore the use of CM in ESL classroom to determine the functions of CM and the difference between CS and CM.

Secondly, this study adopted observations as the research instrument to collect data from teachers and student. Other studies might consider different methods such as interviewing the teachers and students to get better insights of this phenomenon. Furthermore, only one school was used in this study. Data from more schools would definitely extend our knowledge regarding the use of CS in the ESL classes in Sabah, Malaysia.

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