Characteristics and Causes of Code-mixing by Teachers in Chinese SLA Classes in International High Schools

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Abstract. An increasing number of Chinese students are studying English because second language acquisition (SLA) is becoming more and more important in schools. When teaching in conventional test-oriented education system, teachers seldom ever paid attention to their discourse systems. Consequently, this paper gathered several natural observational recordings from SLA classes of Chinese students in international high schools in order to increase Chinese instructors' knowledge of the discourse system employed in such classes. Recordings are then analyzed and interviews with teachers related to code-mixing (CM) they used in classes are collected, with the aim of investigating several characteristics and causes of CM in SLA classes. After adequately analyzing the data collected, it turned out that, if possible, most teachers will use CM in their classes, and the reason for this is mainly because of the student's English proficiency level and the course content of the class. An overwhelming majority of teachers mentioned in the interview that the use of CM can help learners better comprehend new knowledge, as well as for simplicity and efficiency. This result can be reflected and applied to teachers since the pedagogical application of CM can serve as a more natural mechanism for facilitating students' language acquisition and a simpler way of communicating.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, code-mixing, pedagogical applications, international high schools.

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) refers to the study of people who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as children. The importance and deep influence of English, as a widespread global language, have been highlighted in recent years [1]. Chinese students in international high schools are relatively experienced English learners, which means that they are more likely to be bilingual instead of semi-lingual [2]. They are currently experiencing a stage from the beginning of their SLA to the competent acquisition in L2 for regular use [3]. However, when introducing new concepts or knowledge in the process of acquiring language, it is still common that students not to know how to express certain feelings or meanings in target languages, such as English. As previous studies showed, CM is probably an indicator of language deficiency because of the lack of vocabulary in L2 [4]. Therefore, it is undoubtful that code-mixing takes place in classes, often between Chinese and English for Chinese students in international high schools.

Regarding the viewpoint of Chinese instructors, it is undeniable that formal intentional instruction is often how successful and effective SLA occurs [5]. Chinese instructors may unwittingly employ CM to enhance students' language learning and more effectively accomplish their educational goals in SLA sessions. Teachers' CM actions should not be viewed as a lack of language proficiency or linguistic abilities, but rather as a useful pedagogical tool for improved instruction [6]. Prior research has demonstrated that teachers' CM is a successful pedagogical approach when working with students who have low language skills [7].

Attention paid to the discourse system in SLA classes is relatively insufficient in traditional test-oriented education in China. Traditionally, Chinese teachers only focused on the teaching purpose per se and usually emphasized the importance of strict grammatical rules or the correction of languages, but they have rarely focused on the ways of teaching, the language they used in classes and the effect of their ways on students. Through adequate analysis of CM, this research can investigate characteristics, patterns, and feedback from teachers (for example, how they think their

teaching purposes are achieved) with regard to the application of CM in SLA. Recordings were all collected under natural or near-natural conditions; thus, this observation has a relatively high ecological validity. This research can provide pedagogical guidance and implications for teachers in SLA classes, and is likely to remind them of consciously considering the application of CM and the possible corresponding results, as well as raising their awareness of reflecting on their own utterances when teaching. But there are also several limitations, such as the languages mixed are only English and Chinese, and teachers are all Chinese native speakers.

2. Literature Review

As the number of bilingual students in Chinese high schools keeps increasing, code-mixing has become more common in their classes. Code-mixing, abbreviated for CM, can be defined as the embedding of some linguistic units within two languages often in the same discourse, that is, intra-sentential switching between two linguistic systems [8]. As Chinese students learn and comprehend new things, they tend to use matrix language as a base, embedding with another foreign language. In this case, Chinese teachers and students often use Chinese (L1) and English (L2) simultaneously in their classes. This phenomenon is a relatively successful pedagogical application of CM since selectively using linguistic units from L1 has a little negative effect on acquiring L2. To exemplify this, Celik found that partly applying L1 is conducive to teaching L2 vocabularies, and this research is in line with his [9]. CM has the potential to act as a motivation when students are engaged in classes or conversations, proving their bilingual skills. This research mainly focuses on characteristics and teachers' feedback of CM in SLA classes, based on classes recorded from Chinese students in international high schools.

3. Research Method

The methodologies used in this study are qualitative and descriptive approaches, as well as interviews with the instructors to get their perspectives on how they think their teaching goals are reached and other ideas and feelings concerning CM used in SLA.This study is conducted on Chinese IBDP students who use and learn English as L2, they age between 16 and 18. IBDP is the acronym for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, a cohesive and academically oriented two-year program for high school students worldwide. When collecting relevant data for this research, four SLA classes from IBDP are recorded and partially transcribed, each class lasts for 40-50 minutes in a natural or near-natural environment. The CM ratio (CMR) is calculated for each selected part in the SLA classes, the quotient of the code-mixed words, which is the embedded language, English, and the total words occurred, the combination of matrix language and embedded language, that is, Chinese and English [10]. Through discourse analysis, the researcher aims to find out how frequently CM is used in SLA classes and what patterns of the linguistic codes are. Features and patterns of CM will also be analyzed. After the class, interviews from the teachers are collected, which include teachers' self-rated reflections on how they think their goals are achieved, their feelings and feedback on using CM in classes and their own previous experiences with regards to CM.

4. Results

After calculation, the CMR varied from 0 to 0.2373, with teacher's self-rated reflection 8 to 9 out of 10 points. The course contents in these four classes are text analysis, lexical introduction, listening practices and grammar respectively. Data after analyzed are presented in table 1, as shown below.

Table 1. The performance of code-mixed words

Teachers	Code-mixed words in the selected recording	Total words occurred in the selected recording	CMR	Teacher's self-rated reflection (0-10)	Course content
1	0	289	0	8	Text analysis
2	40	358	0.1117	8	Lexical introduction
3	30	223	0.1345	9	Listening practices
4	84	354	0.2373	9	Grammar

According to the interviews with teachers involved, several causes and feedback are gained and transcribed below. Some teachers mentioned in the interview that using CM can help deeper comprehension and better effectiveness in language acquisition. The following are some typical excerpts, excerpt 1 and excerpt 2:

Excerpt 1:

Teacher 1: I used it to help learners better understand my explanation, as well as for simplicity, efficiency, and effectiveness. The course of SLA has its necessity to use two languages. It is more effective to emphasize in L1 and to enhance comprehension and repeat in L2. As a result, students are likely to have a more natural and accurate understanding of the course content and my teaching purposes are effectively achieved simultaneously.

Excerpt 2:

Teacher 2: I think CM could be helpful to SLA, it is more likely to be helpful for both teachers and students if the teacher is proficient at both languages. Basic Chinese is somewhat helpful, embedded with several new terms of L2. I mean, CM surely can be used well in classes, but my observations may probably not be generalizable, it is contextual I suppose.

Excerpt 3:

Teacher 3: I have some previous experience about CM, but not much. My major in university is applied linguistics and I have certainly heard about CM before. The level of the whole class is one of the determinants of whether to use CM or not. And I think for the future, it is important for me, as the teacher, to think about more how CM would work in the classroom and research further on the way teachers talk and interact with students in certain environments.

Excerpt 4:

Teacher 4: To be honest, I did not intentionally pay attention to code-mixing or code-switching before, but I realized that sometimes I am using these unconsciously in my classes. I think the application and ratio of CM probably depend on the specific course content and the teacher's own teaching habit.

From excerpt 3 and excerpt 4 transcribed above, it is also concluded that the attention paid to CM and teacher's discourse system in SLA classes is relatively insufficient. Teachers seldom have relevant exploration or investigation on CM, which further illustrated the importance of conducting relevant research on CM in SLA in the future.

5. Discussion

Possible implications and some pedagogical applications are discussed below:

Language alternation is important in language acquisition classrooms, for both teachers and students. Effective and successful application of CM is conducive to SLA because in non-native settings of English speaking and acquiring, CM somewhat provides a more natural mechanism of communication to a cohort of people, for example, English learners from China. That is, CM has the potential to help learners integrate knowledge from L1 and L2 to better communicate, learn and make sense [11]. As the study showed, many teachers think that the use of CM is conducive to acquiring language. Teachers may consciously be aware of the code-mixed utterance that they used. Instead of solely orient the class on exams preparation, the mindset, that English is not only a subject for scores,

but a tool to communicate and a language to acquire, is of great significance. However, this study only carried out in Chinese teachers and students, which have several limitations. For instances, the sample size was not very large. Besides, teachers, as Chinese native speakers, intrinsically prefer to use Chinese as the main teaching language, thus the proportion of L1 is affected.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, through listening to teachers' interviews and examining recordings from four IBDP English classrooms, the major finding of this paper is that the vast majority of Chinese instructors code mix while introducing new ideas to their students. Under this circumstance, L2 has a large number of embedded English language units, such as lexical items and sentences. The curriculum content includes but is not limited to the lexical introduction, grammatical concepts, and text analysis. Teachers tend to use CM as a pedagogical tool to better make sense of, communicate and teach in SLA classes. During the interview, many teachers noted that successful applications of CM have helped bilingual learners better understand their explanations. Therefore, future teachers can use CM to achieve higher efficiency in teaching communication, simplify their teacher discourse, and better express their thoughts.

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