

An Exploratory Investigation into Social Variables Related to the Use of Codeswitching Among Bilingual Children in Elementary Schools in a South Texas Border Area Part II

Emma Alicia Garza
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Guadalupe Nancy Nava
Autonomous University of the State of Mexico

Abstract

This is an attempt to investigate the social impact of codeswitching in the elementary school along a South Texas border area from the teachers' perspective. The 278 participants were selected on the following basis: (a) they work in the same geographical area, (b) they are all elementary school teachers, (c) they have at least one year of experience teaching in elementary schools; and (d) they belong to one particular school district. The data was collected through the use of questionnaires. This research targets the area of social and cultural effects of codeswitching and the effect on the students' communicative competence. According to the results, most teachers defined codeswitching as alternating between two languages. Teachers indicated that they codeswitch in the delivery of instruction. Most of them do not promote the use of it in their classrooms. Finally, codeswitching continues to be a controversial issue for those who work with bilingual populations.

Introduction

Conversation and communication play a major role in human interactions. It is through language and conversation that children begin to communicate information in a variety of ways through different speech registers and codeswitching behaviors. (Ervin-Tripp, 2001). The sociolinguistic view of codeswitching among bilinguals is often studied in order to comprehend why people who are competent in two languages utilize switching behaviors in particular situations or conversations. A theoretical framework related to communicative competence can be used to investigate the impact of social variables on codeswitching behaviors among bilingual children.

Language use for various types of communication settings or registers includes a greater range of sociolinguistic functions. These functions are derived from the levels of proficiency attained in the second language and by a more expanded knowledge of the grammatical systems of both the first and second languages. According to Poplack (1980), these functions are necessary in order for codeswitching behaviors to occur. Other studies reported that age influences codeswitching behaviors. As children get older, they develop and use more sophisticated discourse strategies. These strategies help second language learners acquire communicative competence. Codeswitching behaviors in developing bilinguals are a major part of the development of bilingual communicative competence (Genesee, 2002). The exposure to different social and linguistic experiences increases as children get older and these experiences affect and enlarge the knowledge and ability to use L1 and L2 interchangeably. This triggers the deployment of codeswitching for sociolinguistic purposes.

The patterns of using language and codeswitching, are a distinct reflection of the ways in which language is used in their communities (Lanza, 1997). Additionally, Poplack (1980) found that adults who are more fluent and balanced in both languages tend to be better at alternating and switching languages. Thus, codeswitching increases in bilinguals as they have more exposure to the second language. Consequently, codeswitching is used as a resource to extend communicative competence. A sociolinguistic theory of codeswitching acquisition by bilinguals is necessary in order to establish the relationship between communication and performance.

Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), proposed four components as the framework for communicative competence: 1) grammatical competence, 2) discourse competence, 3) sociolinguistic competence, and 4) strategic competence. Grammatical competence encompasses the knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology. Discourse competence is defined as the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a “meaningful whole” out of a series of utterances. Sociolinguistic competence requires knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and of discourse. Finally, strategic competence refers to the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence. So how is codeswitching defined within sociolinguistic functions?

Towards a Definition

Trudgill (2003), for instance, defines codeswitching as the process whereby bilingual or bidialectal speakers switch back and forth between one language or dialect and another within the same conversation. This linguistic behavior is very common in multilingual situations. Sociolinguistics research in this area has concentrated on trying to establish what factors in the social and linguistic context influence switching: it may be that one language is typically associated with one set of domains, and the other language with another.

Hoffmann (1991), on the other hand, describes codeswitching as the process that involves the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation. In the case of bilinguals speaking to each other, switching can consist of changing languages; in that of monolinguals, shifts of style.

To continue with this discussion, it is necessary to look into the cases and reasons of why bilingual children move back and forth in two languages. Very few bilinguals keep their two languages completely separate, yet the ways in which they mix them are complex and varied. Grosjean (1992) distinguishes between the “monolingual mode” when bilinguals use one of their languages with monolingual speakers of that language, and the “bilingual mode” when bilinguals are in the company of other bilinguals and have the option of switching languages. Even in the “monolingual mode,” bilinguals occasionally mix their languages (Baker, 2001).

However, codeswitching involves some other aspects such as language choice, language shift, language planning, language and ethnicity and the relationship between languages and society.

Codeswitching As a Linguistic Variation

Second language learners manipulate language as they attempt to communicate with others (Berko-Gleason, 1993). Many second language learners go through patterns of normative and non-normative language behaviors as they learn a second language. One of these “so-called” non-normative patterns is known as codemixing or codeswitching. Although codeswitching is as

common as speech, it is often perceived as a deviation from the “standard.” This deviation from the standard language is seen by many as a linguistic handicap. Therefore, linguists have been more concerned with the question of the linguistic status to be assigned to codeswitching, whether one can establish different types of switches and what kinds of constraints can be at play, if any (Hoffmann, 1991).

Bialystock (1991) states that the variety of language within the speakers’ experiences, the differences in registers, and dialects within their experiences all help to create a code. This code becomes part of the speakers’ language choices that seem to change without a particular notable pattern. Bilingual individuals emulate these differences across the communities in which they live. Codeswitching represents a mode of communication for bilingual students that is extensively and frequently used amongst members of bilingual communities.

The reasons for codeswitching are multifaceted. Many of them are of a contextual, situational and personal kind. Talking about a particular topic may cause a switch, either because of lack of facility in the relevant register or because certain items trigger off various connotations which are linked to experiences in a particular language.

The codeswitching process whereby bilingual or bidialectal speakers switch back and forth between one language or dialect to another within the same conversation is a linguistic behavior that is very common in multilingual situations. Sociolinguistics research in this area has concentrated on trying to establish what factors in the social and linguistic context influence switching.

Sociolinguists have looked into speech communities, both monolingual and bilingual, trying to establish reasons for, and patterns of, changes of style and language switching. As a sociolinguistic strategy, codeswitching is used for signaling group boundaries, conveying emphasis, role playing, and establishing socio-cultural identity. It is also used to redefine an interaction (Scotton & Ury, 1977), to signal the level of intimacy or emotional charge. Finally, a codeswitch may be used when a word is more silent in the other language or unknown in the current language.

Myers-Scotton (1995a) stated that codeswitching is used as a momentary marker of a group identification for the purpose of renegotiating role relationships within the communication context. This leads to a premise that codeswitching is a type of skilled performance which becomes an ability used with communicative intent. Language choice becomes an indicator of group identification, language contact and language use which are factors that lead towards language change. The speakers of a community have a very strong impact on the vernacular code used within their community.

One issue that frequently occurs for parents and teachers of children of different ages is when one language is mixed with another. Terms such as Hinglish, Spanglish, Tex-Mex and Wenglish (respectively for Hindi-English, Spanish-English, Texan-Mexican, and Welsh-English) are often used in derogatory fashion to describe what may have become accepted in language borrowing within a particular community. However, in other bilingual communities, strict separation of languages may be the acceptable norm for political, social, and cultural reasons. If a power conflict exists between different ethnic groups, then language may be perceived as a primary marker of a separate identity, and codeswitching may be less acceptable.

Sociolinguists study verbal behavior in terms of the relations between the setting, the participants, the topic, the functions of the interaction, the form, and the values held by the participants about each of these (Hymes 1974). These elements should also be considered while analyzing language in use.

Social Attitudes Towards Codeswitching

Monolinguals who hear bilinguals codeswitching may have negative attitudes towards codeswitching, believing that it shows a deficit, or a lack of mastery of both languages. Bilinguals themselves may be defensive or apologetic about their codeswitching and attribute it to laziness or sloppy language habits. However, codeswitching is a valuable linguistic tool. It does not happen at random. There is usually purpose and logic in changing languages.

Codeswitching, then, constitutes a habitual and often necessary part of social interaction among bilinguals. Whereas monolinguals have only one linguistic code at their disposal, bilinguals can rely on a four-way choice (the two languages and various forms of mixed and switched codes), since they are able to codeswitch in both their languages.

The Role of Codeswitching in Education

The recent research on dialect and education suggests that dialects should be used in the classroom as a transitional strategy in the acquisition of the standard language. This approach has been criticized for not providing pupils early contact with the target language, and therefore, contributing to the decline of educational standards.

One can refer to the dominant variety used in the conversation as the matrix language and the other variety as the embedded language; however, while the two language forms occur continuously in the codeswitch, the embedded language forms do not become part of the matrix language. Following Haugen (1972), borrowing is defined as the attempted reproduction in one language (the matrix language) of patterns previously found in another (the embedded language). What distinguishes borrowing structurally from codeswitching is that the reproduction is conventionalized so that the embedded language pattern becomes part of the competence of the matrix language.

Methodology

Statement of the Problem

Children who have been raised in a bilingual community often bring to school not only a new language, but also ways of using language which are influenced by culture and differ from those of the mainstream school culture (Heath, 1983; Zentella, 1997). These differences can lead teachers to underestimate or misinterpret the competence of students. In order to provide students equal educational opportunities, teachers need to be aware of not only what their students need to learn, but more importantly, the knowledge and skills that they bring in their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Cummins & Swain, 1986; Genesee, 1994).

Many children who bring linguistically and culturally different practices to school are often misunderstood, mistakenly mislabeled, academically underestimated and devalued (Zentella, 1997). These children often feel that they don't fit into the school community, feel less confident about their ability to succeed in school and are less likely to convey their knowledge to others (Cummins & Swain, 1986).

Description of the population

The participants for this study were selected from a school district located in a South Texas border area. The sample is made-up of 278 teachers from 14 elementary schools, 7 from the south and 7 from the north side of the city. The south schools serve more bilingual student populations than the north schools. The range of teaching experience for the participants was 1 to 30 years.

Method

This research study addressed the following areas through the use of questionnaires: 1) teachers' knowledge about codeswitching and their own linguistic behaviors, 2) codeswitching and social interactions, 3) management of codeswitching in elementary schools, and 4) codeswitching environments. These areas were examined carefully in order to address the issue of how they are related to the use of codeswitching among bilingual children in elementary schools.

Results

Table 1

What is your definition of codeswitching? (n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Alternating between two languages	44% (n=65)	52% (n=68)
Flip flopping within the conversation	33% (n=50)	5% (n=7)
Inability to separate languages	21% (n=30)	37% (n=47)
No Response	2% (n=3)	3% (n=4)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 1 shows that 44% (n=65) of the teacher in the south schools and 52% (n=68) of the teachers in the north schools defined codeswitching as alternating two languages. Thirty-three percent (n=50) of the teachers in the south schools and 5% (n=7) of the teachers in the north schools defined it as flip flopping within the conversation; Twenty-one percent (n=30) of the teachers in the south schools and 37% (n=47) of the teachers in the north schools defined it as the inability to separate languages.

Interpretation: The data seems to indicate that a large majority of teachers 47.84% (n=133) in south and north schools define codeswitching as alternating two languages. This definition was closely related to the working definition used by the researchers for the purpose of this study: Codeswitching involves the alternate use of two languages.

Table 2

Do you codeswitch? (n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Yes	38.82% (n=59)	35.71% (n=45)
No	12.5% (n=19)	15.08% (n=19)
Sometimes	46.05% (n=70)	44.44% (n=56)
No Response	2.63% (n=4)	4.76% (n=6)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 2 indicates that 38.82% (n=59) of the teachers in the south schools and 35.71% (n=45) of the teachers in the north schools do codeswitch; Thirteen percent (n=19) of the teachers in

the south schools and 15.08% (n=19) of the teachers in the north schools said that they did not codeswitch, while 46.05% (n=70) of the teachers in the south schools and 44.44% (n=56) of the teachers in the north schools said they sometimes codeswitch.

Interpretation: The data shows that a combined total of 104 out of 278 teachers in the south and north schools do codeswitch. There was a combined total of 126 teachers from the south and north schools that codeswitch sometimes. The data seems to show that 230 out of 278 teachers codeswitch at one time or another.

Table 3

With whom do you codeswitch? (n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Family	45% (n=69)	27% (n=34)
Friends	32%(n=48)	55% (n=68)
Peers	16% (n=25)	16% (n=20)
No Response	7%(n=10)	2% (n=4)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 3 shows that 45% (n=69) of the teachers in the south schools and 27% (n=34) of the teachers in the north schools codeswitch with their families. Thirty-two percent (n=48) of the teachers in the south schools and 55% (n=68) of the teachers in the north schools codeswitch with their friends; Sixteen percent (n=25) of the teachers in the south schools and 16% (n=20) of the teachers in the north schools codeswitch with their peers.

Interpretation: The results from this data seems to indicate that codeswitching takes place with friends 41.72% (n=116) and family 37% (n=103) than with peers for the teachers in the south and the north schools combined. It is not uncommon for bilinguals to codeswitch more readily with friends and family because the setting is more informal than it is with peers in a professional situation.

Table 4

In what environments do students codeswitch with more frequency? (n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Home	16.45% (n=25)	25.4% (n=32)
School	31.58% (n=48)	27.78% (n=35)
With Peers	45.39% (n=69)	34.92% (n=44)
No Response	6.58% (n=10)	11.9% (n=15)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 4 results show that 16.45% (n=25) of the teachers in the south schools and 25.4% (n=32) of the teachers in the north schools indicated that the students tended to code-switch at home; Thirty-two percent (n= 48) of the teachers in the south schools and 27.78% (n=35) of the teachers in the north schools indicated that codeswitching occurred at school; Forty-five percent (n=69) of the teachers in the south schools and 34.92% (n=44) of the teachers in the north schools indicated that codeswitching occurred with peers.

Interpretation: The data seems to show that a majority of teachers in both the south and north schools 40.64% (n=113) indicated that students codeswitch with their peers most frequently. This response reinforces the notion that codeswitching behaviors occur as part of a natural process of socialization.

Table 5

Do students who codeswitch communicate effectively with others?(n=278)

Table 5 indicates that 49.34% (n=75) of the teachers in the south schools and

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Yes	49.34% (n=75)	54.4% (n=68)
No	11.84% (n=18)	8.8% (n=11)
Sometimes	35.53% (n=54)	27.2% (n=34)
No Response	3.29% (n=5)	9.6% (n=12)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

54.4% (n=68) of the teachers in the north schools felt that students who codeswitch communicate effectively with others; Twelve percent (n=18) of the teachers in the south schools and 8.8% (n=11) of the teachers in the north schools responded that students who codeswitch do not communicate effectively with others; Thirty-six percent (n=54) of the teachers in the south schools and 27.2% (n=34) of the teachers in the north schools responded that students who codeswitch sometimes communicate effectively with others.

Interpretation: The data shows that a combined total of 143 teachers from the south and north schools felt that students who codeswitch can communicate effectively with others. A total of 88 teachers in the south and north schools indicated that students who codeswitch can communicate effectively with others sometimes. There was a combined total of 230 teachers who responded “yes” or “sometimes” to this question. The responses for this question depended on what the teachers themselves defined effective communication to be. Therefore, the attitudes teachers have towards codeswitching, whether it is positive or negative, could have impacted this response.

Table 6

Do you think that codeswitching should be allowed in schools? (n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Yes	47.37% (n=72)	50.79% (n=64)
No	23.3% (n=35)	26.98% (n=34)
Uncertain	25.66% (n=39)	17.46% (n=22)
No Response	3.95% (n=6)	4.76% (n=6)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 6 shows that 47.37% (n=72) of the teachers in the south schools and 50.79% (n=64) of the teachers in the north school felt that codeswitching should be allowed in schools; Twenty-three percent (n=35) of the teachers in the south schools and 26.98% (n=34) of the teachers in the north school felt that codeswitching should not be allowed in schools; Twenty-six percent (n=39) of the teachers in the south schools and 17.46% (n=22) of the teachers in the north schools were uncertain.

Interpretation: The data shows that 138 teachers in the south and north schools felt that codeswitching should be allowed in schools. This response may be indicative of the experience that teachers, who work with children in border areas, have with regard to codeswitching. Moreover, many educators in the public school system across the United States share the attitude that bilinguals who codeswitch are "at-risk" of not succeeding academically. Teachers' beliefs towards codeswitching can lead to the idea that students who constantly switch from one language to another have not acquired proficiency in either language and therefore codeswitching should not be allowed in schools.

Table 7

Do you tolerate codeswitching in your classroom?

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Yes	42.76% (n=65)	26.98% (n=34)
No	31.58% (n=48)	27.78% (n=35)
Sometimes	21.05% (n=32)	36.51% (n=46)
No Response	4.61% (n=7)	8.73% (n=11)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 7 indicates that 42.76% (n=65) of the teachers south schools and 26.98% (n=34) of the teachers in the north schools said that they do tolerate codeswitching in their classrooms; Thirty-two percent (n=48) of the teachers in the south schools and 27.78% (n=35) of the teachers in the north schools said they did not tolerate codeswitching in their classrooms; Twenty-one percent

(n=32) of the teachers in the south schools and 36.51% (n=46) of the teachers in the north schools said that they tolerate codeswitching sometimes in their classrooms.

Interpretation: The data seems to indicate that some teachers in both the south and the north schools (n=99) tolerate codeswitching in their classrooms. There were (n=78) teachers from both areas that said they tolerate codeswitching in their classrooms sometimes. The combined total of teachers that tolerate or sometimes tolerate codeswitching in their classrooms is 60%(n=167). There were 83 teachers from the south and north schools who said that they do not tolerate codeswitching in their classrooms. This might be attributed to the fact that some teachers see codeswitching as a learning interference, handicap, limitation or disadvantage and would rather not deal with it at all.

Table 8

Do other teachers in the school tolerate codeswitching? (n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Yes	26.32% (n=40)	24.6% (n=31)
No	10.53% (n=16)	12.7% (n=16)
Uncertain	57.89% (n=88)	53.97% (n=68)
No Response	5.26% (n=8)	8.73% (n=11)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 8 shows that 26.32% (n=40) of the teachers in the south schools and 24.6% (n=31) of the teachers in the north schools said that other teachers in the school tolerate codeswitching; Eleven percent (n=16) of the teachers in the south schools and 12.7% (n=16) of the teachers in the north schools said that other teachers in the school do not tolerate codeswitching; Fifty-eight percent (n=88) of the teachers in the south schools and 53.97% (n=68) of the teachers in the north schools were uncertain

Interpretation: The data shows that 25.53% (n=71) of the teachers in both the south and north schools felt that other teachers tolerated codeswitching. There were more of the teachers in both the south and the north schools who were uncertain 56.11% (n=156) that other teachers in the school tolerated codeswitching. It seems that most teachers do not want to deal with the issue of codeswitching in their campuses; therefore, they avoid talking about it. This lack of communication among many educators reflects the notion that codeswitching is not considered as a primary issue in the learning and teaching process. It is not uncommon for teachers to avoid an issue such as codeswitching which may be perceived by many as controversial and unacceptable.

Table 9

According to your experience, in which grade levels do students codeswitch the most?
(n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Pre-Kinder/Kinder	25% (n=38)	37.3% (n=47)
1 st -3 rd	46.71% (n=71)	24.6% (n=31)
4 th -+	19.08% (n=29)	16.67% (n=21)
No Response	9.21% (n=14)	(n=0)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 9 results indicate that 25% (n=38) of the teachers in the south schools and 37.3% (n=47) of the teachers in the north schools felt that codeswitching occurs most in pre-kinder and kinder; Forty-seven percent (n=71) of the teachers in the south schools and 24.6% (n=31) of the teachers in the north schools felt that codeswitching occurs most often in 1st through 3rd grades; Nineteen percent (n=14) of the teachers in the south schools and 16.67% (n=21) of the teachers in the north schools felt that codeswitching occurs most often in 4th grade and up. There were 9.21% (n=14) of the teachers in the south schools who did not respond to this question.

Interpretation: The data seems to show that 102 teachers in both the south and north schools responded that codeswitching occurs most often in 1st through 3rd grades. These grades seem to be the ones that have more of the cognitively demanding tasks for second language learners. Therefore, teachers see codeswitching occurring most frequently in those grades because students are manipulating both language systems. However, research suggests that it takes from 5 to 7 years to acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in a second language. Codeswitching becomes a very natural part of language learning and socialization.

Table 10

Do you think that codeswitching is acquired at home, at school, or with peers? (n=278)

Responses	South Schools	North Schools
Home	53.29% (n=81)	55.56% (n=70)
School	23.03% (n=35)	19.84% (n=25)
Peers	19.08% (n=29)	16.67% (n=21)
No Response	4.61% (n=7)	7.94% (n=10)
Total Percentages and Numbers	100% (n=152)	100% (n=126)

Table 10 shows that 53.29% (n=81) of the teachers in the south schools and 55.56% (n=70) of the teachers in the north schools responded that codeswitching is acquired at home; Twenty-three percent (n=35) of the teachers in the south schools and 19.84% (n=25) of the teachers in the north schools responded that codeswitching is acquired at school; Nineteen percent (n=29) of the

teachers in the south schools and 16.67% (n=21) of the teachers in the north schools responded that codeswitching is acquired with peers. There were 4.61% (n=7) of the teachers in the south schools and 7.94% (n=10) of the teachers in the north schools who did not respond to this question.

Interpretation: The data seems to show that more of the teachers in both the south and north schools 54.31% (n=151) responded that codeswitching is acquired at home. As an observation, it is important to note that children often acquire codeswitching behaviors at school more than at home because most students are exposed more consistently to either the native language or the second language at home.

Conclusions

The reasons for codeswitching vary with particular situations. For instance, the speaker may not be able to express him/herself in the language being spoken, so a switch in language use is made in order to follow through with communication. Switching may also occur when the speaker tries to establish rapport with the listener. This rapport is established when the listener responds with a similar switch.

Codeswitching may be used to accomplish two things: 1) fill a linguistic or conceptual gap, or 2) for other multiple communicative purposes (Gysels, 1992). While codeswitching is often perceived as the exception, in many multilingual and bilingual communities it is and should be considered the norm. Gumperz (1982) describes codeswitching as discourse exchanges which form a single unitary interactional whole:

“Speakers communicate fluently, maintaining an even flow or talk. No hesitation pauses, changes in sentence rhythm, pitch level or intonation contour mark the shift in code. There is nothing in the exchange as a whole to indicate that speakers don’t understand each other. Apart from the alternation itself, the passages have all the earmarks of ordinary conversation in a single language.” Regardless, codeswitching implies some degree of competence in the two languages even if bilingual fluency is not yet stable.

Finally, codeswitching seems to have a function of facilitating and supporting thinking and communication, no matter how the outward information may appear. This natural language function is not appreciated or supported by many people because it conflicts with what society has come to know as “standard or conventional.” How educators perceive codeswitching and approach the facilitation of communication in the bilingual classroom is critical for bilingual students’ success.

Continued research efforts may one day produce a practical sketch of language development which supports codeswitching as part of the natural process that bilinguals go through in their quest to learn a second language and communicate with others. Perhaps, codeswitching may come to be accepted as a significant part of the lives of bilinguals.

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