On the Functions of Students Code Switching in ELT Classrooms

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Abstract

Code-switching is known to be a widespread phenomenon among bilinguals and in ESL/EFL teaching/learning process; it refers to any alternate use of two codes or languages within the same conversation or even the same utterance. The present study is an attempt to investigate the functions, types and frequencies of code switching in students discourse in the context of ELT classrooms. The study also explores the relationship between the language proficiency level of the students and their use of code switching. To achieve this end, two groups of students (at two different levels of proficiency) from two classes of general English courses in an institutional program in Oil Ministry Center of Isfahan were selected as participants. All sessions of an entire semester were videotaped. A coding scheme was developed for classifying students' instances of CS into relevant functions. The data were tabulated, and frequencies and percentages were conducted by SPSS program. The findings indicate that the majority of CS in the classroom is highly purposeful, and related to pedagogical goals. Also, the research found that pedagogical functions were more frequently fulfilled through CS compared to social functions. The findings of this research suggest that code switching is a necessary tool for teachers due to a number of pedagogical considerations in ET classrooms and can give teachers a clue to have a better understanding of student code switching in ELT classrooms and use CS in the direction of teaching and effective learning.

Keywords: ELT Classrooms, Functions of Code Switching, Student Code Switching

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1. Introduction

Code switching (CS), which may be briefly defined as the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation (Grosjean, 1982; Milroy & Muysken, 1995) has attracted much attention in last decades. As a common occurrence in ESL/EFL teaching/learning process, CS can be "evidenced along the entire continuum of proficiency" (Brice, 2000). Studies seem to suggest that teacher and student CS, whether in teacher-led classroom discourse or in teacher-student interaction, may be a language strategy serving a variety of pedagogical purposes.

Many researchers devote their attention to bilingual classroom CS of various types, while there are only a few studies of CS in the foreign language classroom. In the second language acquisition (SLA) context, CS has turned out to be a more complicated issue since the foreign language is both the means and the end of the classroom communication (Qian, Tian, & Wang, 2009). While in sociolinguistics CS has been described as a skilled performance, in SLA it has been looked upon as a symptom of error and lack of competence (Belz, 2002).

Classroom CS can be looked upon from both historical and socio-affective perspectives. From the historical viewpoint, some of the most widely used teaching methodologies, such as the Direct Method and Audiolingual, have claimed that students' L1 must be avoided in the classroom for the sake of better language learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

From a socio-affective point of view, the proponents of the exclusive use of the target language believe that it makes the language real for the students and helps them experience unpredictability and develop their in-built language system (Macaro, 2001; Seedhouse, 2005). Moreover, it leads to greater motivation on the part of the students because they see the immediate use of

the target language to fulfill their needs (Turnbull & Arnet, 2002). It also maximizes the exposure to the target language, especially in the EFL settings where students have little contact with the FL outside the classroom (Cook, 2001).

Fortunately, language teaching profession has outgrown such simplistic views toward the use of L1 in the classroom. On the one hand, it is now stated that the exclusive use of the L1 by itself does not guarantee successful L2 learning. Edstorm (2006), for example, proposes that the excessive use of the target language might play the role of a demotivator as students find it redundant, especially when they are engaged in negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, Philipson (1992) adopts a political stance toward the issue and claims that the exclusive use of the target language has been a strategy used by western colonizers to exercise linguistic imperialism. On the other hand, language teaching experts believe that the careful use of L1 can be an instrument in the hand of teachers to promote student learning (Atkinson, 1993; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2005). In addition, according to Atkinson (1987), we should not ignore the value of the use of L1 in the classroom because it is not only the preferred strategy for students to surmount their obstacles of speaking in the target language, but also a humanistic approach to permit learners express their feelings and an efficient way for saving time. Also, the use of the L1 provokes discussion and speculation, develops clarity and flexibility of thinking, facilitates teachers and students' relationships, and increases their awareness of the inevitable interaction between the first language and the FL (Harbord, 1992).

1.1. Research Questions

CS is not only an interesting phenomenon in bilingual environments, but can

also be very common in foreign language learning/teaching settings. Most research on student CS has been originated in contexts quite different from EFL classroom. English is taught in Iran mainly as a subject at school and seldom practiced in the broad social environment. Foreign language teachers and students are frequently observed to employ the alternation of the mother tongue and the target language, i.e., CS in the classrooms. One may wonder how students switch codes and what specific pedagogical purposes or functions CS serves in EFL classroom. The purpose of the present study is to describe the CS patterns occurring in students' utterances and explain the functions of switches in the EFL classroom setting, therefore, is to provide answers to the following questions:

(1) What are the types of CS made by Iranian students in EFL classes?

(2) What are the functions of CS made by Iranian students in EFL classes?

(3) Is there any relationship between the language proficiency level of the students and their use of code switching?

2. The Background of the Study

2.1. Code Switching: Definition

Poplack (1980) states that CS is the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence or constituent. DiPietro (1977) defines it as "the use of more than one language by communicants in the execution of a speech act" (as cited in Grosjean, 1982, p. 145). According to Clyne (2000), CS is the alternative use of two languages either within a sentence or between sentences. It is generally understood as "the alternative use by bilinguals (or multi-linguals) of two or more languages in the same conversation" (Muysken, 1995, p. 7), or "in the unchanged setting, often within the same utterance" (Bullock and Toribio, 2009, p. 2).

As monolingual speakers have the ability to switch between a variety oflinguistic registers and styles (Ervin-Tripp, 1964, 2001; Gumperz, 1967), bilinguals also in addition to this capacity, have two linguistic codes that they can switch as acommunicative strategy during conversation (Reyes, 2001).

2.2. Types of Code Switching

A number of different functional taxonomies of CS have been proposed. What they share in the view that code-switching is a "discourse phenomenon in which speakers rely on juxtaposition of grammatically distinct subsystems to generate conversational inference" (Gumperz 1982:, p. 97). Gumperz distinguishes between situational switches, and metaphorical switches, where the switches are basically a symbol of the relationships being acted out between the participants, regardless of the situation they are in.

Based on observations of many cases of CS, Sankoff and Poplack (1981) identify three types of code switching, namely: tag-switching, intra-sentential switching and inter-sentential switching. Tag-switching, emblematic switching or extra-sentential switching (Muysken, 1995), involves the insertion of a tag or a short fixed phrase in one language into an utterance which is otherwise entirely in the other language. Inter-sentential switching involves a switch at a clause or sentence boundary, where each clause or sentence is either in one language or the other. Intra-sentential switching refers to switching within the clause or sentence boundary. This form involves the greatest syntactic risk and requires that the speaker be fluent in both languages (Qian, et al, 2009).

2.3. The Language Proficiency Level of The Students and Their Use of Code Switching Strategies

The number of studies which considered language proficiency of students and its relation with the use of CS is very limited. Reyes (2001) suggests that there is a positive relationship between bilingual CS and language proficiency. He claims that those speakers with the greatest degree of bilingual communicative competence are the ones who most frequently use CS as a strategy to meet their conversational goals and to communicate with their peers. Based on Genesee (2002), the number of instances of 'code-switching' can be interpreted to reflect the child's developing communicative competence. But both of these studies are related to children not adults.

2.4. Functions of Students Code Switching

CS is a normal feature of L2 use when the participants share two languages. Furthermore, L1 provides opportunity for the students to help each other. L1 use 'is a normal psycholinguistic process that facilitates L2 production and allows the learners both to initiate and sustain verbal interaction with one other' (Brooks & Donato, 1994, p. 268). Through the L1, they may explain the task to each other, negotiate roles they are going to take, or check their understanding or production of language against their peers.

Cook (2001) points out that there are several possibilities for students to use the L1 in learning, both in the classroom and outside. He exemplified the use of bilingual dictionaries, which 85% of students find beneficial, dual language texts on facing pages and the use of L2 films with L1 subtitles. In these cases, students use L1 principally for mastering the meanings of the L2.

Another study was conducted by Eldridge (1996) in a small Turkish secondary school where English is taught as a second language and focused on learners aged 11-13 at an elementary and lower intermediate level. In this research, one hundred instances of CS were transcribed for analysis and the learners were also asked to comment briefly on why they felt they did so. He divided the functions of CS in students discourse into two general categories; general purposes and specific functions of code switching. In the first category he concluded that 77 per cent of all instances of code-switching were related to classroom tasks and just 16 per cent were comments of the learner towards the teacher concerning procedural matters, or questions about English not related to the task in hand. He referred that the most of code-switching cases in the classroom were oriented to learning objectives and finally claimed that the presence of code-switching in the language classroom does not in itself indicate any kind of breakdown in pedagogical purpose. By analyzing the data, Eldridge (1996) grouped the specific functions of CS into the following categories: equivalence, floor-holding, metalanguage, reiteration, group membership, conflict control, alignment and disalignment. In equivalence, an equivalent item is used in the other code. Floor-holding may function as a kind of temporary substitute. Metalanguage involves the tasks which should be performed in the target code and comment, evaluation, and talk about the task may take place in the mother tongue. By reiteration he means reinforcing, emphasizing, or clarifying where the message has already been transmitted in one code, but not understood. Switches in group membership category, function as in-group identity markers. In these instances, code-switching is performing a social function. Conflict control happened with the purpose of mitigating a face-threatening act. Alignment and disalignment are kinds of

negotiation in which the speaker/listener has two choices: to align him or herself to the conversation as it is, or to seek to shift the alignment in some way.

Another study conducted by Reyes (2001) examined the code-switching patterns and the discourse characteristics of children's code switching, and its functions in the speech of immigrant Spanish-speaking children. The categories which he proposed to indicate the conversational function of the code switch include: representation of speech, imitation quotation, turn accommodation, topic shift, situation switch, insistence, emphasis, clarification or persuasion, person specification, question shift, discourse marker. He explained the categories and then gave an example for each category. Finally he concluded that children during peer interaction use the language with which they both feel most comfortable and have greater competence. He also claimed that those speakers with the greatest degree of bilingual communicative competence are the ones who most frequently use CS as a strategy to meet their conversational goals and to communicate with their peers. Based on these finding he suggested that there is a positive relationship between bilingual CS and language proficiency. Moreover, the findings indicate that CS is a complex skill children develop as part of communicative competence. Therefore, educators, teachers, and parents should not consider CS a sign of cognitive confusion, but instead an indicator of student's bilingual competence.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study consist of two classes of students studying general English with two different levels of proficiency (elementary and intermediate) in an institutional program in Oil Ministry center of Isfahan. The number of them in two classes was 9 and 11 with a total of 20. All of the participants were

adult males, between 22 to 27 years of age and they shared the same native language, i.e. Persian. They were attending English classes five times a week with each session lasting for 75 minutes. The number of sessions for an entire semester was 15.

Table 1. *The Characteristics of the Participated Students*

Students	Gender	Age	Course book	Number of students	Students' proficiency level of
Class A	Male	22-27	Topnotch	9	Fundamentals (elementary)
Class B	Male	22-27	Topnotch	11	Topnotch (intermediate)

3.2. Data Collection

The data of this study are the videotapes of different sessions from both classes. Ten lessons wherein there were a greater variety of classroom activities and more teacher–student interactionswere chosen for this study. For instance, the exam sessions were omitted from analyzing phase. Each recorded lesson was about 75 minutes long.

Several measures were taken in order to make sure that the reliability and validity of the research findings will not be greatly affected by the use of this data collection approach. First, although participant teachers received some explanation about the nature of data collection procedure, they were not explicitly informed about the purpose of the research; that is, they were not told that the focus of the study was on students' code switching. By so doing, it was hoped that they would not be negatively affected by their conscious attention to the CS phenomenon and their classroom practice would be closer to the natural situation. Second, in order to minimize the effect of the presence of camera on teachers' and students' classroom conduct, the firsttwo sessions were set aside in the analysis phase. Also, the video recording was completed without

the presence of the researcher so that teachers' and students' classroom performance would not be negatively influenced by the presence of an observer.

3.3. Procedure

Based on the research questions which addressed types, frequency and functions of students' classroom CS respectively, the collected data were analyzed in three phases. In the first one, the video recorded sessions of students' classroom performance were watched with the purpose of identifying those occasions when instances of CS happened in their talk.

All instances in which students switched from English (FL) to Persian (ML) were transcribed and switched discourses were categorized based on the types mentioned in the literature section, i.e. tag switching, inter-sentential and intra-sentential switching. Tag-switching, emblematic switching or extra-sentential switching (Muysken, 1995), as referred in literature section, is the insertion of a tag or a short fixed phrase in one language. Inter-sentential switching includes a switch at a clause or sentence boundary. Intra-sentential switching is defined as switching within the clause or sentence boundary. In this part students CS were classified and a table was designed for students for each of the classes through which the frequency of the switches was presented. Criteria for determining the beginning and the end of the transcripts included either linguistic or behavioral features in their performance. Overall, care was taken to include as much contextual clues in the transcribed segments as possible in order to be able to recognize the functions fulfilled by the instances of code switching.

At the same time, to check reliability of the labeling phase (i.e., classification of the assigned themes under various groups), a second person, a

colleague who was familiar with the research analytic scheme, was requested to regroup the extracted parts, an attempt which is believed to increase the reliability of the results (Gass & Mackey, 2000). The results yielded 90% of consistency between the researcher's categorization and that of the outside examiner.

3.4. Coding Functions

Following the existing literature on student code switching and the available classifications (e.g., Rolin-Ianziti, 2002; Qian et al., 2009; Eldridge, 1996), a coding scheme was designed for categorizing the functions performed by the instances of students' code switching. One of the reasons for developing such new schemes was the shortages of the existing ones in terms of both comprehensiveness and accuracy. Efforts were made to come up with an inclusive classification as much as possible so that the maximum number of imaginable functions would be included. On the other hand, one of the outstanding pitfalls of previous classifications was the confusion of functions and reasons, in that, sometimes the whys of code switching were classified as the whens.

CS of students was grouped into two broad categories of pedagogical and social functions. The first category including instances of code-switching orientated to classroom tasks was divided in to subcategories including *equivalence, clarification, and reiteration* (Eldridge, 1996). The social function category which is not related to learning objectives includes *floor-holding, group membership and imitation (*Reyes, 2004). A complete version of the new coding schemes of functions with each category and subcategory can be found in the following tables.

Table 2. Functions of Student CS

Functions	Subcategory
Pedagogical (methodological) functions	Equivalence
	Clarification
	Reiteration
Social (affective) functions	Floor-holding
	Group membership
	Imitation

Table 3. *Examples for each Function (Students)*

Function	Example
Equivalence	S: sorry, concentration means *tamarkoz*? T: yes. That's right.
Clarification	S: sore throat? T: yes, painful because of infection. S: infection means *ofunat*? T: yes. S: sore throat *yani geludard*? T: yes, it is.
Reiteration	T: Every country has its own currency. S: Currency? T: Yes, money. For example in Iran currency is rial. S: *Poli, arzi?* T: yes…
Floor-holding	T: You said that you were happy there, and then you said you were sad? S: Yes, I was happy, *ghablesh shad boodam dige*(I was happy before that)…and then…
Group membership	S: *yad omadan chi meshod* (what is the meaning of *yad omadan*)? S: remember. S: I remember one day …
Imitation	S: Teacher *goftan baray finale hafteye bad amade bashin.*

4. Results

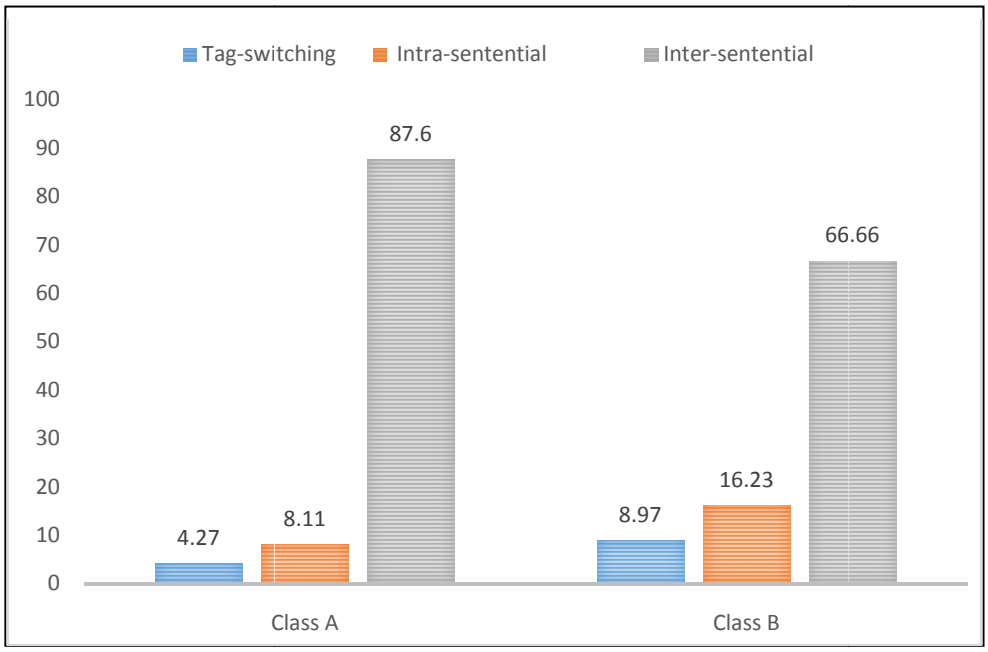
4.1. The Types and Functions of CS Made by Students in EFL Classes

In this part, the data of two classes are presented in one table for comparing the three types of switch patterns. As shown in table 4, among the three subcategories, inter-sentential switching (87.60) far outweighs the tag-switching (4.27) and intra-sentential switching (8.11) for class A and the CS patterns of three types for class B are 8.97 (tag-switching), 16.23 (intra-sentential switching) and 66.66 (inter-sentential switching). This table shows that students with limited proficiency usually use inter-sentential switching more than tag-switching or intra-sentential switching.

Table 4. *Types of Switching in Students Talk*

Types	Tag-switching	Intra-sentential	Inter-sentential
Class A			
Number	10	19	205
Frequency (%)4.27		8.11	87.60
Class B			
Number	14	38104	
Frequency (%)	8.97	16.23	66.66

In the following graph (graph 1), the distribution of three types of CS between two classes is compared.



Graph 1. Types of Switching in Students Talk

4.2. Functions of Students' Code Switching

As it is the case for teacher code switching, the students also are not always aware of the reasons for CS as well as its functions and outcomes. Although they may unconsciously perform code switching, it clearly serves some functions either beneficial or not. These functions are grouped into broad categories: pedagogical and social functions. The functions in the first category which are orientated to classroom tasks listed as equivalence, clarification and reiteration. The social function category which is not related to learning objectives includes floor-holding, group membership and imitation quotation.

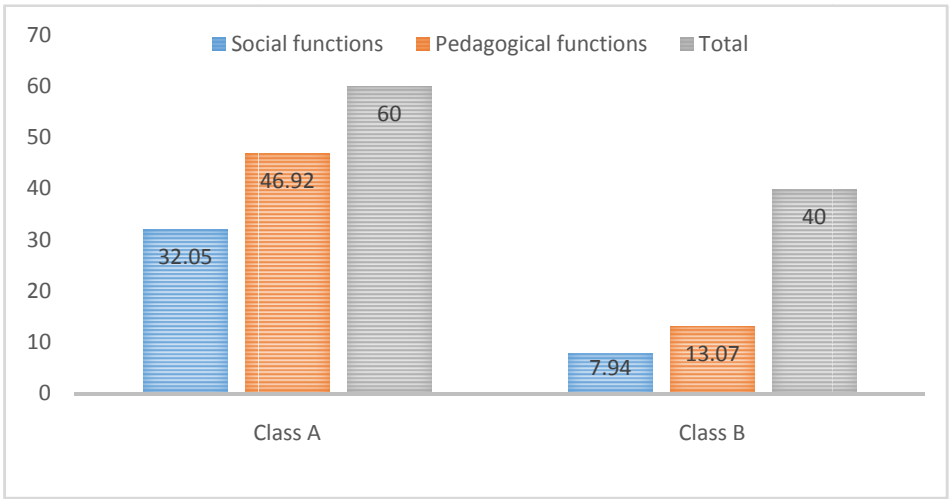
As shown in the following table (table 5), students mostly use CS for pedagogical purposes (78.20% for class A and 80.12%for class B). Generally

speaking, the patterns of CS for these two main categories are similar for the students of two classes.

Table 5. *Frequency of the Total and the Two Main Categories by Students of each Class*

	CLASS A	CLASS B
TOTAL		
NUMBER	234	156
PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTIONS		
NUMBER	183	125
PERCENTAGES	78.20	80.12
SOCIAL FUNCTIONS		
NUMBER	51	31
PERCENTAGES	21.79	19.78

Comparing the main categories of code switching functions for each class (According to the graph 2), CS pattern in both categories of pedagogical and social functions is used more in the class A rather than class B.

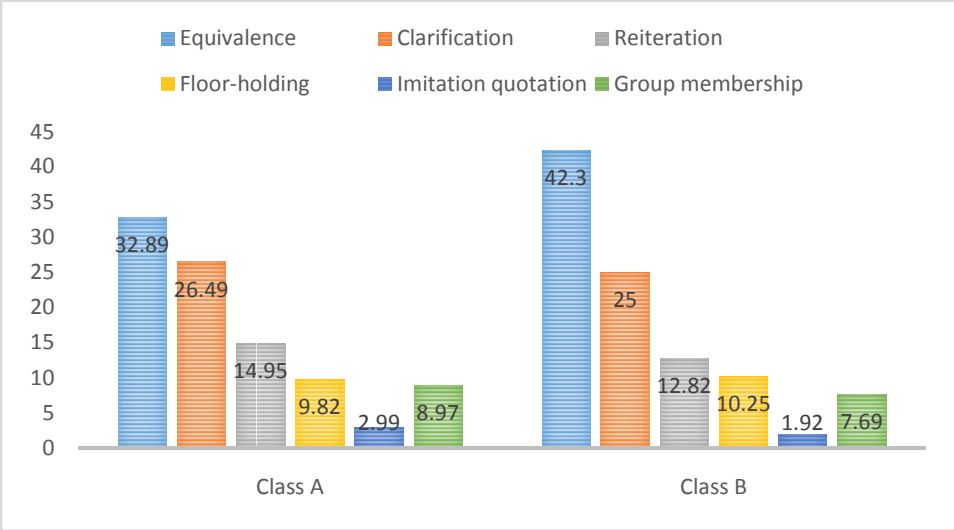


Graph 2. Frequency of the Total and the Two Main Categories by Students of Each Class

When it comes to the subcategories of functions, the distribution through two classes are different with each other. What is significant in both classes is that equivalence, one of the subcategories of pedagogical functions outnumbers the other ones.

Table 6. *Frequency of the Use of Subcategories by Students of each Class*

	Class A		Class B	
Equivalence	Number	Percentages	Number	Percentages
	84	35.89	66	42.30
Clarification	62	26.49	39	25.00
Reiteration	35	14.95	20	12.82
Floor-holding	23	9.82	16	10.25
Group membership	21	8.97	12	7.69
Imitation quotation	7	2.99	3	1.92
TOTALL	234	60.00	156	40.00



Graph 3: Frequency of the use of subcategories by students of each class

Interestingly, students in the intermediate level alternate the language less than students in elementary class. This is may be due to the fact that they are in higher level of language proficiency.

4.3. The Relationship Between The Language Proficiency Level of The Students and Their Use of Code Switching

Students use inter-sentential more than two other types of CS which may be due to their proficiency level since this type needs more competency in both languages..The result of this study revealed that there is a negative relationship between bilingual CS and language proficiency of students. In other word, students in higher level of proficiency use more CS than students in lower levels.

The results show that the students of class A (elementary level) used more CS. May be the reason is that speakers with the limited degree of bilingual communicative competence cannot use it frequently as a strategy to meet their conversational goals.

5. Discussion

5.1. Types of CS for Students

Based on Sankoff and Poplack (1981), three types of CS are defined in the present research. Students in this study were found to engage in these three types of switching i.e. *Tag-switching*, *Inter-sentential switching, Intra-sentential switching.* It seems that the pattern of distribution of these three types is similar between students of two classes.

Generally speaking, students as participants in the present study use inter-sentential type more than two other types. The reason for that may be related

to their proficiency level that they have acquired. Obviously this type needs less proficiency than intra-sentential type.

On the whole, the result of this study revealed that there is a negative relationship between bilingual CS and language proficiency of students. The results show that the students of class A (elementary level) used more CS than class B (intermediate level).The reason is that speakers with the limited degree of bilingual communicative competence cannot use it frequently as a strategy to meet their conversational goals. Based on Genesee (2002), the number of instances of 'code-switching' can be interpreted to reflect the developing communicative competence.

5.2. Functions of CS: Students

As referred in the coding function section, the functions of CS for students are divided in to broad categories of pedagogical and social functions. There are three subcategories of *equivalence* (making use of the native equivalent of a certain lexical item in target language), *clarification* and *reiteration* for pedagogical function. The results of this study show that 'Equivalence' function is considered as a defensive mechanism for students as it gives the students the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gapes resulting from foreign language incompetence. This process may be correlated with the deficiency in linguistic competence of target language, which makes the student use the native lexical item. In this function which is a proficiency related one; it was revealed that elementary learners (class A) outperformed advanced ones (class B). It seems that all elementary students resorted to code switching when they were not able to locate a word in English, hence made use of the Persian word instead. This is either because of their deficiency in English proficiency or

because of the fact that the elementary students lacked the ability to circomlocute when they did not know the English equivalent.

In clarification, changing the language to make sure that the received input is correct, the pattern of this function is somehow similar for the students of two classes. This function occurs especially in the case of learning new words. Similarity in pattern of this function may be because of the fact that clarification is an important part of learning a second language.

The other consideration in students' CS functions is reiteration. In this case, the massage in target language is repeated by student in native code through which the learner tries to give the meaning by making use of a repetition technique. The data show that the elementary students (class A) were more skillful in using this function or strategy. The reason for this specific language alternation case may be two-fold: first, student may not have transferred the meaning exactly in the target language. Second, the student may think that it is more appropriate to code switch in order to indicate the teacher that the content is clearly understood.

The first social function to be introduced is *floor-holding*. A function in which the students fill the stopgap with native language use to continue the stream of conversation. It is a mechanism used more by the intermediate students (class B) in order to avoid gaps in communication, which may result from the lack of fluency in target language.

They made use of Persian words or phrase in order to indicate that they are not shackled within English language boundaries. It can be explained that intermediate students are by now bilinguals who have access to both languages, so can utilize it for these higher order functions of language.

But it should be noted that the learners performing CS for floor holding generally have the same problem: they cannot recall the appropriate target

language structure or lexicon. It may be claimed that this type of language alternation may have negative effects on learning of a foreign language: since it may result in loss of fluency in long term.

In other social function named *group membership*, usually while students do the tasks as pair work or group work, they switch to their native language. This is a function that can be observed among the students of both classes as an unavoidable strategy. The reason is that they want to help each other to do the task faster and correctly even through bearing the cost of changing the code.

As the last subcategory of social function, in *imitation quotation*, sometimes students for announcing a quotation switch to their mother language. Although the frequency of this function is low for the students of two classes but it is reported for both of them.

It is worth mentioning that the pedagogical functions were more than social functions for both classes and elementary students made use of these functions more compared to intermediate students in the classroom. Generally speaking, lack of English proficiency is not the only reason and motive behind English language learners' code-switching in the class, however; there are social and psychological factors playing their roles in this phenomenon.

6. Conclusion

The description and analysis of data in the present study has shown that in student speech, CS exhibits specific linguistic and functional features. Linguistically, inter-sentential CS is more evident than intra-sentential CS for learners. From the analysis of functions for student code switching, we may conclude that CS represents one of the strategies that students employ it to repair their speech.

This study, through showing data, also argues for the use of code switching

among both intermediate and elementary students. Teachers should not think that because they want to make their students proficient in English, so they should handle the classroom in English and abandon the use of L1 in the classroom. In the review of literature of this study the advantages and the disadvantages of L1 use in the classroom were discussed. It is mainly argued that L1 use in classroom is more advantageous rather than detrimental.

The last point is that CS is to be used mainly as a transition language teaching technique to eventually all English instruction. With the improvement of students' level of proficiency, communication in EFL classroom should take place in the target language as much as possible.

The results showed that participants (students) mostly resorted to the L1 to accomplish pedagogical functions. Therefore, ironically the first language was used as a tool and as a strategy of learning for students.

Pedagogical Implementations

Many CS studies are situated in classrooms of secondary and tertiary education, while few have investigated the foreign language classrooms through different levels. The present study draws from previous researches and aims to find out the patterns of L1 and TL distribution in student talk and the functions that student's CS serves in English classroom.

The current study shows that the majority of CS in the classroom is highly purposeful, and related to pedagogical goals. The issue of how we treat language alternation in the classroom is of central methodological importance and one that has enormous implications for language teachers. So, it is crucial that we understand precisely its causes, motivations, effects and functions. This study by providing a comprehensive view of CS functions can be useful especially for teachers. These findings can give them some new perspectives of

CS in ELT classes. The present study can, therefore, help teachers to have a better understanding of their learners' code switching and to use CS consciously toward having more efficient teaching and learning.

Limitation of the Study

Although the research has reached its aims, one limitation was unavoidable. Because of the time limit, this research was conducted only on a small size of population who were attending the general English course. Therefore, to generalize the results for larger groups, the study should have involved more participants at different levels.

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