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L'EDUCATEUR
REVUE INTERNATIONALE MULTIDISCIPLINAIRE

Publiée par :

L'ECOLE NORMALE SUPERIEURE,
UNIVERSITE D'ABOMEY-CALAVI

Sous la direction du :

Dr (MC) Jean-Claude HOUNMENOU
& Dr (MC) Germain GONZALLO

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L'EDUCATEUR

REVUE INTERNATIONALE MULTIDISCIPLINAIRE

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CODE SWITCHING IN BENINESE EFL CLASSROOMS: CASE STUDY OF SOME SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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&

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Abstract

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, it is noticed that teachers and students use sometimes other languages such as a mother tongue (L1) and/or the official language (L2) to make the lesson better understood. Cause (2007) said that this dynamic passage from L3 to L1 and/or L2 in teaching a foreign language is called code switching. Code switching is used by the EFL teachers to make clearer the lesson to the learners, to claim order or discipline in the classroom, to explain the rules, to express a feeling of angry, to make humour and to reformulate the instruction. Benin being itself a multilingual country because of the presence of more than fifty national languages, the usage of mother tongues or the official language in Beninese EFL

classes intervenes by taking into account many conditions. First, the geographical area is important in the choice of the L1. Secondly, the L1 of the EFL teacher is not negligible. If the national language used as "lingua franca" in this part of the country is not understood by the students, they make use of the L2 constantly. If in non-linguistic courses code switching's role is not important, with the linguistic courses it essentially plays a didactic and communicative role in order to solve lexical access difficulties and has a sociolinguistic function in EFL classes. The objective of the present research is to point out the importance of the use of L1 and/or L2 in EFL classes, its advantages and disadvantages. To reach the goal of this investigation, some research instruments such as questionnaire, classroom observation, and interview have been used.

Keywords: Code switching, EFL, national language, French, language acquisition.

Résumé

        Dans les classes d'anglais langue étrangère, on constate que les enseignants et les apprenants utilisent parfois la langue maternelle (L1) et/ou la langue officielle (L2). Cette utilisation d'autres langues que l'anglais se fait

dans le but de mieux faire comprendre la leçon. Cause (2007) dit que ce passage dynamique de la L3 à la L1 et/ou la L2 dans le processus d'acquisition d'une langue étrangère est appelé « alternance codique. » L'alternance codique est utilisée par les enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère afin de mieux expliquer la leçon aux apprenants, donner un ordre ou réclamer la discipline dans la classe, expliquer les règles, exprimer une sensation de colère, faire de l'humour et reformuler une instruction. Le Bénin étant lui-même un pays multilingue à cause de la présence de plus d'une cinquantaine de langues nationales, l'usage de langues maternelles ou de la langue officielle dans les classes d'anglais prend en compte beaucoup de conditions. En premier, la région géographique est importante dans le choix de la L1. Deuxièmement, la L1 de l'enseignant n'est pas négligeable. Si la langue nationale utilisée comme '*lingua franca*' dans cette partie du pays n'est pas comprise par des apprenants, un usage permanent de la L2 se fait. Si l'usage de l'alternance codique n'est pas important dans les cours non-linguistiques, dans les classes de langue, il joue un rôle didactique et communicatif en vue de résoudre essentiellement des difficultés lexicales et a une fonction

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sociolinguistique. L'objectif de la présente recherche est de ressortir l'importance de l'usage de la L1 et/ou de la L2 dans classes d'anglais langue étrangère tout en mettant en exergue ses avantages et ses inconvénients. Pour ce faire, les instruments de recherche tels que les questionnaires, les observations de classe, et les interviews ont été utilisés.

Mots-clés: alternance codique, anglais langue étrangère, langue nationale, français, acquisition.

Introduction

Since 1990, Benin has adopted a new educational policy: the competency based-approach. It is claimed that the main objective of this policy is to make the learners build their knowledge by themselves, the teacher becoming a guide. But this application of the competency-based approach in English classes is facing some problems. It is important to mention that English is taught as a foreign language in Benin and the majority of learners start to study it in secondary school. How can one build a knowledge in a language he/she does not understand?

Consequently, it becomes very difficult to EFL teachers to make themselves understood when speaking only English. They feel then obliged to use French or a

mother tongue in order to explain the lessons to the learners. Code switching from English to French and/or a mother tongue becomes an inescapable phenomenon in Beninese EFL classes.

Code switching is used in multilingual societies where people have the opportunity to use two or more languages to communicate. Lisa Ponceau (2015) revealed the importance of code switching by stating:

> [...] l'alternance des codes joue un rôle important dans l'apprentissage et dans la construction des savoirs en langue étrangère ; employer les deux langues qui circulent dans la classe (la langue maternelle et la langue étrangère) n'est donc plus considéré comme défavorable à l'apprentissage d'une langue. L'emploi des deux langues peut au contraire servir de « levier » à l'apprentissage de nouveaux savoirs linguistiques (p. 78).

For Ponceau, code switching cannot contribute to any learner failure for that cross lingual fact allows an efficient

interaction between the teacher and the learners. Tiknoff and Vazquez-Faria (1982), Levine (2003), Chen Liping (2004) and many other scholars argue that L1 and L2 can promote the learning of the foreign language and L1 and L2 deserve a place in the EFL classrooms. Code switching is then a good strategy of efficiency in teaching. However, it is important to know the condition in which its usage can be beneficial to EFL students. The main objective of this paper is then to investigate how code switching is used in some Beninese EFL classes and to propose some strategies for a more efficient use of code switching. For this, a research method based on sampling, classroom observation and interview has been applied to the present paper. Before going ahead, let's point out some researchers' viewpoint about code switching and its use in language teaching classes.

1. Literature review and theoretical framework

This part deals with the definition of code switching, its functions in language teaching/learning classes, its advantages and disadvantages in a language acquisition process.

1.1 Definition of code switching

Jamshidi and Navehebraim (2013) define code-switching as the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent. Bullock and Toribio (2009) think that it is the bilinguals' ability to alternate easily between their two languages. As for, Myers-Scotton (1988) code switching is a linguistic choice which consists in "negotiations of personal Rights and Obligations (RO) relative to those of other participants in a talk exchange" (p.178). Myers-Scotton explains the rights and obligations, the understanding of the attitudes, current situation, and feelings of the listener. However, on condition that such understanding is achieved, the speaker may initiate his/ her switching of the code. Code switching can then be viewed as a functionally motivated process rather than a random one (McKay & Hornberger, 2009). What functions does code switching have in a language teaching/learning situation?

1.2 Code-switching in language teaching/ learning situation

There are several functions of code switching such as filling linguistic gaps, expressing ethnic identity and achieving particular discursive aims (Bullock & Toribio 2009:2). These different functions can be divided into two dominant approaches: the sociolinguistic approach and the grammatical approach (Auer 1998:3; Hamers & Blanc 2000:260).

The sociolinguistic approach to code switching focuses on variables such as: "the topic of conversation, the participants, the setting, and the affective aspect of the message" (Hamers & Blanc 2000:266). Hamers and Blanc (2000) add that "this type of code switching can be used as a marker of ethnic group membership and identity" (2000:267).

Grammar and vocabulary learning can also be facilitated by code switching (Cook 2001:414; Jingxia 2010:21; Kumar & Arenda 2012:61; Lin 2013:205). Kumar and Arenda (2012) find that grammar instruction was the area that contained the largest amount of code switching.

When code switching, the foreign language teachers is able to draw upon students' L1 and or L2 grammar knowledge, which agreed with what Cook (2001) found in her study. For this author, explicit grammar teaching could be conveyed more thoroughly in the students' L2; even students with a high foreign language proficiency level absorbed information about grammar better if it was in their L1 (Cook 2001:414).

As for Lin (2013), code switching seems to increase the amount of cognitive processing made by students. He suggests that a larger cognitive effort is required to process words when there is both an explanation in the students' L2 and a translation into the students' L1, which could mean that the students will learn new vocabulary more thoroughly (pp.205-207). Code switching can then be of great help when teaching new vocabulary.

To sum up, both the sociolinguistic approach and the grammatical approach can be applied in second or foreign language teaching/learning to facilitate the learning outcome. However, some researchers such as Ellis (1984), Kannan (2009) and Olmo-castillo (2014)argue that if the code switching use in language classes is not well

organised, the learners can miss out the target language input so this language teaching strategy should be forbidden in classrooms.

2. Code switching in Beninese EFL classes

2.1 Research methodology

In order to study the extent to whiching EFL teacher's code switch in the classroom and the students' attitudes towards it, both teachers and students have been consulted. The participants in this study are then both teachers and students, all from a medium-sized town in Benin. Six (6) teachers were interviewed, four male teachers and two female and their mother tongues are Fongbé, Kotafon. They teach English 4 and 6 at two different secondary schools, namely CEG le Méridien and CEG Plateau. Four of them have been teaching for more than ten (10) years and two for thirteen (13) years.

Sixty-five (65) students from the same secondary schools (CEG le Méridien and CEG Plateau) filled out the questionnaire: thirty-five (35) of English 4 and thirty (30) of English 6. The majority of these students have Fongbé and Kotafon as mother tongue (47 out of 65) and the others

(18) understand one of the two languages. It is important to point out there is inter comprehension between Fongbé and Kotafon. Out of the 65 learners, thirty-one (31) have Fongbé as mother tongue, sixteen (16) are Kotafon and eighteen (18) belong to other languages.

During the teachers' interview, questions about their background, the situations in which they code switch during EFL classes, the importance of code switching in the process of language teaching/learning, the advantages and disadvantages of code switching have been asked.

As far as students' questionnaire is concerned, it is a nine-question sheet which have been distributed after classroom observation. It is a close questionnaire of multiple choice type allowing students to choose only an answer per question. It has taken five minutes to be filled in by the students and has been collected on spot to avoid missed or lost questionnaires.

2.2 Results and data analysis

This section presents the results and analysis of the interviews, classroom observation and questionnaires. What

is the teachers' point of view about code switching in EFL classroom?

2.2.1 Teachers' view on the importance of the use of L1 and/or L2, its advantages and disadvantages

The main purpose of the interviews was to look into some teachers' general views on the importance of code-witching and also to find out when and why they code switch and whether they have a specific purpose in doing so. They also have given their opinion on the fact that, in code switching, there are negative or positive impacts to reach their goal of students' understanding. The teachers' answers have been subdivided into three different parts: their views about the importance of code switching, the reason why they code switch or not, and the advantages and disadvantages of code switching in EFL classes.

All of the six teachers interviewed for this research recognise being obliged in a way or another to use code switching when conducting English class by using French and/or mother tongue. They say that they use French to explain difficult words and to point out similarities and

differences of French and English grammatical rules in order to help the learners to understand the lessons.

Talking about the advantages of code switching in EFL classes, one of the interviewees states that he "[…] started using this strategy of teaching since six years and noticed through the assessments that the learners have more good marks than in the past." Another one confess that by using code switching in EFL classes, he has noticed that the learners are more interested in English learning for they better understand what is going on educational authorities.

As for the disadvantages, the interviewed teachers think that the non-existence of formal criteria of the use of code switching in EFL classes makes some teachers this is the reason why we should not involve. For them, teachers should not allow students to speak French or their mother tongue during EFL classes.

2.2.2 Discussion

All of the six interviewed teachers use French and the mother tongue to conduct class, so code switching in undeniable fact in EFL classes. They use this strategy to

explain English words and to make the instructions more clear. According to them, the use of the French and mother tongue play an important role in the teaching/learning process. The advantages of this strategy according to the interviewees are numerous. Code switching helps in vocabulary and grammar learning, and its importance in the implementation of good atmosphere in the class have been emphasised on. So code switching appear a real tool of lesson planning and classroom management.

Nevertheless some of the disadvantages of this strategy have been pointed out. The most important is that when code switching is not used efficiently, it can prevent learners from improving their speaking skill in English. To cope with this situation, the interviewed teachers propose that code switching should be accepted in EFL classes as a learning/teaching strategy with a clear guideline about how and when to use it. By so doing, code switching will enrich the EFL learning process for the reference to L1 and/or L2 is important when acquiring a new language.

2.2.3 Students' answers

As said above, sixty-five (65) learners have filled in the questionnaire for this study. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to seek how the learners perceive the use of French and/or mother tongue in a real classroom situation. The two first questions were about their form and their mother tongue. Thirty-five (35) learners are in 4th form and thirty (30) are in form 6. As far as the learners' mother tongues are concerned, thirty-one (31) have Fongbé as mother tongue, sixteen (16) are Kotafon and eighteen (18) belong to other languages. As for the third question, it is about the language in which learners prefer grammar lessons to be explained to them. The table below (Table 1) displays their answers.

Question n°3: When my teacher explains grammar lessons, I want him/her to use

Languages	Number	Percentage (%)
Only English	6	9.23
English and French	16	24.62
English and mother tongue	3	4.61
Only French	35	53.85

French and mother tongue	5	7.69
Only mother tongue	0	00
Total	**65**	**100**

Table 1: **Learners' language preference for grammar lessons explanation**

As can be seen in table 1, the majority of the learners (53.85%) prefer French to be used when explaining grammar lessons. Only six (6) learners out the sixty-five (65) i.e. 9.23% prefer grammar lessons to be explained in only English by their teacher. 24.62 % of them want English and French to be used together. As far as the use of mother tongue is concerned, three (3) learners feel at ease when English and mother tongue are used together and five (5) prefer French to be combined with the mother tongue for the explanation. None of them wants grammar lessons to be explained in only the mother tongue.

Question n°4: When my teacher gives us instructions, claim order or other things, I want him/her to use

Languages	Number	Percentage (%)
Only English	9	13.85
English and French	13	20

English and mother tongue	2	3.08
Only French	11	16.92
French and mother tongue	24	36.92
Only mother tongue	6	9.23
Total	**65**	**100**

Table 2: Learners' language preference for instructions, claiming order or other things

When it comes to give instructions, claim order or other things, the majority of learners prefer the use of French and/or mother tongue (36.92% for French and mother tongue, 16.92% for only French and 9.23% for only mother tongue). As far as the use of English is concerned, 13.85% prefer the teachers to use only English whereas 20% want English and French to be use together when giving instructions. Two (2) learners, i.e. 3.08% prefer the teacher to use English and mother tongue in this situation.

Question n°5: When I do not understand instructions, I

Languages	Number	Percentage (%)
Ask the teacher in English	5	7.69
Ask the teacher in French	27	41.54
Ask the teacher in my mother	0	0

tongue		
Ask a friend in English	0	0
Ask a friend in French	18	27.69
Ask a friend in my mother tongue	12	18.46
Ask nobody	3	4.62
Total	**65**	**100**

Table 3: Learners' language preference to ask question about non-understood instructions

To ask about non-understood instructions, the learners prefer to use French language whether they are going to ask the teacher or a friend (41.54% ask the teacher in French and 27.69% ask a friend in the same language). 18.46% of these learners prefer to ask a friend in their mother tongue and only five (5) i.e. 7.69% ask the teacher in English.

Question n°6: When my teacher speaks French or my mother tongue during English, I

Level of understanding	Number	Percentage (%)
Understand better	57	87.69
Understand less	0	0

Understand as well when he or she speaks English	8	12.31
Total	**65**	**100**

Table 4: Students' understanding degree

Here, almost all the learners understand better when the teacher uses French and/or their mother tongue to explain the lessons. However, 12.31% have the same understanding may the explanation is in French and/or mother tongue or in English.

Question n°7: If my teacher explains something that I do not understand I want him to re-explain it

Languages	Number	Percentage (%)
in English but in different way	19	29.23
in French	42	64.62
in my mother tongue	4	6.15
Total	**65**	**100**

Table 5: Learners' language preference for lesson explanation

When the learners do not get the teacher's explanation, the majority (64.62%) want the teacher to re-explain it in French. Nevertheless, 29.23% of the learners prefer the teacher to repeat the explanation in English by using other words or in a different way. 6.15% of these learners want the teacher to re-explain the lesson in their mother tongue.

Question n°8: When I am having English class, I want my teacher to

Languages	Number	Percentage (%)
Make me speak more English	57	87.69
Allow me to speak French and/or mother tongue	8	12.31
Total	**65**	**100**

Table 6: Preference of the learners about the language to speak in EFL classes

EFL learners prefer their teachers make them speak English when having class. Only 12.31% want to be allowed to speak French and/or their mother tongue.

Question n°9: My teacher speaks

Languages	Number	Percentage (%)
Only English	8	12.31
Only French	4	6.15
Mainly English but sometimes French and/or mother tongue	48	73.85
Mainly French and/or mother tongue but sometimes English	5	7.69
Total	**65**	**100**

Table 7: The language teachers use according to students

From this table, it clearly appears that the majority of teachers code switch in EFL classes. Eight (8) learners admit that English language is the only language used by their teachers during EFL classes.

2.2.4 Discussion

All the tables above can be summarised as follows:
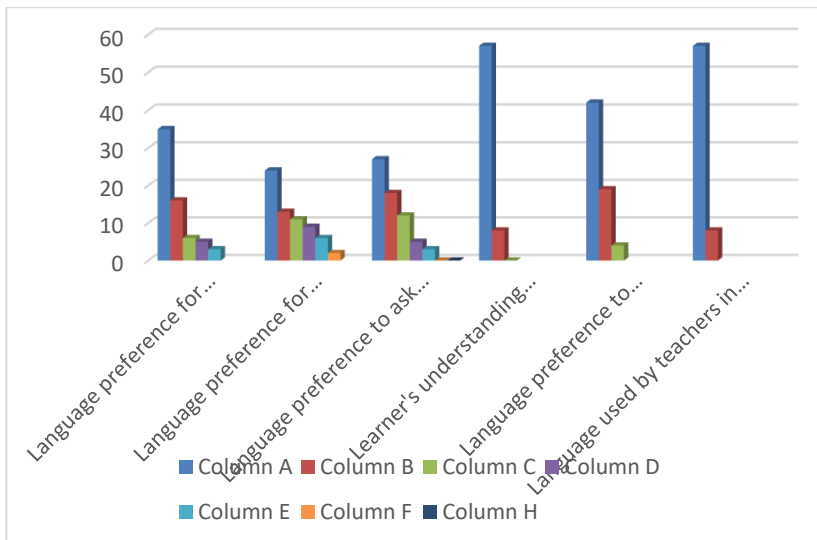
Graph: Summary of the learners' answers

The data of column A show the preference of the majority of EFL learners. Most of them prefer their teacher uses French to explain grammar lessons (Table 1). As far as giving instruction is concerned, they prefer the use of both French and mother tongue (Table 2). When they do not understand given instructions, they prefer to ask the teacher or a friend in French (Table 3). Accordingly, the majority of these learners assume that they better understand English

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lessons when their teacher speaks French and/or their mother tongue (Table 4). If they encounter understanding problems, forty-two (42) prefer their teacher to re-explain by using French (Table 5) and they confess that most of the times, their teachers use French and/or mother tongue in addition to English to communicate with them during EFL classes (Table 7). Surprisingly, 87.69% of these learners want their teacher make them speak English (Table 6). These results show that the learners consider the use of French and/or mother tongue in EFL classes as a means that can help them to acquire the ability to speak fluently English. This remark confirms Cook's assertion when he stated that code switching in language classes do not prevent learners from acquiring the target language but it is an important tool for both teachers and learners in the teaching/learning process (2001:271).

It has been also noticed that some teachers use only French or mainly French and/or mother tongue and sometimes English when conducting EFL classes. This situation should appear as a plea which will motivate school authorities to reconsider the use of L1 and L2 in EFL

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classes by establishing some criteria about how and when to code switch.

Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to investigate on how important is code switching in the process of a new language acquisition. From the results, it is noticeable that code switching is actually in Beninese EFL classes. All the teachers interviewed in the course of this study confess that it will be difficult to eradicate code switching from EFL classes.

The use of this strategy in EFL classes have many advantages and weaknesses. During the classroom observation, it is noticeable that EFL teachers' code switching is automatic and seems to be inevitable. As Trudgill (1984) said it, code switching in EFL classes should not be viewed as an evidence of poor language learning but as a "sign of giftedness" for the switching from one language to another successfully, the speaker must possess some skills (Hughes et al., 2006).

As for the learners, it has been observed that the main reason why they code switch to French or their mother tongue in EFL classes is that their competence in English is

so little that it does not allow them to communicate successfully. Do not allow them to code switch during classes can create anxiety which will prevent them to express themselves. Teachers should build a bridge from the 'known' of the second language or mother tongue to the 'unknown' of the target language (Sert, 2005).

The major weakness of code switching in the surveyed Beninese EFL classroom is related to the multilingual aspect of those classes. The fact that the students do not share the same first language makes code switching to this language exclusive. It has been observed that some teachers overcome this difficulty by code switching only to the second language but many of them do not care about this aspect. As stated above, the non-organisation of code switching in Beninese EFL classes make some teachers and learners overuse it, reducing then the chance of those learners to master English.

It is crucial then that we be aware of the societal diversity and multilingualism which are crucial for any program in teaching second language and in bilingual education as McKay and Hornberger (2009) said it and we corroborate them when they add that research on

multilingualism needs to be incorporated into materials and methods of teaching English, contrastive linguistics language testing and error analysis. This will help the EFL teachers to know what exactly to do and how to manage their classroom. By so doing, code switching will become an important tool of acquiring the target language.

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