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The Benefit of Code Switching within a Bilingual Education Program

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The Benefit of Code Switching within a Bilingual Education Program

Introduction

As an increasing number of Spanish-speaking students enter the school systems throughout the United States, districts are faced with meeting their academic needs. These students enter into the classroom with varying levels of mastery of the English language. While some of these students begin school with English fluency or competency in both English and their native language (Spanish), others are monolingual Spanish-speakers or have mastered just minimal vocabulary in the English language. It is these students who have perplexed educators and have caused them to reevaluate their methodology for teaching this growing number of minority students.

Some schools have adopted bilingual education programs, teaching subject matter in Spanish while the English language is taught separately. Others believe in immersion, or placing the students in mainstream classrooms in which they are expected to learn the English language and subject matter taught in English simultaneously. Still other schools hover somewhere in between, striving to find the best way to reach these children. In which of these settings are students able to attain subject matter more effectively? This question is the debate of bilingual education throughout the country.

In this study, I explore the effects of two types of education (bilingual and immersion) on Spanish dominant students in two cities in the U.S. Specifically, I examine the role of code-switching (the use of both Spanish and English within the same discourse) in bilingual and immersion settings. I explore the effects of code switching on bilingual students and whether subject matter can be discussed more effectively in classrooms where code-switching is allowed and encouraged due to the language freedom it provides.

Literature Review

As schools have been faced with teaching this growing number of Spanish-speaking students, different educational programs have emerged. In this study, I examine the effective and non-effective code switching that takes place by the students in an immersion classroom and a bilingual classroom.

An immersion classroom is one in which language minority students (in this case Spanish dominant children) are taught English through subject matter. Students are placed in an "English only" classroom where the aim is for these students to learn English as quickly as possible and to be able to function within the mainstream classroom. Colin Baker writes that the intended outcomes of placing students in such a classroom "often include monolingualism in the majority language of the country (or limited bilingualism) and assimilation into the mainstream culture, values and attitudes. " (145) Students within an immersion classroom are not only expected to learn the English language, but also to simultaneously learn subject matter in the second language (English).

A bilingual classroom is one in which both the majority language (English) and the minority language (in this case, Spanish) are spoken in the classroom. Subject matter is usually taught in Spanish while English is taught as a separate subject. As students' second language abilities develop, more of the subject matter may be discussed and taught in English. Although the bilingual and immersion classrooms in my study fit these definitions, it is important to note that, between districts, variations in both immersion and bilingual education programs do exist.

An interest in the study of code-switching has existed since the early twentieth century when Espinosa (1917) first wrote of a "speech mixture" in the dialogues of New Mexicans (Huerta-Macías 1). In the past two decades, this interest has grown considerably as code-

switching becomes a more frequent occurrence in classrooms in the U.S. Most recently, code switching has been defined as the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent (Poplack 224). An example of such code switching in a Spanish-speaking student was recorded while the student was playing a game within the bilingual classroom: "Your turn. *Después de llegar a la calle* 'after getting to the street' then you gotta slide. Slide." The student switched fluidly between Spanish and English without hesitation. Researchers debate the importance of this phenomenon; some call it "language interference" (Skiba, Hammink) while others believe it to be an essential part of the language acquisition process. Richard Skiba writes, "code switching may be viewed as an extension to language for bilingual speakers rather than an interference and from other perspectives it may be viewed as interference." (Skiba 4)

Those who believe code switching to be harmful claim that students will not be able to communicate effectively in either language. Rosa M. Fernandéz writes,

> *el cambio de código o code-switching, sobre todo entre inglés y español, se interpreta como una deficiencia linguistica que revela la falta de proficiencia del hablante en ambas lenguas.*
>
> code switching, above all between English and Spanish, is interpreted as a linguistic deficit that reveals the lack of proficiency of the speaker in both languages. (52)

Julianne E. Hammink comments that code switching is often viewed negatively. "It is often considered a low prestige form, incorrect, poor language, or a result of incomplete mastery of the two languages." (Hammink 1) She also comments that these negative feelings tend to be held by monolingual speakers (Hammink 5). Some monolingual speakers, primarily language purists, fear that "the use of a second language with the first will either keep the first one from growing or debase it or cause confusion in the speaker's mind." (Hammink 5) Because of these negative

connotations, many classrooms or entire school districts discourage code switching in academic settings.

There is research, however, that supports the use of code switching in the classroom as a strategy with which bilingual children are able to communicate more effectively. Code switching is one of the most frequent communication strategies used by foreign language students (Burenhult 5). These children do not view code switching negatively; rather they see it as a means to relay information more effectively. In their study of bilingual children, Ana Huerta Macías and Elizabeth Quintero found that, "code-switching serves to not only enhance communication in the teaching/learning process but can also help to maintain and develop the languages of a bilingual." (86) Such code switching is used to "elaborate, to emphasize, to specify an addressee and to clarify---in short, for effective communication." (Macías 76) Niclas Burenhult also agrees that the main function of code switching within a classroom is to communicate effectively, since the bilingual's proficiency of the second language may be incomplete. (4) Linguistic insecurity may be eased by code switching into the language that is most comfortable for the speaker (Burenhult 4) or using the more readily available lexical term (Hammink 1).

Although there has been much research done on code switching and its effects on the education of bilingual children, there is still not a consensus as to whether or not it should be permitted within academic situations. In this study, I examine how effective code switching (when students are able to communicate effectively by switching between languages) and non-effective code switching (when students cannot communicate because code switching is not allowed or understood) affect the students' acquisition and display of subject matter knowledge. I will show how such examples of code switching have negative or positive effects on the

students' learning. Through this research, I hope to make the benefits of code switching in academic settings more apparent so that bilingual students may be allowed to use this strategy as a learning aid.

Methodology

My involvement in a bilingual and an immersion classroom involved tutoring the Spanish dominant students in subject matter and teaching or re-teaching science or social studies lessons to the students in small groups.

I was a part of the immersion classroom two days a week from January 1999 to May 1999. Although I did participate in and observe numerous lessons within the immersion classroom, the majority of my time was spent in "pull-out" lessons with all five students in order to clarify subject matter concepts and vocabulary. During this time, I took the students to a small classroom within the library where we discussed concepts that were being taught in class. The purpose of my presence was to help re-teach (in the students' native language) previously taught subject matter in the hopes of clarifying what had been missed in the class lessons (taught in English).

My participation in the bilingual summer school began in June 2001 and ended with the session in August 2001. Summer school classes were half-day and I was a teacher in the bilingual classroom for the duration of the program. The main focus of the summer school class was a unit I taught in Spanish on erosion. Vocabulary for the unit was taught in Spanish in order to reinforce the concepts and vocabulary to which the students had already been exposed during the previous school year. I also taught lessons on how the different types of rocks are formed and I tutored several students in native language reading (in Spanish).

Participants

The focus of this study is on a first and second grade bilingual classroom in a public elementary school in Evanston, Illinois and a group of five Spanish-speaking fifth graders within an immersion classroom in a Bloomington, Illinois public elementary school. In these classrooms, students were expected to attain subject matter in science and social studies through lessons and activities provided by the teachers.

Students within the bilingual classroom were primarily first or second generation Mexican with monolingual Spanish-speaking parents. Although they were all Spanish dominant, the children's language abilities varied greatly. A small amount of the students could communicate adequately in both English and Spanish while others limited their use of English to one word utterances. Students were of a low middle-class socioeconomic level and the need for their parents to work or travel to Mexico sometimes interrupted summer school involvement. The class size varied between eight and twenty students, depending on the day and needs of the family. The class was taught by a bilingual woman who had learned Spanish through studying and living in Spain and the teaching of Mexican-American students. Her conversations with the students and her lessons were in both English and Spanish, as in a typical bilingual classroom.

Students in the immersion classroom came from various backgrounds and cultures. The five students portrayed in this study are either first or second generation Mexican and have monolingual Spanish-speaking parents. The students themselves were Spanish dominant and had limited English vocabulary. Conversations in English were usually short and comprised of short, two to three word sentences. They were from varying socioeconomic levels, ranging from low to upper middle-class. The classroom teacher was a monolingual English speaker who taught and addressed each of the five Spanish-speaking students in English.

Data Collection

Data for this study was gathered through cassette tape recordings in the bilingual classroom and journal observations in both classrooms. Journal observations were also used in the small group tutoring sessions with the immersion students.

Students' interactions with both peers and teachers within the classroom were documented in a journal through the use of a note-taking and note-making format. In this format, a student or group of students were observed for a set period of time during which objective observations were written in a journal. These observations included students' expressions, their speech, body language, physical surroundings and exact conversation. Objective observations were first listed in one column while interpretations of behavior and speech (how and if these factors were affecting learning) were recorded in a corresponding column.

The tape recorder, in addition to journal observations, was used in the bilingual classroom to record interactions between peers and between the students and teachers. When recording conversations of small groups, the recorder was placed on the table or on the ground near the group. During lessons or play time, the recorder was set behind the group. A few students were also recorded individually during one-on-one tutoring sessions. When these sessions were being recorded, the tape recorder was set on the table between the teacher (myself) and the student. Later, the taped conversations were transcribed and occurrences of code switching were highlighted.

Data documented for this study was also supplemented with information provided by the classroom teachers, including students' earlier assessments and grades, comments on personality in the classroom, and students' previous reactions toward both teachers and peers.

The tape recorder and my constant note-taking were accepted early as normal parts of the classroom. Although there was curiosity about my involvement for the first week of class, students quickly adjusted to my presence and accepted my role as a teacher and tutor. After the first week of journal writing and tape recording, questions from the students regarding my presence ceased.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data is qualitative. Journal observations and transcribed tape recordings were used to identify instances of code switching within the classrooms. These instances were then analyzed for their affect on students' acquisition and display of subject matter knowledge.

Two different types of code switching were deemed as non-effective. One type of non-effective code switching occurred when students had to cut their thoughts on subject matter knowledge short because of language barriers. In these instances, students began a statement in English and may have attempted to code switch into Spanish. Since the code switching was not acceptable or understood in the classroom, the students' attempts to communicate failed. Due to a lack of fluency in English or a minimal vocabulary, students could not adequately relay the information they knew about a given subject to the listener. In many cases, the students were later able to elaborate on the subject in Spanish (their native language). Such an example is seen in example (1) with a bilingual student in the immersion classroom.

(1) T1: Leo, what can you tell us about the lava?

S1: The lava is the…the…red that comes out from the ground.

T1: From the ground?

S1: No, not the ground. From the... [he leans over to Anayeli, another bilingual student] *¿Cómo se dice volcán?* 'How do you say volcano?'

T1: Leo?

S1: I don't know.

Since S1 was within an immersion classroom where only English was spoken, a lack of vocabulary in his second language (English) prevented expression of ideas and thoughts. He clearly knew where the lava came from when he asked a bilingual classmate in Spanish, *¿Como se dice volcán?* 'How do you say volcano?' His response, however, when prompted by the monolingual English-speaking teacher was not a further attempt to relay this information to her. Instead he claimed, "I don't know." He was unable to effectively communicate his knowledge of volcanoes to the teacher.

Another type of non-effective code switching was observed when no attempt was made by students to share subject matter knowledge with English-speaking peers or the classroom teacher but were later able and eager to share this information in Spanish. A lack of fluency in English and a minimal vocabulary prevented students from voicing their ideas in English even though they did have knowledge on the subject. Code switching into Spanish (although not attempted) would not have been effective because the majority of peers and the teacher within the immersion classroom did not understand the student's native language (Spanish). An example of this type of non-effective code switching is seen in (2):

(2) T1: María, what did you find out in your experiment?

S2: Nothing.

T1: What did you write in your notebook?

S2: We write...um...I don't know.

Student 2 did not share the information that she had learned during her barometer experiment with the classroom teacher. She had, however, made discoveries during the experiment (done with a bilingual partner) and later communicated these discoveries to me in Spanish. Because she readily volunteered this information to me in her native language (Spanish) it may be concluded that the information was previously withheld within the immersion classroom setting because of a lacking English vocabulary. Code switching may have been beneficial to the student but wasn't because the students' native language would not have been understood in the immersion classroom

Examples of effective code switching were also noted. In these instances, the student was able to clearly communicate his or her knowledge of the subject matter to a teacher or peers through the use of two languages. Based on the dialogues, it was determined whether these instances of effective or non-effective code switching were helpful or harmful to the students' acquisition and display of subject matter.

Results

Code switching was a common occurrence within the bilingual classroom. Students often switched freely between Spanish and English during class and play in order to communicate with teachers and peers. Instances of non-effective code switching were not observed within the bilingual first and second grade classroom. In all documented instances of code switching, in the bilingual classroom, students accurately conveyed meaning and were able to be understood by the listener.

Nineteen examples of [the two types of] non-effective code switching were found within the immersion English-only classroom. In these examples, students did not accurately communicate their subject matter knowledge to the listener. Five examples of effective code

switching between bilingual peers were documented within the immersion classroom while numerous examples also took place in the private tutoring sessions between the bilingual tutor (myself) and the bilingual students.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

Students who were able to code switch freely within the classroom were faced with fewer language barriers when discussing subject matter. Thus, they were better able to relay the information that they had learned to teachers or peers because of the language freedom code switching provides. Conversations of students who were not allowed to code switch or code switched non-effectively were often choppy and came to an end prematurely. These students were not able to accurately convey their knowledge of subject matter to teachers or peers due to language barriers.

When I began working with the bilingual students in the immersion classroom as a native language tutor, the students' grades in science and social studies corresponded to their level of fluency in the English language. As I worked with them as a small group, however, I realized that these grades were not an accurate reflection of their knowledge in the subject matter. Since subjects had been taught and assessed in English, the grades were simply a reflection of their grasp on the language instead of an accurate representation of their subject matter knowledge. Students were often able to discuss subject matter with me in Spanish but were faced with a lacking vocabulary when they were asked to relay this information in the immersion classroom (where the teacher did not speak Spanish).

This occurred to S1 when he attempted to discuss subject matter with the monolingual English teacher in the immersion classroom in the previous example of non-effective code

switching (1). After effectively discussing volcanoes with the group of students in Spanish, we returned to the immersion classroom for a whole class discussion on the subject. The teacher began to ask S1 questions which she hoped would reveal his knowledge on the subject. In (1), Leo clearly knew that lava was the substance that came from deep within the volcano. A lacking English vocabulary, however, kept him from providing this information to the teacher. When Anayeli would not respond to his Spanish inquiry, *cómo se dice volcán* 'how do you say volcano?' Leo gave up on trying to answer the teacher's question. In spite of his knowledge of the subject, he shrugged his shoulders and falsely told the teacher, "I don't know." If code switching would have been welcome and understood in the classroom, Leo could have discussed volcanoes much more effectively.

Student 3 (also a student in the fifth grade immersion classroom) often had the same difficulty with a lacking English vocabulary in science and social studies. As I entered the room one afternoon, I observed him hunched over his desk, his social studies book and a blank worksheet laid out before him.

> (3) Carlos [S3] was bent over his desk, his eyebrows furrowed. As I leaned over his shoulder, I saw a blank worksheet which he was attempting to complete. Number one said simply the word: woodlands. Carlos was to write a sentence relating it to the settlers of Illinois. I approached Carlos and asked him if he knew what "woodlands" meant. He shook his head at me. "*Significa bosque* (it means forest)," I told him. Carlos' eyes quickly lit up and a small "ohhh" escaped his mouth. "I know what *bosque* (forest) means. A *bosque* (forest)is where they hunted for animals and stuff." Carlos turned back to his work and began to write his sentence on woodlands. (journal notes)

This instance began as an example of non-effective code switching because S3 was unable to use the Spanish word he knew, *bosque,* to write about woodlands. He was unable to communicate the importance of the word "woodlands" in English because he was unfamiliar with the English vocabulary. After the meaning of the word had been translated into his native language

(Spanish), he was able to use the Spanish word that he was familiar with to discuss the subject. With the bilingual tutor (myself) he was able to effectively code switch and he easily told me why the *bosque* was important to settlers. If S3 had not been able to code switch with the bilingual tutor, he would not have been able to accurately convey his knowledge of the subject matter to his teacher through the worksheet. As a result, the assessment of S3's knowledge of woodlands would only have reflected his level of vocabulary in English, not his understanding of the subject.

Difficulty with the acquisition of subject matter and with the accurate portrayal of this knowledge was also displayed through the students' presence and attitudes in the classroom. Another example of the harm of not allowing code switching within the classroom is displayed through the silence of the students.

> (4) Leo[S1] sat in the corner of the room, slouched down in his chair, avoiding eye contact with Mrs. D [T1]. Carlos[S3] had the same posture and was gazing without direction around the back of the room. Daniela[S4] and Vanessa[S5] whispered occasionally to each other in Spanish but did not readily volunteer any information to the classroom discussion. Genesis[S6] looked suspiciously like he could fall asleep at any moment. (journal notes)

Shortly after this observation was noted, a brief dialogue occurred between Daniela [S3] and the teacher.

> (5) T1: Daniela, how do you think earthquakes affected the people who lived there?
>
> S4: I don't know.
>
> T1: Do you think something happened to them or their homes?
>
> S4: Maybe.

When observing these five Spanish-speaking students in the immersion classroom setting (4), I noted that they seemed uninterested and uninvolved, only responding to class discussion when asked a question directly by the teacher. If they were not singled out, they sat silently at their

desks, removed from the rest of the class. The students in (4) were clearly detached from the lesson. They did not participate in the classroom discussion as did their monolingual English-speaking peers. Student 4 responded with disinterest in (5) as she stated to the teacher, "I don't know" when asked a question about earthquakes. Had the teacher been completing any sort of authentic assessment of the students' responses, she would have found them to be uninvolved in the lesson with little information to share with the class.

Nevertheless, these students showed great interest in the subject matter when discussing it with me in both English and Spanish as shown in (6).

(6) T2: What can you tell me about earthquakes? *¿De los terremotos?* 'About earthquakes?'

S4: *Puedan causar* 'they can cause' a lot of hurt to people.

S1: And they can knock down *casas y edificios* 'houses and buildings.'

S3: It depends on where they are. How much damage.

S4: *Sí, si están en la ciudad o no* 'Yes, if they are in the city or not.'

Because of their use of effective code switching, the same student (S4) who appeared disinterested and seemed to have minimal knowledge of earthquakes in the immersion classroom in (5) relayed information about the natural disasters to me in a small group session. By code switching effectively, she told me various facts about earthquakes, including the harm that they can cause to people and the amount of damage that varies between locations. This information may not have been volunteered minutes before in the immersion classroom due to her lacking fluency and vocabulary in English. By allowing S4 to code switch effectively, she was able to communicate her knowledge of subject matter accurately.

Within the bilingual classroom where code switching was accepted, there were no examples recorded where students had to cut their conversations short due to language barriers.

Students switched freely between languages in order to convey meaning. The student in the following example of effective code switching is simulating how a rock is formed beneath the pressure of water.

(7) S7: Look, *maestra* 'teacher', I am making *un lago* 'a lake.'

T2: *¿Qué tipo de roca es?* 'What kind of rock is it?'

S7: Mmmmm...*¿Roca sedimentaria?* 'Sedimentary rock?'

T2: *Bien. ¿Cómo lo sabes?* 'Good. How do you know?'

S7: *Porque va a tener* layers *diferentes.* 'Because it's going to have different layers.'

In (7), an example of effective code switching, S7 was able to clearly communicate her knowledge of sedimentary rocks to the teacher. The conversation in Spanish and English resulted in S7 saying, *Porque va a tener* layers *diferentes.* 'Because it will have different layers.' It is unclear why S6 switched from her Spanish explanation into English. Nevertheless, her sentence was spoken without hesitation and her knowledge of the subject matter was accurately conveyed to the teacher.

Example (8) depicts a typical teacher-led discussion in the bilingual first and second grade classroom. Both the teacher and the students switch without hesitation between English and Spanish in order to convey meaning in the best way possible. The following example of effective code switching is a teacher led discussion regarding what will become of some rocks that we have placed in a rock tumbler.

(8) T2: How will the rocks change?

S8: They will be *más brillosas* 'shinier.'

S9: *¡Más pequeñitas!* 'Smaller!'

S10: They will change color!

T2: *Piensen en porque crees que van a hacer esto. Piensen en las rocas del lago o del mar.* 'Think about why you think they will do this. Think about the rocks in a lake or the ocean.'

S8: *Porque tiene* 'Because it has' waves and the ocean has waves.

In this discussion, each student is understood by his or her peers and the teacher. Language barriers do not get in the way of effective communication. Assessment of this discussion by the teacher will accurately show what each student knows about water erosion.

Conclusions

Students who are allowed to code switch in the classroom are better able to convey their knowledge of subject matter to their classmates and teachers. In the immersion classroom where code switching was not allowed or understood, children often stopped themselves mid-sentence or declared that they did not know the answer to a question (when perhaps they did know the answer but lacked the vocabulary in English). For these children, enrolling in English-speaking schools did not only mean that they would have to learn an entirely new language, but that their acquisition of subject matter would also suffer because of language barriers.

In this study, it should be noted that children within the bilingual classroom and the fifth grade bilingual tutoring sessions (where code switching was allowed) did not hesitate in their conversations or become blocked due to language barriers. It was in these bilingual settings that students code switched freely and were best able to convey information to their peers and teachers. The immersion setting, on the other hand, created an atmosphere where the Spanish-speaking students seldom volunteered to participate in classroom discussions. They often appeared disinterested and detached from lessons and were not able to convey an accurate picture of their subject matter knowledge to the class when called upon.

This study affirms that code switching is a valuable strategy for students to convey their knowledge of subject matter. This particular research, in which students from both a bilingual classroom and an immersion classroom are depicted, shows the benefits of code switching occurring only within the bilingual settings. In schools, where it is a principal goal to give students the best education possible, students should be allowed to use those strategies that will help them learn best. Perhaps schools will be able to use this study as one testimony to the benefits of having a bilingual program within their schools.

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