

Code-Mixing and Code Switching: A Special Issue in ELT

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to offer a brief discussion on the issue of code-mixing and code-switching which has played crucial but controversial role in the foreign language teaching-learning activities more specifically in the English Language Teaching (ELT). The methodology used in this article is essentially the descriptive one which deals with the non-numerical data to explain and analyze the proposed issue. The basic theory has been drawn from the sociolinguistics that generally discusses on the bilingualism as well as multilingualism where the notion of code-mixing and code-switching have become universal phenomenon. This paper can be helpful for the students, teachers, textbook writers and the beginners of the ELT practitioners.

Keywords: code-mixing, code-switching, ELT, foreign language, multilingualism

Introduction

The job of teaching, as it is generally assumed, is not an easy task. The intricacy is even greater especially in the case of language teaching. With other subjects like geography, history, or political science, the language serves as the means of medium. It means, the language merely relates the notion of the subject concerned. For example, with the geography subject, the language has to deal with the land features, climatic situation, the flora and fauna. Here, the language is being used to describe the related issues of the geography. In contrast, the language is used as both the means as well as ends in terms of language teaching. The language has to be used to carry or transport the ideas and for its goal. In this sense, the language plays the dual role regarding the language teaching. Moreover, the complexity in language teaching also owes to that fact that this task is based certain philosophical assumptions derived from the theories of linguistics, psychology and other related aspects of socio-environmental sciences. More specifically, language teaching is directly related to theories of linguistics and psychology, because a language teacher should have a sound knowledge of that language which he or she is supposed to be teaching. The term 'linguistics' refers to the scientific study of language or how the language operates in the human communication. In the same manner,

psychology is also an inseparable matter in the language teaching since it deals with the notion of how a child learns language. Therefore, these two notions i.e. linguistics and psychology are the significant aspects in the field of language teaching.

English being the world's medium language undoubtedly plays a vital role in the global communication. Though our country Nepal has not got a long history in teaching English, it has occupied the status of 'Foreign Language' in our educational system curriculum. The English language is considered as 'Foreign Language' in the sense that it is not the native language of Nepal. In this regard, Crystal (2007) states, "A foreign language (FL) in its more restricted sense, is a non-native language that is taught in schools, that has no status as routine medium of communication in country" (p. 372). Crystal's remark has clearly specified that the English language is 'a Foreign Language' in the context of Nepal because it is taught in schools but not used as means of communication.

Putting aside the issue of private run boarding schools, the English Language Teaching (ELT) has not been proved to be fruitful and encouraging in the government assisted schools. Although there can be many possible reasons behind the disparity between the private and public sector schools in terms of the ELT standard, one of the reasons is that English is used as the medium of instruction in all the subjects except Nepali subject in the private sector schools. In contrast, Nepali becomes the medium of instruction except the 'English subject' in the public schools. In other words, the medium of instruction is found to be in the opposite manner in these two different types of schools. In most of the public schools it is not the surprising thing to find considerable number of code-mixings and code-switching at the time of the ELT. However, the ratio of mixing varies from the lower to higher grades. In this regard, Bhattarai (1986) opines, "Until now, school level English has suffered much in Nepal." The ELT entails a series of code-mixing and code switching. As a result, the exact percentage of ELT could be lower than fifty percent out of the given time. This does not necessarily mean that mixing of mother tongue (i.e. Nepali) is the sole reason for the lower standard of English in the public schools.

There are many reasons which are directly linked to the degeneration of the ELT situation. The reasons are as Chaudron (2009) argues, "careful evaluation of results can lead to well-informed decision making at all levels of educational planning: development of curriculum, preparation of materials, training of teachers, preference for classroom teaching activities and techniques, decision about individualization of instruction, and even teachers' modifications of speech in explanation." However the excess amount of code-mixing and code-switching lowers the amount of English exposure resulting in lower performance and achievement. The matter of code-mixing and code-switching has an explicit relation with the

popularly known teaching method as Grammar Translation method or GT method in short. It is also an undeniable fact that GT method has a strong hold on the present ELT situation, more specifically the public-run schools in Nepal. In the GT method, both the teachers and the students are held at certain liberty to mix up the 'mother tongue' technically known as L¹. Thus, the GT method has offered the teacher a fertile ground for code-mixing and code-switching. As a result, an English class in the public schools sounds like the Nepali class because the teacher mixes the codes unhesitatingly. This process further narrows the range of English exposure. Less amount of exposure means less amount of learning. Suppose that an English teacher uses the target language (TL i.e. a language that someone is learning) roughly 22 minutes out of 45 minutes' period. It means s/he might be using English only 2.12 hours a week. If the full course has been allotted 150 periods, the teacher may be using English 55 hours or 2.29 days in a whole academic year. This amount of exposure may not be sufficient to raise the prescribed standard in ELT situation.

Discussion

Under this sub-heading, the basic concepts like 'code', 'code-mixing', 'code-switching', difference between 'code-mixing and code-switching', and the rationales of 'code-mixing and code-switching' are briefly discussed.

About the Code in Linguistics

Language is a system of signs that means "in linguistics, the words and other expressions of language which signify, that is, 'stand for' the other things" (Richard, Platt & Platt, 1999, p. 334). The message is conveyed using different linguistic signs or 'codes'. The linguistic sign basically includes either visual (written symbols) or oral-aural sign (vocal) signs. For this reason, we can refer to a language or varieties of languages or dialects as 'code'. The linguists assume that the term 'code' for language is appropriate because it is a neutral term. They even argue that the terms like dialect, language, style, standard language, pidgin, and creole are inclined to arouse certain emotions and thus draw the line of division. But the neutral term 'code' can be any kind of system that two or more people employ for communication. In this regard Crystal (2008) opines:

The term has come to the fore is sociolinguistics where it is mainly used as a neutral label for any system of communication involving language and which avoids sociolinguistics having to commit themselves to such terms as dialect, language or variety which have special status theories. (p. 83)

The above statement refers to the notion that the term code is specially related to sociolinguistics and this avoids some kinds of emotional effect that is aroused from likes versus dislikes.

Differences between Code-mixing and Code-Switching

In general these two sets i.e. 'code-mixing' and 'code-switching' sound similar or synonymous however, they are different in the way they occur in the conversation (Tumbahang, 2009). If the shift from one code to another is absolute, it is then code switching. "It is inevitable consequences of bilingualism or more generally multi-lingualism" (Hudson, 1999). Anyone who speaks more than one language chooses between them according to the circumstances. For Trudgill (1983), "Code-switching means, switching from one language variety to another when the situation demands." There are mainly two kinds of code-switching i.e. situational and metaphorical. The situational code-switching, as it suggests, occurs when a language is changed in accordance with the situation. The speaker, for instance, speaks in the classroom but whenever s/he comes outside, s/he starts using another language. Unlike the situational code-switching, the metaphorical code-switching, the language being spoken gets changed as the change in topics or the subject-matter. In other words, it refers to the tendency in a bilingual or multilingual society to switch codes (language or language variety) in conversation to discuss a topic that would normally fall into another conversational domain. For instance, a speaker may use low level variety while talking about the family, but when s/he has to talk about the religious topic, immediately s/he shifts to high variety of codes.

On the other hand, code-mixing is also a usual happening in the bilingual or multilingual community. Code-mixing unlike the code-switching refers to the lexical shift within a sentence or an utterance. The code-switching is related to at least a sentence level shift from one language/language variety whereas the code-mixing is word level mixing up within a sentence. This means a sentence can have the words from two different language varieties. Let us consider the example of code mixing, "*memro idea chha children-laai childhood dekhi nai Nepali language bolnai nadiyera English bolaudai laana paaye pachhi yinko pronunciation correct hune thiyo,*" (Aryal, 2022 BS). Out of twenty different words, seven words are from English codes in the Nepali utterance. The code-mixing thus refers to the mixture of different types of codes (languages/language varieties) within a sentence. Hudson (1999) refers to code-mixing as to get the right effect, the speakers balance the two language against each other as a kind of linguistic cocktail, a few from one language then a few words from the other then back to the first for few words more and so on. In this regard Wardhaugh (2000) also states, "code-mixing occurs when conversant uses both languages together to the context that s/he changes from one language to the other in the course of single utterance." It is better to say that code-

mixing is automatized form of speech where the code-switching is more probably purposive. About the code-mixing, Holmes (2008) prefers to call it as "*fused lect*" because there are two dialects mixed together.

Importance of Distinguishing between Code-Mixing and Code-Switching

From the above discussion, it is obvious that there is difference between these two aspects i.e. code-mixing and code-switching. This distinction is very important in terms of ELT because "code-mixing raises several issues involving grammar" (Sridhar, 2009). For example, what kinds of morphemes, words, or phrases can be mixed from one language to the other language? Is the mixture governed by the guest language or the host language? What are the implications of mixing for theories of mental processing of language in bilinguals? These and other related questions are very much important to be considered in the bilingual situation. But with the code-switching, such issues do not arise because it is the process of shifting from one code to another from the sentence level to even discourse level. The speaker maintains the grammar of the language s/he chooses to communicate. Code-mixing on the other hand, is not a random or free-for-all phenomenon. "Several researches have shown that code-mixing is rule governed or subject to several grammatical constraints, some of which have been claimed to be universal" (Sridhar, 2009).

Rationales behind Code-Mixing and Code-Switching

Generally assumed notion about code-mixing and switching in ELT is that it has reduced the amount of English exposure, however there some positive aspects with this phenomenon. Whether one accepts or not, the matter of code-mixing and code-switching has become the universal feature. In this globalized context, the monolingual situation especially for the learners who learn English as a foreign language is rare or impossible notion. The ELT in our context is the issue of bilingual or even multilingual one. In such situation, confining in one code (language/language variety) is quite impossible today. So the code-mixing and switching is likely to occur in different frequencies and intervals. No matter how long interval it might be the code-mixing and switching are to take place. However, the occurrence of code-mixing and code-switching is a bit different. This means code-switching takes place quite purposefully and the speaker should have the grammatical knowledge of both the host and guest languages. On the contrary, code-mixing occurs unconsciously and automatically. The speaker may not have the grammatical knowledge of the guest language. Even illiterate Nepali speaker can mix up several English words in his/her utterances. When the code-mixing takes place automatically, it is said to be in the process of 'assimilation'. The main purpose of code-mixing is to make one's idea known to the learner/conversant. If the speaker feels or realizes

that the listener is not making him/her out, s/he may shift or mix the codes which are supposed to be understandable or agreeable to the addressee. Sometimes, the code-mixing proves to be a great boon in the situation when the explanation seems to create vague or hazy impression to the listeners. For instance, following is the conversation between a teacher and a boy (student/pupil) in which a teacher describes about a 'saw' to a boy:

- Boy: What is a saw, sir?
- Teacher: It's something we use to cut a piece of wood into two.
- Boy: You mean, it's a sort of axe, sir?
- Teacher: No, not an axe. This one has a thinner blade and short ring-like handle of wood.
- Boy: Oh! I know what it is. It's like a sword.
- Teacher: Not really, a sword has one edge sharp, the other edge doesn't cut.
- Boy: Like a big knife?
- Teacher: Partly, but the sharp edge doesn't cut like knife

(Source: Narayanaswami, 1994, pp. 79-80)

This given conversation (dialogue) shows that the teacher does not seem to be successful to give the clear impression of the object s/he is going to describe. This description is rather leading to the vague as well as hazy impression. It also feels like a time wasting and good for nothing.

Code-mixing and code-switching can be of a great help in ELT especially in the culture specific matters. The same thing can be understood or perceived differently depending on the cultural variation. Let us take the example of the word 'kiss' and its meaning perceived in different cultures. In the western culture, the 'kiss' is the natural way of greeting showing the love and affection. A young boy can unhesitatingly kiss a young lady. The onlookers take it very common and natural. But surprisingly, the same 'kiss' is thought to be as a serious crime in the eastern country like Mongolia and China. The kissing in public places, whether the partners are lovers or not, is strictly restricted in these countries. So the sense carried by the term 'kiss' differs from one to another culture. It is therefore the culture specific term like 'kiss' should be interpreted through code-mixing to fit the sense where it is being taught. There may be a lot of things related to a certain culture but absent in another. In this case there is no practically way out except the code-mixing, e.g. *Sindur* and *Pote* are essentially culture specific objects of the

Hindus, which are absent in either in Christian or Muslim culture. If one tries to interpret them in English it can be absurd or awkward.

The ELT practitioners greatly vary in the issue of code-mixing and code-switching regarding the teaching instruction of the ELT. Some are found to be very stern against mixing and switching codes as they emphasize on communicative approach or the Direct Method. They are not ready to listen or imagine code mixing and switching in the ELT. Their opinion is similar to Sridhar (2009) as he states, "code-mixing has been regarded as sign of laziness or mental sloppiness and inadequate command of language" (p. 59). However, there are teachers who prefer code-mixing and code-switching, and by this procedure, they minimize the ratio of English exposure in the ELT classroom. Undeniable fact is that the English language cannot be mastered via mother tongue teaching. It is obvious that language learning is thought to be a kind of special skill just as swimming and dancing. It implies that learning language requires a rigorous practice. The both extreme ideas that is, the intolerable to mixing and switching code and much favorable to them are perhaps impractical as well as useless. As has already been mentioned some of the situations where the mixing and switching codes are inevitable factors when the interpretation of something becomes vaguer and obscure than that of being clearer, the teacher must turn to the short-cut way through code-mixing and switching. For example, a teacher has to deal with the meaning of 'salt' s/he may say 'sodium chloride' (NaCl) as the synonym of 'salt' it is obscure than being clearer since the 'sodium chloride' is the technical version of the 'salt'. If the teacher describes it as one of the important things to make curry tasty, the students may think it as a kind of spices. If, then the teacher goes on to say that the salt looks like sugar, the students may perceive it as the flavor enhancer or monosodium glutamate (Ajinomoto). In this case, the short-cut way for the teacher is code-mixing. Those teachers, who strongly oppose the use of code-mixing, may argue that the term 'salt' can be conceptualized through showing a real object 'salt'. The suggestion and the technique could be extremely fruitful but the worrying thing is that each and every thing referred to in the lesson can hardly be taught through displaying the objects.

English language is no more the legacy of British and American alone but this is the language of the world. Due to the cultural disparity, the English language may lack the terms we use in our cultural, traditional and religious contexts. Let us consider one more example of Nepali traditional dress '*Daura*' and '*Suruwal*', when an English teacher and also a hater of code-mixing may go on describing the features of dress for hours without mixing code, his/her description may be worthless and time wasting. The distinction in terms of mode and style of culture essentially causes complexities in the linguistic behavior. This does not necessarily mean that a language teacher may not be able to deliver without code-mixing. It possible

through the target language but there is equally the chance of lump-sum or wholesale (in an indiscriminate) teaching. The teaching in a roundabout way is not in fact a real teaching for the real teaching should create the single most impression of the topic. Everything can be expressed through general way but specific way of teaching requires certain competency and shrewdness. If someone has eaten 'Gundruk' curry and s/he says "I've eaten curry", this offers a very general concept of the curry. But when s/he wants to specify the type of curry eaten, s/he really gives hazy impression because the particular 'curry' does not exist in the English dishes/menus. In this situation, the code-mixing can be a reliable means to solve the problem.

Conclusions

In the issue of code-mixing or code-switching, a considerable number of ELT practitioners regard it negatively for they think that code-mixing and code-switching can never be helpful in the foreign language teaching-learning situation. To apply these issues in the ELT means the teacher is lazy and incompetent in the target language (English). Even they charge that mixing and switching code ravishes the purity of a language. Basically these concepts are the result of the combination of the puristic attitude and the use of a monolingual paradigm of language. But these sorts of ideas distort and devalue many aspects of multilingual behaviors. Recent researches have reflected that code-mixing and code-switching serve important socio-cultural and textual function as an expression of certain types of complex personalities and communities. They are the versatile and appropriate vehicles especially for the multicultural-based communication. They have undoubtedly extended the range of communicative horizon. Now, finally the question regarding the code mixing and switching in ELT should neither be under used nor be over used but be proper used.

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