

Delving Into The University Students' Perception of Instructors' Code-Switching

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Abstract

This study examined Abdou Moumouni University students' attitudes towards Code-switching (CS) in an English language class. Data were collected from four English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners through interviews and analyzed thematically. The results from the study revealed a couple of attitudes exhibited by participants. First, they thought that switching codes in an English class depends on the learners' level. They believed that instructors do not need to use other languages than English in an EFL classroom, especially if the learners are at a higher level. Second, the research suggested that CS is necessary because it helps the learners to understand the teaching point. Finally, the study has identified learners' lack of understanding of the lesson and limited vocabulary as the key factors that pushed the instructors to switch codes. Conducting a needs analysis is judged necessary to fully understand the reasons that motivate the students to register at the English department to develop adaptable and sensitive teaching materials.

Keywords: Code-switching; Need analysis; Teaching Materials

INTRODUCTION

Being a colonial legacy, the teaching of the English language in Niger, with French as the official language, started in the secondary school (Ousseini, 2016). Based on that, English has become a compulsory subject from secondary school to university (Goumandakoye, 1992). In other words, English, considered as a foreign language in Niger, is a required subject from middle school to high school. This is linked to the colonial heritage as the curriculum used in the Nigerian educational system is merely the same as the colonial master (Ousseini, 2016). In the process of filling the gap, foreigners were in charge of teaching the subject from the colonial era up to the post-independence Niger. Those instructors, with the collaboration of a few Nigeriens, used some pedagogical methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method (hereafter, GTM), Direct Method, and Communicative Language Teaching (hereafter, CLT) (Ousseini, 2016; Goumandakoye, 1992).

As foreigners do not speak the local languages, the learners were only taught in the target language. At a certain period, national teachers were in charge of teaching English. Most of, if not all, the instructors in charge of teaching English at university speak at least two languages apart from the target language. Based on their background, most of them tend to use other languages in English classes for some purposes such as introducing new items, explaining difficult words, or filling a vocabulary gap in the target language. They advocated that they alternate to other languages if they miss words in a language while discussing a specific point or when the expression, they want to use does not have an equivalent in the target (Kim, 2006). To illustrate, Jingxia (2010) suggested that switching to Chinese is a strategy used for translation, explanation, classroom management, and making relationships between learners and their instructors.

Moving from one language to another one is known as code-switching (CS, hereafter). It is the mingling of utterances through the speaking and writing process from two languages (Muthusamy et al.,

2020). It mostly occurs in a multicultural society where people are from many backgrounds. CS is greatly perceived (Muthusamy et al., 2020) in classes where most of the learners do not share the same language. It is defined as a concurrent use of two languages that involves some skills in both languages (Duran, 1994). This is a situation that mostly happens in African countries with their multicultural and multilingual system (Johanes, 2017).

Some scholars consider CS as a bad strategy for learning a language. Most of those scholars think that instructors switch codes when they are not proficient in the English language (Muthusamy et al., 2020) or for the necessity to keep the flow of the conversation. Some, on the other hand, averred that CS cannot be detached from a bilingual learner (Mukti & Ena, 2018). They suggested that code-switching should be used in bilingual classes to help the learners meet their needs. For instance, Gulzar (2010) asserted that “it is strongly recommended that use of code-switching as a strategy should be introduced for teaching English in the bilingual classroom discourse but keeping in view the level of the students.” (39). Kustati (2014), also, found that code-switching contributes to the learners understanding and helps instructions to clarify the teaching items. He put forward that this “is an interesting phenomenon indicating that the use of the first language or native language, and foreign language can never be avoided as long as the teaching of English is set in non-native countries.” (181). Those scholars believed that it is a process that makes the learning environment interact. For instance, Al-Qaysi (2019) found that his participants are motivated in a class where a teacher switches codes and that it contributes to improving their learning competencies. Macaro (2005) also stated that speakers switch codes as it makes them feel at ease to convey meaning contrary to a monolingual class.

Being a multi-ethnic country, CS also occurs in the Nigerian context. Throughout the history of the teaching of the English language in Niger, many teaching methods have been implemented. The recent method on which materials were developed and the teaching should be based is the CLT. The core objective of this method is to use English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI); unfortunately, instructors are using different methods. This situation could make the teaching of the English in Niger inefficient. The use of other methods is related to many reasons. First of all, the learners who are supposed to be taught based on CLT are not assessed based on it. This brings instructors to teach based on other methods such as the GTM to make their students understand the content and pass their examinations. Moreover, instructors themselves are not trained, or few of them are, in using the implemented method. Based on those reasons the teaching of English does not achieve the goals set by decision makers. Another related problem is linked to the fact that both instructors and researchers rarely conduct need analysis to discover the reasons that pushed the students to enroll in English fields. Although there is a huge body of research on CS, the researcher has never, to his knowledge, come across a study that delved into Abdou Moumouni University students’ perceptions of their instructors’ code-switching.

Findings from this small-scale research are significant as it could raise instructors’ awareness in not only conducting need analysis before designing their syllabi but also avoiding using other languages unless for some purposes. Based on the purpose of this study that is to delve into university students’ perceptions of the instructors’ code-switching, the researcher evolved his research around two questions:

- What are the university students’ perceptions of the lecturers’ code-switching?
- What are the reasons that push the lecturers to switch codes in English classes?

METHODS

To achieve the purpose of his study, which sought to delve into university students’ perceptions of instructors’ CS, the researcher used the qualitative research procedure to get to the bottom of the social world in which his respondents are living and why things are the way they are (Hancock et al., 2009). Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined it as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 41). Qualitative researchers used this method to understand the issue under investigation. It “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible.” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 3). Taking into account these characteristics, this approach helped the researcher to safely collect his data and ascribe meaning to the collected data (Castillo, 2018).

The data of the current study was generated from the English department’s students. The researcher randomly selected two students (male and female) from the second year and two (male and female) from

masters. He made this choice to see the perception of the learners based on their levels. Each participant was informed of the purpose of the study, and signed a consent letter.

Table 1: participants according to their gender and level

Participants	Gender	Level
Dan Baba	Male	MA
Hadjo	Female	MA
Modibo	Male	BA
Djama	Female	BA

To answer his research questions, the researcher used interviews to collect his data. Interviews are procedures through which researchers explore people's perceptions and understanding (Heigham and Croker, 2009) of the issue under investigation. There exist three types of interviews: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews. For this study, the researcher used the last two types of interviews. First, he used semi-structured interviews to collect data from the two first interviewees. The second type of interview was used when the researcher realized that the two first respondents answered the predetermined questions before being asked. With these two instruments, the researcher asked for clarification, especially with the last participant. Moreover, this method gave him complete flexibility in conducting his research by asking questions during the interviews. The collected data were transcribed and presented to each participant to read and confirm the accuracy of the data before coding and categorizing it. After that, the researcher analyzed the data thematically.

FINDINGS

Based on the purpose of the study which aimed at delving into university students' attitudes towards instructors' code-switching in English classes, this section presents the findings generated from the participants. The researcher analyzed his data, categorized it into themes, then came up with the following themes: *the participant perceptions of instructors' code-switching, the motivations and frequency of CS, and finally, the possible strategies that could be used to avoid code-switching.*

Learners' perception of instructors' CS

The researcher invited the participants to express their attitudes towards instructors' code-switching in an English class. The participants showed double attitudes towards the process. Firstly, they stated that code-switching is a negative strategy as it may stunt learners' learning process. Second, they thought that it is a way of clarifying some learning points. Most participants pinpointed that switching codes depends on learner's level. Some believed that using other languages in English classes is not a good strategy especially in the English department. For instance, Dan Baba and Djama suggested that using the first language is necessary at the lower level but not at university. Djama thought that masters' students should not be taught in other languages.

I think it is not good to switch codes in English classes at university, but if it is out of the university, it is interesting to switch codes because of their students' level is not the same (Dan Baba, 11/16/2023)

From my point of view, it depends on the learner's level. If the student is at a lower level such as L1 or L2 where s/he may not understand the class, the lecturer can use other languages. But I think it is wrong to switch codes at master level. So, if the student doesn't master the English language, why is he doing master? (Djama, 11/18/2023)

Dan Baba further pointed out that instructors do not need to switch to other languages, and claimed that learners will not master the target language if their instructors alter to other languages. He then argued that if the learners are used to using other languages, they will not try to understand the target language.

For me the lecturers should not switch codes because if they want their students to master the language, they should focus on the target language. Students also should not expect a translation or to be taught in other languages. They should always focus on the target language as they are English department students. (Dan Baba, 11/16/2023)

Djama and Modibo's points of view enhanced the above statement. Modibo believed that it is a negative attitude as learners will miss the point during the exams. He maintained that instructors used French to explain the classes; then, while taking exam, they gave the instructions in English. On the other hand, Djama assumed that using the French will make the learners become lazy in learning. She put forth that the students may not try to learn the target language as they already knew that the instructor will explain the lesson in other languages:

I think that switching codes is a way of developing laziness in the learners, because if the lecturer switches codes, they will say that it's not necessary for them to learn as the lecturer will explain in other languages (Djama, 11/18/2023).

Hadjo, who claimed that instructors do not need to explain in other languages as the learners are at university to learn English, expressed the same feeling. She elaborated on that by given her experience at the second year when an instructor explained everything in English, and they could not get his point. She stated that the instructor did not use other languages to explain his course; and this pushed them to improve their English before being in third year. This point is echoed by Modibo, who pointed out that the learners have been learning French since; therefore, it is unnecessary to explain the classes in French. He suggested that instructors should involve the learners in English if they discovered that the learners did not get what they were teaching them.

If a lecturer says that he is going to use French because the learners do not understand what he is teaching, I don't think if the learners will be able to master the language. Also, the learners have been learning French since. If the teacher realizes that the students do not understand, he will do his best to make them understand the English language. (Modibo, 11/16/2023)

Another reason from Dan Baba is in relation to the multicultural context in which the students are socializing. Niger, with its various languages, according to him, it is difficult to use another language in a class without having a negative impact on the other learners. This is demonstrated as follow:

As we have a variety of languages in Niger, if the lecturer switches codes, it will be somehow impacting some people who do not speak the same language. For example, if the lecturer is a Hausa, he will use this language in class. So, what about those who speak Zarma or Tamaseq and so on? Based on that it is better to specify a language that everybody speaks. I think this is going to be a problem and the only way to solve it is using only English (Dan Baba, 11/16/2023)

This point was reinforced by Hadjo who believed that learners will feel marginalized if an instructor switches codes. She claimed that it could even give a bad image to the country as various learners from other countries do not speak French, and those learners may think that the teaching is only for the Nigeriens. She put forth that learners may have a negative attitude towards the instructor as they will say he is against their improvement.

Switching codes has a negative aspect according to me as it can discourage the students, because they will say the lecturer is the one who should help them to improve the English language. So, if the lecturer is not using English, they will say maybe he is against their development or something like that. Some lecturers tend to use the local languages. So, if a lecturer decides to switch to Hausa for example, the other learners who speak Zarma, Fulani, and Tamaseq feel kind of marginalizing or excluded from the class. Even French as we have lots of students who come from Nigeria and Ghana who could not speak French. So, if the lecturers switch to French, they are giving a bad image to the country. Those students will say that they are just explaining to the students from Niger, so they are excluded (Hadjo, 11/25/2023)

Notwithstanding, the participants expressed a positive viewpoint towards CS. Most of them recognized that it is not easy for an instructor to teach in English without switching from other languages. As a matter of

fact, Hadjo deemed that CS is also a positive aspect. According to her, if an instructor switches codes, it could motivate the learners to learn many languages by looking up to the instructor as their role model. She believed that knowing many languages in the twenty first century is encouraging:

It may develop the learners' linguistics competence. This can be a good image for the lecturer because they perceive him as a multilingual and this is a good skill in the twenty first century. This can encourage the learners to take a good example from the lecturer (Hadjo, 11/25/2023).

She believed that it is not easy to teach in a multicultural context like Niger without using other languages, however she proposed that instructors should switch to explain or give instructions:

I could not say it is impossible, but it is really difficult as we are not English. So, to make them better understand the class, it is better sometimes to switch. If it is necessary, they can switch to explain their instructions but not all the courses (Hadjo, 11/25/2023).

Along with, Dan Baba asserted that using other languages in an English class can interface with the target language. Nevertheless, he made it clear that CS could positively impact learners who speak fluently the language used by the instructor.

I think it is really going to be very easy for those who are fluent in French to understand the class. But those who have a low level it will be difficult for them to adapt to the language or to even understand the language (Dan Baba, 11/16/2023).

Regarding the above results, the study revealed that the participants expressed positive and negative perceptions of the instructors CS. They related the negative aspect to the fact that CS could not make learners comprehend the English language. It is also evidenced that the culture of the country is not a favor place to use other languages because all the learners do not speak the same language. On the other hand, the participants stated that code-switching is necessary, for it can encourage the learners to master the language or even become multilinguists.

Motivations and frequency of CS

The participants were asked about the frequency of CS and the motivations behind their instructors' code-switching. The overall participants articulated that instructors switch to explain the learning point even though some of them intensively switch codes. First, Dan Baba pointed out that while some instructors switch codes on purposes, others use it intensively. He stated that the former switch codes to explain the lesson or make the learners understand it. He thought instructors should switch only to make the learners better understand the class:

Sometimes some of the lecturers use it for a purpose. They do it just to make the students understand what they are teaching, and this can be understood. Because many of the students do not even understand what the teacher is talking about, so if he switches codes, it may be relevant for the students to understand. Unfortunately, some exceed the use of code-switching in class whereas they should use it for the previous purpose given. (Dan Baba, 11/16/2023)

From the above excerpt, it is demonstrated that the participant claimed that instructors should switch codes for purposes but not so intensively. Djama also stated that instructors switch to make the teaching point understood by the learners.

Most of the lecturers switch codes to explain their lesson as they want the students to understand more (Djama, 11/18/2023)

This point corroborated with Modibo who claimed that instructors switch codes when they realize that the learners do not understand the learning point or when they want to draw learners' attention, or to maintain order in the class. However, Hadjo claimed that some instructors switch if they are not fluent in English.

According to me some switch if they are not that good at English. Sometimes if they are blocked, they prefer to switch to other languages. Sometimes they are good, but they switch for the sake of the learners. So, they prefer to explain it more to make the students understand (Hadjo, 11/25/2023).

On the contrary, Djama stated that instructors are sometimes forced to switch as the learners do not want to work these days. According to her, this situation brings instructors to code switch because they don't want to pass without letting them understand their class. She thought it is not useful to teach a lesson and go forward without a full understanding.

Nowadays the students don't want to work hard to improve their English. Based on that the lecturers are obliged to switch codes in explaining the course. They think that if they explain only in English, the students will not understand what they are teaching them. Then they have to come back to explain it in the L1. I think there is no any importance to teach a course that the students didn't understand and pass. So, you have to do something that can make them better understand (Djama, 11/18/2023).

Going from the above findings, the study revealed many reasons that motivate instructors to switch codes. First, the participants believed that the learners' level pushed instructors to switch. Second, instructors alternate other languages in their classes either to get the learners' attention or to make a learning point clear to them. Lastly, the researcher found that instructors switch when they lack vocabulary.

Possibility to avoid CS

The researcher invited the participants to express their point of view on the strategies that could be used to avoid shifting to other languages. First, Hadjo stated that the instructors should be sensitized in teaching only in the target language to help the learners become fluent.

I think the best way to avoid code switching is to talk to lecturers and sensitize them on using only the target language, and this could help the learners to achieve their goals (Hadjo, 11/25/2023).

Contrary to the previous participant, Dan Baba thought that learners should, instead, be sensitized in involving themselves into the activities of the club: an environment which helps learners to improve their language competence. He also added that the instructors should use methods that do not require switching to other languages.

I think, depending on lecturers, methods that do not necessarily need a switching like Audiolingual Method and Communicative Language Task Based should be used in class in order to prevent students from speaking other languages (Dan Baba, 11/16/2023).

Modibo propounded that instructors should dig into the learners' motivations why they registered to the English department. He put forward that an appropriate condition should be given to help learners to understand the classes.

I think if they want to avoid the using of other languages, even though it is not easy, they should know the reasons why the learners registered at the English department. You know, they are just giving them classes without knowing whether their objectives are to learn or just validate the exams. So, they should create a situation or let say a place that will help the students to learn English, because it is the first step. (Modibo, 11/16/2023).

He elaborated on that by bringing out the idea that instructors should invite other students who seem to understand the lesson to explain it to the others if they realize that the learners could not grab what they are teaching them, or even use simple English to make the learning point clear to the learners.

I think the teachers should involve more the students. Sometimes if a learner did not understand the lesson, the teacher may select a student who understood what he taught, and maybe the others will understand what the student explained (Modibo, 11/16/2023).

Taken to the above insights, the participants claimed that the intensive use of code-switching can be put to an end if some conditions are met. Both learners and instructors are suggested to be sensitized. It is also demonstrated that simple English can be used to make the point understood or even invite other learners to explain to their mates. The participants lastly stated that only English pedagogy should be used to avoid switching codes.

DISCUSSION

Based on its purpose, which sought to delve into the university students' perceptions of CS, the current study revealed a twofold attitude towards using other languages in an English class at the university level. The participants thought that switching codes in a class depends on the learners' level. On the one hand, they stated that it is not necessary to teach learners in other languages in an English class. They believed that switching codes has a negative impact on the learners' mastery of the English language (Johanes, 2017). This finding corroborated with Ousseini (2023), who found that the use of the second language in English classes hinders the mastery of the target language in the Nigerien context. His participants claimed that the learners could not express themselves because of instructors who shifted to other languages in English classes.

The current study also suggested that the learners will not make any effort to improve their English language if they are used to switching codes. Another negative attitude demonstrated by this study is linked to the multilingualistic culture in which the learners are socializing. Even though it is not easy to avoid using other languages in their context, the participants claimed that some learners may be marginalized if an instructor switches codes. Lastly, it is showed that it could give a bad image to the country due to the students who come from other countries and are not fluent in the languages used apart from the target. This specific point conflicts Kustati (2014)' findings who claimed that switching is the consequence of the relationship between the culture and the language. He put forward that shifting to other languages allows learners to not only accept others, but also keep the democratic virtues.

On the other hand, the researcher found that CS is necessary because it helps the learners to better understand the teaching point. The participants also claimed it could greatly impact the language learning and even becoming a multilinguist. This finding is enhanced by Kim (2006) who put forth that mixing codes could considerably affect the bilinguals' languages. The study further indicated that CS can show a higher understanding of other languages and this may motivate the learners to be multilinguists by taking the instructors as a role model. This is reinforced by Kustati (2014) who thought that switching codes showed that the speakers have a sophisticated mastering of the languages being used.

Concerning the second research question, findings showed that instructors switch codes for various reasons. First, the participants believed that instructors switch codes "to cater for the needs of the students" (Moghadam, 2012: p. 2023) when they realized that they did not understand what they taught them. Based on that, they have to explain in other languages as they don't want to pass without making the learners understand the teaching point. Second, it is expressed that instructors switch codes to excel conversational disruptions when they do not have enough words in the target language. This finding is in line with Muthusamy (2020), whose participants claimed that they switch codes because they lack vocabulary. Kim (2006), on the other hand, challenged this point. He indicated that "the fundamental reason why bilinguals switch and mix their languages is not because they lack language skills but because they try to make their utterance more easily understandable and meaningful" (p.51). Lastly, the study has revealed that instructors switch codes to make the class understood or to draw the learners attention. Many studies confirmed this finding. For example, Bhatti et al. (2018) found that their participants switched codes when they wanted to translate new words, explain concepts, maintain discipline, and get the learners' attention. Similarly, Kustati (2014) found that lecturers switched to clarify the subject matter, build understanding in students, and create motivation and relationships in the learners.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this small-scale study demonstrated a double perception towards code-switching. Most of the participants expressed a negative attitude towards CS. They claimed that it is not necessary to shift to other languages as the learners registered in the English department to learn the target language. The respondents believed that switching codes can not only impact the mastering of the target language but also marginalize many learners who do not speak the language used by instructors. The study further suggested that instructors should not switch at a higher level. However, the researcher found that it is difficult for an instructor to teach only in the target language because the learners may not understand his teaching point.

The researcher found that instructors switch codes for various functions. First, they put forwards that instructors switch for clarification. Second, they claimed that if instructors want to introduce new items, they generally switch codes. Lastly, it is believed that they alternate to draw the learners' attention. From the findings of the study, it is demonstrated that the participants had higher negative attitude toward the use of other languages in an English class even though some showed a positive attitude. This could be related to their level. The research could yield a different point of view if the research has collected data from both higher and lower learners. Further researches are necessary to better get to the bottom of the issue of code-switching by inviting the instructors to express their thinking about it. Based on those limitations, the researcher did not intend to generalize the findings of his research but just to raise awareness.

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