

# Investigating Code-Switching as a Teaching Strategy: a Case Study of Primary Schools in Hoabinh, Vietnam

Quynh Dzung Dang

1<sup>st</sup> Shanghai International Studies University  
550 West Dalian Road, 200083 Shanghai, China.

Ihsan Ali

2<sup>nd</sup> Shanghai International Studies University  
550 West Dalian Road, 200083 Shanghai, China.

**Abstract:- English has marked its presence in all genres and poses pedagogical implications for teachers in a multilingual society. This paper aims to explore how Vietnamese English teachers in the Second Language (ESL) settings are aware of how and when to use code-switching (CS) as a teaching strategy, its application and the main factors that affect the CS application in the classroom. The study uses qualitative approach and employs the case study design. A group of ESL teachers has been interviewed at two different Primary schools in Hoabinh, Vietnam. The results show that the teachers are inclined to use Code-switching as a successful classroom teaching strategy, particularly for guiding language learners. Therefore, this study implies that Code-switching could be an effective strategy for the low proficient learners.**

**Keywords:- Code Switching (CS); Effectiveness; Second Language (L2); First Language (L1); Teaching English; English as a Foreign language (EFL).**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The English language has spread most rapidly and extensively across the globe. It is a fact that the English is considered as a universal lingua-franca in the modern world. It opens up immeasurable vistas of information in all the fields and has become the global language for education, business, and technology. That is the reason why after initiating the overall economic reform and exercising the open-door policy in 1986, Vietnam has made the emergence of English as the most popular foreign language in this country. Up to the present, English teaching and learning has made rapid growth and expansion in Vietnam. However, it is being realized that English teaching strategy and methodology is also renewing and reshaping rapidly. It raises questions about English teachers' decision-making while teaching English as a second language that directly involves the switching between English and Vietnamese.

However, the students are in a constant struggle to acquire this language. The teachers utilize all of their energies to infuse their students the core linguistic skills of English. The students put much effort to become proficient. However, still, the results are not satisfactory. There are many reasons; faulty language policy, lack of resources, inefficient teachers, the disappointment of the students and wrong teaching methods, etc. However, the students have shown a considerable amount of willingness to use in the classrooms if they are encouraged and feel successful learning it. One way

of developing this willingness to communicate is the use of the CS in the initial stages of the L2 learning process. The CS is the way of interchanging between languages in different settings, ideas, and statements. In language education, the CS is the process in which teachers switch between the first language and the second language to teach the second language learning students. Many qualitative studies have proven the effectiveness of using this strategy. Therefore, the current study aims to explore qualitatively, the efficacy of the CS while instructing Primary school students in Hoabinh, Vietnam.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. The use of Code-switching in a bilingual society

According to Grosjean, Code-Switching is “the use of two or more languages in the same vocalization alternatively” [1]. In other words, it can be said that the bilingual speakers shift from one language to another language for specific communicative purposes. Moreover, it is believed that Code-switching and Code-mixing are similar terms. However, they are differentiated by sociolinguistics. Bokamba posits that in one utterance if the shifting from one language to another language is done thoroughly, it is Code-switching, and if the shifting from one language to another is done partially, it is Code-mixing [2]. The previous literature shows that the shifting of linguistic codes always takes place in bilingual society or in any environment where more than two languages are being used. Therefore, it can be assumed that Code-switching is an essential phenomenon in bilingual society.

As far as the communicative purposes of Code-switching are concerned, it assists an individual to become proficient equally in two languages and lends him an opportunity to develop his identity and express his ideas and feelings vividly, convincingly and eloquently. However, in order to understand the communicative purposes of Code-switching, three contextual reasons should be considered. The first reason that should be considered is the relationship between the communicators, the second reason is the background during the shifting and the third reason is the topic [3]. Among these three contextual reasons, the first and the second reason are the most significant ones. If the relationship between the speaker and the listener is the teacher and students, and the background of the shifting between the languages is classroom, Code-switching will occur more frequently and will be used as a significant strategy.

*B. Code-Switching as a teaching strategy in the ESL classroom*

Many studies have shown that the CS is a popular common strategy of teaching English as a second language in the ESL contexts. The obvious reason is that the CS is effective in teaching a foreign language [4]. Students find it easy and get interested in acquiring a foreign language in such a comfortable environment. They continue their learning process instead of dropping out. Cole mentions that bilingualism has assisted in the Japanese English language classes [5]. He explained that the progress of learning was somewhat slow, but it was not disappointing for the learners. They gained better intelligibility in grammar and vocabulary. Generally, it is shown that acquaintance to the target language confirms the success, while it may not be applicable in every classroom [6]. English classrooms depending on target language may lead to frustration, on the score that output is not possible without proper input. Thus, the use of bilingualism has been found advantageous in learning English as a foreign language. For instance, in Malaysia, Omar, comments that it effectively functions in the case of students who are weak in English conversation classroom [7]. As, Krashen holds a view that the use of an effective model of the target language in the classroom can be fruitful for the learners of English as a Foreign Language [8]. Further, Greggio and Gil investigated in their qualitative study that code-switching stands in good stead in foreign language teaching [9]. It can be assumed that Code-switching can be used as a strategy to teach the L2 students in different context. Therefore, the current study employs this conceptual framework and investigates the use of the CS by Primary ESL teachers at Hoabinh, Vietnam.

*C. Research questions*

- How do Vietnamese ESL teachers use the CS as a teaching strategy at primary schools in Hoabinh, Vietnam?
- What factors influence the use of the CS as a teaching strategy at primary level in Hoabinh, Vietnam?

**III. METHODOLOGY**

As this study explores the use of the CS by ESL teachers at Primary level context, therefore it uses qualitative approach for the investigation.

*D. Research Design*

The current study has adopted the cross-case study research design as it can help to explore the research problem and has a deep understanding of an existing problem in a real-life context.

*E. Research setting and Participants*

The participants have been selected based on a purposeful sampling technique that looked for four ESL teachers teaching English at the same grade level primary schools in Hoabinh, Vietnam. Four teachers have been chosen from different schools so that the comparison of their implementation of the Code-switching could be made. Table 1 indicates the main information about these teachers.

Participant s	Gender	Age	Age of teachin g	Degree
1	Female	36	13	Bachelor
2	Female	35	10	Master
3	Female	39	13	Master
4	Male	40	15	Master

Table 1. Participant teacher’s information’s

While Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 belong to a key school that is located at Hoaxing center, Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 are from a smaller school.

*F. Data collection*

As it aims to investigate the impact of code-switching as a teaching strategy by the Primary level ESL teachers, the procedure of data collection includes different sources of information. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations are the core research instruments for the selection of the respective data. Four participants joined this study for two weeks, including three times classroom observations and two interviews with each teacher.

*G. Data analysis*

Data analysis process includes two stages: data coding and developing potential themes. Table 2 provides an example of semi-structured interview data coding in the present study.

Teacher	Extract	Initial coding
1	I use Vietnamese to explain some problematic words	The purpose of using Code-switching
	The students must understand the grammar, and if I only use English, I am afraid it is not right enough for them	
	It always happens in class, just more or less	The frequency of using Code-switching
2 or 3 times when guiding the students to read a paragraph of English text.		

Table 2. Initial codes of the interview data.

**IV. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA & RESULTS**

*A. The application of Code-switching strategy in ESL classroom*

Both interview and observation data shows that the Vietnamese ESL teachers at primary level have known well about the CS and uses it with a clear purpose that fits the students. Four participants gave a wide range of answers applying CS as a strategy in their classroom. As Teacher 1 said, “It always happens in class, just more or less, sometimes we use CS for a clear purpose as speaking in Vietnamese it will provide students a better understanding.” Teacher 3 added one more thing “I think many times I change the language into

Vietnamese quite naturally without any awareness, I just do it because I think it is the right time.” In the case of Teacher 2 and Teacher 4, both of them agreed that the CS as a strategy could be used to help students “to understand and to remember.” All of them think that using CS is an essential in bill gangue classroom, especially to the low proficiency students. The applications of the CS strategy in teaching is provided in Table 3.

e	Cod	Application of Code-switching strategy	N=
	1	Translating the word	4
	2	Explaining linguistics knowledge	4
	3	Comparing synonyms	3
	4	Correcting students' mistakes	3
	5	Providing instructions	2
	6	Changing topics	2
	7	Making requests	1
	8	Asking questions	3

Table 3. The frequency of the Vietnamese ESL teachers' use Code-switching as a teaching strategy

As shown in Table 2, code 1 and code 2 are most popular applications of the CS strategy. For example, Teacher 2 uses the CS to explain the meaning of some English words that she considered “unique or difficult”:

*Episode 1*

Teacher 2: And the next one is “pen friend.” Do you have any pen friend?

*Students: (Silent)*

Teacher 2: Oh, well. That is bạn qua thư or bạn quen qua thư.

*Student 1: I don't have pen friend.*

In this study, the data shows that CS is least used as a request. Only Teacher 3 applies it, and according to her, sometimes students don't pay attention to English instruction, using Vietnamese can help her to get the attention.

*Episode 2*

Teacher 3: Now we will write this word five times. Write it on a paper is okay.

Students: (Start writing, some don't)

*Teacher 3: Write down. Viet ra giấy nào.*

In short, data from classroom observations illustrated some situations among the participating teachers. It shows that the CS strategy makes students understand and pay attention to the lessons.

*B. Code-switching assists in teaching language skills*

The thematic analysis of the Primary level ESL teachers' interview shows that the CS assists them in teaching English language skills. They have demonstrated their concern as below:

Teacher 1: “When I teach reading comprehension, I always shift from English to Vietnamese because the level of the student is low and I understand they can not comprehend if I speak English completely.”

Teacher 2: “The students don't have enough vocabulary at his level. They are very poor in their reading and writing. Using English all the time is not easy for the students, especially in grammar.”

Teacher 3: “I think Code-switching method is suitable for the students in this level.”

Teacher 4: “During speaking and listening skills, Code-switching helps me a lot. The students can't speak English completely. At that time, they try to make use of Code-switching. Especially in the case of listening if they don't understand, I use Vietnamese to make them understand.”

According to them, the level of their students' language competence is shallow, especially in vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, they have to make use of the mother tongue to teach their students successfully, especially improving student's vocabulary and grammar.

Teacher 4: “Especially, in the teaching of English grammar, I can not live without using Vietnamese. I feel easy to teach them grammatical structures of English, and secondly, the students easily understand. Even sometimes I have to compare between the two languages.”

Teacher 2: “Using Vietnamese in vocabulary and grammar teaching is the basic to build up their linguistic knowledge and language skills.”

According to them, the students feel comfortable when they understand something in their mother language. Otherwise, they will not be able to understand, and in results, they will fail in their exams. Therefore, it becomes indispensable for them to shift from one language to another. They have to make use of the mother tongue to teach their students successfully.

*C. Factors affecting CS*

The data of this study shows a few main factors that influence teachers' use of Code-Switching in their classrooms:

- The requirement from school
- The type of the subject
- Educational background of the teachers
- Teacher's control
- Vietnamese social communication culture
- Student's English proficiency
- Student's corporation

In general, there are maybe some more factors which affect the CS in an English classroom at the same times. Thus, it can be posited that the Primary level ESL students are satisfied and comfortable by the use of Code-switching in the classroom. It does not undermine their learning process instead it helps them to acquire the language contextually and accurately.

## V. DISCUSSION

In the light of the investigations about the applicability of Code-switching as a teaching strategy, it is pertinent to infer that it assists positively in inspiring Primary ESL teachers and learners in Hoaxing Vietnam to continue learning English. It provides a care-free classroom atmosphere and thus improving the students' ability of comprehension. The findings of this study are lined with the findings of Alshammari's study in the ESL context of Arab. The results of his study indicate that the use of L1 in the EFL classroom can be useful in the language learning process leading to learner's comprehension [10]. It is further confirmed by Pei-Shi in the Taiwan context that the use of code-switching facilitates the L2 learning [11].

Further, the studies of Tang and Eschewers indicate that both teachers and students use code-switching as a successful communicative strategy in the classroom [12,13]. "The students code-switch not only as a fallback method when their knowledge of the L2 fails them but also for discourse related functions that contextualize the interactional meaning of their utterances" [14]. Nevertheless, the teachers should be very careful and cautious while Code-switching. Its use should not be made excessive as it may turn the pace of learning very slow. There is no harm of using Code-switching if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students inefficient way but its use for a long time diminishes the L2 students' interaction with the native speakers [15]. Besides this factor, Code-switching should be used only for those learners who are weak in language acquisition. It has been observed that the students of rural and backward areas are vulnerable, least pushed and unresponsive. This strategy can function quite effectively if the teachers make wise use of it. This form of classroom instructions can yield good results by fulfilling the syllabus requirement and leading the low language proficiency learners to their projected goals.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study, therefore, concludes that Code-switching is a fruitful and robust strategy of teaching English to the learners at Primary level ESL Context. This study also finds that the teachers must have the freedom in choosing the technique that they want to use, whether CS or English only technique. They are the ones who best know what is best for their students. They are aware of their capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses and identify the appropriate method that is needed to meet the learning objectives. Hence, it is inferred that teacher's use of Code-switching is closely related with learners' effective support and their success in performing various classroom assignments. Therefore, this study implies that Code-switching could also be an effective strategy for the low proficient learners.

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