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## Code Switching and Code Mixing in Arab Students – Some Implications

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### Abstract

More recently, educators explored code-switching and code mixing in classrooms and have found it to be effective as a teaching and communicative strategy which can be used among students (Aguirre, 1988; Hudelson, 1983; Olmedo-Williams, 1983).

This survey aimed at finding out the implications of code switching and code mixing in Arabic context. It looked at attitudes, outlook and need for code mixing and code switching in Arabs.

The survey was conducted using questionnaires, tape recorded conversations, classroom observations, newspapers, billboards, brochures and other relevant materials available to the students.

The survey was conducted in the context of the classroom and interactions with other people as well. The data was collected, analysed and results tabulated. The results were further analysed for their positive and negative implications on learning a second language – English.

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The researcher hopes that the survey and its results will interest the English teachers not only from the Arab countries but other countries as well, because code mixing and code switching, the two phenomena have positive implications but not negative as was thought by the earlier linguists.

**Key Words:** Code switching, Arab students, merits of code switching, implications for teaching.

### **1. Demystifying Code Mixing and Code Switching**

Code Switching (CS) refers to the mixing of two or more languages by bilinguals (or multilinguals) in a discourse. Two types of code switching have been recognized by most researchers: Intrasentential code switching used for switches within sentences, and intersentential code switching for switches between sentences.

To illustrate further the difference in code mixing and code switching, examples are given below.

1a. Life in cities is comfortable *bass* I am sick and tired of traffic.  
Life in cities is comfortable *but* I am sick and tired of traffic.

Here in the above sentence, only one word from Arabic is mixed in a sentence of English. This is code mixing.

1b. If you work hard, ráh tingah.  
If you work hard, you will pass.

Here in the above sentence, the speaker starts in English but switches to Arabic to complete the sentence. This is code switching.

Crystal (1987) suggests that code, or language, switching occurs when an individual who is bilingual alternates between two languages during his/her speech with another bilingual person.

A bilingual is said to be one who is able to communicate, to varying extents, in a second language. This includes those who make irregular use of a second language, are able to use a second language but have not for some time (dormant bilingualism) or those who have considerable skill in a second language (Crystal, 1987).

This type of alteration, or code switching, between languages occurs commonly amongst bilinguals and may take a number of different forms, including alteration of sentences, phrases from both languages succeeding each other and switching in a long narrative.

Berthold, Mangubhai and Bartorowicz (1997, pg 2.13) supplement the definition of code switching thus far with the notion that it occurs where speakers change from one language to another in the midst of their conversations.

In general, a person who code switches demonstrates linguistic creativity and sophistication. Here, we take code switching as an umbrella term for both code switching and code mixing because our interest is in the implications of these phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves.

I have been teaching English to Omani students for the last seven years working at various levels. At first I worked in schools and then I moved to teaching in colleges. When I was teaching in school, I observed that the students had very little exposure to English outside of their classrooms. I observed the same was the case with the students at the college level. The teachers at the college level were using CS a lot in their classroom teaching and interaction outside the classroom. I have also learnt a little bit of Arabic courtesy from students and the environment around me. I too started using CS in my classrooms and I could bond well with the students, which is very crucial for the harmony in the language classrooms.

CS served a variety of purposes for me and my colleagues at the college. Then I was intrigued by this phenomenon and its positive or negative implications on teaching.

This study is also necessitated by the fact that the students have a very little exposure to English and thereby practicing the language in the classroom albeit using CS is imperative for language learning. It boosts the confidence of students and helps them to plug the gap in communication.

## **2. What do Linguists say?**

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After I identified the area of interest and formed a hypothesis, I conducted literature review and found that experts generally agree that teachers should restrict CS to the inter-sentential type. That is, teachers should switch languages only from sentence to sentence and not intra-sententially, or within a sentence. They should, however, accept intra-sentential CS by their learners (Ovando, 1985). There is some evidence; however, that complete separation of the two languages of instruction is beneficial to the development of both (Cummins & Swain, 1986).

Tukinoff (1985) addressed the use of two languages as a factor in effective instruction. Even though he distinguished between code-switching and language alternation, his conclusions are nonetheless pertinent to this study. He writes, "Effective teachers make use of every available resource--including knowledge of a limited English proficient (LEP) student's native language--to ensure that students learn. The purpose of language alternation should be tied to achieving effective instruction" (pp. 19-50).

The teacher's code switching necessarily serves some basic functions which may be beneficial in language learning environments. These functions are listed as topic switch, affective functions, and repetitive functions by Mattson and Burenhult (1999:61). Regarding students' code switching, Eldridge says although they may unconsciously perform code switching, it clearly serves some functions either beneficial or not. He names these functions as: equivalence, floor-holding, reiteration, and conflict control (1996:305-307). As I observed that CS was widely used in the language classrooms in Oman, I conducted the survey to prove the hypothesis.

### **3. The Survey: Background to the Context**

The ministry of higher education in Oman has introduced a common minimum program called (General Foundation Program) GFP. GFP (General Foundation Program) is a pedagogical orientation and process which seeks to promote collaborative and cooperative learning, problem-solving, and meaningful communication between learners and teachers and among learners themselves. All these require learners to interact with both the teacher and other learners.

The GFP aims at providing a comprehensive intellectual base that is relevant to all further study and to the development of broad thinking and life skills in general. The four areas that have been selected are English, Math, Computer and Study Skills. These are selected based on the advice of academic staff in Oman, international literature and international benchmarks.

But in Oman most English language teachers are native speakers of Arabic, and they vary considerably in terms of their mastery of the English language. In particular, it is important to note that these foreign language teachers perhaps should not be regarded as true bilinguals who can choose freely between different codes or languages. Instead, they are, more accurately, monolingual individuals who have varied skills and knowledge in English and whose task is to teach this language to the monolingual learners.

When English serves both as a content subject and also as the means of instruction in English language teaching classrooms, it becomes difficult for the students to participate effectively in

language learning. So, the teachers use all the available resources to make the students feel comfortable and learning second language becomes fruitful.

As Tukinoff (1985) says, “Effective teachers make use of every available resource--including knowledge of a limited English proficient (LEP) student’s native language--to ensure that students learn. The purpose of language alternation should be tied to achieving effective instruction” (pp. 19-50), it is observed in Omani language classrooms that comprehension and communication in English can be a barrier for Omani students. So the teachers are frequently observed to employ the alternation of Arabic, the mother tongue and English, the target language, i.e., code switching in Omani classrooms. It is in this context that this study looks at how the teachers switch codes and what specific pedagogical purposes or functions code switching serves in EFL classroom.

#### **4. The Main Focus**

As said earlier, I have come across the phenomenon of code switching (CS) quite often and this has triggered off the inquisitiveness to dwell deep into this aspect. The survey was undertaken to find out convincing answers to the following questions.

1. Which code(s) do students and other Arab speakers of different varieties use when they engage in intra-group informal discussions?
2. Which code(s) do students and other Arab speakers of different dialects choose when they engage in informal discussions and conversations with other speakers?
3. What are the socio-cultural factors behind CM and CS used among students and other Arab speakers of different/same varieties?
4. Why do students and other Arab speakers switch or mix codes?
5. What are the educational implications of code switching?
6. How did I go about it?

#### **5.1. Participants**

In this section the discussion would focus on the participants who took part in this survey along with the instruments used to obtain authentic data.

The participants for this study are:

(i) 80 students who are at present in the General Foundation Program learning English in preparation for their Diploma and Degree programs.

(ii) 5 teachers who are teaching English to the students in General Foundation Program.

The students who participated in this study are in the General Foundation Program. These students had had 8 years of English taught by a mix of different nationalities of teachers in schools before they came to colleges. All the students who graduate from secondary schools have to take a placement test, the scores of which will be used to place the students in different levels of learning English. So, these participants took the placement conducted by the English Language Centre, Scientific College of Design.

## **5.2. Instruments**

Questionnaires, classroom observations and interviews were the tools that were used for obtaining data.

### **5.2.1 Questionnaires**

(A). Questionnaire to determine the current level of exposure to English

A questionnaire was distributed to the students to know their level of exposure to English in all domains of their lives.

(B). Questionnaire to identify the students' attitude to code switching

A second questionnaire was distributed to the students to know about their attitude to code switching and also what they think about code switching.

(C). Questionnaire to the teachers

A questionnaire was distributed to the teachers as well to know their background knowledge and their attitude to CS.

### **5.2.2. Recorded Data**

Four classes were observed and the teaching was recorded. This was done with the knowledge of the teacher but unknown to the students. The total tape-recorded data amounts to 6 hours. The four classes that were observed covered all the four skills. The classes were of two-hour duration and the number of students was 25 in each of these classrooms. The classes were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Teachers are native speakers of Arabic and have more or less equal proficiency in English.
2. They teach English at foundation level.
3. They teach all the four skills.

## **6. Data Analysis**

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Very interesting conclusions were drawn from the data collected from various sources using different tools.

### **6.1. Analysis of the Responses from Questionnaire (A) (Appendix 1)**

1. 80% of the students come from remote villages and they are first-generation learners.
2. Their exposure is limited to the classroom.
3. They like to watch English music channels but stick to Arabic channels for their daily entertainment.
4. They don't read much of English newspapers.
5. Most of their English vocabulary comes from what the teachers provide them in language classrooms.
6. Arabic is a dominating language with English used only in the classrooms.

### **6.2. Analysis of the Responses from Questionnaire (B) (Appendix 2)**

1. Almost all the students agree that they mix languages when they speak.
2. They mix Arabic and English while speaking to their teachers, in the language classroom and also on informal occasions.
3. They are also of the opinion that it is very beneficial to them when their teachers use two languages in the language classroom.
4. They also feel that they pick up most of their English vocabulary when the teachers mix languages as it helps to know the word and its meaning at the same time.

### **6.3. Analysis of the Responses from Questionnaire (C) (Appendix 3)**

1. The teachers mix codes; English and Arabic, while teaching in a language classroom as they feel that the students understand better.
2. They use CS in classroom as they strongly feel that it helps them in bonding with the students, which is very important while learning a second language.
3. They opine that mixing codes has positive implications on learning a second language, English in this case.

4. Arab teachers feel that the students' exposure to English is very limited, so they should use Arabic while teaching English.

#### **6.4. Observations from the Tape-recorded Data and Classroom Observations**

The data was collected from three different teachers teaching in their classrooms as that provided a wider range of perceptions, practices of CS and attitudes toward CS. It also provided the range of skills (listening, speaking, reading and grammar class). Listening and speaking provided the ground for students using CS, grammar, and reading for the student-teacher interaction in classroom settings and also general interaction classroom. The recorded data support the claim that CM has positive effect on learning English. The following merits were observed from the data.

#### **7. Merits of Code Switching**

**7.4.1.** It functions as a defensive mechanism for students as it gives the students the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gaps resulting from the incompetencies, if they have any, in using foreign language. Examples from class observations are;

##### **Teacher 1:**

It was a Listening and Speaking class. The teacher gave them a topic "Learning a second language (English) is important." The students were asked to discuss the topic for about two minutes in pairs. The students worked in pairs and listed the points on papers. Whenever they had difficulty in expressing their ideas, they gave the words in Arabic and the teacher or some of the competent students translated them into English which was helpful in maintaining the thought.

Student: Learning a second language is good because it helps atefægum .....other people.

Teacher: atefægum – understanding.

Student: Learning a second language is helpful because it helps understanding people.

**7.4.2.** In this case, the message in target language is repeated by the student in native tongue through which the learner tries to give the meaning by making use of a repetition technique. In this case Code Switching functions as a bridge between known (native language) to unknown (English.)

##### **Teacher 2:**

The teacher was checking out the vocabulary section of the lesson. He read out a word and asked the students to repeat the word. While doing so, the students came across words like the following:

Teacher: century

Student: Ustaad, century yaani qarn!! (Teacher! Century means qarn?)

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Teacher: Yes, century means qarn.  
Teacher: pronunciation  
Students: yaani ntoq? (meaning ntoq?)  
Teacher: Yes, pronunciation means ntoq.

**7.4.3.** It was observed, specially while having group activities in the classrooms, that CS is a beneficial tool.

### **Teacher 3:**

It was a reading class. The teacher asked the students to discuss the topic in groups. The title of the text was “Academic Life around the World”. The students discussed the topic in groups and wrote the important sentences in their books. Interestingly, when a student had a problem expressing herself in English, another student from the same group helped her with the English word.

Student 1: English is very important as al anglezi luga alamiaiah

Student 2: ..... international language.

Then the teacher asked them to discuss the challenges that they encountered while they were in school.

Student1: challenges?

Students 2: tahddiyaat

**7.4.4.** In this case, the teacher uses code switching in order to avoid conflict and for better comprehension of the information. Following the instruction in target language, the teacher code switches to native language in order to clarify the meaning, and in this way stresses the importance on the foreign language content for efficient comprehension.

### **Teacher 2:**

It was an introductory session conducted by the Head of the English Language Centre. He was talking about some important points that the students should pay attention to during the semester. He started off in English but when he realized that they did not understand what he was saying, he code switched

Teacher: There are some procedures which you have to follow during this semester. Even if you fail in one subject, you will redo the whole semester. If you take an ‘F’ in two skills, rah taidd el level.

(.....If you take an ‘F’ in two skills, you must repeat the level.)

## **8. Implications for teaching**

Code switching in language classroom has been found to have positive implications. There are many uses of code switching by both the teachers and learners.

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A. The first function of code mixing is of “equivalence”. . This process may be correlated with the deficiency in linguistic competence in target language, which makes the student use the native lexical item when he/she does not have the competence for using the target language explanation for a particular lexical item

B. Secondly, code switching helps in reiteration, which is pointed by Eldridge as: “messages are reinforced, emphasized, or clarified where the message has already been transmitted in one code, but not understood” (1996:306).

C. Thirdly, code switching in language classroom has a repetitive function. In this case, the teacher uses code switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge to the students for clarity. It facilitates language learning, as observed in the vocabulary class, by providing a chance for the students to learn new English words along with their Arabic equivalents.

D. Fourthly, code switching helps in directing students’ attention to the new knowledge by making use of code switching. In this case Code Switching functions as a bridge between known (native language) to unknown (English.)

E. Finally, code switching helps in building solidarity and intimate relations between the teacher and the students. In this sense, one may speak of the contribution of code switching in creating a supportive language environment in the classroom. It acts as a bridge that builds solidarity between the teacher and the students.

Cook (1991) asserts that code switching may be integrated into the activities used for the teaching of a second language. He describes two approaches to code switching in teaching/learning:

1. The first approach uses code switching as a foundation for the development of a second language like in the activities where the students need to collect information using first language and present dialogue in the second language.

2. The second approach uses reciprocal language teaching. This approach requires students to switch languages at predetermined points pairing students who want to learn each other's languages. Thus the students alternate between the two languages and exchange the roles of student and teacher. He also adds that the teachers should be allowed to code switch languages in certain key areas such as while explaining important concepts, when students are getting distracted, during revisions or when students are praised or reprimanded. On this basis, switching may be used as an effective teaching strategy for second language learning.

## **9. Conclusion**

To conclude, CS has been noticed as a common feature amongst Arab students and their effort to learn English found to be easy through CS. The positive effects of CS have been once again confirmed through this survey. The implication is, teachers who can learn local language of

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students would be more successful in teaching than those who have reservations about using any language other than the target language. At the same time, caution should be exercised in using CS as a teaching tool, and teachers should know where to draw a line, so that it would not become a translation technique. It seems, from the presenter's experience, that CS would be an effective tool in EFL contexts.

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### Appendix A

#### Questionnaire to Determine Students' Current Level of Exposure to English

1. What language(s) do you often speak?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
2. What language did you first learn to speak before school age?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....

3. What language did you learn at the primary school?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
4. What language(s) was/were used in teaching you in elementary/primary school?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
5. What language did you learn at the secondary school?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
6. What language do you normally use to communicate with your family?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
7. What do you use to reach non-members of your close family (uncle, cousin, nephew, aunt)?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
8. In what language do you interact with your colleagues (friends)?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
9. What language would you normally use if a friend visits you in your college or if you visit your friend in his/her college?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
10. What language would you use in speaking to a non-colleague or a person not familiar with you, if you visit or happen to come across such a person?
  - (a) in his office or place of work?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
  - (b) in his Home?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
  - (c) in an informal setting (like a party, club house, restaurant, market, football field, etc.)?  
Arabic ..... English..... Others.....
11. Have you ever worked or lived in a big city or town and for how long?
12. Do you prefer Arabic TV channel or English TV channel for news?
13. For entertainment, do you watch Arabic TV channels or English TV channels?
14. Do you read Arabic newspapers or English newspapers?

## Appendix 2

### **Questionnaire on Attitude to Code Mixing and Code Switching**

1. Have you ever observed the language people use while speaking?
2. Do they use one language or mix words or sentences from another language?
3. How many languages do people mix while speaking?
4. What are those languages?
5. Do you mix languages while talking to another person?
6. How many languages do you mix while talking?
7. What are those languages?
8. Do you like mixing languages while speaking?

If yes, answer question no.10 If no, answer question no.9

9. Why don't you like mixing languages? Tick in the following boxes.

- a. Because my language is better than English
- b. Because it has all the words equivalent to English
- c. Because it is difficult to understand when you mix languages
- d. Because it is wrong to mix two languages while speaking
- e. Because people think that I don't know my language well
- f. Because I will forget my language
- g. Because people want to show off that they know two languages
- h. Because my religion and culture prohibit it
- i. because my friends laugh at me

10. Why do you mix words from another language? Tick from the following:

- a. Because I don't know the word in my language
- b. Because the word in my language is a complex one
- c. Because it sounds good
- d. Because I know two languages
- e. Because I want to show people that I know two or more languages
- f. Because my friends use it
- g. Because I am learning a new language
- h. Because it is easy to convey meaning to people
- i. Because it helps me practice the new language that I am learning
- j. because using words from another language is good

11. Do you think you can learn better if you mix words from English with Arabic?

12. What is the nationality of your teachers?
  13. Do they speak Arabic or any other language?
  14. Do your teachers mix Arabic and English when they speak to you?
  15. Do you like it if your teacher uses Arabic and English while teaching English in the classroom?
  16. Do you think it is good for the students if the teachers mix Arabic and English while teaching in the classroom?
  17. Do you think you can learn new words from the teachers when they mix Arabic and English?
  18. Do you think it will help you in understanding the lesson well if your teachers mix Arabic and English while teaching?
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### **Appendix 3 C. Questionnaire for Teachers to Know Their Attitude to Code Switching**

1. Which country are you from?
2. What was the medium of instruction in your school?
3. What is the language(s) that you generally use with your family?
4. What is the language(s) that you use with your colleagues and friends?
5. Have you observed your speech while talking to others?
6. Do you mix languages when you speak?
7. If yes, what are those languages?
8. Which subject do you teach?
9. Do you use Arabic or English in teaching?
10. Do students communicate with you in Arabic or English?
11. If they ask you a question in English how do you respond?

12. Do students communicate with each other in Arabic or English?
13. What do you think of mixing languages while speaking or teaching?
14. Does it help the students when you mix Arabic and English while teaching?
15. Why do you mix Arabic and English while teaching? Tick the following boxes:
- a. Because I don't know the word in my language
  - b. Because the word in my language is a complex one
  - c. Because it sounds good
  - d. Because I know two languages
  - e. Because I want to show people that I know two or more languages
  - f. Because I feel the students are not exposed to English
  - g. Because it is easy to convey meaning to people
  - h. because using words from another language helps the students in learning English

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