Shifting to one's native language in an English oral examination: a phenomenon of code-switching in the process of learning a foreign language

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to describe how and why English as a Foreign Language students resort to their own native language in the process of taking an English language oral examination. This research stems from previous linguistic investigation on first language interferences in the process of taking an EFL oral examination. For instance, Palmer and Posteguillo (1997) detected that code-switching represented the third most frequent first language interference for both Spanish business and computer science students when taking an English oral examination. This fact made us consider that further research was necessary to explain what triggered these switches to one's native language in an EFL oral examination. We have looked into this phenomenon in the light of previous research on code-switching (Poplack, 1982)

METHOD

We have analysed a total corpus made up of 40 conversations that EFL learners had in English in their oral examinations, so that the discourse of 80 different subjects has been involved in this linguistic enquiry. These conversations consisted of a sale role play. Once the conversations had been registered and analysed, the different code-switches detected in the corpus were categorised, taking into account a specific taxonomy of code-switching which we have specifically developed for this research, based on the one devised by Valdés (1982). The taxonomy we have devised, taking into consideration our focus on the underlying psycholinguistic reasons of this phenomenon, can be seen in table 1.

RESULTS

A total of 320 minutes of conversations between EFL learners were recorded, transcribed and examined. The average conversation lasted for 8 minutes and 2 seconds. A total of 72 instances of code-switching were detected. This implies an average of 1 switch every 4 minutes and 26 seconds–in other words, there were almost 2 switches in each conversation. Certainly there were variations and some conversations included more of these switches than others. To be more precise, among the 40 conversations analysed, 13 had no switches, so that the 72 instances of switches detected were concentrated on the other 27 conversations. Table 1 summarises how these switches were distributed.

Table 1.- Percentages of the various types of code-switches detected in the corpus.

Type of switch	Percentage of appearance
1. – Self-correction	8.33
2. – Indicative of conflict	5.55
3. – Clarifying	1.38
4. – Reassuring the other speaker	6.94
5. – Interjections	13.88
6. – Indicative of self-assurance	5.55
7. – Exam interferences	2.77
8. – Indicative of nervousness	22.22
9. – Lexical switching of isolated items/lexical	29.16
10. – Discourse markers	2.77
11. – Proper nouns	1.38

DISCUSSION

The most frequent type of code-switch is that of *switching of isolated items/lexical* which represents almost one third of all the switches in our study. Most of these switches are related to a conscious and/or unconscious lexical need on part of the student which makes him/her shift from an unfamiliar linguistic code–in this case English–into his/her more familiar native language. It is particularly interesting that this is not a consistent practice. That is to say, the same technical term may be sometimes reproduced according to the English linguistic code and then reproduced in the student's native linguistic code, as it can be seen in the following example:

(1) *Alberto*: Of course, we only have CD-ROMs of Microsoft, because we are the **Microsoft** official service in Castellón. We can install your **CD-ROM** in your computer. With the **CD-ROM**, CD-ROM, you can find...

In example (1), the learner initially pronounces both *CD-ROM* and *Microsoft* both correctly, but then shifts into the Spanish linguistic code. Finally, the student becomes aware of this shift and corrects himself, turning back to the English linguistic code.

The second most frequent type of code-switch detected in the corpus is that related to the learners' nervousness. In other bilingual contexts where code-switching has been analysed, the psycholinguistic implications of anxiety may not be present, or at least not with the same intensity as in the context of an oral exam, where students are urged by the need of passing a text. These examples illustrate how this process takes place:

(2) *Silvia*: May I come in?
Berta: Oh, yes, please, ummm, **estoy muy nerviosa**. Oh yes please, good morning...

(3) *Carmen* : Eh, ah, we need a person who work for company, **es que lo estoy cagando el examen, se lo leo y que lo haga ella, porque es que no me acuerdo**
Teacher: **Tú concéntrate. Yo estoy evaluando a las dos individualmente. Así que tú tranquila.**

Carmen: **Pues si no hago las preguntas...**
Teacher: **Concentrate, venga. Despacito. Verás como sale.**
Carmen: Good morning...

(4) *César*: Which model of modem do you need eh, for...**espera**...which model of modem do you need..eh, emmm... **son los nervios**... which model of modem do you have at home?

In both examples (2) and (4), the learners code-switch, using this linguistic device as a means to explain his and her nervousness, respectively. In example (3) the switch is longer, and it has to be noted that the Spanish learner not only makes grammar mistakes in her English speech, but also in her own native Spanish.

The use of interjections in the EFL learners' native language represents the third most frequent type of code-switch detected. Among the various types of Spanish interjections, students almost systematically resort to the use of *ay,* as in the following examples:

(5) *Francisco*: I would like a ... a... a.... a four or fifth... **ay**... a four or five star hotel

(6) *César*: Could I serve in you in anything?
Francisco: Yes, I'm interested in a fax modem.
César: What can... **ay**...
Francisco: **Vale**, I have been searching a versatile fax.

In both (5) and (6) the interjection *ay* has been used as an expression of relief on part of the speaker in a tense situation. To be more precise, in (5) *ay* also provides a brief lapse of time that allows the speaker to introduce a correction in the L2 linguistic code. In (6), César's switch by means of the interjection *ay,* triggers Francisco's switch into Spanish with the expression *vale.* This is a typical instance where we have deviated from Valdés' (1982) classification of code-switches: for her, *vale* would have represented a triggered switch, whereas for us it is a switch used to reassure the other speaker. Valdés focuses on the sequential relationship of the expressions *ay/vale* while we focus on the psycholinguistic motivations of the switch itself. In our understanding, both expressions share equally valid perspectives towards the same linguistic phenomenon. In fact, they complement each other and we could say that *vale,* within this context, is a triggered code-switch in order to reassure the other participant in the conversation.

Self correction code-switching is the fourth most frequent type in the corpus of conversations analysed. In (5) above, the interjection *ay* gave the speaker a brief lapse of time to introduce a correction in his L2 discourse, but it did not represent a *self-correction* code-switch. In (7) below, however, the speaker first shifts into Spanish, and then immediately corrects himself by saying the same expression in English again.

(7) Luis: As you can see the Sound Blaster **treinta y dos**, ummm, thirty-two, ummm, has not enough reproduction quality.

The fifth most common type of code-switch is the *reassuring the other speaker* category. In the next example (8), we may see how the second speaker, makes an effort to reassure the first participant:

(8) *Gemma*: Well, ...ummm...ummm... **no me acuerdo de nada. Es que no me acuerdo...**
Carmen: **Venga.**
[pause]
Gemma: **¿Podemos empezar?**
Teacher: **Claro, venga.**
Carmen: **Espera, espera, venga.**
Gemma: **Empezamos, ¿eh?**
Teacher: **Venga.**
Gemma: Good morning, can I help you? Good morning.
Carmen: Good morning.

We can see how Gemma switches from English to Spanish and how Carmen switches to Spanish as well (a triggered switch, from Valdés' perspective), in order to reassure Gemma so that she may turn back to English. The teacher imitates Carmen's behaviour, shifting to Spanish and reassuring Gemma. Finally, Gemma turns back to English and the exam proceeds.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research regarding code-switching in EFL is in progress. We are now looking into the pedagogical implications of this linguistic phenomenon, in relation to University EFL teaching settings. Additionally, we are also interested in analysing the particularities of code-switching in our bilingual context, where we have noticed that switches do not only take place from English into Spanish, but also from English into Catalan.

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