

Conversational code-switching among intermediate learners of French at Alliance Française de Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

Using a framework based on conversation analysis (Auer 1984, 1995), this paper presents an analysis of second / foreign language (L2) learner code-switching between English (L1) and French (L2) in an intermediate foreign language classroom. The study aimed at finding out why, how and when intermediate learners of French at Alliance Française de Kampala employ code-switching in the learning of L2. This paper presents a description, categorization and analysis of the processes of code-switching among intermediate learners of French at Alliance Française de Kampala. It was found that learners code switch when not only their knowledge in the L2 fails them, i.e. for participant-related functions, but also discourse-related functions that contextualize the interactional meaning of their utterances. It was also found that the intermediate learners of French at Alliance Française de Kampala use code-switching as a learning strategy specifically during small group activities. Learners would switch when clarifying or giving the meaning of new vocabulary or lexical items they came across when reading or discussing texts.

Key words: Code-switching, foreign language learning, learning strategy, participant and discourse-related switching

1 Introduction

Code-switching is one of the most striking features of various conversational exchanges in bilingual or multilingual communities. However, its definition remains complex as Gardner-Chloros (2009) noted that it is problematic to define code-switching. She remarks that code-switching can have different meanings and refer to whatever we want it to mean. Winford (2003) defines code-switching as a cover term for a variety of bilingual and bidialectal language mixing, which results from different social circumstances and motivations. According to Gardner-Chloros (1997), code-switching is the use of two languages in the same conversation or utterance whereas Schendl and Wright (2011) define code-switching as the ability to alternate between languages in an unchanged setting, often within the same utterance. In brief, code-switching refers to cases where bilingual speakers alternate between codes/languages within the same speech event or within a single turn (a speaker's contribution in a conversational exchange), or mix elements from two codes within the same utterance or sentence.

Gumperz's (1982) pioneering work on bilingual discourse strategies showed that language alternation, far from constituting a language or communicative deficit, provided an additional resource which bilinguals systematically exploited to express a range of social and rhetorical meanings. From this perspective, code-switching is an element in a socially agreed upon matrix of contextualization cues and conventions used by speakers to signal the addressee's context of conversation (Gumperz, 1982).

On the other hand, Auer (1995) represents a very different development of Gumperz's conversational paradigm. Auer argues that Gumperz's list of established functions, such as addressee selection to mark emphasis or interjections, was not only theoretically problematic and unmotivated, but it could also in principle never be complete. Developing Gumperz's idea of code-switching as a contextualization cue, he suggests that the problems posed by an analysis in terms of functions could be solved by adopting the sequential framework of conversational analysis. Auer's suggestion was that code-switching worked like other prosodic or gestural contextualization cues, the chief function of which is to signal participants' orientation to each other. Auer also argues that since the contrast set up by code-switching is particularly visible, switching serves as a particular salient contextualization cue in bilingual communities.

Auer draws a distinction between participant-related code-switching, which is motivated by the language preferences or competence of the participants, and discourse-related code-switching, which is employed by the participants to set up a contrast that structures some part of the discourse, for instance, reiteration of an utterance of emphasis in a different language. Participant-related switching may be seen as either preference-related or competence-related. According to Auer (1995), participant-related switching involves negotiation of language for the interaction, participants switch from one code to another until when consensus is reached on the medium of exchange. On the other hand, discourse-related switching is associated with the organization of the ongoing interaction, such as change of topic and change of addressee, as will be discussed in the findings of the study.

In Auer's view, the conversational analysis approach has at least two advantages: first, it gives priority to the sequential implicativeness of language choice in the

conversation. This sequential implicativeness means that the choice of language, which a particular participant makes for the organization of his or her turn or for an utterance, exerts an influence on subsequent choices of the same or other speakers. Second, it limits the external analysts' interpretational leeway because it relates his or her interpretations back to the members' mutual understanding of their utterances as manifest in their behavior (Auer, 1984). It should be noted that Auer's sequential approach to conversational analysis gives priority to dialogical meaning, i.e. meaning in any interaction is negotiated by the participants in the conversational exchange. Auer (1984) posits that what is of primary interest is the visible-observable strategies, signals or cues by which participants make themselves understood, display their understanding of co-participants' utterances, or negotiate the language of conversation. He adds that in order to be able to interpret code-switching, the participants and analysts alike depend on the small details of verbal interaction, such as pauses, hesitations, overlaps, gestures, eye contact, gaze among other cues. It is this kind of sequential approach that the analysis of data is based on in this study.

1.1 Conversational functions of code-switching

Studies have shown that code-switching is used as a communicative device depending on the switcher's communicative intents (Tay, 1989; Myers-Scotton, 1995, Adendorff, 1996). It should be noted that speakers use switching strategies to organize, enhance and enrich their speech in order to achieve their communicative objectives.

According to Trudgill (2000), speakers code switch to manipulate, influence, or define the situation as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intentions. In this respect, code-switching may be used for self-expression and as a way of modifying language for the sake of personal intentions.

Speakers may code-switch for discourse-enhancing functions or sociolinguistic benefits, that is, to express solidarity and affiliation with a particular social group (Gal, 1979; Milroy, 1987). That is to say that code-switching can be used to build intimate interpersonal relationships among members of a speech community. It is a tool used to create linguistic solidarity, especially between individuals who share the same ethno-cultural identity. In fact, Wardhaugh (2006) posits that various factors determine the choice of codes in any given situation. According to him, factors such as solidarity, accommodation to listeners, choice of topic and perceived social and cultural distance may exercise an influence on the choice of a particular code.

Furthermore, code-switching is used to fill a linguistic or conceptual gap for a speaker (Gysels, 1992). Code-switching is seen as a communicative strategy; it provides continuity in speech to compensate for the inability of expression. Skiba (1997) suggests that in the circumstances where code-switching is used due to an inability of expression, it serves for continuity in speech instead of presenting interference in language. In this respect, code-switching stands to be a supporting element in communication of information and in social interaction; therefore it serves communicative purposes as it is used to transfer meaning.

Studies have also reported that speakers code-switch to reiterate or emphasize a point (Gal, 1979; Malik, 1994). By repeating the same point in another language, the

speaker is stressing or adding more on the topic of discussion. Code-switching is also used for different pragmatic reasons, depending on the communicative intent of the speakers, such as mitigating, aggravating and personalizing messages (Koziol, 2000), effective production (Azhar & Bahiyah, 1994), distancing (Maya, 1999), or signaling topic change (Fishman, 1972; Hoffman, 1991).

Code-switching provides an opportunity for language development and creates a supportive language environment in the classroom. The listener is able to provide a translation into the second or foreign language, thus providing a learning and developing activity. This in turn will allow for a reduced amount of switching and less subsequent interference as time progresses. Cook (1991) asserts that code-switching may be integrated into activities used for the teaching of a second language, because it is used to get information and clarify meaning, and widens the learner's vocabulary base in the target language. Code-switching modifies input in such a way that it facilitates target language acquisition (Rolin-Ianziti & Siobhan, 2002) and enhances the quality of input and thus, promotes intake (Van Lier, 1995).

Eldridge (1996) identifies four functions of students' code-switching: equivalence, reiteration, conflict control, and floor-holding. During a conversation in L2, learners fill a linguistic gap with L1 use. In other words, learners' code-switching is a mechanism used to avoid gaps in communication. This may be due to lack of fluency in L2, or due to the fact that the learners cannot recall the appropriate L2 structure or lexicon.

Eldridge (1996) also points out that messages can be reinforced, emphasized or clarified where the message has already been transmitted in one code but not understood, i.e. for purposes of reiteration. The message in L2 is repeated by the learner in L1 through which s/he tries to give the meaning by making use of repetition technique. The reason for this specific language alternation has two implications; first, the learner may not have transferred the meaning exactly in L2. Second, the learner may think it is more appropriate to employ code-switching to indicate that the meaning or the content has been well understood. In the same vein, Gumperz (1982) states that when functioning as reiteration or repeating the message in another code, code-switching may be performed literally or in a modified form and it serves to clarify, to emphasize, and to promote understanding.

In a like manner, the learner may use code-switching to avoid a misunderstanding or as a means of conflict control, i.e. it is used as a strategy to transfer the intended meaning, but this may vary according to the learner's needs, intentions or purposes. In addition, the lack of culturally equivalent lexis among learners, which may lead to violation of the transference of the intended meaning, may result in code-switching to avoid possible misunderstandings or conflicts due to L2 shortcomings (Simon, 2001).

There are many reasons behind the phenomenon of code-switching. In this study, we attempted to examine how intermediate French language learners at Alliance Française de Kampala use code-switching to organize their conversation as well as to accomplish a given group task. We based our analysis on Auer's distinction between participant-related and discourse-related code-switching.

2 The present study

Code-switching is a widely observed phenomenon in bilingual, multilingual or multicultural communities. In Uganda, a multilingual and multicultural country, code-switching is very common in second or foreign language (L2) learners' speech. Studies have shown that code-switching occurs in both formal and informal contexts of communication and is used by anyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect, regardless of the extent of contact (Gardner-Chloros, 2009). It should also be noted that conversational code-switching tends to occur subconsciously as speakers are motivated by factors within the conversation itself when it takes place (Gumperz, 1982). The present paper explores the reasons behind code-switching and aims to find out how and when code-switching takes place in the L2 classroom. Focus is put on the intermediate learners of French at Alliance Française de Kampala.

2.1 A brief background of Alliance Française de Kampala

The Alliance Française de Kampala was created in 1954. It is a non-profit, apolitical, laic and undiscriminatory association recognized by the Ugandan private law. It offers language and translation services and organizes different cultural events such as concerts, expositions, Francophone Day activities, among others. About 1500 students per year enroll in French as a foreign language, French for specific objectives, Luganda, Swahili and English classes. It offers French language courses from A1 to B2 levels and is in charge of conducting DELF (Diploma in French language Studies) and DALF¹ (Diploma in advanced French). It is linked to the Alliance Française de Paris. Its purpose is to promote French/francophone and Ugandan cultures, and to foster cultural exchanges between Uganda and France. In conjunction with the Association of Teachers of French in Uganda, Alliance Française de Kampala organizes training for the teachers of French in the different regions of the country.

2.2 Methodology

The data used in this study is from two French classes and consists of four hours of videotaped discussions in small groups. They were B1 classes (Intermediate level) composed of six adult learners each. In one class, there were four females and two males, and in the other, there were three females and three males. The participants were from different socio-cultural and professional backgrounds, and were learning French for various personal reasons. The participants were aged between twenty and forty years and spoke different first languages, but spoke English as a common language. Permission to record the two classes was granted by the director of studies. Teachers and learners were also asked for their consent to be recorded and were informed that the data recorded was to be kept confidential.

¹ DELF and DALF are diplomas awarded by the French Ministry of Education to certify the French language skills/proficiency of non-French candidates.

The learners were videotaped as they were trying to accomplish small group tasks, because it is more likely to yield both participant-related and discourse-related switches. Markee (2005) also states that “in small group work, rules of classroom talk are somewhat suspended or are at least loosened up and talk resembles more that of mundane conversation where the status of each participant is somewhat equivalent as opposed to the hierarchical relations in teacher-fronted class time”. This means that language learners feel more at ease and less pressured to use the target language in small group activities as was evident in this study.

The recorded speech was transcribed using Jefferson’s transcript notation as described in Atkinson & Heritage (1984). Jefferson’s transcript notation is a set of symbols used to transcribe and describe speech in conversational analysis. The symbols used in this study are explained in the appendix. The utterances that contain code-switching were identified, categorized and analyzed based on Auer’s distinction between participant-related (preference-related or competence-related switching) and discourse-related code-switching. In order not to expose the participants’ identity, pseudonyms are used.

3 Findings and Discussion

The data presents a description of learners’ use of code switching as a language of preference and as a learning strategy. The data also shows how learners employ code switching to get information, clarify or give the meaning of new vocabulary. The data further shows how learners use code-switching as a result of language deficiency as illustrated by the excerpts below:

3.1 Excerpt 1

This conversation is between Ben and Lenny in their small group discussion. They were asked to read a text on doping. Their major task was to find out the definition of the term *doping* and below is the dialogue.

- 1) Ben: *Le dopage est dangereux dans le mesure où les produits* ((silence))
‘Doping is dangerous in the sense that products’
- 2) What is this ? *Pour Lutter contre ce fléau ?* (gazes at Lenny)
‘To fight against this scourge?’
- 3) Lenny: ((checks in the dictionary)) to struggle
- 4) Ben: To struggle↑
- 5) Lenny: to fight (.) To fight against
- 6) Ben: To fight against this ()
- 7) The teacher asks a question: *C’est difficile?*
‘Is it difficult?’
- 8) Ben: *Non, non, c’est facile*
‘No, No, it is easy’
- 9) Lenny: *Il y a quelques mots, quelques phrases difficiles*
‘There are some difficult words, some difficult sentences’
- 10) Ben: *Oui, mais beaucoup de mots sont comme en anglais*

- ‘Yes, but many words are like in English’
- 11) Lenny: *Nous comprenons* the flow
‘We understand the flow’
- 12) Teacher: *Pardon*
‘Pardon’
- 13) Lenny: *Nous comprenons la*, the flow
- 14) The teacher: The flow↑
(Lenny continues with the reading of the text)
- 15) Lenny: To fight against this *fléau*
To fight against this scourge
((pause))
- 16) Ben: How is it spelt?
- 17) Lenny: *Ce F.L.E.A.U.* (2.0) it would have been the first one
- 18) Ben: It is not there
- 19) Teacher: *Vous avez fini? On va avoir une pause et après la pause, on va discuter*
‘Have you finished? We are going to have a break and after the break,
we are going to discuss’
- 20) Lenny: *Avec qui?*
‘With whom?’
- 21) Teacher : *Non, non, vous allez présenter ce que vous avez lu.*
‘No, no, you are going to present what you have read.’

In line 2, Ben switches to English when he came across a new lexical item in French (what is this?). He, in fact, gazes at Lenny, which can be interpreted as asking for help and telling him to look it up in the dictionary. In other words, he employs code-switching to find out the meaning of the new word (lutter contre). We also see that in line 11, Lenny switches to English when he cannot find the equivalent of the word “flow” in French due to limited vocabulary. He uses what Eldridge (1996) calls equivalence. In this case, the student makes use of the L1 equivalent of a certain lexical item in the target language and therefore code switches to his/her L1. He adds that this switching may be correlated with the deficiency in linguistic competence of the target language, which makes the student use the L1 lexical item when s/he does not have the competence in the target language to enable him/her to explain a particular lexical item. He posits that equivalence functions as a defensive mechanism for students as it gives them the opportunity to continue the communication by bridging the gaps resulting from foreign language incompetence. It may be argued that Lenny uses English in this situation as a floor-holding technique; he fills the stopgap with an English lexical item “flow” in order to avoid breakage or gap in communication as Eldridge (1996) notes. In other words, he uses code-switching to maintain the interaction with the teacher.

It may well be argued that, in this excerpt, code-switching is used as a way of asking and clarifying the meaning of the new French lexical item, i.e. code-switching is used to fill the linguistic or conceptual gap of a speaker as Gysels (1992) notes. In fact, Jingxia (2009) claims that sometimes a lexical gap resulting from a lack of semantic congruence between vocabulary in L2 and its putative equivalence in the speaker’s L1 leads to instances of code-switching. Similarly, Leibscher & Dailey-O’Cain (2005) claim that foreign language learners switch back to their native language or L1 when they meet obstacles in the target language

conversation. It can therefore be argued that the use of code-switching in lines 2 and 11 is triggered purely by linguistic reasons and therefore is competence related as remarked by Auer (1995). According to him, competence related code-switching is made by bilingual speakers to adjust their languages depending on the participant's language ability.

Additionally, code-switching in this excerpt is as a result of the dictionary used by the learners. The learners were using a bilingual dictionary (English-French), which, on the one hand, did not leave them any other option but to say the word as presented in the dictionary. On the other hand, code-switching in this situation could also be analyzed as lack of interpretation skills on the part of the learners, which may also be attributed to lack of language competence due to limited vocabulary. If Ben and Lenny were competent or proficient enough in the French language, they would have been able to use synonyms or have paraphrased to clarify the meaning of the new words in the target language.

In lines 15-18, Lenny and Ben switch to English as they continue to read the text in French. In this context, English is their language of preference. In fact, Auer (1984) states that preference-related switching allows the speaker to ascribe to other participants' individualistic preferences for one language or the other. It should be noted that Lenny's switching to English (*to fight against this fléau*) triggered Ben to respond to him in English (*how is it spelt?*), i.e. he ascribed to Lenny's preference for English.

3.2 Excerpt 2

This is a conversation between Lorie, John and Mary after they had finished the group task that was assigned to them. It was an argumentative task in which learners had to defend their points of view and after the teacher had gone out of the classroom. The question of the small group discussion was "Are you for or against minimum service?"

- 1) Lorie : *A l'université, ce n'est pas de question de vie ou mourir, mais à l'hôpital, c'est la question de vie* ((laughter)) (5.0)
'At the university, it is not a question of life or death, but in hospitals, it is a question of life'
- 2) At what time did he say he is coming back?
- 3) John: *trois minutes*
'Three minutes'
- 4) Mary: *Non, vingt minutes (.) Il a dit vingt minutes*
'No, twenty minutes. He said twenty minutes'
- 5) John: *Mais, maintenant c'est trois minutes qui restent*
'But, we are remaining with three minutes now'
(After the 3 minutes)
- 6) Teacher: *C'est ok?*
'Is it okay?'
- 7) Lorie: *Oui*
'Yes'

Lorie's switch from French to English (line 2) can be analyzed as exemplifying discourse-related code-switching. Lorie code switches immediately after the teacher had gone out of

the classroom, which contextualizes a shift in footing (which Goffman (1981) defines as a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production and reception of an utterance). When we talk with others, we make language choices based on our relationship with them. In this excerpt, Lorie switches to English based on the relationship she has with John and Mary (her fellow classmates). Her code-switching also marks contrastively the beginning of an exchange that does not constitute part of the classroom task. Additionally, it shows her language of preference (English), because, according to her, it seems that French is only used during classroom interactions and classroom tasks. Her switch to English also implies that French is only spoken in the presence of the teacher. It can be argued that a language classroom is considered as a social group or setting, where members of the social group feel free to use any language of their choice. Therefore, a phenomenon, like code-switching, which usually occurs in daily discourse/interaction of any social group, has the potential to be practiced in any language classroom (Sert, 2005).

It is also important to note that, in this excerpt, Lorie's switching to the language of her preference did not prompt John and Mary to switch to English because individual language preference of a participant does not necessary mean a change of language as noted by Auer (1984). Auer claims that individual preference may not bear on the participants' code-switching behavior. It could be said that, for John and Mary, French is not only the language of communication in the presence of the teacher, but also in his absence.

3.3 Excerpt 3

This was a discussion between two learners, Martin and Grace. They were assigned the task of discussing how *doping* could be controlled or fought. They begin by reading the text silently until when Grace spoke out. This is where the excerpt begins. Below is the dialogue as they read the text in French.

- 1) Grace: () The Olympic Games () what is this word?
- 2) Martin: prepare
- 3) Grace: To prepare↑ Ya, that's it, ()
- 4) Grace: which tense is this? Which tense? (points at the word and gazes at Martin)
- 5) Martin: *Permettent* is *présent* (1.0) *C'est le présent*
'Permit is present (1.0). It is the present tense'
- 6) Grace: Not *imparfait* ?
'Not imperfect'
- 7) Martin: *perme....* (4.0) *permettre*
Perm..... (4.0) permit
- 8) Grace: *Permettre*↑
'Permit or allow'
- 9) Martin: Um, *oui pluriel*
'Um, yes plural'
- 10) Grace: So, they permit....
(Grace and Martin continue with reading but silently)

- 11) Grace: *permettent de saisir un bon nombre de dopeurs*
'Permit to get a good number of dopers'
((pause))
- 12) Martin: *saisir, saisir (2.0) c'est quoi?* (checks in the dictionary)
'To get, to get (2.0) what is it?' (5.0)
- 13) Martin: *Obtenir* (smiles and gazes at Grace)
'To get /obtain'
- 14) Grace: *comme um ()* it is like in Olympic games (gazes at Martin)
'Like/as um()'
- 15) Martin: () *de découvrir les sportifs dopeurs*
'to discover /identify dopers'
- 16) Martin (checks in the dictionary) *Les sportifs suivent um ()*
'The sports persons follow um'
- 17) Grace: *Le cadre*, (gazes at Martin), *c'est* a frame, a frame (gazes at Martin again)
'The frame(work) (gazes at Martin, it is a frame, a frame'
- 18) Martin: A frame?
- 19) Grace: *d'interpellation, interpellier* (checks in the dictionary) to fall out or question
'Of interpellation/ questioning'
- 20) Grace: the frame of questioning or a control policy *depuis mille neuf cent dix neuf ()*
'since 1919'
- 21) cases of dopers
- 22) Martin: () *auraient été annoncés*
'would have been announced'
- 23) Grace: are announced (gazes at Martin)
- 24) Martin: Yes! (nods and gazes at Grace)
- 25) Grace : *Il existe un autre moyen suffisant* (silence) ()
'There is another effective way'

In this excerpt, we see that the learners use a lot of code-switching. This could be partly because they are using it as a fallback when their knowledge of French fails them and as preference-related switching. In this dialogue, there were also long pauses, “ums” and many gestures, which are indicative of lack of competence to express oneself in French. On the other hand, we can argue that they use code-switching as a way of interpretation of the text. One learner reads the text in French then translates it into English to the other for better understanding of the topic or text. In other words, they are using code-switching as a learning strategy, that is, the ultimate reason for code-switching to L1 (English) was to facilitate the learning process and understanding of the meaning of the text. This is in line with Anton and DiCamilla (2012) who argue that language learners use their L1 as a tool to understand the L2 better, i.e. to support each other's learning, and with Vygotsky (1986) who posits that L1 is used as a “scaffold” to help students to jointly construct the meaning.

4 Conclusion

The learners' switch to English may not necessarily have emerged entirely from lack of proficiency in French, because the same learners who code switched during the small

group discussions were able to express themselves in the target language quite well with the teacher. Despite some grammatical errors, the learners used well-constructed sentences or utterances when reporting what they had discussed in the small groups, were participating actively and responded intelligibly to the teacher's questions in the target language. From the data presented, it can be concluded that code-switching was used more as a learning strategy in the process of interpretation and comprehension of the meaning of new vocabulary than a deficiency in French language skills. The use of code-switching somehow builds a bridge from known to unknown and may be considered as an important element in language teaching/learning when used efficiently as Sert (2005) notes. This is in line with Qing (2010) who suggests that code-switching in a language classroom is not always a blockage or deficiency in learning a language, but may be considered as a strategy in classroom interaction, if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer knowledge in an efficient way.

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Appendix: Characteristics of speech delivery according to Jefferson's transcription notation

↑ represents marked rising shift in intonation

() no hearing could be achieved for the string of talk or item in question

(2.0) timed pause in seconds

((pause)) unlimited interval heard between utterances

(.) a stopping fall in tone

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