Strands of Tongue: Code Switching in the Mulitlingual ESL Classroom

(Kepelbagaian Bahasa: Pertukaran Kod oleh Penutur Pelbagai Bahasa dalam Kelas Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua)

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Abstract

English is considered an important second language in most countries including Malaysia. Sabah as a multiracial and multicultural Malaysian State has multilingual speakers with inherent language ability that code switching is often used in communication and education. This case study was carried out with the purpose of identifying the reasons for code switching practice and determining the domain language used in code switching among the multilingual ESL students at Penampang Community College in Sabah. A qualitative research approach was employed to collect data through the interview from ten multilingual ESL students from this college. The findings of this study indicated that multilingual students employed code switching as an instructional tool and a language learning strategy in the ESL classroom especially for translation, dealing with difficult vocabulary, encouraging them to speak in English, and as an alternative to cope with difficulty in speaking English. Additionally, the domain language used by students in code switching is the Sabah Malay dialect (SMD). Code switching has a positive impact on students' interaction strategy, but its excessive use should be avoided as it may slow the English language learning pace. Further research should explore the practice of code switching using larger sample size and in other research setting such as other higher learning institutions in Sabah.

Keywords: Code switching, multilingual ESL classroom, Community College, Sabah Malay dialect

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INTRODUCTION

Sabah is the second largest state in Malaysia, with 52 indigenous ethnic and sub-ethnic groups such as Dusun, Kadazan, Murut, Rungus, Bajau, and numerous immigrant groups like Bugis, Javanese, Suluk, and Chinese (Wong, 2000). As one of the multiracial States in Malaysia, Sabah is prominently known for its unique diversity of ethnics, races, cultures, languages, and identities. Speaking two or more languages is a habitual practice among Sabahans both in rural and urban settings. English is an important second language in Malaysia and considered as an international language used ubiquitously in most countries in the world for communication, interaction, enterprises, social-economic, commerce, technologies, and education (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014), its use among Malaysian in Sabah is also prominent. Furthermore, Rosario and Maguddayao (2019) stated that English is subjectively accepted regardless of culture and race. Thus, code switching and borrowing from another language such as English are a natural occurrence in the Sabahan context.

Motivated by the previous studies and the call for more research on code switching practices in ESL classrooms, this study aims to investigate the situation in Sabah. As in an ESL environment, the multilingual students in Penampang Community College in Sabah were observed to have some code discrepancies in communication. Hence, this study was directed by the following research objectives:
(i)   To identify the reasons for code switching among the community college multilingual students; and
(ii)   To determine the domain language used in code switching among the community college multilingual students.

Code Switching in the ESL Classroom

Code switching in the second language classroom has become a crucial area of study and debate. There appears to be two opposing language attitudes between the use of target language exclusively and tolerate code switching to get benefits out of it (Fachriyah, 2017). Code switching serves a few essential functions which are beneficial to the second language learning environment. The teachers or instructors are, therefore, advised to create a situation that inspires students to speak English in the classroom. Multilingual ESL students should be able to know a language that is better than others and considered their first language and naturally switch to another language in which they feel contented and confident to speak (Simon, 2001). There are many studies on code switching in various languages, settings, and contexts (Ríos & Campos, 2013; Simasiku, 2016). There are also researches on code switching in the ESL classroom and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom (Magid & Mugaddam, 2013). As a multilingual country, code switching and its occurrence have also become one of the areas of investigation especially in the sociolinguistic field in the Malaysian ESL classroom (Muthusamy, 2010; Azlan & Narasuman, 2013).

Magid and Mugaddam (2013) found in their study on the role of code switching in students' first language which is Arabic in their ESL classroom that it expands the interaction of the students in the classrooms towards facilitating the ESL learning process. The code switching in the ESL classroom can be reflected as an alternative interaction among the students in enhancing their language learning and communication competence. Most studies on code switching in the language classroom involved students and teachers as the respondents because both parties benefitted from the role and functions of code switching (Fareed, 2016; Makulloluwa, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to provide a more detailed account of the topic being investigated. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is "an

approach to exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". Qualitative research also attempts to gather a detailed picture of a situation inductively (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2014). This study also employs a case study design which is a type of qualitative research quite prevalent in social science. It is used to scrutinize a problem, issue, or event.

This study was carried out at the Penampang Community College which is one of the eight community colleges in Sabah, Malaysia. The colleges were established under the Ministry of Higher Education as one of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) providers in Malaysia. Only ten students were involved as participants in the interview. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria that the students are: (i) studying in Semester One; (ii) taking the Certificate of Business Operation programs; and (iii) taking the Communicative English course. The method of collecting data in this study was through a semi-structured interview. Prior to the interview, consent was sought from the respondents and they were informed regarding the purpose of the study. The individual interviews for each of the respondents were recorded and their responses were transcribed. Content analysis was carried out whereby the themes from their responses were identified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Reasons to Code Switch in Classroom Interaction

From the interview data, it was apparent that code switching serves as an interaction tool among these students. Specifically, it appears that code switching allows the learners to increase their language acquisition and their content understanding as well as to support cognitive development. Based on the interview data, there are four reasons for code switching among the respondents which are; translation, helping with vocabulary, practice speaking in English, and difficulty in speaking English.

Translation

Findings from the interview showed that the multilingual students in this community college tend to code switch from English to Sabah Malay dialect or Malay as a means of translating meaning at various levels of languages, comprising of words, sentences, or language functions. Examples are shown below:

Senang mau kasi faham kalau cakap in Malay sama steady saja bercakap. [Easy to explain to friends when speaking in Malay and speaking is more fluent.]

(Respondent 2)

Senang mau berinteraksi if using other languages not English. [Easy to interact when other languages are using instead of English.]

(Respondent 3)

These interview excerpts imply that translation provides an efficient solution that support the students' understanding and helps them to feel more at ease when interacting with their classmates, and in turn, assisting their learning in the ESL classroom.

Helping with Vocabulary

Code switching also seemed to be used by the Community College students in this study to help with their understanding of vocabulary items, especially in English. This reason for CS is used to overcome a lack of understanding or inability to retrieve lexical items in English. This phenomenon is found to be a collective linguistic behaviour among respondents. The respondents respond illustrated below:

Code switch juga sebab ada perkataan yang tidak tau maksud in English supaya senang kena faham. [Code switch is also used because there are words with meaning not known in English, so that it can be easily understood.]

(Respondent 6)

Practice Speaking in English

Findings also showed that code switching is an alternative for the respondents to practice speaking in English. The respondents struggled to code switch from SMD to English when they practice speaking in English. It implies a personal effort to advance their speaking ability in English as shown by the example below:

Code switch supaya boleh praktis speaking English sama lebih faham. [Code switching enables greater practices in speaking English and to ensure better understanding.]

(Respondent 5)

Difficulty in Speaking English

From the interview data, the respondents stated that the code switched from English to other languages such as SMD due to difficulty in speaking English. Limitation on knowledge of English vocabulary impedes the respondents' ability and performance to speak English during classroom interaction. Therefore, code switching bridges the respondents' interaction because they were facing difficulty to speak English or due to their empathy of others who may have difficulty understand in English. The excerpts presented below support this finding.

Supaya senang orang mau faham. [So that others can understand easily.]

(Respondent 7)

Code switch sebab susah mau cakap English di kelas. [Code switch because difficult to speak in English in the class.] (Respondent 8)

The occurrence of code switching among the multilingual community college students in Sabah is considered an authentic phenomenon. These reasons also implied that the students' richness of linguistic knowledge and unique ability to use multiple languages to converse in one string of utterances. Hence, code switching is not incompetency of using a language but rather, indicating a multi-linguistic competent speaker. These students' reasons to code switch are supported by past studies (Muthusamy, 2010).

The Domain Language Used in Code Switch in Different Domains

The findings from the interviews revealed that Sabah Malay dialect and English were prominently spoken by students in their daily interactions. Two domains recognized as the usual setting for students' interaction in the classroom are (i) interaction with classmates; and (ii) communication with lecturers. Sabah Malay dialect and English are dominantly used among the students as an alternative language of interaction in the multilingual classroom.

Domain Language used for Interaction with Classmates

This question was employed to find out the language used by students when they interact with their classmates. The findings from the interview data analysis identified the two most dominant languages spoken by the respondents which are SMD and English.

Sabah Malay Dialect

The finding from the study shows that Sabah Malay dialect was dominantly used in code switching among the students when they interact with their classmates. The high intelligibility of SMD as a Lingua Franca attributed its dominant use in code switching among the multilingual Sabahan students. The excerpts from the interview serve as evidence to this claim.

Malay juga, tapi kadang-kadang ada mix juga la BI, tapi bukan kebanyakannya BI la, kadang-kadang ya, mana yang kita tau BI tu, itulah yang kena cakap… tapi kebanyakan Malay la. Sabah Malay dialect. [Malay too, but sometimes mixed with English, but not all in English, only when we know it in English, then that will be spoken…but mostly Malay…. Sabah Malay dialect.]

(Respondent 1)

English Language

The respondents also disclosed in the interviews that they do interact with their classmates in English but using improper and incomplete sentences in English. English has spoken assertively when the words are familiar and known to the students. The interview data showed that the students tried their best to speak in English exclusively with their classmates in their English classes. Excerpts from the interviews are shown below:

Mix la, kadang-kadang cakap macam kalau tandas tu toilet, macam tu. [Mixed, sometimes speaking in English to refer to words like 'tandas' is toilet.]

(Respondent 4)

Sabah Malay tapi sometimes sia mix juga dengan English, even sa Bajau, sa tidak berapa cakap Bajau. My mother is Dusun. [Sabah Malay but sometimes, I also mix it with English. Even though I am a Bajau, I don't speak Bajau often. My mother is Dusun.]

(Respondent 6)

Domain Language When Communicating with Lecturers

There are two domain languages spoken by the respondents when communicating with the lecturer in the class which are SMD and English. Respondents tend to code-switch from Sabah Malay dialect or Standard Malay to English as the most desirable means of communication with the lecturers.

Sabah Malay Dialect

The findings from the study revealed that Sabah Malay dialect was the dominant language used in code switching in the students' communication with their lecturers. Excerpts from the interviews are shown below:

English and Malay lah. Contohnya, kalau lecturer BI yang masuk di kelas kami, jadi cakap English sajalah, sampai mana yang mampu saja lah. Begitu itu saja lah. Malay and English saja lah. [English and Malay. For example, when the English lecturer in in the class, we speak English to the best of our ability. We speak Malay and English only.]

(Respondent 1)

Mix languages, kalau lain madam, lain lecturer, lain bahasa diguna. [Mixed language, depending on the lecturer, then other languages are used.]

(Respondent 2)

English Language

Since English is not a compulsory language for the instructors to use when interacting with the students, SMD or other languages are habitually spoken. Therefore, the learners have the choice of communicating in other dialects or other languages besides English to speak with their lecturers. Fascinatingly, as evident from the interview excerpts below, the students showed their awareness and determination to speak in English during English classes.

But if my lecturer, English speak, I will speak in English lah. [But if my lecturer speaks in English, I will speak in English too.]

(Respondent 9)

Based on the interview data, this study found that the Sabah Malay dialect is the dominant language used in code switching among community college students. It is not surprising as SMD is dominantly used in code switching in students' daily interactions with other people like their siblings, cousins, and parents (Wong, 2000). SMD is competitively used in code switching along with other languages such as the students' native language and English. The students' ability to code-switch naturally from a language to another is elevated by the home domain setting where parents shift from mother tongue to other languages such as Sabah Malay dialect, Standard Malay, or even English. It is an authentic language shifting practice in daily interaction among multilingual communities in Sabah (Wong, 2000).

Meanwhile, the community college students also revealed that SMD is mostly used for code switching during interaction with their classmates as it is spoken among multilingual and multi-ethnic communities in Sabah, particularly among the students in the community college. SMD accommodates students' interaction effectively regardless of the ethnic and mother tongue differences. In addition to that, SMD is also used dominantly in code switching when the students talk with their instructors. Based on the students' responses in the interview and the way they speak during the interview provided evidence that all the respondents preferred to use SMD in all communication settings and interactions.

The students also engaged in some utterances in English due to lack of confidence, limited knowledge of vocabulary and inadequate proficiency to speak English. The overall analysis of the interview data indicated that the community college students preferred to use SMD as an interaction tool among themselves in various social settings for different purposes and functions in the classroom. SMD was dominantly conversed by the students regardless of whom they were talking to. It is generally held that students' code switching is related to their language dominance which reflects their language proficiency. The findings in this study are supported by findings from (Azlan & Narasuman, 2013).

The code switching occurrence in classroom interaction among the community college students reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity in Sabah. Such diversity in language and culture has led to the emergence of code switching as a useful alternative to facilitate interaction among the multi-ethnic and multicultural ESL students in Sabah. These findings are similar to Chen and Rubinstein-Avila (2018) mentioned that cultural and linguistic diversity attributed to the emergence of code switching in a multilingual setting.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study was able to identify the main reasons for code switching during interaction of the multilingual ESL learners at Penampang Community College in Sabah, Malaysia. This study has also identified the domain language used on code switching among the learners as they interact with their classmates and lecturers. It is concluded that code switching was employed strategically as an interactive tool in daily conversation among the students, especially in the ESL classroom setting.

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