

Exploring code-switching in Persian-English bilingual children: Lessons for language educators

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Abstract

Code-switching, a common phenomenon among bilinguals, serves as a strategic tool for effective communication rather than a reflection of linguistic inadequacy. This article examines code-switching among Persian-English bilingual children during storytelling, shedding light on its triggers, cultural implications, and relevance to language education. By leveraging findings from qualitative research, it offers practical strategies for integrating bilingual pedagogies into English Language Teaching (ELT). These approaches not only enhance linguistic competence but also foster cultural inclusivity, aligning with TESL Ontario's commitment to equitable and innovative language instruction.

Keywords: *Code-switching, bilingualism, Persian-English learners, TESL Ontario, cultural identity, ELT strategies*

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines, including approval from Brock University. Informed consent was obtained from the guardians of all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and the safeguarding of their identities.

Introduction

In today's globalized classrooms, bilingualism is increasingly common, making it essential for educators to understand its dynamics. Code-switching, or alternating between two languages within a conversation,

exemplifies bilinguals' adaptability. This study investigates code-switching among Persian-English bilingual children while retelling an Iranian folktale. The findings highlight how code-switching serves cultural and communicative functions, offering valuable insights for TESL professionals.

Research context and methodology

The study focused on five Persian-English bilingual children aged 5–7, residing in Canada. Participants narrated the Iranian folktale *Amoo Nowruz* in English, a task designed to elicit code-switching due to its cultural richness. Audio recordings of their storytelling were analyzed to identify patterns and triggers of code-switching. Parental surveys provided additional context about the children's language proficiency and usage. This multi-modal approach ensured a holistic understanding of the code-switching phenomenon. Observations included analyzing how cultural elements influenced language choices and how communicative functions dictated linguistic preferences.

Findings and discussion

1. Cultural triggers

Code-switching occurred frequently when children encountered culturally specific terms such as *Haft Sin* (a traditional Iranian table setting) and *Samanoo* (a Persian sweet). These terms lacked direct English equivalents, prompting participants to retain Persian words to preserve cultural meaning. The children demonstrated a strong attachment to their cultural identity by maintaining these linguistic markers within English narratives.

2. Communicative functions

Beyond linguistic gaps, children used code-switching to fulfill various communicative functions, including:

Requests: Switching to Persian for clarification or assistance (e.g., asking for the English equivalent of a Persian term). This highlights their reliance on both languages to ensure effective communication.

Humor: Lighthearted switches to add comedic effect and create rapport. For instance, humorous comparisons between Persian folktale characters and familiar Western figures like Santa Claus enhanced engagement.

Topic shifts: Spontaneous changes in language during digressions from the story, reflecting the fluidity of bilingual discourse and their natural inclination to use the most effective linguistic tool for the context.

3. Language proficiency gaps

Code-switching often bridged vocabulary limitations in English, enabling uninterrupted storytelling. For example, when describing items like *lipstick*, children switched to Persian while providing contextual clues in English. This adaptive use of language highlights bilingual children's ability to balance linguistic systems effectively, even when one language is dominant.

Practical recommendations for TESL Ontario practitioners

1. Integrating bilingual resources

TESL educators can incorporate students' first languages into lesson plans through storytelling, role-playing, and cultural discussions. Using bilingual texts and multimedia materials fosters engagement and bridges linguistic gaps. For instance, bilingual picture books featuring cultural narratives can support language learning while reinforcing students' heritage.

2. Encouraging cultural exchange

Code-switching offers an opportunity to explore students' cultural identities. Facilitating discussions about cultural terms and practices can promote cross-cultural understanding in diverse classrooms. Activities such as multilingual fairs and collaborative projects centered on cultural heritage can foster appreciation for linguistic diversity.

3. Supporting strategic code-switching

Educators should view code-switching as a learning tool, not a deficit. Activities like lexical mapping, bilingual debates, and reflective journaling in both languages can help students refine their language-switching skills, enhancing both fluency and confidence. Teachers can explicitly model when and how to switch languages effectively, turning code-switching into a skill rather than a challenge.

Classroom applications

1. Cultural storytelling

Assign students to retell folktales from their heritage in English, encouraging the use of culturally specific terms. Follow with discussions about these terms' meanings and significance. This activity fosters both linguistic skills and cultural appreciation, making language learning more meaningful.

2. Role-playing

Simulate bilingual interactions, such as shopping or asking for directions, to practice switching languages naturally in different contexts. Role-playing can be further tailored to reflect real-life scenarios students might encounter, thereby building their practical language skills.

3. Lexical mapping

Create visual tools that connect vocabulary across languages, helping students navigate linguistic overlaps and gaps. For instance, a *vocabulary tree* with branches representing terms in L1 and L2 can aid memory and comprehension. Such visual aids can also include cultural elements to deepen contextual understanding.

4. Peer-led discussions

Organize group activities where bilingual students share how they navigate code-switching in daily life. Peer-led discussions can provide insights into diverse language strategies and inspire collaborative learning. For example, students might create presentations on how their cultural heritage influences their language use.

5. Multimodal projects

Encourage students to create bilingual multimedia projects, such as videos or digital storytelling, that highlight their experiences with code-switching. These projects can help students reflect on their linguistic strategies and foster creativity.

Conclusion

Code-switching is a dynamic and resourceful practice among bilingual learners. By embracing its pedagogical potential, TESL Ontario educators can foster inclusive and effective language learning environments. This approach not only enhances students' linguistic capabilities but also validates their cultural identities, enriching the collective learning experience. The findings from this study underscore the need for innovative bilingual practices that align with TESL Ontario's standards for equity, accessibility, and lifelong learning. Future research could expand on this work by exploring code-switching in older learners or in different linguistic contexts, offering even broader insights for educational applications.

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Author Bio



Zohreh is a certified ESL instructor with over a decade of experience teaching English in Canada and internationally. She specializes in CLB-based instruction, IELTS preparation, and curriculum design. With dual master's degrees in TESOL and ELT, she brings a strong academic foundation and a passion for student success. She thrives in hybrid classrooms, uses tech to enhance learning, and adapts her teaching to meet the diverse needs of adult learners.