

Switching codes in the plurilingual classroom

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Abstract

The English as a foreign language classroom is a plurilingual setting par excellence since it involves at least two languages. However, plurilingual practices such as code-switching and translation have been consistently discouraged in formal learning contexts, based on the belief that keeping languages compartmentalized helps learning, and allowing the simultaneous presence of two (or more) languages favours interference (negative transfer), a lack of learner interest in using the foreign language(s), or a reduction in foreign language exposure. Two specific plurilingual learning strategies will be described here. Pedagogically Based Code-switching and Translation for Other Learning Contexts are means to advance communicative development through languages in action (noticing, understanding, using, and monitoring), based chiefly on the notions of 'translanguaging' and 'multi-competence'. We present a rationale for an informed use of code-switching and translation along with tasks that can be easily included in the foreign language syllabus, and reference is made to ongoing research to identify further connections between the two classroom strategies.

Introduction

Using students' own languages in the English as a foreign classroom and opening the door to all the languages in the students' language repertoire is an issue that is gathering momentum in the field. It is clearly required as ELT teachers are asked to develop their students' plurilingual and intercultural competencies as well as their communicative competence, due to the new communication and social needs of our globalized world. The question that remains, however, is how to do it in an informed and effective way.

Two specific plurilingual learning strategies that favour communicative development will be described here, namely, Pedagogically Based Code switching, or PBCS (Corcoll 2013), and Translation for Other Learning Contexts, or TOLC (González-Davies 2014). These strategies have been applied and analysed separately in different learning contexts following a plurilingual paradigm, and will be defined in terms of what they have in common and also what makes them different. Finally, examples of specific tasks are presented to be implemented within a pedagogical framework based on humanistic and socio-constructivist (i.e. student centred), rather than transmissionist (i.e. teacher-centred), educational premises. Further research on the convergence of both strategies is now under way.

Switching codes

Potentially, the EFL classroom is a translanguaging situation par excellence since there are at least two languages involved. However, for a long time the consensus was to try and discourage code-switching and translation (Hall and Cook 2012; Richards and Rodgers 2014), based on the belief in the literature that keeping languages compartmentalized would help learning, and that allowing their simultaneous presence would only bring interference (negative transfer), a lack of interest on the part of the students to use the foreign language, or a reduction in exposure to the foreign language.

Both PBCS and TOLC share the aim of exploring informed and effective ways to switch from one

language to another to benefit the language learning process while addressing possible misgivings about the use of two languages in class. Whereas PBCS draws from code-switching, TOLC draws from translation. Both code-switching and translation are learning and communicative strategies that are naturally and spontaneously developed by plurilingual speakers. We situate both strategies within the framework of translanguaging, defined by Canagarajah (2011: 401) as ‘the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system’. Thus, we need to note that the minds of plurilingual speakers operate differently from those of monolinguals, a point also made by other authors such as Cook (1999, 2002), who first formulated the concept of multi-competence, that is, the knowledge of more than one language in one mind, and Cummins (2008), whose Interdependence Hypothesis propounds teaching for transfer instead of compartmentalizing languages in the learner’s mind. Translanguaging in the English classroom can be unplanned (spontaneous alternation of languages) or planned (through activities designed by the teacher or by the students), and responds wholly to the underlying belief that the use of L1s or known languages is effective in teaching the foreign language. This implies that specific pedagogical scaffolding is needed to bridge languages in an effective way.

Code-switching

Code-switching involves a change of language within the same text, defined as a unit of meaning. It is considered typical of a bilingual mode of communication (Grosjean 2010) and, therefore, a bilingual language skill, which specifically occurs when the speakers involved share the same languages.

Cook (2002) defined code-switching as a highly skilled activity that may help language users carry out a range of social and psychological functions. It ‘shows the intricate links between the two language systems in multi-competence: in the mind, the L1 is not insulated from the L2’ (Cook 1999: 193). One reason for discouraging its use is that, particularly when utilized by children, code-switching has been treated as evidence of an absence of linguistic differentiation, as an unconscious and unintentional activity. However, studies on code-switching indicate that it is both rule governed and function specific, and is neither evidence of linguistic interference nor symptomatic of linguistic fusion or confusion.

Grosjean (op.cit.) further describes code-switching as a communicative resource that comprises a two-stage decision process where first, bilinguals decide which base language they are going to use, and, second, decide whether to deploy code-switching. He relates this two-stage decision to the complementarity principle, according to which ‘bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Different aspects of life require different languages’ (ibid.: 29). Therefore, this decision may be the result of different types of sub-decisions, i.e. topic-oriented, vocabulary-oriented, proficiency-oriented, strategy-oriented, emphasis-oriented, participant oriented, or mood-oriented.

Meanwhile, Myers-Scotton’s (1993) Matrix Language Frame is based on the opposition of a Matrix Language to an Embedded Language. Thus, when using code-switching, the languages involved can be categorized as a Matrix Language, i.e. the main language used, and an Embedded Language, i.e. the language into which the switch is made. This categorization, however, may change in the course of the discourse. This is known as the Matrix Language turnover. Myers-Scotton’s understanding of code-switching relates to the ‘two solitudes assumption’ put forward by Cummins (op.cit.), as the two languages (Matrix and Embedded) seem to belong to different ‘compartments’ in the learners’ minds. This perspective needs to be revised in the light of new ideas produced by concepts such as multi-competence and translanguaging.

Taking all this into account, in this article we define code-switching as the ability of plurilingual speakers to switch within or between sentences from and to the codes in their repertoire, in order to fulfil communication needs triggered by decisions concerning the communicative context in which they are

immersed.

Translation

We believe that the potential of translation to benefit language learning is underexploited and aim to explore how it can be used appropriately. We consider translation to be both a process and a product of communication, in line with real-life practices. To differentiate it from code-switching and use of the L1(s), we define it as an informed change of linguistic or cultural code applied consciously to an explicit primary source text.

A distinction can be established between TOLC, which we define as translation to acquire linguistic mediation skills and intercultural competence in fields other than Translation Studies, and Translation per se, studied to acquire professional translator competence. TOLC focuses on the explicit use of translation in foreign language learning and sets out to explore how translation can improve both general linguistic competence and mediation skills. It includes a reflection on how best to relate educational objectives and learning strategies with translation competence, and views translation as the means to advance linguistic and encyclopaedic knowledge as well as transfer skills that favour efficient language learning (see TOLC activities below).

Code-switching or translation?

At this point we introduce the key difference between code-switching and translation noting that, although either can be a planned or unplanned occurrence in the plurilingual classroom, here we focus on an action planned by the teacher.

Code-switching involves going from one language to another, within or between sentences, with no primary source text to be reproduced and with each language playing different roles at different stages in the discourse.

When dealing with translation, the relationship between the languages involved is different, as they function separately in their respective contexts: the same message is repeated in two different languages and the process entails using appropriate translation strategies to meet the translation assignment and to keep the source text effect and message in the target language. No code-switching is involved unless it is part of the source text.

Figures 1 and 2 reflect the relationship between the languages involved in code-switching and translation.

figure 1

Code-switching: one text, two languages

figure 2

Translation: two texts, two languages

Orientations for the teacher: PBCS and TOLC

Our research¹ suggests that distinguishing between PBCS and TOLC, and using them both, is beneficial for the language learning process (Corcoll op.cit.; González-Davies op.cit.). To do so in an informed way, some issues need to be considered when including them in a long-term plurilingual approach. On the one hand, the cognitive load involved in each task and, on the other hand, the highly sensitizing nature attached to PBCS advise that it should be introduced prior to TOLC.

PBCS is a code-switching pattern designed by the foreign language teacher as an informed language

learning strategy applied in a formal setting; it enables students to work with several languages simultaneously and it mainly aims at fostering students' ability to *notice* language/s characteristics, thus initiating metalinguistic thought and sensitizing students towards language similarities, differences, and connections. By 'noticing' we mean noting, observing, or paying special attention to a particular linguistic item, generally as a prerequisite for learning (González-Davies and Scott-Tennent 2005: 163). Following Schmidt (2001), the Noticing Hypothesis claims that 'input' does not become 'intake' for language learning unless it is noticed, that is, consciously registered.

Within the classroom and related literature, translation is often erroneously considered to be a simple interlinguistic substitution. Translation Studies and the practice of professional translators, however, continuously prove that translation involves complex mental processes such as analysing, evaluating, and creating. In TOLC, these skills become entwined with the main actions of understanding, deciding, and justifying, as the translation task involves conscious awareness of the process and the strategies chosen to be implemented. 'Understanding' entails constructing meaning from previous knowledge. 'Deciding' is inherent to all parts of the process, especially when choosing and using appropriate translation strategies. 'Justifying' is related mainly to monitoring and explaining the chosen solution to the problem in question (González-Davies and Scott-Tennent op.cit.: 163).

Finally, with regards to the development of plurilingual and intercultural competence, i.e. the ability to communicate between more than one culture efficiently, both PBCS and TOLC can be considered as effective strategies in the EFL classroom to learn how to act plurilingually, as expressed by Byram (2008: 69):

Acting plurilingually pre-supposes certain attitudes, knowledge and skills that need to be learnt. [It] requires a willingness to suspend deeper values, at least temporarily, in order to be able to understand and empathise with the values of others that are incompatible with one's own.

Certain mediation techniques related to declarative (knowing what), procedural (knowing how), and attitudinal knowledge and skills need to be consciously learnt to achieve this aim: PBCS and TOLC are means to this end.

Exploring PBCS and TOLC in the classroom

In order to explore the actual use of PBCS and translation in EFL learning, we have been carrying out research for each of these learning strategies in different learning contexts based on the common theoretical and pedagogical frameworks explained here. In the first stage, our main aim was to observe authentic (unplanned) plurilingual practices and, in the second, to integrate planned tasks informed by the results of our previous observation. The principle underlying these tasks was that communicative development involves noticing, understanding, using, and monitoring language, that is, the students become engaged in using language in meaningful communicative situations and in reflecting on how to connect languages to formulate messages efficiently. We will refer first to a study on PBCS and then to a long-term study on the use of translation. Ongoing research is being carried out to further analyse the intersection between both strategies.

The PBCS study (Corcoll op.cit.) involved 100 participants. They were young learners in a primary school context and the research was carried out during their English (L3) lessons. The main aim of the study was for them to use PBCS in their English lessons and to see whether PBCS improved their English language learning as well as their motivation and the classroom atmosphere. The main findings were related to the improvement of socio-affective aspects (i.e. motivation and classroom atmosphere) as well as to the development of metalinguistic thought amongst the students (i.e.

language awareness). As for language learning (improvement of oral comprehension and vocabulary acquisition and production), there were no significant differences when comparing treatment and control groups.

The TOLC study (González-Davies op.cit.) involved nine teachers and over 200 students: teacher trainees, Psychology and Sports Sciences undergraduates, and primary and secondary school students (2008–2015). The guiding research questions were:

- 1 Can research and good practices in Translation Studies be transferred effectively to foreign language learning?
- 2 Can translation be used as both a skill and a strategy to improve linguistic, interlinguistic, and intercultural competence in foreign language learning?
- 3 Can learning material and procedures such as translation tasks and projects be designed to improve linguistic and intercultural competence in foreign language learning?

Additionally, more specific questions were explored such as (a) when, why, and how did these students use translation? and (b) which of these uses were perceived by the students to be successful in aiding or improving their foreign language learning process?

The results regarding TOLC showed that translation can improve accuracy, certainty, speed of acquisition, and resourcing skills. It contributes optimally to the practice, not only of reading and writing, but also of listening and speaking, grammar and vocabulary, and, additionally, helping learners solve problems surrounding cultural references. Moreover, an informed use of translation did not increase more general and uncontrolled translation in the foreign language classes. On the contrary, following explicit reflection and guided practice, it was used by the students as a last resort after applying other language learning strategies such as guessing through context. It also triggered discussion of issues regarding other languages, thus confirming the Interdependence Hypothesis and contributing to the visibility of all the students' languages. Two unexpected findings also emerged. On the one hand, translation strategies (for example 'explicitation', inserting a brief explanation in the text to clarify the meaning; 'domestication', a conscious transformation of the source text to make it conform to the target language and culture, favouring the translator's invisibility; 'foreignization', a conscious choice to make the source text visible in the translation) were used to improve communication in English without using the L1 (for example in a comparative activity on Christmas traditions in both countries, the team in charge of looking for traditional British food described the ingredients and/or cooking process of each dish in English instead of translating, as finding an equivalent word in the target language was not always possible). On the other hand,

the students were also using other communication strategies such as paraphrasing to arrive at appropriate translations. However, a word of caution: translation may lead to interference when dealing with either extremely different or highly similar grammatical structures, lexis, or conceptual frameworks.

Finally, translation practised in a collaborative environment was found to strengthen team work, foster the active participation of all learners regardless of learning styles, and made visible their rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In all cases, the use of translation was independent of the students' proficiency. This suggests that informed translation activities may be beneficial at all levels of linguistic competence.

Thus, the aim for both PBCS and TOLC is to create explicit and informed routes to move between languages, that is, to give students the chance to translanguaging. The students enjoyed these approaches and felt motivated, as they played an active role in the process and they could use their prior linguistic knowledge while doing them. Furthermore, language awareness was promoted by the use of these strategies. As one student remarked after completing one of the tasks below: 'I think this

is a very interactive task that helps us improve our knowledge in a more specific way. And it is fun'. We shall now turn to specific PBCS and TOLC activities for the classroom.

PBCS as a learning strategy

Activity 1 and Activity 2 (below) were PBCS activities that were included in a syllabus on 'Food and drinks'. Previously, key vocabulary had been taught and practised, firstly, in English, and then in the two school languages (Catalan and Spanish). The aims behind these activities relate to differing linguistics aspects, such as prosody, rhythm, spelling, comparison, and connection between the spoken and the written codes.

Activity 1: trilingual flashcard

This was a noticing activity in which children listened to and read the following chant from their textbook ([Maidment and Roberts 2003](#)):

I don't like coffee
I don't like tea
I like lemonade
Lemonade for me!

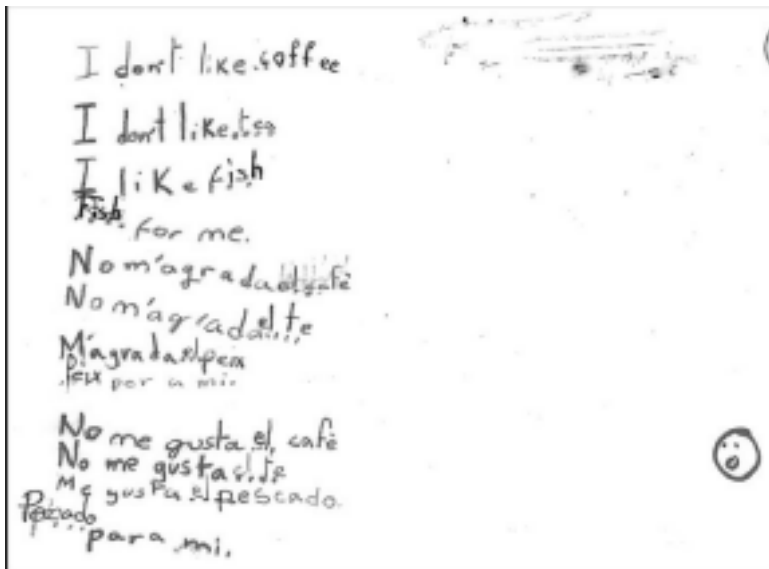
Next, they were asked to stand in lines and form six groups. The first child in each line had a picture flashcard and word card showing one word from the rhyme, which was the word representing that particular group. The teacher called out the names of the pictures in English or Catalan or Spanish and, when they heard their word, all the children in the group raised their hands. In the same position, children listened to the chant—only in English—and again they raised their picture and hands when they heard their word in the song. The aim of the activity was for children to respond physically (by showing the picture) to the key vocabulary in the three languages, which meant that they had to quickly connect words in the three languages before reacting.

Activity 2: chant

Once the language and the music were familiar, the children had to work collaboratively in a plurilingual singing activity. With an adapted version of the chant in the three languages, with blanks to include food or drink, they had to write the chant in the three languages and finish the lines with new foods or drinks in the three languages. Afterwards, they sang the resulting three versions of the chant in front of their classmates.

The aim of the activity was for children to sing the chant in the three languages, with the appropriate rhythm and intonation ([Figure 3](#) gives an example).

Figure 3
 Students' written production .



Interesting observations can be made regarding the development of language awareness during these activities. Specifically, vocabulary doubts arose when the children write their chants, and most were solved by the children themselves, for example the comparison between English 'fish' and Spanish and Catalan *pez/pescado* or *peix*. Another recurrent problem was the omission of the article in the Catalan and Spanish texts (as if copying the English written structure), even though the children actually said it when practising the chant orally. The fact that a word was missing was pointed out by either a child or the teacher, and children corrected their text, thus noticing a difference in the languages they were working with, beginning to develop their metalinguistic thought and discourse, and engaging in what could be labelled the initiation of spontaneous contrastive analysis.

TOLC as a learning strategy

Translation tasks were designed and presented as communicative activities in a collaborative student-centred environment, not as a substitute for existing communicative practices, but to complement them. The following tasks illustrate three relevant aspects in both EFL and translation competence that converge to support English language learning: linguistic, encyclopaedic, and transferential knowledge. Although these aspects may overlap in each task, one predominates.

Linguistic knowledge

Besides source and target language knowledge, this aspect includes noticing interferences so that, by reflecting on them explicitly, our students can cope with them more efficiently. Interlinguistic transfer can be positive or negative: we can contend with false friends (see Activity 3 below), calques, or collocations, but we can also establish connections between similar constructions or vocabulary, or draw attention to words in English that come from other languages (for example 'patio' or 'pizza').

Activity 3: noughts and crosses game (false friends)

The teacher—or the students—collect as many English words with false cognates in Spanish as possible and insert them in a grid.

In pairs, the students play noughts and crosses: each pair can cover a false friend in a square with either a nought or

a cross if they translate it appropriately, until they cover three words in a row.

A whole class or peer correction follows.

Sample (English/Spanish)

tramp	conference	career
dramatically	to forge	library
demonstration	physician	eventually

.Key (incorrect/correct translation)

<i>trampa/ vagabundo</i>	<i>conferencia/ congreso</i>	<i>carrera/grado universitario</i>
<i>dramáticamente/ drásticamente</i>	<i>forjar/falsificar</i>	<i>librería/biblioteca</i>
<i>demostración/ manifestación</i>	<i>físico/médico</i>	<i>eventualmente/ finalmente</i>

Encyclopaedic knowledge

This may include knowledge related to different subjects, awareness of similarities and differences regarding text types, style, or register, or recognizing and transferring cultural references (see Activity 4 below).

Activity 4: role play (meeting an English-speaking friend)

Imagine you are with an English-speaking friend and you have to translate her conversation, or explain things that do not exist in her culture. What would you do with these sentences and situations?

Your friend: 'I'd love a cup of tea! Where's the *kettle*?'

You: You offer him an *ibérico* sandwich ... What do you say?

(Note: *ibérico* = cured ham)

Once they have noticed the problems, the students investigate to understand how food is talked about and how to narrow the intercultural gap. They do this by using their resourcing skills and monitoring the application of appropriate translation strategies to solve the communication problems, for example by describing the ingredients or by describing the cooking process.

Transferential knowledge

This includes undertaking challenging translations by applying appropriate translation strategies (see Activity 5). It mainly involves problem-spotting and solving, and critical and creative thinking.

Activity 5: riddle ('transtraitor' or 'transcreator'?)

Here, we focus on transfer by working on critical and creative thinking, and target cultural conventions in a motivating way. Any popular or published riddle can be used, for instance the Sphinx Riddle in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J. K. Rowling (2002).

Translate the riddle keeping the same answer. Can you translate it literally? Why (not)? Before translating, discuss how you would translate riddles. Would you use the same words, rhythm, and syntax? Would you keep to the riddle format?

(Insert the chosen riddle here)

Now translate it and show it to different readers. Ask them to solve your translated riddle and give their opinion.

Finally, compare your versions with published ones (in the different languages in the classroom).

Conclusions

Our approach to code-switching and translation as both learning and communication strategies is based on our conviction that they hold a positive place in language learning and intercultural development when the aim is to train plurilingual speakers with plurilingual skills, rather than aiming for the usually unattainable task of training for nativespeaker-like language use.

Here, we have explored possible ways of implementing these two specific learning strategies to build communicative development, based chiefly on the notions of translanguaging and multi-competence. We have also presented a rationale for the use of code-switching and translation in formal learning contexts along with task samples that can be included easily in the EFL syllabus.

In sum, the response to our research questions above is positive overall. We believe in connecting all languages through informed practices to foster efficient language learning, thus moving from instruction in the 'target language only' to instruction in the 'target language mainly'. Also, we feel that language learning involves both language use and reflection on language use, which may be initiated by consciously registering language aspects. Although exposure to the foreign language should clearly predominate in the classroom, we need to move from the paradoxical (and perplexing!) perspective of teaching plurilingual students through monolingual instruction towards integrating the advantages of teaching plurilingual students within a plurilingual approach.

Final version received June 2015

¹ Research project designed and partially funded by the RG CILCEAL, 'Interlinguistic and Intercultural Competence in the Teaching and Learning of Languages', University Ramon Llull. It was also partially funded by the University Ramon Llull: *Ajuts a Projectes Recerca 2013–2014*, by the Spanish Government, and by RG GR@EL (University Pompeu Fabra) (joint project): PNIF (*Programa Nacional de Investigación Fundamental*). Ref. EDU2012-38452.

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