

**Factors of Code Switching among Bilingual English Students
in the University Classroom: A Survey**

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ABSTRACT:

This study proposes to identify and evaluate the factors that affect code switching in the university classroom among 15 bilingual international students. The findings from the study conducted in a southern American university revealed that the primary factor of code switching in international classroom is incompetence in the second language. Other noted factors were: to maintain privacy; to make it easier to speak in their own language than to speak in English; to avoid misunderstanding; being unfamiliar with similar words in English. However, code switching can be a useful strategy in classroom interaction if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way.

Key words: code switching, bilingual, English as Second Language, international students

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1. Introduction:

People who have learned two languages demonstrate an interesting phenomenon known as “code switching” by mixing words or phrases from the two tongues together during the course of speech or writing. A ‘code’ is defined as a language or a dialect. Code switching (CS) is an alternation of words and phrases between two languages or dialects. This usually occurs between people who share those particular languages.

Alternation between languages in the form of code switching is a widely observed phenomenon in foreign language classrooms. Various bilingual speakers switch their languages with ease at different points in conversation or in writing. People commonly shift code in the course of their daily conversation. Many educated people who are fluent in English as their second language (L2), often employ code-switching by inserting English words, phrases or sentences into their communications. Although participants may unconsciously perform code switching there is always a reason that this occurs.

Code switching is determined by a number of social and linguistic factors. It is a widely used in multilingual and multicultural communities. In Asian countries such as Nepal, India, Pakistan and China, speakers who are bilingual usually have English as their second language (L2) and their first language (L1) is their mother tongue and dialect. Similarly, in European bilingual communities, French, German, Spanish or Italian may use alternatively as the language of classroom instruction.

In university classrooms, code switching comes into use in both the teachers’ and the students’ discourse. (Sert, 2006). ESL teachers, linguistics and researchers believe that code switching is not necessarily a blockage or deficiency in learning a language.

Bilingual speakers alternate the codes for various reasons during conversation. Code switching is studied to learn why people who are competent in two languages alternate words or phrases in a particular situation.

This study proposes to identify and evaluate the factors that affect code switching

in the university classroom among bilingual international students. Primary data has been collected, analyzed and compared with related research for the purpose of reaching comparative conclusions about these factors. The research was conducted at Troy University located in Troy, Alabama.

While code switching has been examined in previous studies researchers have not focused on the factors affecting bilingual international students learning English in universities. Reyes (2004) noted the absent of such studies. This paper explores the factors that determine code switching among non-native speakers of English in university level English classes.

2. Types of Code Switching:

Code switching takes a variety of forms. It can occur within or at the end or beginning of sentences. In intersentential code switching, the language switch is done at sentence boundaries. This is seen most often between fluent bilingual speakers. In intrasentential code switching, the shift is done in the middle of a sentence with no interruptions, hesitations, or pauses indicates a shift (Lipski, 1985). Intersentential language switching is known as mechanical switching. It occurs unconsciously, and fills in unknown or unavailable terms in one language. This type of code switching is also known as “code-mixing”. Another type of code switching is called “code changing”. It is characterized by fluent intrasentential shifts, transferring focus from one language to another. It is motivated by situational and stylistic factors and the switch between two languages is conscious and intentional (Lipski, 1985).

3. Review of Previous Research in Code Switching:

Several researchers have studied the functions, characteristics, determining factors and effects of code-switching in a wide range of linguistics domains. In a seminal work by Gumperz (1982) he identifies six functions of code switching which are: Quotation, Addressee specification, Repetition, Interjection, Message qualification and Personification.

In a study by Sert (2006) about the possible applications of code switching in educational contexts in bilingual community, he finds its function is to bring an authenticity to conversation and to help the reader better deduce the ideas being communicated. In this study further factors that determine Code Switching among students include: Equivalence, Floor holding, Reiteration, and Conflict control.

Auer (1998) identifies eight functions whereas Baker (2000) lists 12. Auer admits that such functions are 'ill-defined' and they are actually a "mixed bag" of different dimensions such as linguistic form, conversational structure and function. Furthermore they ignore community specific norms which motivate code switching (Chan, 2003).

According to some scholars of linguistics, as quoted in Ayeomoni (2006), the factors of code switching are: intra-group identity, poetic creativity and the expression of modernization. Reyes (2004) writes that children switch codes when they do not know the word in the acquired or target language. Other research findings have indicated that one of the major factors of code switching is that elements of the other language convey the meaning of the intended idea more accurately (Gumperz, 2004).

Researchers have observed that code switching among Spanish-English bilinguals focus on 'lexical items', Turkish-Danish bilinguals focus on 'power-wielding purposes' and French-English bilinguals focus on 'competence and performance.

In summary, the following factors have been suggested as determinates of code shifting:

(Gumperz 1982)

Quotation,

Addressee specification,

Repetition,

Interjection,

Message qualification

Personification.

Sert (2006)

Equivalence,

Floor holding,
 Reiteration,
 Conflict control.

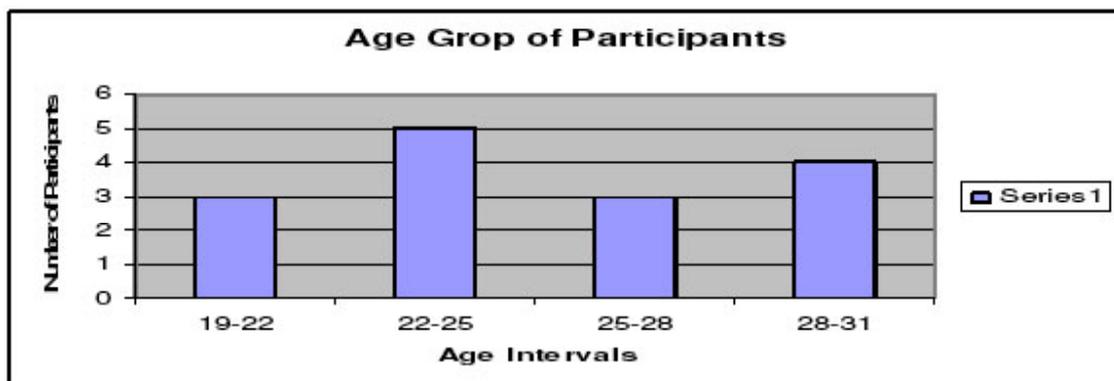
Ayeomoni(2006)

Intra-group identity,
 Poetic creativity,
 The expression of modernization.

4. Methodology:

Participants in the Study

The participants of this study were 15 international students from Troy University located in Troy, Alabama. Of them, 10 were graduate students and 5 were undergraduates. All of them came from different countries with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. All students who participated in this study were Nepalese-English, Indian- English, Chinese-English, and Korean-English bilinguals. The ages of participants ranged from 19 to 31. One third of the subjects came from a 22-25 age groups (figure 1). An equal number of subjects had ages of 19-22 and 25-28 respectively whereas four ranged in age from 28-31 and these were graduate students.



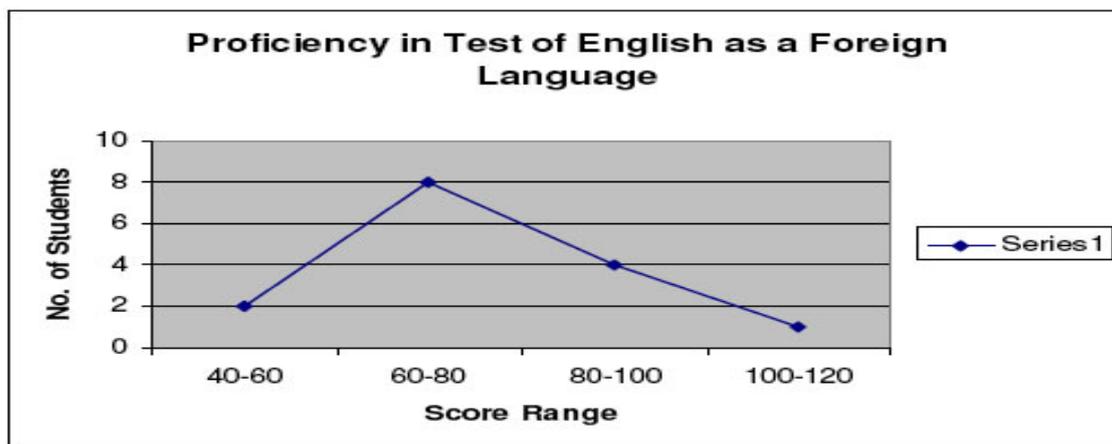
(Figure 1)

The study was conducted at Troy University which is a center for bilingual studies at the graduate and undergraduate levels.

Language Proficiency of Participants

For all the participants, first language (L1) was their national language, and second or target language was English (L2). The proficiency of English for this study was measured using their standardized test scores of Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL). While the subjects' proficiency in their native tongue was assumed to be of a higher level, one or two questions in the questionnaire (appendix 1) were intended to assess their proficiency level of first language.

Students who participated in this study were enrolled in English classes where they learned and exercised the second language in a classroom setting. The subjects spoke both L1 and L2 outside the classroom as well as during classes. It was found significant that students sometimes switched from one language to another during the general medium of instruction. Information regarding each participant's English language background was obtained from questionnaire (see appendix 1). More than half participants came from graduate classes and most had higher scores in standardized tests. In some cases when some ESL and graduate students tested lower a conference was held with the student to determine concomitant factors.



(Figure 2)

As seen in the figure 2, more than half students achieved a score 60-80 on TOEFL test. Only one student secured the highest range 100-120 whereas four out of total got in the range of 80-100 and just half achieved the range of 40-60. An interesting fact that emerged during data analysis is that many undergraduate students have obtained higher

TOEFL score than the graduate students.

5. Data Collection: Design and Procedure

Design and Procedure

Data was collected through the use of questionnaires and by classroom observation (see Appendix 1). Participants were not informed that their code switching behavior was the subject of observation by the researcher in the class. Observation was carried out in two graduate level classes and in undergraduate ESL classes for six days as a substitute teacher. In graduate observation classes, there were 14 international students ---4 from Korea, 1 from Nepal, 6 from China, 1 from Saudi Arabia, and 2 from India. These students were seated with their friends from the home country. While observing these graduate level classes, the researcher had had a chance to record the classroom interactions and the particular circumstances where code switching occurred. It was noticed that when students come across an unfamiliar word in the lecture or reading the text, they used to put the word in their electronic translators and thus let their friends know the meaning in their native languages. This was especially true with Korean, Chinese and Indian students. Even when responding to questions from the teacher, some students suddenly replied in their native language as if the teacher understood those terms. Students were comfortable talking in their native language. They would ask the teacher for the meaning of unfamiliar terms, or seek possible equivalents in English and local languages.

In the undergraduate ESL classroom, the observation was made among 30 International students—4 Korean, 6 Chinese, 7 Indian, 8 Saudi Arabian, 3 Nepalese, and 2 others. The majority of students in each day class were seated according to their nationalities although such seating was not the intention of this research. Students voluntarily choose to be together with their friends from home country like those graduate students. Lessons on various topics were developed in the speaking class so that participants would have enough room to express their views, opinions and arguments.

The frequencies of language exchange came from those observed instances of students in which they either ask questions with friends or share private message during the time just before the instructor asked question in the classroom. Similar to graduate students, these undergraduate students also employed word switching to share a meaning with a friend. When they come across a new word in the lesson they would jot it down quickly and pass it to each other, sharing the meaning with their friends. Many of them

whisper to convey to their friends the possible meaning. The observations were conducted for a periods of 45 minutes. It was also noticed that students also talk to each other in their native language during class to share thoughts of their family or friends although such issues were not related to their ongoing lesson. Their private and personal communication seemed consist of a word or few sentences spoken when the teacher's attention was elsewhere. Factors influencing code switching included the students' degree of English language proficiency, their self confidence due to their appearance and cultural background and their speech with an accent, and the pressures and demand of the classroom situation. It was normal for those students to use their own language in the English classes.

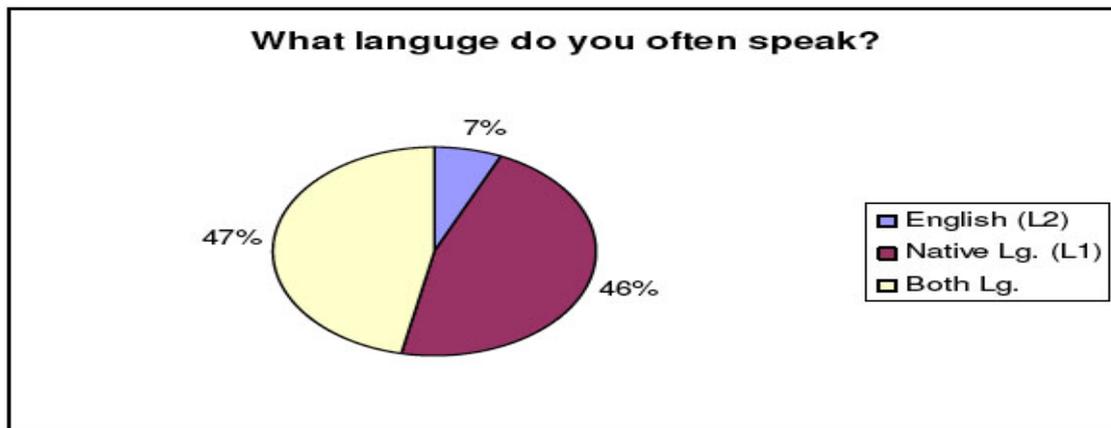
Respondents filled out the questionnaire in both classroom and out of classroom settings. Each questionnaire contained 12 multiple choice questions asking for general to specific information. The questionnaire emerged from observer's personal experience as an international graduate student, from classroom teaching experience, from earlier studies of code switching and from interviewing international students in the university setting. In addition to personal interviews with participants, the use of questionnaire was considered to be an effective tool for data collection and analysis. The main motivation of using questionnaire is to capture the whole scenario of observed situation in the way it was. Tape recorder and camera were not used in data collection process.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

The data was analyzed step by step in the order that the questions appear. It was compared and contrasted with related studies. Aspects of the findings were graphically displayed.

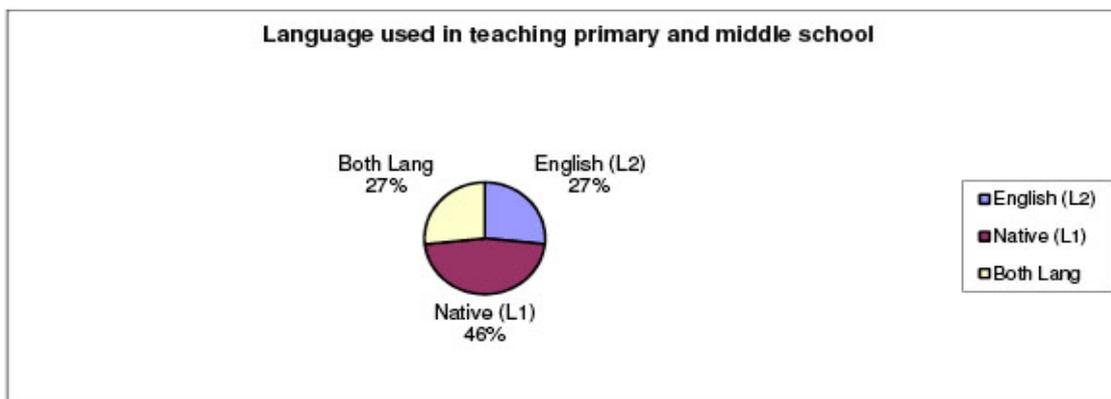
Participants' Knowledge of First and Second Languages

In responses to the question "Which language do you often speak at Troy University", 47% of the participants said that they often speak both languages (figure 3). 46% reported that they often speak only their native language. The remainder, about 10 times smaller than the other two groups, speak only English at Troy University. This shows that most of the subjects speak English less frequently than their native language in English classes (Figure 3).



(Figure 3)

In another question from the questionnaire “What language was used in teaching you in primary and middle school?” 46 % participants answered that they were taught in native language where 7% participants were instructed only in English. This indicates that many students are instructed in their native language in primary and middle school classes in many countries.



(Figure 4)

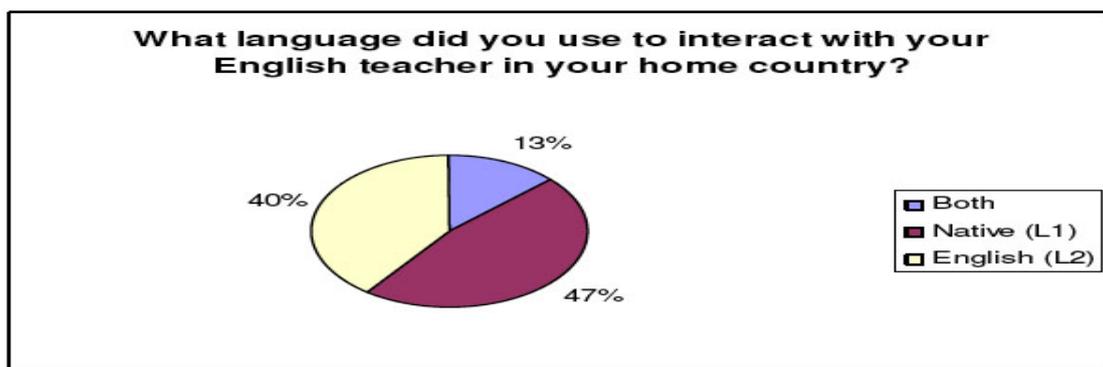
When asked “What language do you often speak?” 27% listed English as their acquired language (L2). 46% named their native language (L1). 27% said that they often spoke both languages.

To determine the competence of participants in their second language the question was ask: “what language did you use to interact with your English teacher in your home country?” In response it was found that majority of them (47%) spoke in native

language, 40 % in English and 13% in both languages to interact with teaches in home school or the university (Figure 5).

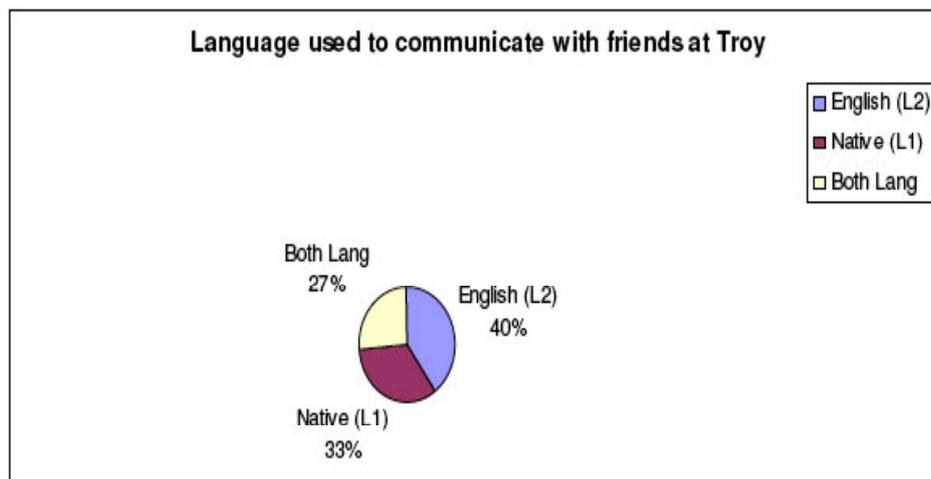
It shows that many students do not practice their second language very much in their native places.

When the question was ask “What language did you use to interact with your English teacher in your home country?” 13% said both, 47% named their Native tongue (L1) and 40% listed English as their second language (L2).



(Figure 5)

In order to determine the second language competence of the participants the questionnaire asks “what language do you use to communicate your friends at Troy? ”



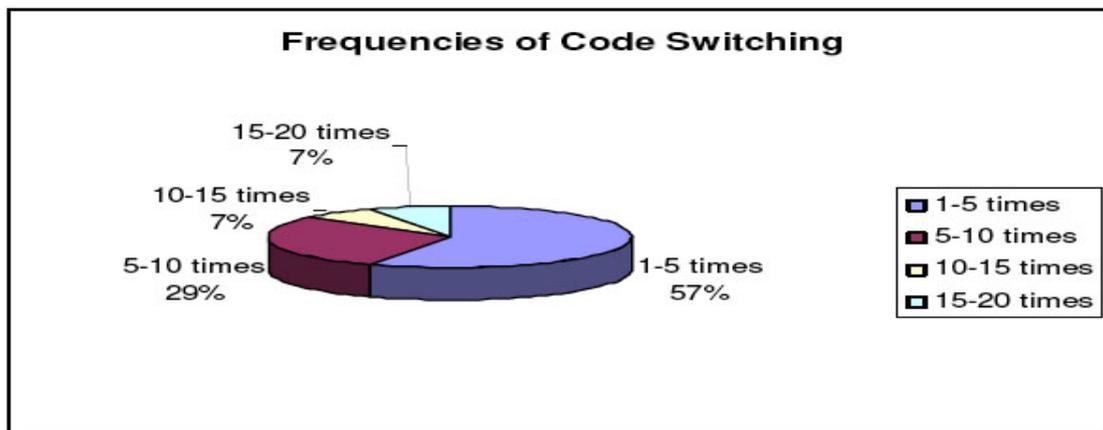
(Figure 6)

Since foreign students do not have as many friends from their home country with

whom to communicate, it was expected that they would use more English rather than their native language. However it was found that 40% students used English, 33% native language and 27% both languages to communicate with each other (figure 6). This shows that students use their first language even if students have fewer friends speaking the same tongue.

Frequencies of Code switching in Troy Class

The frequency of occurrence of code switching was a factor included in this study. The results indicate those undergraduate students code-switched less frequently than the graduate students. Analyzing responses from the questionnaire, it was found that the graduate Chinese students switched codes with greater frequency than the Nepalese and Korean students. For example, a Chinese student switched the codes from 10 to 15 times in an average in a class. One of the reasons behind that could be that their native language was the language of instruction in their primary and middle schools in China or in Nepal.



(Figure 7)

Figure 7 shows that 57% switch the code 1 to 5 times, 7% switch 5 to 10 times, 7% switch 10 to 15 times. Whereas 29% switch code 15 to 20 times, and some do not switch the codes at all.

The frequencies of Code Switching which occurred in this study were:

- 1-5 times 57%
- 5-10 times 29%

10-15 times 7%

15-20 times 7%

The Language used to communicate with friends at Troy was

English (L2) 40%

Native (L1) 33%

Both Lang 27%

Factors that Influence Code Switching in this Study

In socio-linguistic analysis, participants showed various responses regarding the factors of code switching. Many of them agreed with the options mentioned in the questionnaire. However, some the participants responded to the factors of code switching in different perspectives. Both views of code switching factors are considered in this study. Factors affecting code switching suggested in the questionnaire include:

- a) No similar words in English
- b) Did not know the English word
- c) To fill the gap in speaking
- d) Easier to speak in own language
- e) To avoid misunderstanding
- f) To convey intimacy
- g) So others would not understand (Privacy)
- h) To add emphasis
- i) Other reasons

In each 45 minutes' class observation, several examples of cross coding occurred. Factors were noticed such as the surrounding circumstances in which coding happened, whether the coding was voluntary or spontaneous, whether the students were comfortable or uncomfortable. The frequency of switching was recorded on the basis of students' interaction during the class time.

In the interview students were asked: "why did you switch the codes in class?" The majority of the participants reported that they didn't know the English word. Many of them responded that the class was boring and code switching made it more interesting. The fact that every one of the students from a variety of different countries spoke with accents created a degree of non intelligibility and made them laugh at one another. One

student said, “I speak English but my Korean friend does not understand me because of my accent. I also do[es] not understand Chinese spoken with an accent. I ask my Saudi friend before I reply to my professor. If we talk in Arabic first, and answer my professor, he says ‘very good’.”

In individual interviews with bilingual foreign students, it was observed that one factor of code switching was to maintain privacy. Participants agreed that they switch the code in the classroom so that others would not understand the matter they are conveying with home country friends. After data collection, this study found that 6% of the participants switch codes to maintain privacy.

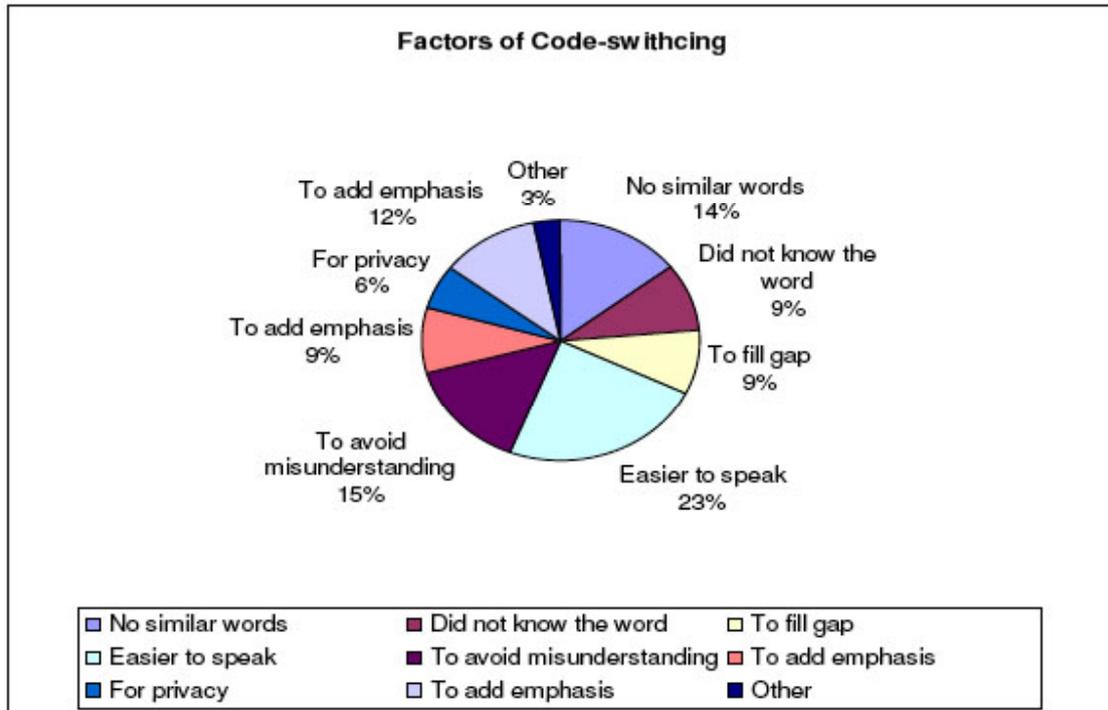
Data analysis indicated that the most influential factor was ease of expression. 23% of the participants responded that it is easier to speak in their own language than to speak in English. Interestingly, 14% said that the reason they code switched was to avoid misunderstanding when they did not know the English equivalent. Obviously, students are not as competent in speaking English, the new language they are learning, as in their native tongue. Those participants whose second language competence is less always have difficulty in finding equivalences of L1 and L2.

In this case, the student makes use of the native equivalent of a certain lexical item and therefore code switches to his or her native tongue. This factor is mostly noticed among students who are acquiring a second language. This process may be correlated with the deficiency in linguistic competence in speaking the newer target language. In this way equivalence seeking factor gives the student the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gaps resulting from foreign language incompetence.

During conversations in their off class, the students filled in the stopgaps using their native tongue. The lack of fluency in the target language results in code switching situations in order to avoid gaps in communication. 9% of the participants listed ‘to fill a gap’ as a reason for their code switching.

Another factor in students’ code switching, is ‘to add emphasis’ which is considered very important in linguistic study. A total of 9% of the test subjects responded positively to this factor. In this case, the message in the target language is repeated by the student in his or her native tongue through which the learner tries to give the meaning by making use of a repetition technique. The reason for this specific case of language alternation may be two-folds: first, the student may not have transferred the meaning

exactly in the target language. Second, the student may think that it is more appropriate to code switch in order for the message to be clearly understood. 12% subjects responded that this kind of code switching was used to make their speech appear stylish or to ‘add emphasis’ in the foreign language so that other would notice them and be impressed.



(Figure 8)

In summary the study revealed that the factors that influenced code-switching were

No similar words 14%

Did not know the word 9%

To fill a gap 9%

Easier to speak 23%

To avoid misunderstanding 15%

To add emphasis 9%

To add emphasis 12%

For privacy 6%

Other 3%

The last question of the questionnaire gave participants room to give individual responses. A participant mentioned 'my mood is the main factor in my code-switching and mostly I do to swear in Hindi'. This factor is an example of the use of code switching for conflict control. Many students switch the code intentionally simply to avoid a misunderstanding. The underlying factors for using this type of code switching may vary according to students' needs, locations, setting, intentions or purposes.

Other factors such as frustration in new international cultural settings and assimilation of new foods and unfamiliar cultural behavior have also counted in code switching case. Nevertheless, all these factors seem, in one way or another, influential in second language acquisition for bilingual international students in international classroom setting.

Skiba (1997) suggests that code switching is used in language classrooms because of an inability of expression and it provides continuity in speech rather than interference in the flow of linguistic expression. In this respect code switching can be seen as a supporting element in communication of information and in social interaction. Thus it enhances communication and is used as a tool for transference of meaning.

6. Conclusions and Implications:

The findings from this study revealed that the primary factor of code switching in international classroom is incompetence in the second language. Other noted factors were: to maintain privacy so that others would not understand; to easiness of communication; to avoid misunderstanding; to share informational; being unfamiliar with similar words in English; to put emphasis being stylist or to be thought clever.

Class observation, personal teaching experience and interviewing the participants have led to the conclusion that code switching is a natural phenomenon among bilingual foreign students. Participants agree they switch the codes for various reasons. The frequency of code exchange is not the same among graduate and undergraduate students. The incidences are more specific and limited in graduate class whereas undergraduate exhibit code switching more frequently. This is because graduate students are more fluent in using English in a variety of situations and are more familiar with the subject matter. On the other hand, undergraduate students in this study scored higher on standardized

tests than graduates. It's observed that in many cases, code switching has been a useful tool in adult language learning classroom; however, in undergraduate classes, it can be more disturbing and unwanted.

In their teaching philosophy, language instructors should be aware that codes emerge from bilingual interaction and they are very useful for conveying the message of the lesson if correctly used in the discourse. In many circumstances, a teacher may encourage students to exchange codes seeing it as an advantage for learning the target language. Its appearance and the form depend on the demographics, the age and background of learners and psychodynamic modality of the class itself. In some cases, code exchange may bring a unharmonious relationship between speakers and language community, because in their respective cultures the words may not carry same value, status and functions. In some cultural settings, local languages may be considered inferior when they are used in familiar and informal communication. Other times learners try to get best possible answer in English class to show they know it. While doing so, they code switch with their friends so that they would be right in answering the teacher. This issue was observed in the undergraduate class in which learners were excited to tell the accurate meaning or answer to their instructors. For that, they consulted with their friends in native language before they stood and answered in the class.

Another implication of code switching is to serve better in English immersion setting where they provide clarification when a word or phrase is not known. The code exchange occurrences are welcomed in the class and may increase English competency if the frequency is not excessive. In addition, if the language teacher has some knowledge of students' first language, the lessons can be better dealt with. In short, code switching can be a useful strategy in classroom interaction if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire on Code switching

Instruction: Please fill this questionnaire completely by selecting the options. Where the information demanded does not apply to you, leave the number blank.

1. Sex: Male..... Female.....

2. Which of the following is your home country?

Nepal... India..... China.... Korea....Other (Please name).....

3. How many language(s) do you speak very well?

2..... 3..... 4..... More than 5.....

4. Which level are you studying at Troy University?

Undergraduate..... Graduate.....Pre-requisite..... ESL.....

5. Which of the following is your close English test score in TOEFL/IELTS?

40-60 (5.5-6)..... 60-80 (6-7)..... 80-100 (7-8)..... 100-120(8-9).....

6. Please to which of these age-groups do you belong?

19-22..... 22-25..... 25-28..... 28-31.....

7. What language(s) do you often speak?

English..... Nepali..... Korean..... Chinese..... Hindi.... Other (Please name).....

8. What language(s) was/were used in teaching you in primary and middle school?

English..... Nepali..... Korean..... Chinese..... Hindi.... Mixed.....Other (Please name).....

9. What language(s) do you normally use to communicate with your friends in Troy?

English..... Nepali..... Korean..... Chinese..... Hindi.... Mixed....., other (Please name).....

10. In what language did you interact with your English teacher in your home country?

English..... Nepali..... Korean..... Chinese..... Hindi.... Mixed..... Other (Please name).....

11. How often do you switch/change your language from one to another during one class period at Troy?

1-5 times.... 5-10 times.... 10-15 times.... 15-20 times....

12. Why do you use words in your own language even while speaking in English? E.g. I don't like that *kura*. [I don't like it at all]

Please choose as many possible reasons as you like:

Not similar words in English..... Did not know the English words.....

To fill the stopgap..... Easier to speak in own language.....

To add emphasis To avoid misunderstanding.....

To convey intimacy..... To have privacy

Other reason (please state).....

Thank you!