Kazakh-English Code Switching and its Role in the Educational Space of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Due to modern integration processes, increasing trends of globalization, active migration of peoples, and expansion of interethnic contacts, the issue of code switching has been the subject of different studies recently. In this regard, Kazakhstan is of a particular interest, as the sociolinguistic situation of the country represents unique social, cultural and linguistic conditions for existence of different languages. The paper presents the study on the attitudes of Kazakhstani students towards Kazakh-English code switching and its impact on second language acquisition. The paper analyzes Kazakh-English code switching in a sociolinguistic aspect. The paper also briefly describes the role and the place of English in the linguistic space of Kazakhstan. In order to determine the relation between Kazakh-English code switching and its impact on English learning, the study investigated 100 Kazakh-speaking students of higher educational institutions of Astana (Kazakhstan). Results of the study show that, in general, Kazakh-English code switching contributes to successful second language acquisition: students learn difficult words and concepts faster, and explanation of difficult parts of the grammar in the native language assists in acquiring the proficient level of English. Code switching is regarded as a facilitating tool in second language acquisition in the educational space of Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Code switching; language attitudes; second language acquisition; the Kazakh language; the English language.

Introduction

The issue of Kazakh-English code switching has been the focus of some research in Kazakhstan quite recently; therefore, researches in this field are in the development stage and are highly relevant. The present paper addresses the issue of Kazakh-English code switching in educational space of Kazakhstan. The aim of the study was to determine the relation between code switching and its impact on English language learning.

The study is based on the questionnaire conducted among students of higher educational institutions of Astana with different proficiency levels of English.The present paper is organized as follows. Literature review summarizes the research on code switching in the second language classroom. Methodology of the study is given after the literature review part where the participants, study design and instruments are described. The results are analyzed in discussion and conclusion part of the paper.

Literature review

Dynamic development of modern society, increasing tendencies of integration and globalization, expansion of interethnic contacts, and the processes of migration have engendered great interest in the issue of language contacts in general, and the issue of code switching in particular. Code switching, defined by Myers-Scotton (1993) as "the use of two languages varieties in the same conversation", plays a significant role in multilingual and polycultural communities where the language contacts are inevitable. Being a relatively new phenomenon, this subject has been widely developed in foreign linguistics, so the fundamental researches on this topic have been presented mostly by foreign linguists.

Here it should be noted that code switching has also been in the centre of many heated debates in the field of second language acquisition, which has engendered a lot of theoretical and practical investigations. As Martin-Jones (2000, pp.1-9) notes, the first investigations in this field received attention in 1980s when researchers began to work with audio-recordings made during the classroom interactions, their analyses had a more linguistic orientation, and classroom discourse functions became the focus of investigations. The main reason for it was the fact that researchers considered code switching as a haphazard mixture of two languages; therefore, students were not allowed to switch forth and back between the target language and the native language (Chaudron 1988, pp. 61-74).

The proponents of intralingual teaching strategy such as Wong-Fillmore (1985), Lightbown (2001) , Ellis (1984) support the idea that the use of only the target language in the classroom environment contributes to productive language acquisition, and any switching negatively impacts on the process of second language acquisition (Cook 2001). However, many linguists such as Auer (1992), Gumperz (1982), Heller (1988), Li and Milroy (1995),

Myers-Scotton (1993), Levine (2003), admit the facilitating role of code switching to achieve communicative aims, in particular, in second language acquisition.

According to Cook, the tradition of excluding the native language from the second language classrooms had considerably limited "the possibilities of language teaching" (2001). The linguist claims that code switching assists in explaining grammatical and lexical materials; may be used as a tool for description of difficult concepts; reduces the time to explain tasks; and demonstrates real second language situation (2001).

It should be noted that most of these studies were mainly conducted in the countries where structurally similar languages coexist (e.g. European languages) and, in most cases, they refer to one language family. Therefore, to portray a full picture of code switching and its impact on second language acquisition we need to consider it on the example of languages with different structures such as Kazakh and English and to examine how these languages coexist in the sociolinguistic space of Kazakhstan.

This problem is of particular importance in relation to the realities of Kazakhstani society, where the linguistic landscape of Kazakhstan represents a unique linguistic space, which is characterized by demographic and socio-linguistic complexity and represents a multi-lingual society. Therefore, the issue of code-switching requires careful study.

Methodology

The study was carried out on the basis of higher institutions of Astana (Kazakhstan). Participants of the study were students of English language departments. The reason for choosing students was that they are characterized by formation of their own social, ethnic, political views and are ambitious and developing unit of society.

The questionnaire consists of three different sections which are described as follows:

A - Background information.
B - Questions concerning the role of English in Kazakhstan. C
– Students' attitudes towards code-switching.

The sample contained 100 students who voluntarily participated in the study. All participants of the study are the Kazakhs and live in Astana (Kazakhstan). The average age of the respondents is 20. The group distribution of the respondents is even: 25% of learners are studying on the 1st course, 20% are studying on the 2nd course, 25% are studying on the 3d course, 30% are studying on the 4th course.

The native language of the participants is the Kazakh language. According to the questionnaire, the level of English proficiency of the respondents is quite high: 87% of students speak fluently, 75% read fluently, 70% understand fluently, and 51% of respondents write fluently. The English proficiency level of students is given in Table 1.

Table 1

English language proficiency levels.

	Percentages (%)
Beginner	3.0
Pre-Intermediate	12.0
Intermediate	46.0
Upper-Intermediate	35.0
Advanced	4.0

According to table one, the majority of students assessed themselves as Intermediate (46%) and Upper-Intermediate (35%) users of English. Here it should be noted that 99% of respondents indicated that it is necessary to improve their proficiency in English. 96% of respondents showed high interest in studying English which is the evidence of topicality of the issue.

The second section of the questionnaire includes items regarding the place, prestige, necessity, interest, etc. of English in the context of the linguistic situation in Kazakhstan. Here it should be noted that 99% of respondents

indicated that it is necessary to improve their proficiency in English. 96% of respondents showed high interest in studying English which is the evidence of topicality of the issue.

The third section of the questionnaire is directly connected with the issue of code switching and aimed at determining relation between code switching and its impact on learning English. Section C includes close-ended questions and has standardized Likert-scale format which is comprised as follows: 1 - Strongly Agree, 2 - Agree, 3 - Disagree, 4 - Strongly Disagree. 5- Undecided. The data were analyzed statistically by using SPSS 16 programme. In our research the strength of internal consistency of all questionnaire items was quite high – the level of the Cronbach alpha was more than 0.7, which indicates the correctness and reliability of the statements' structure.

Results

In order to determine the relation between Kazakh-English code switching and its impact on English language learning, initially, we have tried to identify the attitudes of students towards code switching in general. The data analysis shows that attitudes of 83% of respondents towards code switching are positive and 17% of them hold negative attitude towards Kazakh-English code switching.

Table 2

Code switching and its impact on language learning.

Item description	Students' answers (percent)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Undecided**
Mixing of Kazakh with English assists in understanding new words.	23	29	26	10	12
Mixing of Kazakh with English helps me understand difficult concepts.	25	41	16	6	12
Mixing of Kazakh with English contributes to better understanding of English grammar.	13	44	13	16	14
Mixing of Kazakh with English assists in learning the English language.	31	42	17	4	6
Mixing of Kazakh with English helps me to fulfill tasks successfully.	19	41	23	9	8

As manifested in table two, code switching contributes to productive learning of English. For 52% of students, code switching assists in understanding new vocabulary. As it is seen from the table, 66% of respondents consider code switching as a facilitating tool in acquiring difficult concepts. According to 57% of learners, Kazakh-English code switching is one of the best ways to understand English grammar. The significant majority of students (73%) believe that code switching plays the important role in a class and it helps them in learning the English language. Most of the respondents (60%) think that code switching contributes to successful fulfilling of tasks.

Table 3

Reasons for code switching.

Item description	Students' answers (percent)				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Undecided**
I mix Kazakh and English when I don't know the equivalent of a word or expression.	14	35	32	12	7
I mix Kazakh and English when I want my speech to be expressive.	8	26	44	16	6
I mix Kazakh and English to make my speech clear for everybody.	15	42	26	11	6
I mix Kazakh and English not to make my speech clear for everybody.	23	26	29	10	12

Table 3. (continued)

I mix Kazakh and English to attract listeners' attention.	30	44	17	4	5
I mix Kazakh and English when there is no equivalent word in one of the languages.	19	41	23	9	8
I mix Kazakh and English when a speaker does not understand the meaning of a word or expression.	13	34	34	12	7

According to table three, 49% of respondents switch back and forth between the Kazakh and English languages when the speakers the equivalent of a word or an expression. It should be noted that only 34% of students agree with the statement that Kazakh-English code switching makes the speech more expressive and exact, whereas 54% of respondents disagree with it. This situation probably reflects fact that the in Kazakhstani educational space the target language exclusivity is mostly encouraged by a teacher during the lesson, therefore, students regard code switching as a negative phenomenon. To the statement "I mix Kazakh and English to make my speech clear for everybody" 57% of respondents answered positively.

Here it should be noted that nearly half the students switch back and forth between the Kazakh language and the English language when they do not want to make their speeches clear for everybody, i.e. show identity with a certain group. The overwhelming majority of learners (74%) switch from Kazakh to English to attract the listeners' attention. Most of the students (60%) switch when there is no equivalence of a word in one of the languages. However, as it is shown from Table 3, nearly half the respondents tend to switch back and forth between languages when an interlocutor does not understand the meaning of a word or expression. Approximately the same number of respondents (46%) disagrees with this statement. We assume that this situation is interpreted by the fact that target language exclusivity is considered as a positive phenomenon; therefore, students try to convey the meaning of a word or an expression by means of linguistic tools of a target language.

Discussion and conclusion

The present study is aimed at determining the relation between code switching and its impact on learning English. The results of the study reveal that learners regard code switching as a positive phenomenon in general.

Also the results of the study indicate the relation between code switching and its impact on learning. The majority of students unanimously respond that code switching contributes to effective language acquisition: it helps them understand difficult words and concepts, and explanation of difficult parts of the grammar in the native language assists in acquiring the proficient level of English. In general, students believe that code switching that students hold positive attitudes towards code switching in the process of second language acquisition. Findings of the study demonstrate that code switching contributes to increasing interest in learning as difficult linguistic material is easily learnt with the help of switching to the native language.

Some reasons for code switching have also been identified during the study. Kazakh-English code switching is used to attract the attention of the interlocutors, to convey more precise meaning, and make speech expressive. Code switching also serves as a means of identifying with a specific group. Kazakh-English code switching happens when the students do not know the appropriate word or expression and when there is no equivalent word in one of the languages.

A favorable environment is created for students and the process of language learning becomes more efficient. Students do not feel lost and feel satisfied in the process of language learning. However, as mentioned previously, many respondents do not switch forth and back between languages which is apparently interpreted by the fact that the use of only English is mostly encouraged by a teacher and code switching is regarded as a negative phenomenon.

The issue of code switching is currently studied from different perspectives and the attitude of a learner, speaking personality, towards code switching is one of the important ones. Code switching in educational environment is an unavoidable and necessary phenomenon. We think that it contributes to efficient second language learning.

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