

Article

Functions of Code-Switching in Children's Conversations

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Abstract: This study analyzes the functions of code-switching in peer interactions to explore its relationship with the development of children's bilingual communicative competence. Focusing on 8- and 10-year-old Chinese-English bilinguals, the research investigates conversations across social and academic (science activity) contexts. Findings reveal that while both groups predominantly used Chinese as their base language, 10-year-olds code-switched more frequently and employed a wider range of functions than 8-year-olds. Furthermore, code-switching functions varied significantly by context, with "topic shift" dominating social talk and "clarification" prevailing in academic tasks. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that code-switching is a strategic, complex skill utilized by bilingual children to achieve specific communicative goals and facilitate cognitive development.

Keywords: switch; bilingualism; conversation; function

1. Introduction

Conversation constitutes a major part of human interaction. It is through language and conversation that children begin to communicate information through a variety of speech registers and style switching [1]. From the point of view, code-switching is studied to understand why people who are competent in two languages alternate language in a particular conversation or situation. The most general description of code-switching is that it involves the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation.

In this study, communicative competence refers to the speaker's knowledge of when to speak and when not to, and what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner [2]. Based on previous research, we know that monolingual speakers have the capacity to switch among a variety of linguistic registers [3]. Similarly, bilinguals also have these communicative registers that monolinguals have, but in addition, they have two linguistic codes that they can alternate as a resource for strategies during conversation.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by a number of theoretical assumptions related to bilingualism and communicative competence. First, in terms of children's use of code-switching, it was expected that older children would use code switches at a higher rate and for a greater range of functions than younger children. This expectation is based on the assumption that older children would have developed a higher level of proficiency in their L2 and greater knowledge of the grammatical systems of both their first and second languages-factors that have been found necessary for code-switching [4].

3. Methodology

In this article, the focus is to investigate how children from two age groups (8- and 10-year-olds) switch between two different languages, English and Chinese, and draw on features of each language to accomplish their conversational goals. In particular, peer interaction without an adult present was analyzed to explore how children make use of

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their native language (Chinese) and their L2 (English) in a social and school-related context. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do children use code-switching during peer interactions?
2. What are the functions of the code switches used by school-age children from different age groups?
3. Is there an effect of context on the type of code-switching and language used by schoolchildren (social setting vs. school-related setting)?

Subjects were told that the researcher was interested in children's conversations during a science project and that they would be participating in a science activity. The children were asked to nominate a friend with whom they wanted to participate in the science activity.

For the analysis of conversational functions, the different types of code switches that were most of prevalent in the children's conversations were first identified through analysis of the transcripts and then compared with the code-switching typologies used in previous frameworks by Gumperz. In the end, combining new data-based and older typologies facilitated identification of the categories most relevant to the code switches produced by the children in this study. The study used eight categories in the analysis for conversational code-switching. These categories were used to indicate the conversational function of the code switch and were always determined in relation to the contextual information at a specific point of the ongoing conversation.

➤ Representation of speech: Code-switching employed to represent talk.

c: all right I'm calm I'm calm ...他们可能在说我们长得很漂亮吧

e: ...may be they are saying that we are good looking

➤ Topic shift: Code-switching occurring due to a change of topic in conversation.

c: we finished the homework ...thank you 看我的衣服掉了

e: ...look at my cloth it is falling

➤ Situation switch (on/off topic in academic work): Code-switching marking a switch between science talk and non-science talk.

c: 看看这些磁铁 ...what was he saying during recess

e: look, look the magnets

➤ Insistence (non-command): Code-switching indicating a child's persistence in a specific idea. The child usually repeated the same utterance in both languages.

c: let me see ...让我看看

e: ...let me see

➤ Emphasis (command): Code-switching used to put emphasis on a specific command.

c: loud 读 loud!

e: loud read it loud!

➤ Person specification: Code-switching occurring when children referred to another person during their conversation.

c: you should ask A # give name # 如果放学后她想去吃冰淇淋的话

e: if she wants to eat ice cream after school

➤ Question shift: Code-switching indicating a switch in language when children had a question.

c: let me see 你怎样做的?

e: how did you do it?

➤ Clarification: Code-switching giving more information to clarify an idea.

c: 是的就是那个 we do not need this no more

e: yeah that thing

4. Results

4.1. Language Use

During the social talk, both the 8-year-olds and 10-year-olds used more Chinese than English. This finding was expected, considering the children's linguistic proficiency in

Chinese and English. Unexpectedly, a similar pattern was observed for language use during the science activity. Developmentally, it was anticipated that the 8-year-old children would use their native language (Chinese) with a higher frequency than the 10-year-olds because the latter have developed higher degrees of bilingual proficiency. Table 1 shows the frequency for each language used by age group across the two contexts: the social setting and the science activity setting.

Table 1. Average Percentage of Turns with Code Switches Used by Children in Different Contexts

Age group	Social talk	Science activity (on-task talk)
8-year-olds	13%	10%
10-year-olds	28%	28%

As can be seen in Figure 1, on average, the 8-year-olds used Chinese in 85% of their total conversational turns in the social setting and used English for only 7% of their conversational turns in that segment. For the 10-year-olds, there was a decrease in the use of Chinese, hence and increase in English, as well as a decrease in code-switched turns. Both groups of children used their native language, Chinese, as the base language during their conversations. However, we see that the 10-year-olds used English and mixed English and Chinese in about 31% of their turns, in comparison with the 8-year-olds, who only used English and mixed English and Chinese for about 15% of their turns.

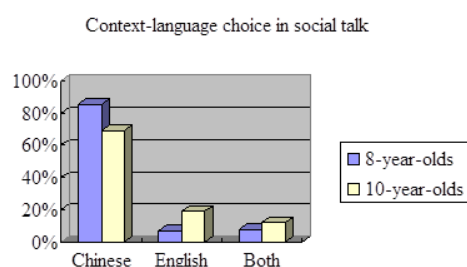


Figure 1. Average Percentage Distribution of Total Conversational Turns by Language Choice

During the science activity (see Figure 2), both age groups used Chinese again as the base language. The 8-year-olds used Chinese for more than 75% of their total turns during the science activity. Hence, the 8-year-olds showed a slight increase in use of English during the science activity, compared with the social setting, but they still used Chinese as the primary language for discussing social and academic topics during peer interaction. The 10-year-old children showed a similar pattern of language use in both contexts (social talk and on-task science talk).

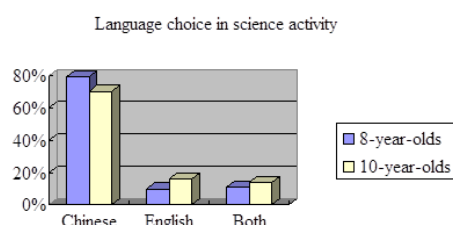


Figure 2. Average Percentage Distribution of Total Conversational Turns by Language Choice in the Science Activity

The results indicate that the younger children code switched less than the older children. The 8-year-old children used Chinese as the base language during the social talk,

code switched to English, and then code switched back to their base language. The 10-year-old children code switched with greater frequency than the younger children (see Table 1). Older children seemed to use a wider range of code-switching to fulfill different functions. This finding seems to indicate a relationship between the number of years children have been exposed to their L2 and the influence on their bilingual communicative skills.

4.2. Code-Switching Functions

For analysis, children showed variation in the types of code-switching functions they used according to context. A summary of the most commonly used types of code-switching by age group is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Functions of Code Switches by Activity, in Order of Frequency

Age group	Social talk	Science activity on-task talk	Science activity off-task talk
8-year-olds	1. Topic shift	1. Clarification	1. Situation switch
	2. Emphasis	2. Emphasis	2. Topic shift
	3. Clarification	3. Question shift	3. Emphasis
10-year-olds	1. Topic shift	1. Clarification	1. Situation switch
	2. Clarification	2. Topic shift	2. Topic shift
	3. Representation of speech	3. Question shift	3. Representation of speech

Across age groups, for the social context, the four most commonly used types of functions were topic shift, clarification, emphasis, and representation of speech. The topic shift of code switch was the most frequently used by both groups of children during the social setting. Children frequently code switched while changing topics. This type of code-switching function seems to be particularly important in social talk, because children spent a great deal of time talking about social events and teasing each other (see example below):

Zhang Yu: c: 看, 我要做什么

e: look what I'm going to do # child is playing with Play-Doh #

Zhu Jia: c: 她是做什么的?她是宋承宪吗?

e: what is she? Is she Song chengxian?

c: go go Song chengxian ...hi, is this the activity? 她是移民

e: she is the immigration

child is referring to researchers as immigration officer#

[both children laugh]

In this example, we see how Zhang Yu and Zhu Jia, 10-year-old boys, switch languages from Chinese to English when talking about popular character (Song cheng xian) in a television show, but switch back to Chinese when changing topics to refer to "immigration officers". These children were teasing each other while code switching to Chinese to refer to the researcher as移民 [immigration officer]. This particular dyad continues to code switch throughout the conversation in both the social and science activity contexts.

During the science activity (on-task talk), the four most common types of code switches used across age groups were clarification, emphasis, topic shift, and question shift. In terms of code-switch variation during the science activity, the only difference across age groups was the use of the emphasis type of code-switching for the young children and the topic shift type of code-switching for the older children. The pattern of code switches children used during the science activity when they were off task is more similar to that of the social-talk context. The 8-year-olds used situation switch, topic shift, and emphasis more frequently than any other type of code-switching. In a similar way, 10-year-olds used situation switch, topic shift, and representation of speech within their

conversations. Therefore, the variation in the use of functions for code-switching reflects particular means to achieve discourse goals during peer interactions.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

An unexpected finding was the consistent use of Chinese (the children's native language) as the base language in both types of conversations and contexts. A possible explanation to these findings is that the children might have felt some pressure in carrying out the science activity and answering the questions, in order to report back to the research. Therefore, the children were more comfortable using Chinese to solve the science activity. Because the activity was a cognitive task, the children might have switched to their native language, Chinese, as a result of wanting to get through all the science activity's questions. Moreover, Benjamin (1996) also documented schoolchildren's use of their native language to communicate their knowledge to carry out complex academic tasks while negotiating participation in ongoing conversations [5].

In sum, there was some variation in the functions of code switches used with respect to type of context. During the social talk, the most systematic function for code-switching among children was the topic of the conversation. For the science activity (on-task), switching to add emphasis a statement and to clarify information given to the listener was important when a child had a question regarding the activity. Children manipulated their languages in order to make sure the other child understood what they were trying to communicate.

This study has attempted to explore the different patterns of code-switching functions Chinese-English bilingual children use during peer conversation. These results show that children during peer interaction use the language with which they both feel most comfortable and have greater competence, and also indicate that those speakers with the greatest degree of bilingual communicative competence are the ones who most frequently use code-switching as a strategy to meet their conversational goals and to communicate with their peers. For classroom teachers, the findings are particularly important, because code-switching should be understood as a tool for cognitive development and a skill children use to achieve communicative goals. Moreover, code-switching is a complex skill children develop as part of communicative competence.

Appendix: Transcription Conventions

The line t: is the transcript literally from the conversation.

Line e: is a free translation into English to give the meaning.

#: Use it when extratextual information needs to be included with the text (e.g.,

R: did you ask E #surname# to come?) [6]

: Nonlexical phenomenon which interrupts the lexical stretch (e.g., text [laugh] text/)

[6]

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