How to Prevent Students' Code-Switching during Group Work

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Abstract—Group work is one of the most favorable techniques in communicative language teaching. In an EFL setting, it is the one that learners have to depend on in order to use the language functionally and meaningfully. Therefore, language teachers have to make sure it serves its purpose. One of the obstacles that decrease usefulness of this activity is code-switching. This action research is concerned with students' use of first language during pair and group work in an EFL setting at Hacettepe University, Turkey. It aims to test the effectiveness of some strategies that are used to prevent code-switching.

Index Terms—Code-switching, EFL, group work, pair work, Turkey.

I. INTRODUCTION

Collaboration has been one of the fundamentals of communicative language classes because of its potential for engaging students in meaningful learning with authentic tasks in a social setting [1], and since it became popular, the use of mother tongue among students has been a key concern for language teachers. Although the latest trends in language teaching say "Code-switching in language classroom is not always a blockage or deficiency in learning a language" [2], and L1 can be a useful tool in homogenous classes, the majority accept the fact that it should be limited during pair and group activities which usually aim at improving students' communicative skills. According to Nation [3], it is important to maximize the use of L1 in the classroom where learners don't have enough opportunity to meet and use it outside the classroom. While doing this, teachers should know how to use the L1 in the classroom, and if the teachers want to limit the use of L1 in a language class, they need some strategies, which this study hopes to find out.

A. The Context of the Study

This study has been conducted at Hacettepe University School of Foreign Languages, Turkey. The aim of the school is to improve students' language skills and enable them to follow their undergraduate studies in their own departments where the medium of instruction is 100% or 30% English. Students take 25 hours of input per week so as to reach the required level to pass the proficiency exam given at the end of the year. My study group consists of 34 elementary students whose departments vary. In this group, there are 15 males and 19 females aged between 17-21.

B. Problem Statement

Small group work in EFL settings undoubtedly has a contribution to development of students' communicative use of English. However, the expectations of what group work can achieve need to be informed by knowledge of what actually goes on when students work in groups in EFL settings, especially when students share a common L1 [4]. In classrooms where the learners all share the same L1, there is a tendency for tasks which should be done in the L2 such as discussion of reading, conversation activities, preparation for writing, etc. to be done in the L1.It is a known fact that especially low proficiency EFL learners make use of the L1 to manage the tasks and to discuss grammar and vocabulary [5]. Nation [3] suggests four main reasons for this to occur. The first one of these reasons is that learners' L1 is more natural to them. Second, it is more communicatively effective. These two reasons mean learners code-switch naturally when they have a communicative need which they cannot meet in the target language. As the third reason, L1's being easier for the learners is mentioned; and fourth, it is claimed that learners are embarrassed to speak the target language when there is an artificial need to do that, which is often the case in EFL classes. All these reasons seem logical in our EFL setting at Hacettepe University, and the need to find out some strategies to prevent students from switching to L1 during pair and group activities derived from the fact that many scholars felt the use of L1 would interfere with the development of the L2 [6]. Most language teachers agree that in order to promote communicative competence, learners must get practice in speaking in communicative exchanges in the classroom [7].

Achieving optimal levels of the use of target language and students' first language is particularly important in school-based foreign language programs where the teacher is usually the only proficient speaker and opportunities for using the target language beyond the classroom is limited. [8] To achieve the optimal levels, "students need to be encouraged to try to increase the range and quantity of their communicative uses of English when they work in groups" [4] because they already use L1 for exchange of ideas, clarification of meaning, explanations, etc. What I observed in my classes also show that when the students share a common L1, it is inevitable for them to switch to it as soon as they feel a need for any reason, unless they are trained to avoid that or avoidance can be made possible in some other ways such as rewarding, penalizing or pre-teaching the necessary language items. Therefore, this action research would be of great importance for our school setting and our future teaching because it seeks to find out ways to encourage students to keep speaking the target language even when they feel a strong need to code-switch.

C. Action Research Question

The reason why this action research is conducted is to answer the question *'How can we prevent students from switching to L1 during pair and group work?'*

II. METHOD

A. Introduction

In this study, first, the assumption that the students' code-switch during collaborative activities was checked, and then what the students think about how to prevent this was found out. With the help of these findings and the literature, seven strategies were determined and each one was applied during a four-week study. After the applications, students' qualitative feedback was gathered and the students were also asked to grade the strategies out of 10, considering their effectiveness. In the end, the mean scores of each activity were compared to see which one, the students thought, was the most effective, and which one was the least.

B. Data Collection

In order to find out students' reasons to code-switch and their ideas on how to prevent this, they were asked to answer 3 questions, and write down their answers. The questions were;

Item I. Do you think you speak enough English during pair and group activities?

Item II. What are the reasons that make you switch to Turkish?

Item III. What can be done to prevent you from switching to Turkish and increase the quantity of English you speak?

After the students' answers to these questions were evaluated, seven main strategies were determined by looking at the literature as well: Explaining the aim of the activity clearly, providing the language students need, making students work with a different partner, punishment, rewarding, letting the students pre-plan, and monitoring more closely. Each strategy was applied once, and students were asked to evaluate those independently. As an answer to the item I, 80% of the students say 'No, I don't think I speak enough English during pair and group work' while 20% of them said the opposite. This item, on its own, was enough to show that my assumption was true. Therefore, I could move on to reviewing other items and concluding some strategies with the help of them.

C. Strategies to Avoid Code-Switching

1) Explaining the aim of the activity

In their comments for the Item II, 90% of the students state that they switch to Turkish because they want to fulfill the task, and they are sometimes not able to do it in English. They illustrate their answers mostly with the information gap activities in our course book. Approximately 70% of them also added that they switch to Turkish as they cannot speak English fluently because they are too much concerned with grammar. Hence, the first strategy to work on was 'explaining the aim of the activity clearly'.

Before one of our speaking activities about 'holiday plans', I informed students about the aim of the activity. I told them that this activity was for exchanging ideas about how to make a holiday better, and they did not need to be

concerned with grammar too much. What was important was to tell their ideas to their pairs and understand theirs. For another activity, which was for practicing 'have got, has got', I told them that using 'have got, has got' correctly is more important than anything else during their speech. Some additional questions could be asked, but the forms of those were not of much importance.

After students completed the tasks, I asked them to write their feelings about this strategy, and how it helped them. They were also supposed to give this strategy a mark out of 10. 0- for 'completely ineffective'; 10- for 'completely effective'. What they thought about each strategy will be analyzed in the results section.

2) Providing the language the students need

In their answers to Item II, 65% of the students emphasize the fact that they switch to Turkish because they do not exactly know how to say or ask a certain thing. In addition, 20% of them suggest that we could think of the words or phrases that may be needed during the conversation beforehand, and write them on the board. These ideas were enough to determine the second strategy: Providing the language they need.

Before an activity of which aim was to 'tell one's favorite relative to his/her group', I asked students what they could need while speaking about a person, and I pre-taught how to ask about someone's appearance and personality. I also let them review personality and appearance adjectives. Then, they did the speaking activity and wrote their feedback.

3) Making students work with a different partner

As an answer to Item III, 15% of the students say 'My pair should be changed because s/he usually doesn't want to talk, and so I can't talk either.' Odlin [6] suggests that letting students work with the same partner for every activity decreases their creativity and makes them reluctant to speak. What one student mentioned in his/her answer also made me think about this strategy. S/he says: "I enjoy speaking to my pair, but I'm afraid I won't be able to communicate with anybody else in English!" As a result of these ideas, the third strategy became 'making students work with a different partner.'

For a reading comprehension check activity which was to be done in pairs, I paired the students with the help of some nouns and synonyms of them. Each student picked a piece of paper on which a noun was written, found the person who has its synonym in the class, and worked with him/her. After the activity finished, the students wrote their feedback individually.

4) Punishment

No student mentioned 'punishment' in his/her answers, but it is frequently mentioned in the literature and blogs [9]. I thought it would be a good idea to punish students who switch to Turkish during group work, and I asked for students' advice on how to penalize those. They suggested collecting money for class photocopies, and I accepted. For noting down the uses of Turkish, I asked for one of my students' help.

While the speaking activity about 'future plans' was being done, we monitored and noted down the number of Turkish words used. The students wrote their feedback after they finished doing the activity.

5) Rewarding

As well as punishment, rewarding is also one of the most frequently used methods in dealing with L1 use of the students. 7% of the students mentioned it in their answers as 'Some prizes might be given to encourage us because we never switch to Turkish, and it is really difficult.' Concluding from the past experiences and the students' ideas, I decided to reward them with something they are really interested in: my key rings.

As soon as I announced that I would give one of my key rings to the person who speaks most during a 'debate', the students started to get prepared for it, and it became a really heated one. However, we may not be able to give such presents all the time.

6) Letting the students pre-plan

Harbord [10] suggests that giving students some time for preparation before group work would make them more self-confident. 20% of the student suggest in Item I that if they had the chance to pre-plan, it would be easier for them to keep speaking the target language.

So as to try this strategy, I assigned 'Social English' parts of our course book to pairs. However, as these parts were consisting of dialogues, only memorizing them would not meet the needs of the students and the aims of the activity. Therefore, after they studied those parts, I asked them to add a conflict to the dialogue while they were performing it. In this way, I could make sure that they acquired the necessary language function studied in that part. After they did this, they wrote their feedback for this strategy.

7) Monitoring closely

Monitoring is widely accepted as one of the essentials of group work. However, to be able to deal with students' code-switching during pair and group work, a closer monitoring is necessary. In their comments for the Item I and II, in total 45% of the students say that they cannot be controlled properly, and this makes them feel free to speak Turkish whenever they need. Thinking these comments, I created a better control system with the help of my students.

While the students are engaged in a game during which they were trying to persuade each other for buying a product, two randomly chosen students helped me monitor the ones playing the game. They were even more careful than me. For better monitoring, I took my notebook with me and noted down the problems they encountered during their speech, and this strategy seemed to work.

III. FINAL REFLECTION

A. Introduction

During a four-week study, seven different strategies were implemented and they were evaluated by the students. In addition to marking the strategies, students made some precious remarks about them. The comments made by the students were really honest and sincere, and they created me a good path for the future.

B. Results

The results of the study shows that among the seven strategies worked on, not one seems ineffective. In addition to giving high scores, the students also made really good comments about the strategies. The scores given to the strategies were respectively 8.79, 9.14, 6.12, 6.85, 7.37, 7.88 and 9.16.

1) Monitoring closely

Among all the strategies implemented during the study, 'monitoring more closely' was chosen the most effective. Nevertheless, there were also some negative comments as well as the positive ones. The comments students made are the following:

"I think I can speak English more than I usually do when somebody is especially listening to me to see if I am doing it"

"I like speaking English, but sometimes I may speak Turkish if nobody is monitoring. However, when the teacher is around, this encourages me, and I continue speaking English."

"When you walk in the class while we are speaking, we can ask you how to say a certain thing, so we don't switch to Turkish. I think it's really effective."

"When somebody is listening to me, I feel nervous and I don't want to speak English."

2) Providing the language they need

This strategy got the most praise from the students, and became the second most effective one. The comments for this one are the following:

"The reason why we speak Turkish is always the same: Not knowing how to say what we want to say. By providing us with the language we need, you made us feel OK while speaking English."

"Actually we never do a speaking activity which necessitates language items we haven't learned. However, during speaking, we usually forget what we know. So, writing them on the board made a great contribution to our speaking. Thanks for that."

"Teaching the language items before speaking activity is a good idea. You also asked what we thought we could need, and it was perfect."

"I don't think it's a good idea because we won't be able to find anybody doing this in real life."

"I think this is really a good way to help us speak English. I wrote this suggestion in my first feedback. Thanks for trying it."

3) Explaining the aim of the activity

To my surprise, this strategy was chosen the third most efficient one. The reason why it is a surprise is that I thought the students could evaluate an activity and decide what its aim was –at least on fluency vs. accuracy basis. Nonetheless, while I was explaining the aim of the activity during the first application, I realized that it was really a new thing to the students, and they had been trying to deal with all aspects of the language at the same time during speaking. For that reason, this strategy became really popular among the students. This strategy also shows us that we should not make assumptions about our students. Asking their opinion is really important.

"As we are obsessed with grammar, we cannot talk fluently, and this makes us reluctant to speak. However, when we heard that grammar was not always the most important thing, we relaxed a lot and suddenly started to speak. In the end, what I realized was that the grammar we

used during this speech did not have much more mistakes than the one we used before."

"Explaining the aim of the activity clearly was the best favor you did to us. It let us speak!"

"Before, we didn't know what was actually expected from us, and trying to complete the task, we always spoke Turkish. But no more"

"It really made a big difference. I felt I could communicate in English for the first time."

"Although you tried to make us feel relaxed and speak more, I don't think speaking without thinking of grammar would be useful for us."

4) Letting the students pre-plan

Most of the students stated they liked this strategy while some said it is not really effective because they spoke Turkish while planning. It seems effective when we look at the quantitative results, yet it could be more effective if it was combined with 'monitoring more closely' strategy.

"This strategy is effective because we feel better when we have a chance to get prepared."

"This strategy helped us speak English more because we studied what we wanted to say."

"I don't really find it useful because we spoke Turkish anyway. The difference was that we spoke Turkish before the activity, not during it. I think 'providing language chunks' strategy should be used instead of this one."

5) Rewarding

Rewarding has been one of the most popular methods among instructors. It seems effective in our case as well; however, not as much as the other four methods. What students thought about this method are the following:

"Everybody likes being rewarded, so this method is a good one."

"This is a very traditional method, but works"

"Everybody spoke English to win the key rings, but you cannot always find such good presents."

"I think we spoke English not because we wanted the present, but because we had started to feel better about it and it became a habit for us with the help of all the strategies until now. Or I am lying because I couldn't win it!"

"I like all the strategies, but this one is the best as we have an aim even if it is something very little, and knowing there is a present at the end of the effort you make is a very good thing."

6) Punishment

Just like rewarding, punishment is also a highly popular method used for encouragement. The students, of course, do not like it; however, they evaluated it very objectively.

"If none of the strategies we have tried until now can persuade a person to speak only in English, this one would make it!"

"We are not kids, we all know that. Even so, we are affected when there is punishment."

"I find it effective since I observed all my friends was speaking English."

"I spoke English but not because there was punishment. I don't like it."

"I think it is the worst strategy among all."

7) Working with a different partner

Although some of the students stated in their first feedback that they wanted to work with different pairs, this strategy became the least effective one, and this shows us that not all the students share this idea. This strategy is also known as one of the most used ways when a problem occurs during pair work. However, in our case, it seems like most of the students are happy to work with their usual pairs.

"Why do we need to change our partners? It's unnecessary."

"We have got used to talking to each other, and we know each other's' strong and weak points. As it's an advantage for us, I don't think we need to work with somebody else."

"Even though we like working with our partners, we won't talk only to them in the real world, so it is necessary to try it."

"It's the best strategy because I could speak for the first time."

"I thought changing my partner would be good, but nothing changed."

"I don't understand why we need our teacher's guidance to work with different partners. I have already changed my place in classroom many times and worked with very different people."

C. Conclusion of the Study

What I have tried to achieve during the implementation of this action research was to come up with some strategies that could work out in encouraging students to speak only English during their pair and group studies. As the results bring up, the strategies I determined with the help of the literature and the students' ideas have become successful in reaching their aim. I did not have the chance to test their effectiveness in other ways, but I know I can trust my students' views because they are self-aware and responsible individuals.

As a result of this study, it can be suggested that by explaining the aim of the activity clearly, providing the language the students need, making students work with a different partner, punishment, rewarding, letting the students pre-plan and monitoring more closely, code-switching of the students can be prevented.

D. Implementation of the Study

This action research suggests the following implications:
1) Make sure that you monitor the whole class closely. If your class is a big one, ask for your students' help.
2) Some students may be embarrassed to speak when you are near them, so you may need to have them monitored by your assistant students-each time a different one.
3) Always revise the language students need before they speak, and don't forget to ask for their demands.
4) Do not suppose that your students already know what they are doing an activity for. Explain it instead.
5) Try to lower your students' affective filter to make them feel free to make language mistakes.
6) For some activities you think reaching the aims of which is important, let students pre-plan.

But do not overuse this strategy because then you may make students dependent on preplanning.
7) Using rewards and punishment for encouragement might be a good idea, but don't forget the fact that some learners, especially at university level, may not be

fond of it.

8) Changing students' usual pairs may have a good effect, yet it may not result well all the time. Asking students' ideas about it, and maybe changing only the ones who want it would be the best way of implementing this strategy.

9) Remember these strategies can be combined. The fact that we treated them independently in this study does not mean that should always be the case.

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