

Code-switching: the application of a spontaneous phenomenon to L2 acquisition

It is a well-known fact that young children acquire their L1 in a spontaneous way, without any effort and in a relatively short period of time. This is possible thanks to two crucial factors. On the one hand, children are totally immersed in an environment that provides constant linguistic input. On the other hand, they benefit from the incredible brain plasticity that characterizes the first years of life, which progressively declines over time (Lenneberg 1967, Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson 2003 a.o.). This situation is hard to replicate for L2 acquisition: this process often involves students who are beyond the sensitive period, and the input they receive is generally limited to a few hours per week.

Studies on early bilingualism have shown that children may easily acquire two (or more) languages at the same time, provided that they receive enough input. Moreover, they spontaneously produce mixed utterances called code-switching (CS) (Meisel 1994, Cantone 2007), which vary according to context and communicative situation. In particular, in cases of unbalanced bilingualism, children (and adults) often insert words of one language into sentences in the other language as a sort of compensatory strategy (Muysken 2000).

In the present work, we investigate whether CS-based materials can facilitate vocabulary acquisition and retention in L2 classroom settings. This practice is generally stigmatized in this context, but recent pedagogical approaches such as Translanguaging (García and Wei 2014, Vogel & García 2017) have cleared the way for the use of L1 alongside L2 in language classes. In particular, we have designed innovative material specifically focused on L2 vocabulary acquisition. Since L2 acquisition also represents a case of unbalanced bilingualism, the insertion of L2 words in a text in L1 helps students reduce anxiety and understand the overall context in which the target words are inserted, thereby allowing them to focus on lexical learning.

Our training consists of four steps. First, a pre-test is used to measure participants' initial competence. Second, participants are presented with mixed-language stories, each containing target lexical items. Third, a post-test is used to measure immediate improvements. Lastly, a follow-up test assesses retention over time. We have implemented this training with three groups of participants. The first group includes 24 US university students learning Italian as an L2. The second group consists of 38 Italian university students learning English. The third includes 70 Italian middle school students, also learning English.

Results have been encouraging. Indeed, all groups showed an improvement in vocabulary recognition and retention between the pre-test and the post-test, with retention effects also emerging in the follow-up phase. In particular, this improvement has proven statistically significant for US students and Italian middle school students, namely the participants whose initial level was lower, thus suggesting that this type of activity may be particularly effective in the early stages of L2 vocabulary development and for lower proficiency learners.

Keywords: L2 acquisition, Code-switching, Translanguaging, Vocabulary acquisition.

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