NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS CODE-SWITCHING AS A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN RELATION TO THEIR ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

There has been a controversy regarding whether code-switching should be employed in an English language classroom. It is believed that code-switching probably facilitates English learning process; however, some researchers express their doubt about the effectiveness of code-switching in a classroom in which English is taught and learned as a foreign language. This study aims to investigate university non-English majors' attitudes towards the use of code-switching as a communication strategy and examine whether or not it was correlated with their English proficiency. After the delivery of the proficiency test and a closed-ended questionnaire to 50 non-English majors at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City, the quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics and Spearman correlation. The findings indicated a positive attitude towards using code-switching as a strategy for communication and some positive correlations between their attitudes and English proficiency. Based on the findings, it is supposed that the use of code-switching is considered to be a means of communication rather than a hindrance in an English language classroom.

THÁI ĐỘ CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH VỀ VIỆC CHUYỂN ĐỔI NGÔN NGỮ NHƯ LÀ CHIẾN LƯỢC GIAO TIẾP TRONG MỐI TƯƠNG QUAN VỚI KHẢ NĂNG TIẾNG ANH CỦA HỌ

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TỪ KHÓA

Thái độ
Chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ
Chiến lược giao tiếp
Sinh viên không chuyên ngữ
Tiếng Anh là ngoại ngữ

TÓM TẮT

Việc sử dụng chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ trong lớp học tiếng Anh vẫn là một vấn đề gây tranh cãi. Trong khi một vài nhà nghiên cứu cho rằng việc chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ có thể hỗ trợ việc học tiếng Anh thì những nhà nghiên cứu khác tỏ ra nghi ngại về tính hiệu quả của việc chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ trong lớp học tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ nước ngoài. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khảo sát thái độ của sinh viên đại học không chuyên tiếng Anh đối với việc chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ như một chiến lược giao tiếp và tìm hiểu xem có tương quan giữa thái độ và trình độ tiếng Anh của họ hay không. Sau khi thực hiện bài kiểm tra năng lực và khảo sát với 50 sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học tư thục tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, dữ liệu được phân tích dựa vào phân tích thống kê mô tả và tương quan Spearman. Kết quả chỉ ra rằng những sinh viên này thể hiện thái độ tích cực về việc sử dụng chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ như một chiến lược giao tiếp và nghiên cứu này còn xác định một vài mối tương quan giữa thái độ và trình độ tiếng Anh. Dựa trên những kết quả này, chúng tôi cho rằng việc chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ nên được xem là một chiến lược giao tiếp hơn là một cản trở trong lớp học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ.

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1. Introduction

In the process of globalization, socio-cultural interference requires dramatic changes in using English as a foreign language to meet communication demands. It is widely acknowledged that English is the most commonly used language all around the world, so it has gradually become the medium of instruction at schools in non-English speaking countries. In Vietnam, educational institutions have required more use of English for academic and communicative purposes. In practice, however, EFL students do not entirely use one language (target language or mother tongue) for daily communication, but tend to mix other languages in their sentences [1]. This phenomenon is called code-switching referring to the act of using multiple languages in speech, often between individuals who know more than one language [2]. According to [3], code switching is the process of "switching from one code to another or [mixing] codes even within sometimes very short utterances and thereby create a new code" (p. 101).

There has been a high volume of code-switching research in both global and local contexts. Ma's (2014) [4] study on attitudes and reasons of students towards code-switching in the bilingual class of accounting English was conducted in seven provinces in China. The findings showed the students' positive attitude, i.e., They were comfortable when the teachers or students used the languages flexibly in class because they viewed code-switching as a useful means of communication in case of insufficient lexical resources in the target language. Meanwhile, [5] investigated reasons for the use of code-switching in the classroom and the impact of teachers' code-switching on EFL learning and teaching. It was found that both the educators and students held a positive attitude towards code-switching as it facilitated the learning process. Specifically, it aided the teachers in explaining English grammar and/or establishing relationships with the students. Moreover, the findings in [6] illustrated that the students and educators in terms of gender, age, major, and degree had a positive attitude towards code-switching, and code-switching was utilized and performed by all the students regardless of their gender, age, major and degree.

In the local context, a number of studies on code-switching have been carried out. Tran (2013) [7] explored that the participants were aware of the possible harmfulness of code-switching towards one's language use. Noticeably, they conversely believed that code-switching was an essential communicative strategy in a particular context. Besides the workplace context, [8] suggested that code-switching was perceived as a beneficial tool which could be an instructional strategy in pedagogical circumstances. Additionally, classroom code-switching has been proved to be an essential resource for second/foreign language teachers [2]. It is worth noting that low-level students had a tendency to rely more on and benefit from code-switching in the classroom than advanced ones did. In the Vietnamese EFL context, students, especially non-English majors have encountered a lot of challenges when they communicate in English [9]. Similarly, most of the students at the research setting have had difficulties during their learning process despite the fact that they take seven courses for general English prior to specialized courses in which English is used as a medium of instruction. Therefore, the students need to employ strategies to overcome such difficulties in communication. Code-switching is regarded as a communication strategy that can minimize students' breakdowns [10]. Given the aforementioned rationale, the study on non-English majors' attitudes towards code-switching as a communication strategy at the tertiary level was conducted with the following research questions.

1. What are the attitudes of non-English majors towards code-switching as a communication strategy at a private university?

2. Are there any relationships between the students' English proficiency and their attitudes?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research site and participants

Table 1 illustrates the demographic information of the participants. The research was undertaken at a private university with total 50 non-English majors from five

departments, including 20 students of the Faculty of Economics, 7 students of the Faculty of Information Technology (14%), 11 students of the Faculty of Finance and Commerce (22%), 5 students of the Faculty of Public Relations and Communication (10%), and 7 students of the Faculty of Law (14%). Of the 50 participants, the number of male participants (18%) was approximately one-fourth of that of female participants (82%).

Table 1. *Gender of the respondents*

Department	n=50		
	Male	**Female**	**Participants**
Economics	3 (6%)	17 (34%)	20 (40%)
Information Technology	2 (4%)	5 (10%)	7 (14%)
Finance and Commerce	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	11 (22%)
Public Relations and Communication	1 (2%)	4 (8%)	5 (10%)
Law	2 (4%)	5 (10%)	7 (14%)
Total	**9 (18%)**	**41 (82%)**	**50 (100%)**

2.2. Research instruments

The survey including two different parts employed a closed-ended questionnaire as the data collection tool. The first part comprises the information about gender and department that the participants belong to. The second part consisting of fourteen items relating to the participants' attitudes towards code-switching uses five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree).

The questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaire of [4] concerning students' attitudes towards code-switching in the bilingual classroom of accounting English, the questionnaire of [5] relating to code switching in the EFL classroom from Bangladeshi perspective, and the questionnaire of [6] about students and educators' attitudes towards code-switching. Meanwhile, the English proficiency test was adopted from Cambridge English Proficiency Quick Test for schools.

2.3. Data collection and analysis method

Before officially delivering the questionnaire to the students, the items were first written in English and then translated into Vietnamese. This study was undertaken during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the participants were invited to do the survey online, i.e., the questionnaire was transferred to Google Forms and sent to the participants via email. Also, the English proficiency test was attached to the email. The students were required to complete the test and the questionnaire and submit them by replying to the email. Initially, the expected number of participants was approximately 100; however, only 50 copies of the questionnaire accompanied by the test were valid.

Regarding data analysis, the collected data was extracted to Microsoft Excel from Google Forms. The data were then converted to SPSS for statistical analysis which ran the descriptive statistics (i.e., Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD)) and inferential statistics (i.e., Spearman correlation) that the researchers used to investigate the non-English majors' attitudes and the correlation between their English proficiency and their attitudes towards code-switching respectively. It should be noted that the results were calculated and interpreted based on the five intervals (1.00-1.80=strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60=disagree; 2.61-3.40=neutral; 3.41-4.20=agree; 4.21-5.00=strongly agree).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Attitudes towards code-switching

Table 2 illustrates how the participants held the attitudes in 3 aspects which are cognitive, affective and behavioral attitudes. With reference to the cognitive dimension, the students strongly agreed with the statements '[c]ode switching helps to explain unfamiliar words, terms or

expressions.' (M=4.20, SD=0.88), 'code-switching enhances my communication skills.' (M=4.22, SD=0.89), and '[c]ode-switching helps me practice English.' (M=4.56, SD=0.67). Additionally, the students showed their agreement with the items '[c]ode-switching helps me communicate with other people better.' (M=3.8, SD=1.23) and 'code-switching allows me to understand the lesson better.' (M=3.62, SD=1.09).

Concerning the affective dimension, the participants remained a positive attitude towards code-switching. In particular, the mean scores for the items 'I am comfortable to switch between Vietnamese and English in front of people I know well.' (M=3.90, SD=1.15) and 'I like people to switch between Vietnamese and English while they are speaking to me.' (M=3.44, SD=1.26) were quite high; however, they held a neutral attitude towards the items 'I prefer switching between Vietnamese and English' (M=3.20, SD=1.29) and 'I am comfortable switching between Vietnamese and English in front of strangers.' (M=3.10, SD=1.33).

In contrast to the two dimensions above, the mean scores of the items belonging to the behavioral dimension expressed the participants' neutral attitudes. For example, the item 'I use Vietnamese and English every day.' (M=3.10, SD=1.31) occupied the highest mean score which was the same as the lowest mean score of the affective dimension, followed by the items 'I switch between Vietnamese and English when I'm speaking' (M=3.04, SD=1.07), 'I switch between Vietnamese and English in the same sentence' (M=2.8, SD=1.07), 'I switch between Vietnamese and English between sentences (i.e., one sentence in one language and the next one in another language)' (M=2.76, SD=1.12), and 'I switch between Vietnamese and English easily.' (M= 2.76, SD=1.20).

In a nutshell, the mean score for all the items (M=3.46; SD=1.04) indicated the participants' agreement with the three aspects (cognitive, affective and behavioral) towards code-switching. Amongst the three dimensions, cognition-related items achieved the highest mean scores (M=4.08; SD=0.95), whereas behavior-related items had the lowest mean scores (M=2.90; SD=1.15).

Table 2. *Attitudes towards code-switching of non-English majors*

	Items	1 (N)	2 (N)	3 (N)	4 (N)	5 (N)	Mean (SD)
COGNITIVE	Code-switching helps me practice English.	0	1	2	15	32	4.56 (0.67)
	Code-switching enhances my communication skills.	0	3	6	18	23	4.22 (0.89)
	Code switching helps to explain unfamiliar words, terms or expressions.	0	2	9	16	23	4.20 (0.88)
	Code-switching helps me communicate with other people better.	2	7	10	11	20	3.80 (1.23)
	Code-switching allows me to understand the lesson better.	2	5	15	16	12	3.62 (1.09)
	Average						**4.08 (0.95)**
AFFECTIVE	I am comfortable switching between Vietnamese and English in front of people I know well.	2	4	11	13	20	3.90 (1.15)
	I like people to switch between Vietnamese and English while they are speaking to me.	3	7	16	13	11	3.44 (1.26)
	I prefer switching between Vietnamese and English.	7	5	20	7	11	3.20 (1.29)
	I am comfortable switching between Vietnamese and English in front of strangers.	7	11	11	12	9	3.10 (1.33)
	Average						**3.41 (1.26)**
BEHAVIORAL	I use Vietnamese and English every day.	7	9	16	8	10	3.10 (1.31)
	I switch between Vietnamese and English when I'm speaking.	4	14	9	22	1	3.04 (1.07)
	I switch between Vietnamese and English in the same sentence.	5	18	10	16	1	2.80 (1.07)
	I switch between Vietnamese and English between sentences (i.e., one sentence in one language, the next one in another language).	8	17	7	15	3	2.76 (1.12)
	I switch between Vietnamese and English easily.	8	13	18	5	6	2.76 (1.20)
	Average						**2.90 (1.15)**

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

3.2. The relationship between the students' English proficiency and their attitudes

In order to test statistical relationships between the participants' attitudes towards the use of code-switching as a communication strategy and their English proficiency, Spearman Correlation was calculated. Table 3 demonstrated the correlations between the two variables.

Table 3. *Relationships between the students' English proficiency and attitudes*

Cognitive		Proficiency
Code-switching helps me communicate with other people better.	Correlation Coefficient Sig. (2-tailed)	.344* .015
Behavioral		
I switch between Vietnamese and English easily.	Correlation Coefficient Sig. (2-tailed)	.301* .034

*Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

As depicted in Table 3, a positive correlation between the item '[c]ode-switching helps me communicate better with other people.' and the participants' English proficiency was found. This item belongs to the cognitive dimension. This result indicates that a more proficient English learner might tend to flexibly utilize various sources of linguistics to explain and interpret their ideas. Furthermore, the item 'I switch between Vietnamese and English easily.' which is of the behavioral dimension was positively correlated with their English proficiency. This means that the higher achievers somehow adapted themselves to the conversation for more effective communication.

3.3. Discussion

As far as the first research question involving the non-English majors' attitudes towards the use of code-switching as a communication strategy is concerned, the results indicated that the participants had a positive attitude towards the items of the cognitive dimension and showed neutral attitude regarding the affective and behavioral aspects. It can be interpreted that the non-English majors tended to use both their mother tongue (L1) and the target language (L2) to maintain the communication. These results are in line with the findings of [4] which showed that code-switching might be a practical and effective communication technique. This situation can be explained by the conclusion of [9] that non-English majors faced lots of difficulties during their communication in English. That is why they are likely to switch to the first language to avoid communication breakdowns. On the other hand, the participants showed their hesitation in employing code-switching as a communication strategy. As claimed by [7], code-switching may ruin students' target language use.

As for the findings of the second research question regarding whether or not there were correlations between the participants' attitudes and their English proficiency, Spearman correlation coefficient was run. It was found that there were positive relationships between the participants' level of English proficiency and their attitudes towards code-switching as a mode of communication. Specifically, those who were more likely to recognize the effectiveness of code-switching in communication obtained a higher level of English proficiency. Furthermore, the easier the participants felt in communicating with others using code-switching, the higher level of proficiency they achieved. Even though these results may not be sufficient to lead to a conclusion that the use of code-switching and students' proficiency are correlated with one another, it somehow contributes to the theoretical foundation on the relationship between the two variables. Some researchers ([2], [8], [11]) considered code-switching as an effective instructional strategy for EFL teachers.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This study focuses on exploring the attitudes of the non-English students at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City towards the use of code switching as a means of communication

and the relationship between the students' attitudes and their English language proficiency. The findings showed the participants' positive attitude in terms of cognition and neutral attitude in terms of emotion and behavior towards the inclusion of code-switching in an EFL classroom. The results further demonstrated positive correlations between their attitudes and their level of English proficiency. In relation to levels of English proficiency, the first correlation is associated with effective communication and the second correlation involves the flexibility of switching between L1 (Vietnamese) and L2 (English).

Regarding the recommendations for future research, researchers should extend the scope of the study. In other words, the sample size is relatively small, and the research focus is limited. In particular, the present study concentrated on attitudes of 50 non-English majors from six disciplines towards code-switching as a communicative strategy and the relationship between the students' attitudes and their proficiency. Therefore, the number of participants should be larger to gain more reliable results. Moreover, there are plenty of other noticeable issues which researchers may find interesting, e.g., challenges and prospects of code-switching in an EFL classroom or comparison of code-switching use in terms of disciplines, age, gender, or proficiency. In another aspect, researchers can opt teachers as a research subject, e.g., teachers' perspectives on the use of code-switching in an EFL classroom.

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