

# Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Volume 6

## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LANGUAGE

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## AWARENESS AND LANGUAGE SWITCH IN SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEXTS

In this paper I will discuss the interplay of *awareness* and *language switch* in second/foreign language (S/FL) learning contexts with particular reference to self-learning FL situations, FL classroom environments as well as SL learning settings. In particular, I will report research concerning the factors that lead to awareness and language switch and I will discuss the functions that they serve as learning parameters in these language learning contexts.

The research about awareness and language switch in FL self-learning contexts has been carried out in the context of a project funded by the European Union. The project concerns the production of intermediate multi-media self-learning materials for adults in Greek, Spanish and German. Three institutions, the Universities of Athens and Barcelona and the Goethe Institute in Munich, have been involved in the project.

### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

Language switch as a marked or unmarked characteristic of the conversation of bilingual and multilingual speakers has received a lot of attention. Language switch was initially considered a structurally unified phenomenon whose significance derived from a universal pattern of relationships between form, function and context (Heller, 1988; Gumperz, 1971). Eventually it was seen as a resource for indexing situationally salient aspects of context in the speakers' attempts to accomplish their interaction goals. Merritt et al. (1992), for instance, present an interesting account of teacher language choice and language switch in primary classrooms in Kenya. They claim that teachers are teaching prevailing patterns of multilanguage use as an unmarked choice – students learn when to use English, Swahili or the vernacular. At the same time they teach them how to manipulate language to make marked code-switches in the interest of successfully negotiating their way through society. In multilingual communities it seems that language switch patterning is learned at school and it is then used in the broader community. In examining language switch in in-group and inter-group situations two questions have preoccupied researchers: firstly, the actual distribution and function of language switch in the community,

and, secondly, the speakers' awareness and acceptance of language switch as a normal way of speaking (Bathia & Ritchie, 1989; Garcia & Otheguy, 1989).

### MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS

Besides bilingual and multilingual contexts, awareness and language switch have also been researched in S/FL learning contexts. In these contexts, language switch has usually been referred to as use of the 'mother tongue'. In the FL classroom, in particular, the L1 has been primarily used to provide grammar explanations, vocabulary explanations and to manage the class (Harbord, 1992). Use of the L1 in the S/F language classroom, however, has been viewed as evidence of some sort of deficit. It is an indication that learners who switch cannot as yet function well in the S/F language they are learning. In language teaching methodology, emphasis has usually been placed on the use of the S/F language-only principle. See for instance, Weinberg (1990) who reports how language students were penalized for speaking their L1 in an SL context.

Saville-Troike et al. (1984), however, refer to the L1 as a facilitating factor in SL interaction. They report ethnographic research in the SL classroom and describe how the SL young learners managed communication successfully among themselves although their SL production was minimal. They state that the learners achieved successful communication by making use of their awareness of the structure of the SL classroom situation as well as by switching to non-verbal language and their L1 to compensate for their poor L2. Furthermore, Aston (1983), arguing from an FL point of view, maintains that use of the L1 in the classroom helps to build a supportive and friendly environment for learners. He favours a more positive use of the L1, which can be negotiated between learners and teachers. Also Atkinson (1987), in reviewing the uses of the L2 in the FL classroom, concludes that the L1 should be sparingly used. He suggests that a ratio of 5% would be enough to cater for such cases as grammar explanations, etc., where its use can be considered necessary.

Moreover, studies of L2 speakers' use of communication strategies have shown that learners often resort to their L1 to solve problems in the L2 (Bialystok, 1983). Faerch & Kasper (1983) in particular discuss strategies in interlanguage communication, including use of the L1, and relate them to problems learners face. They consider them 'potentially conscious plans set up by the learner in order to solve problems in communication'. Furthermore, they argue that strategies as overt behaviours allow us to take a glimpse at the covert cognitive behaviour of learners, the way they think and cope in learning and communicating in the L2. Their views on strategies seem to embrace the Canale & Swain (1980) concept of strategic competence. Canale and Swain consider the learners' knowledge

and abilities from L1 as a potentially valuable factor in L2 learning and communication. On the L2 acquisition issue in particular, Ringbom (1987) has shown that the L1 can have an important role to play in the context of cross-linguistic influence. In comparing the English learning processes of the Swedish speaking Finns with the Finnish speaking Finns he concludes that Swedish being closer to English seems to have facilitated learning English for Swedish speaking Finns considerably.

#### WORK IN PROGRESS

Monolingual views on S/FL learning/teaching have begun to be modified. S/FL learning is seen as a cross-cultural and a cross-linguistic experience. In this framework, language choice and awareness seem to play an important role. A variety of factors seem to contribute to language switch: linguistic, cognitive, affective, personal, personality, social, cultural, interactional and pedagogical. The function of language switch is to facilitate language learning and interaction and to build up learners' awareness about the L2 language and culture, the learning and communicating processes as well as the learning tasks, that the learners will have to carry out, in relation to their needs and purposes. Research about these factors and functions has been carried out in various learning environments, namely, in FL self-learning contexts, FL classroom situations as well as SL classroom settings.

Evidence from research in FL self-learning contexts indicates that language switch and awareness can help learners to combat cognitive, linguistic and cultural interference from L1. That is because students lack appropriate metalanguage as well as metacognitive and metacommunicative language in the L2. Besides, language switch and awareness seem to set learners at ease. After all, the learners are not under pressure to adopt a new identity or prove themselves competent L2 users as is the case of bilinguals, multilinguals or SL speakers (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Moreover, in these contexts, learners have been assigned many roles. They are participants and observers in the learning process, learners and teachers, recipients of knowledge but also assessors of the use of this knowledge. Not all learners can make the transition easily enough from one role to the other. Language switch and awareness make things easier for them. Furthermore, learners need to have general information as background knowledge concerning the country, the culture and the people. This can be achieved through language switch which thus becomes a means to develop L2 cultural awareness. Consequently, awareness and language switch are not only a matter of method, rather they indicate that specific factors are at work that can have a positive role to play in FL self-learning contexts. See Papaefthymiou-Lytra (*forthcoming*).

Similar factors and functions seem to determine language choice in teacher talk and learner talk in the FL classroom (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1990). Research indicates that learners and teachers switch languages for metalinguistic, metacognitive and metacommunicative purposes or for classroom management purposes. Being aware of their poor linguistic or communicative competence they override conformity to use-the-FL-only principle. Learners seem to prefer to switch languages to express motivation and interest in learning the L2, to express verbal humour and relaxation and to express attitudes and feelings. Teachers may also switch languages when they feel that tension and dissatisfaction are building up. Language switch is a means for teachers to impose their power and authority since their message cannot fail to reach their learners. Furthermore, when teachers are asked to talk about topics unrelated to the content of the lesson(s) or the procedures followed in class, they usually take refuge in the L1 as a strategy to save face. Similarly, learners switch languages to avoid displaying their poor L2 competence.

Language switch in the FL classroom also serves pedagogical purposes. It can be employed as an alternative teaching/learning strategy if teachers feel that other strategies, i.e. visual, linguistic, kinesic, etc., may not work. Little & Singleton (1992), for instance, consider language awareness an important aspect of pedagogical grammars that incorporate linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects. Language awareness, they maintain, is tied up with language switch in the early stages of FL learning in particular. In this context, awareness is often restricted to the intrapersonal, cognitive perspective emphasizing the reflective mode and how well the learner understands the relationships among form, function and meaning (Rutherford, 1987). Teacher talk and learner talk, however, are characterized by asymmetry in the use of language switch in classroom discourse. In teacher talk, there is a fluent authoritative L2 user (the teacher) present as a participant, who often regulates language switch in favour of the L2. When monolingual learners are involved in pair and group work, they seem to opt for language switch in order to fulfill a wider variety of roles and functions than their knowledge of the L2 and the situational constraints would permit. Poulisse & Bongaerts (1994) report research of a similar nature about Dutch learners' language switch at the lexical level. Their findings indicate that the occurrence of language switches in oral production is related to the learners' proficiency in English. Some of these switches, they argue, are intentional, others are unintentional. The researchers argue that intentional switches appear to be of two kinds: self-directed and other-directed. Self-directed switches are used by the learners in order to comment on problems, gain time or organize their thoughts. Other-directed switches are used by them in order to compensate for lexical problems or to mark asides.

There is evidence, however, that factors and functions encouraging

language switch in SL contexts are not exactly the same as those that prompt language switch in FL contexts, mainly because the social and situational parameters are different. Under the influence of critical discourse studies (Fairclough, 1989), a new approach for adult SL learners has been developed. This approach aims at enabling the learners to critically examine the host society and its values and to become active in shaping their own roles in it (Auerbach, 1995: see her review in Volume 2). This participatory approach starts with the assumption that meaningful language learning must be centred on issues of importance to the learners in order to facilitate the shaping of the reality they are living in. Such an approach invites reflection, cultural comparison, and exploration of possible new practices, thus handing the power back to learners. In this way SL learners can maintain a stance of independence and choice in the learning process. In this context, language choice, Auerbach (1995) claims, seems to be an important issue. Whereas children, especially those coming from dominant L1 backgrounds, seem to benefit more from immersion programmes, adult SL learners, particularly those coming from low-prestige languages, find the bilingual approach more beneficial. A monolingual approach often leads them to frustration, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. In this context, the use of the L1 seems to alleviate language shock and it allows for a safer transition from L1 to L2.

### PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Some of the difficulties in implementing awareness and language switch insights in S/FL contexts derive from the fact that social, ideological and economic factors have overridden affective, cognitive, cultural, personal, personality, interactive, pedagogical and other factors; indeed, the very factors that can lead to awareness and language switch. An orientation to L2 learning, where these factors gain prominence, involves a mainly educational process, where the linguistic, emotional and intellectual world of the learner becomes central to this process.

Language teachers, however, are not prepared to handle practices deriving from awareness and language switch insights in the language classroom, nor are the learners who study languages in self-learning contexts. Very often appropriate learning materials are not easy to obtain, nor are teachers trained to prepare them themselves. Moreover, some also claim that an over-indulgence in awareness and language switch practices may result in an unnecessary use of the L1 in the language classroom or in self-learning contexts. Although the L1 is employed by teachers and learners to perform a wider variety of functions than they can perform in the L2, it is likely that it may end up being used where it should not. Unrestricted use of the L1 may easily result in patterning language switch in S/FL discourse



in a fashion similar to bilingual/multilingual societies. However, this is not the goal of S/FL learning and should be avoided.

Research and practice have not always taken into account that SL and FL contexts are two different learning environments. So language switch and awareness (among others) may not always serve the same purposes in those two contexts. In FL contexts, in particular, teachers are usually fluent users of the L2, though not as competent as native speaker teachers. However, they share the same L1, the same culture and similar learning experiences with their learners. Thus it makes it easier for them and their learners to adopt bilingual/bicultural practices in the classroom; it may not be as easy to incorporate similar practices in SL settings, if teachers are monolingual speakers. Moreover, FL learners may not share the same needs, interests and purposes as SL learners who live and work in the L2 social milieu.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Recent developments in the cultural and cross-cultural dimension to language learning and teaching have added extra value to the interplay of the L1 and the L2. Research will further investigate the factors and the functions of language switch and awareness in a wider variety of learning environments, i.e. different age groups, other socio-cultural groups, different L1 groups, etc. The aim is to determine more precisely the cognitive, linguistic and cultural influence of L1 on S/FL learning and language use in a variety of learning contexts and communicative situations. In this framework, language switch and awareness might have a central role to play in facilitating the learning and communication process.

Secondly, research should be carried out to investigate how awareness and language switch can promote tolerance and understanding between the various languages and cultures aiming at the learners' personal development and the enrichment of the learners' own culture. In this context, cross-cultural S/FL learning can be integrated with the learners' general educational and self-development goals or their more instrumental and professional objectives.

Thirdly, self-learning practices are closely related to learner training, autonomy and independence. They all seem to demand the use of awareness and language switch as special learning aids at the early stages of learning, in particular. Some educators, however, may argue that language switch can be as much an evil as a blessing for autonomous language learning. A lot of learners' time and effort is spent in working in the L1. Research is therefore needed to develop motivational practices and techniques as well as multi-media learning materials that promote use of the L2 rather than the L1 in these contexts.

It is hoped that research findings will eventually find their way into classroom, self-learning and distance learning materials and practices as well as into teacher training and learner training materials and techniques.

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## LITERACY AND GENRE

The word "genre" was rarely used with respect to literacy, at least in the sense of composition theory and pedagogy, until the late 1980's. "Genre," as a term, was reserved largely for literary texts, and was understood to refer to "text-types" – categories of texts marked by linguistic and formal similarities.

During the 1980's, however, the notion of genre was resurrected and redefined. Theorists on three separate continents, working quite independently in distinct traditions, seized on the notion of genre as central to an understanding of language use by imbuing the traditional definition with social, functional, and pragmatic dimensions. In 1984 in the U.S., Carolyn Miller's "Genre as Social Action" summarized, crystallized and foregrounded key aspects of a redefinition of "genre" that was emerging within the new rhetoric; in 1986, "Speech Genres and Other Late Essays" by Mikhail Bakhtin, although written considerably earlier, was translated from the Russian into English and became widely known and influential; and roughly within the same time frame, Sydney School linguists and language educators in Australia developed a notion of genre derived from the socially-oriented linguistics of M.A.K. Halliday (e.g., 1978). (Swales, 1990, working out of the tradition of applied linguistics and second-language teaching, also developed a congruent model, partly based on the work of both Halliday and Miller. Since his educational focus is primarily on second-language learning, his work will not be dealt with here.)

Common to all this work was the recognition that the textual regularities of genres (identified in traditional discussions of genres) are themselves correlates of pragmatic, social, political, and cultural regularities within the enveloping contexts of the discourse. At its base, then, this new theorizing involves the dual recognition that language is a way of getting things done, in response to the exigencies of the rhetorical situations or enveloping contexts; and that human beings tend to develop, within specific cultures and socio-economic groups, fairly conventionalized or regularized ways of getting similar things done through language.

'All our utterances' wrote Bakhtin (1986) 'have definite and relatively stable *typical* forms of construction'; and if 'we speak only in definite genres' (p. 87), this is at least in part because these primary speech genres 'correspond to typical situations of speech communication' (p. 87).