Code-mixing of Chinese Language Learners in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: During the process of second language acquisition, language learners tend to use code-mixing as a learning strategy or a form of language transition. Among Chinese language learners, Chinese-English code-mixing is very common among language learners in classrooms and daily communication and many studies have been focused on this topic. By reviewing previous researches on Chinese people's code-mixing in different situations, this paper attempts to find out the influence of code-mixing on Chinese language learners' second language acquisition. It is found that code-mixing in the classroom is beneficial to both teachers and students, as code-mixing helps improve teaching efficiency and makes it comfortable for beginners to express themselves in class. In addition, code-mixing, not only in class, but also in other situations, facilitates second languages acquisition. Moreover, code-mixing does not have negative influence on Chinese people's cultural identity and L1 ability. In conclusion, code-mixing is generally beneficial for Chinese language learners' second language acquisition.

Keywords: code-mixing, Chinese English learners, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

It is a very common phenomenon that language learners use code-mixing during the process of second language acquisition. In order to communicate with others more effectively, establish certain identity or solve the problem of translation between L1 and L2, language learners do code-mixing in different situations: in Internet communication, in daily communication, in the classroom, etc [1]. Numerous studies on the impact of code-mixing on second language acquisition have been conducted since understanding the influence of code-mixing is crucial to understanding the process of second language learning and both positive implications and negative implications are found [2-4].

Chinese language learners often have difficulty in learning foreign languages, especially those of Western countries, for instance, English. Just like language learners in other countries, Chinese people do code-mixing during their second language acquisition in different situations. And it is significant to figure out the influence of such code-mixing which may give Chinese people some hints on language learning. However, few studies have been focused on code-mixing of language learners who are Chinese native speakers. The author of this study will draw conclusions on the impact of code-mixing on Chinese native speakers and provide some recommendations for students and teachers of the Chinese language after evaluating earlier studies on the subject.

2. Code-mixing

2.1. Code

A linguistic code is a distinguishable variant of a language which involves systematic sets of choices. These choices can be associated with many factors, like geographical area, social class, assignment of functions, context of use, etc [5]. Contrary to terms like language or dialect which tend to arouse emotions, the term code is neutral [6].

2.2. Code-mixing and Code-switching

Among second language learners, code-mixing (CM) and code-switching (CW) are relatively prevalent occurrences. Generally, CM and CW refer to the mixing of more than two languages in the same utterance. However, there has long been debate regarding how CW and CM are related. According to Clyne and Genesee, CW and CM, although having subtle differences, are synonymous, both referring to the intra-sentential or inter-sentential use of two languages [7,8]. Some other scholars distinguish code-mixing from code-switching, holding the point of view that code-mixing is the language blending within the same sentence while code-switching is the switching of languages between sentences [9,10].

In this paper, code-mixing refers to the intra-sentential language mixing, different from code-switching which refers to the inter-sentential language mixing.

2.3. The Functions of Code-mixing

Code-mixing has different functions in different situations. According to current study, code-mixing mainly has three functions: referential function, identity function and communicative function.

Referential function accounted for the largest number of code-switching [11]. When speaking a second language (L2), language learners tend to use the words in their mother tongue (L1) if they lack the proper vocabulary in L2. And when speaking L1, language learners like to use the words in L2 if they can't find suitable equivalents in L1 or they have difficulty in translating the words from L2 to L1. For example, Chinese college students usually use the English word "presentation" directly when they want to express "I'm going to do a presentation" in Chinese because translating the word "presentation" into Chinese may cause a loss of meaning or even an ambiguity.

Many multilinguals use code-mixing to show their identities [12]. By mixing different languages, code mixers are showing that they belong to certain groups [1]. Language learners who are learning the same L2 tend to do code-mixing when chatting with each other because this helps establish their common identity, thus creating a sense of belonging. The code-mixing of immigrants from the same country helps maintain and display their special cultural identities.

From the pragmatic perspective, code-mixing has strong a communicative function, including euphemism, humor, greeting and so on [13]. For example, instead of using Chinese words "你好", Chinese young people like to use the English word "hello" or "hi" to greet each other, which is considered to be more casual and fashionable.

3. Code-mixing of Chinese Native Speakers

Chinese people, especially students who are learners of other languages do code-mixing in their studies and daily life almost every day [1]. Chinese foreign language teachers can also use code-mixing in the classroom as an instructional strategy [14]. In this paper, mainly two of these occasions will be discussed.

3.1. Code-mixing on the Internet

The Internet communication is one of the common scenes for Chinese people to engage in code-mixing, and CM on the Internet is often related to Internet buzzwords. CM in Internet communication has its uniqueness, and it presents different forms with the different identities, cultural backgrounds, and communication purposes of Internet users. It usually involves abbreviations of Hanyu Pinyin syllable initials, occurrence of English words in Chinese sentence structures, abbreviations of English words, etc [13]. For example, Mandarin Alphabetic Words (MAWs) which usually combines Chinese characters with alphabets in other languages are really popular on the Internet in China [15].

3.2. Code-mixing in the Classroom

The classroom is another major scene of Chinese code-mixing. In foreign language classrooms, both teachers and students engage in code-mixing. From the teacher's perspective, code-switching is a teaching strategy to help students better understand the class content. From the students' perspective, code-mixing is a process of their second language acquisition and helps them adapt to the language learning in the classroom [14]. For example, in a dialogue in the classroom, the teacher is mixing Cantonese (a Chinese dialect) and English to make her instruction clearer and easier for students to understand. The teacher wanted to check whether the student was able to translate the Chinese word "臭" (bad smell) into English，so she asked the question mainly in Cantonese, using only one English word. The student understood the question immediately and gave a satisfying answer. In this way, the teacher got to know that the student understood the teaching content very well [16].

4. The Influence of Code-mixing on Chinese Native Speakers

4.1. The Influence of Code-mixing in the Classroom

Many of the existing studies concerned the code-mixing used in the classroom. In 1983, Guthrie studied the language use of two different English teachers (one is Chinese-English bilingual, another did not speak Chinese), in a Chinese-English classroom. The subjects are Chinese-American students who were first-grade in an American elementary school where the majority of the students and teachers were Chinese people. In this study, sociolinguistic methods are applied to analyzing the recordings of the classes. It was found that the biggest difference of the language use of the two teachers is that the teacher who was able to speak Chinese often did Chinese-English code-mixing in the class to communicate more efficiently with the students or to check for understanding. This kind of Chinese-English code-mixing was proved to be beneficial in the classroom because it helps reduce students' confusion and misunderstanding and is especially friendly to Chinese students who were not very proficient in English [17]. In another research, Marlan A and Xiting W studied the Chinese-English code-mixing of teachers and students in Chinese university English classes. The participants involve a 24-year-old Chinese university student of an intermediate English level and an experienced English teacher. During the study, the participants were asked to answer questions in semi-structured interviews. After analyzing the feedback from the teacher and the student, it was found that, for the student, code-mixing in English class improves her understanding in class, but she couldn't accept the overuse of code-mixing because she thought it would undermine her progress in English. The teacher also gained a lot from code-mixing because it makes it easier for her to effectively translate complex grammar rules or other concepts for her students and to pique their interest in learning. [14]. In 2019, in the context of Hong Kong's trilingual education system (Mandarin, Cantonese, and English), Lixun Wang investigated the role of code-mixing in language teaching. The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative research methods, which means the study involves interview, classroom discourse analysis, teachers' reflection and student questionnaire. Dispite Hong Kong

language policies' discouragement of the occurrence of code-mixing in teaching, language teachers in Hong Kong sometimes mix Chinese and English to improve their teaching efficiency and teachers in other subjects use code-mixing in the classroom even more often for the same reason. The usage of code-mixing in the classroom, according to the students' feedback, enhanced their knowledge and helped them develop their language. [16]. All of the three mentioned studies discovered that code-mixing in the classroom benefits both teachers and students. From teachers' perspective, using code-mixing allows them to improve their communication with students and enhance their teaching efficiency. From students' perspective, code-mixing not only helps them better understand the teaching contents but also helps improve their proficiency in second language. In the study of Marlan and Xiting, the student worried that the teacher's overusing of code-mixing in class would harm students' language development, but it was the subjective feeling of the student and no concrete evidence was given.

4.2. The Influence of Code-mixing on Second Language Learning

Just as mentioned above, Chinese-English code-mixing in the classroom benefits students' second language acquisition, that is to say, English acquisition [14,16]. But Chinese-mixing in a wider scope, not only in the classroom, also positively affects second language acquisition. In Guo's study in 2022, three of the five participants mentioned the positive influence of Chinese-English code-mixing on their English language skills, for example, the improvement in communication ability in English, an increased confidence in speaking English, etc [1]. However, all conclusions in this perspective are mostly based on participant feedback., which is unavoidably subjective and lacks convincing evidence.

4.3. The Influence of Code-mixing on Code Mixers' Mother Tongue

It has been generally admitted that code-mixing influences the development of second language, but does it has some influence on code mixers' first language? In a study on the attitudes of Chinese undergraduate students towards Chinese-English code-switching and code-mixing, the students reported that they were positive about the Chinese-English code-mixing and They did not anticipate a loss of Chinese customers as a result of this [18]. In addition, Chinese remained dominant in their Chinese-English code-mixing, as English was embedded into the sentence as a part of the sentence and the sentence structure was mainly Chinese. From this perspective, at least, the level of Chinese of code mixers is not negatively influenced by their code-mixing. In Guo's study on the Chinese-English code-mixing among Chinese college students, most of the students agreed that code-mixing generally doesn't affect their proficiency in Chinese and does not influence their cultural identity. In a study on Chinese-English code-mixing of Chinese netizens, It was discovered that only proficient English learners tended to employ English structure as the scaffolding of code-mixing sentences in Chinese people's online code-mixing, with English lexical elements or morphemes mostly being placed into Chinese-based sentence structures [19]. This also indicates that Chinese-English code-mixing will not strongly influence Chinese people's Chinese level. The findings of the three studies coincident with each other, suggesting that Chinese-English code-mixing doesn't affect code-mixers' Chinese language competence.

5. Discussion and Suggestion

5.1. Findings

In regard to code-mixing in the classroom, it's found that code-mixing benefits both teachers and students. For teachers, code-mixing facilitates their interpretation of difficult points and their

interpretation with students in class, thus improving their teaching efficiency. For students, it is easier for them to understand the contents of the class if the teachers use code-mixing in class. And the students also reported that code-mixing benefited their language development. In most of the cases, the involved students are language learners of intermediate level of their second language (L2) who are not very comfortable with being taught in their L2 only [17]. So code-mixing of their L1 and L2 in class not only improves their understanding but also reduces their anxiety and inadaptation during the learning of L2. From the perspective of second language acquisition, according to language learners' feedback, it is possible that Chinese-English code-mixing has positive effects on language learners' English abilities. For language learners, code-mixing can act as a transition from their L1 to L2, which gives them more opportunities to practice their L2. In addition, code-mixing does not have negative influence on Chinese native speakers' Chinese proficiency and their cultural identity as Chinese speakers. When Chinese people do Chinese-English code-mixing, the sentence structure is mainly Chinese, which is one of the possible reasons why code-mixing does not hurt language learners' L1. However, whether this Chinese-dominant code-mixing sentence structure would negatively influence the acquisition of L2 (English) has not been known.

5.2. Suggestions

The findings of this study give some helpful hints to Chinese native speakers, both language teachers and language learners. It is advised that teachers correctly implement code-mixing as a teaching approach in language classes in light of the encouraging results. When there are some points that are difficult to interpret in L2, teachers can use L1-L2 code-mixing flexibly to ensure that their teaching is understandable for the students. In addition, in the beginning teachers can allow students to use code-mixing in class communication if the students are not able to speak the targeted language confidently and then gradually encourage the students to speak only in L2 in class. The second step of this advice is necessary, because if students develop the habit of using code-mixing when speaking L2, it may become a permanent in the long term and harm their L2 development [4]. Code-mixing can function as a language transition for less proficient language learners, but it is not suggested to consider it as a permanent learning strategy. Moreover, teachers can also use code-mixing to check students' understanding, thus improving teaching efficiency. For language learners, it is advised that they use code-mixing as a temporary learning strategy if they are beginners, but they had better avoid overusing it as they reach higher language levels. And language learners' code-mixing on the Internet, for example, Mandarin Alphabetic Words, is in nature embedding English words into Chinese sentences which is not very likely to help learners to improve L2 grammar. So despite their positive feelings, language learners are not supposed to expect to greatly improve their L2 proficiency through this kind of code-mixing.

5.3. Limitations

It is important to note that this study has certain limitations when examining the impact of code-mixing on Chinese native speakers. First of all, this study did not clarify in detail the influence of code-mixing in daily life, outside the classroom as very few previous studies dealt with the influence of code-mixing in daily communication, including on the Internet. Moreover, most of the reviewed studies applied the method of interview or questionnaire, allowing participants to report their own reflections and feelings on code-mixing. As a result, the findings of these studies can be subjective and lack scientificity. Last but not the least, it is not clear why and how code-mixing influence second language acquisition and first language, this study only gives some possible reasons and suggestions.

6.   Conclusion

After reviewing previous studies on code-mixing of Chinese native speakers, this study concluded with the following points. Firstly, code-mixing in the classroom is beneficial to both teachers and students. With code-mixing applied as a teaching strategy, teachers deliver the knowledge in a more efficient way and students feel more comfortable and more confident in their language learning. Secondly, according to language learners' feedback, code-mixing, not only in class, but also in other situations, facilitates second languages acquisition. Improved learning confidence and language ability have been reported. Thirdly, code-mixing does not have negative influence on Chinese people's cultural identity and L1 ability because when mixing Chinese and English, Chinese code-mixers are inclined to use Chinese sentence structures and English sentence patterns are seldom used.

This study is focused on the influence of code-mixing on Chinese native speakers and gives tips on language teaching and learning to Chinese teachers and students. Therefore, it is meaningful to the improvement of L2 teaching and learning and it helps teachers and students to form an objective and rational attitude towards code-mixing. However, how code-mixing outside the classroom, for example, on the Internet, influences Chinese people's second language acquisition. To solve this problem, further studies are required. In addition, there are not very many studies on Chinese based code-mixing. The author expects that this study will serve as inspiration for other scholars working in this area and will spur additional research on this topic.

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