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## The use of code-switching between English and Spanish in Mexican EFL classrooms

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### Abstract

This research synthesis analyzes concepts related to plurilingualism inside the classroom, such as plurilingual pedagogy; plurilingual instruction techniques and its comparison to monolingual instruction; and code-switching within the lesson. There are four main questions that this research synthesis aims to answer: what is plurilingual pedagogy, and why is it used? what are the techniques used in the plurilingual instruction? why do teachers and students code-switch? and what are the effects of using the first language as a tool in EFL classrooms? These serve as a guide to outline the goal of this paper. The main focus of this research is to analyze the use of code-switching as a tool by teachers and students in Mexican EFL classrooms. It also discusses its implementation inside the lessons, the factors that lead to its use and its effects in the students' learning experience.

**Keywords:** *plurilingualism; plurilingual pedagogy; plurilingual instruction; code-switching; Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL).*

### *El uso de la alternancia de códigos entre inglés y español en las aulas mexicanas de inglés como lengua extranjera*

### Resumen

Esta síntesis de investigación analiza conceptos relacionados con el plurilingüismo dentro del aula, como la pedagogía plurilingüe; técnicas de instrucción plurilingüe y su comparación con la instrucción monolingüe; y además el *code-switching* entre el español y el inglés dentro de la lección. Hay cuatro preguntas principales que esta síntesis de investigación pretende responder: ¿Qué es la pedagogía plurilingüe y por qué se utiliza?, ¿Qué técnicas se utilizan en la instrucción plurilingüe?, ¿Por qué los maestros y los estudiantes utilizan *code-switching*? y ¿Cuáles son los efectos de usar el primer idioma como herramienta en las aulas de EFL? Estas preguntas sirven como una guía para delinear el objetivo de este documento. El enfoque principal de esta investigación es analizar el uso de *code-switching* como herramienta por parte de docentes y estudiantes en las aulas de EFL mexicanas. También discute su implementación dentro de las lecciones, los factores que conducen a su uso y sus efectos en la experiencia de aprendizaje de los estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** *plurilingüismo, pedagogía plurilingüe; Instrucción plurilingüe, code-switching, enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL).*

## Introduction

During my formation as an English teacher, I have been told multiple times to avoid using Spanish in the classroom. However, I have come to realize that completely avoiding the use of the first language is impossible. Either the students make use of their native language to ask about unknown words or to share complete ideas. Teachers also use it when time is very limited, or a topic is too difficult. When analyzing these situations, questions about the monolingual approach and misconceptions about the students' use of their first language come up.

The focus of this research synthesis is to explore the different concepts that surround the main topic, which is plurilingualism and its place inside pedagogy. This paper also analyzes the use of code-switching in the Mexican English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Moreover, I will be comparing the effectiveness of both plurilingual and monolingual pedagogies according to the findings of authors who have done research on the topic. In order to achieve the goals, set forth in this document, a diverse variety of articles and studies on previously mentioned concepts were analyzed, compared and related to personal experiences observed in Mexican EFL lessons.

## Research Questions

Taking into consideration the context this research focuses on, there are four different questions that this paper seeks to answer, and which also lead the direction of the research. As a starting point, it is necessary to research thoroughly and have a clear definition of the main topic which is plurilingualism and its role in pedagogy. Therefore, the first question that rises is: what is plurilingual pedagogy, and why is it used? Then, another topic that needs to be described is the type of instruction plurilingual pedagogy has, as well as the techniques that are implemented in it. The second question is: what techniques are used in the plurilingual instruction? Retaking one of the keywords of this research, the concept of code-switching should be analyzed, as well as its definition and its use, and if there are factors that provoke its use and the effects that this practice has in the lesson for both the teacher and the students. The third question is: why do teachers and students code-switch? This question leads to the final question: What are the effects of using the first language as a tool in EFL classrooms?

Another goal of finding the answers to these questions is to try to diminish the negative view some programs have towards plurilingual approaches in the Mexican EFL classroom; instead, provide a new perspective that includes such strategies and consider them as tools to make

the lessons more meaningful, clear, and comfortable for students. Additionally, to encourage teachers to promote plurilingualism and to embrace the students' first language alongside with the second language.

## Research Synthesis

In the following paragraphs, I will explain the concepts that are relevant to my research. Each concept presented was taken from different articles related to this topic, and researchers who have experience in the plurilingual field.

### *Plurilingualism*

Plurilingualism is one of the multiple-lingualisms that includes other concepts such as bilingualism, multilingualism, polylingualism, and others. This lingualism refers to the situation when individuals make use of their knowledge of different languages to facilitate their communication. Experts on the plurilingualism field, Marshall and Moore (2016) state that plurilingualism "describes a sociolinguistic phenomenon in contact situations, where people use two/three or more languages in interactions" (p.3). In this regard, Galante (2021) says it is a "social phenomenon of individuals using different languages to communicate in a fluid way" (p.2).

Plurilingualism is also known as multilingualism; The Council of Europe (CE) has been studying this concept along with multilingualism, as mentioned in Professor Yesim Turker's research (n.d.). In this study, the effects plurilingualism has in fields such as education, social relationships, and cognitive development has been assessed. The policies stated by the Council of Europe promote this plurilingualism, as mentioned in their paper *Plurilingua/ Education in Europe 50 Years of International Co-operation* (Council of Europe, 2006). It is supported and encouraged since it is seen as beneficial for people's development.

Plurilingualism is commonly practiced in multilingual contexts, where people who speak different languages socialize with each other. An example, are Mexican Americans who live in the United States of America; they use English when they are at work or school, Spanish when they are with their family, and also code-mix Spanish and English, also known as Spanglish, to socialize with friends who are fluent in both languages. In addition, people who are more fluent in one language than another can also be mentioned. For example, a situation where a Mexican American speaks with others who share the same context, they can be speaking in English, but suddenly

they forget how to say a certain word; instead of completely stopping the conversation to remember that word, they switch to Spanish to say that word and then continue their sentence, switching to English once again. This action allowed the conversation to keep on going fluently. The example helps us understand the concept of plurilingualism defined by Abiria, Early and Kendrick's (2013), which describes it as "an integrated vision of linguistics competencies. As the developments of a repertoire, which social agents draw to satisfy their communicative purposes" (p. 570).

Coming back to the main topic of this paper, which is the EFL classroom, plurilingualism takes place among students. The most common situation is when students try to understand new concepts. A good example is when the students try to pronounce or write a word in the target language and relate it to a similar one in their first language. Teachers could probably pay attention to the students' Spanish repertoire used when learning English as a foreign language.

### *English-only Classrooms*

In countries where English is the official language, some schools have implemented an English-only policy, which prohibits the use of any other language inside the schools regardless of being in class or not. The reasons are that speaking other languages in front of people who do not understand it is disrespectful, and that the official language of the country is English. Another reason behind this policy is that students want to improve their English and according to some schools where this practice is part of the method "this can only be done if you try to speak English at all times" (Pattison High School, 2021, parra. 3). In EFL classrooms, there is a strong belief that English can only be improved by making learners try to speak and think in that language.

When learning about EFL pedagogy, future teachers are taught by experienced teachers that they should not use Spanish when giving the class and try to avoid students using it. For example, if a student does not know the meaning of something in English, teachers must explain the concept as clearly as possible using language that is level appropriate. However, if teachers find it difficult to explain something, they are advised to use visuals as an aid, which can be time-consuming if teachers are not prepared beforehand.

Additionally, this is not only a struggle for teachers. Students are also affected by such English-only environments. In a research study conducted in Uganda, they found students' struggles

to be lack of participation when asked a question, misunderstanding of activity instructions, failing to understand the lesson they were presented, and that students also felt anxious, stressed, and intimidated. (Maandebo Abiria, Early, & Kendrick, 2013). This scenario is similar to students' experiences in Mexican EFL classes.

Although I understand the idea of improving English by forcing students to completely switch to the target language, I still wonder if using plurilingual instruction could prove to be more effective in the students' learning process. As previously mentioned, negative emotions generated by English-only lessons can affect learners' outcome. Therefore, using plurilingual instruction in a balanced way might reduce such negative feelings in students. It is well known by teachers that not all students learn the same way or at the same pace. There are cases where students who are fully immersed into an all-English environment, have great results and develop the second language at a greater pace. However, there are also cases of students who decide to drop out of the courses or give up learning the language as a result of the constant stress they are under when they feel as if they are not understanding what is being taught during the class.

### *Plurilingual Pedagogy*

Plurilingual pedagogy is the branch of pedagogy that embraces plurilingual practices in teaching, in contrast to other pedagogies that reject the use of other languages, and center on monolingual instructions. Also, according to a description from Professor Trentman (2019), an applied linguistics researcher from the University of New Mexico that focuses on language and intercultural learning, who states that "plurilingual pedagogies view students' previous linguistic knowledge (of languages and dialects) as a tool to expand their knowledge of new languages". Plurilingual pedagogy utilizes students' knowledge in other languages to learn new concepts or information.

Plurilingual pedagogy originated from the ideas of developing a language instead of acquiring the language and rejecting the monolingual norm, as mentioned in Professor Elisabeth Wichser-Krajcik's teacher's guide to plurilingual pedagogy (2021). In her article, Wichser-Krajcik's mentions that "plurilingual pedagogy aims to teach language in a way that is more reflective of how it is used in real-world settings" (p. 3). She also mentions that the old-fashioned monolingual instruction is unrealistic, and its counterpart "plurilingual pedagogy, from a cognitive or psycholinguistic standpoint, is based on how we actually use and learn languages" (p. 44).

This different point of view in language pedagogy has a variety of strategies known as plurilingual strategies or plurilingual instructions. These can serve as a tool in language development. For my research, it was necessary to investigate this type of pedagogy to understand which plurilingual instructions are applicable in the Mexican EFL classrooms without disrupting the flow of the program. As well, during my research on articles focused on plurilingual pedagogy, I realized that there were very few investigations conducted on this field in the Mexican context.

### *Plurilingual Instruction vs. Monolingual Instruction*

As previously mentioned, plurilingual pedagogy includes plurilingual instructions, and monolingual pedagogy has monolingual instructions. This section describes both and discusses the differences.

Monolingual instructions are frequently used in the Mexican language classroom because of the belief I have previously mentioned, which states that language is best acquired when students are immersed in an environment where only the target language is used. According to Bastian's article (2001), the following are some monolingual strategies. For reading strategies, which include understandable language for students' level and visual aids to provide help with comprehension, he included visual aids such as graphics, maps, diagrams, pictures, and key elements that can help students infer the meaning. Artistic interpretation includes acting out definitions, role plays, and music to have students grasp the meaning of concepts. Comprehensible input is to carefully choose the words you use to explain, according to what the student already knows. Finally, social interaction is having students work in groups with students who have more knowledge in the target language.

Plurilingual instruction includes strategies that take into consideration the learner's repertoire. The following strategies were taken from the research paper "Eng/ish-Only Is Not the Way to Go": Teachers' Perceptions of Plurilingua/ Instruction in an Eng/ish Program at a Canadian University. Comparing languages by Galante et al. (2020). They have students "compare linguistic items across the languages in their entire repertoire at the level of syntax, grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatics". Translanguaging "engages students to use their entire repertoire flexibly and fluidly for meaning-making across languages" (p. 983). Intercomprehension means that "students use their entire repertoire to understand (and not to speak or write) another language" (Galante, et al., 2020, p. 983).

Galante (2021) also mentions other strategies for plurilingual instruction such as Code-switching which they define as "alternating between two languages or varieties between sentences or in one single sentence". Another one is Plurilinguaging that means "using different linguistic and semiotic resources for meaning-making", translating "among languages to mediate language learning" and finally, communicating interculturally, which has students share their cultural experiences with their peers (p. 3).

Monolingual instructions focus on learners acquiring the language through great amounts of use and exposure to the language. In contrast, plurilingual instructions take into consideration the learners' already existing language repertoire to function as a tool for their development of a new language. Previous research has shown that plurilingual instruction has helped students have a more cognitive, empathic, and critical approach to the language, and has shown that "motivation and self-esteem were positively affected" (Galante, 2021, p. 4).

### *Code-switching*

As previously mentioned, code-switching is one of the multiple plurilingual instruction strategies. Code-switching (CS) can be described as "alternating between two languages or varieties between sentences or in one single sentence for ease of communication" (Galante, 2021 p. 3). This description states that code-switching is done between two languages. Similar to Galante's description, Bista (2010) describes code-switching as "mixing words and phrases from the two tongues together during the course of speech or writing" (p. 2). However, another definition states that it is "the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of languages in a conversation" (Memory, Nkengbeza, & Liswaniso, 2018 p. 56). In contrast to Galante's and Bista's definitions, this one has a more open view of code-switching. To support the idea of code-switching happening between more than two languages, Memory et al. also state that it is "the act in which the speaker diverts from their language, dialect, or speaking style in order to suit the listener's environment" (2018, p. 56). For the development of this research synthesis, we will center on the wider view of code-switching based on Galante's and Bista's definition.

In Bista's research (2010) about code-switching among bilingual students, he identifies two types of code-switching. The first one is code-mixing. He describes that when using the language, "the shift is done in the middle of a sentence with no interruptions, hesitations, or pauses that indicate a shift" (p. 3). An excellent example is when speakers are talking in their first language

and without any hesitation or stop, they say or two words in their second language, and then immediately come back to speak in the first language again, without hesitating when doing the shift. The second type of practice is called code-changing, Bista (2010) describes it as "transferring focus from one language to another" (p. 3). An example is when the speaker is using his/her first language in a conversation but from one moment to another starts the next sentence in the second language and continues speaking in that language. Both situations are commonly observed in bilinguals. Not just those with a high level of proficiency in both languages, but also in those who have an A2 level (high beginners). It is common for students with a low proficiency level code-switch to try and communicate complete ideas when they do not have the necessary vocabulary to structure their sentences.

Even though using other languages in class is heavily promoted in plurilingual pedagogy, in the EFL classroom context code-switching should be done moderately, not word by word (Memory, et al., 2018). Besides, in previous studies researchers mention that "it is used when they (students) cannot understand a situation in a topic" (Abiria, Early, & Kendrick, 2013, p. 577), and not to teach the whole lesson.

In his article, Bista also mentions that "code-switching can be a useful strategy in classroom interaction if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way" (2010, p. 16). In addition, another study that supports his statement says that "code-switching in EFL classrooms helps learners understand difficult aspects of the lesson taught and therefore are able to follow instructions" (Abiria, et al., 2013, p. 56) in addition to this "...it helps learners with English learning difficulties participate, and it helps them to express themselves. Also, code-switching helps teachers manage the classroom" (2013, p. 56).

In research reported by Memory et al. (2018), was found that the use of code-switching "provides opportunities to communicate and enhance their understanding", is "time effective", is "beneficial for students' understanding", makes "students feel more confident and comfortable", and "helps students with lower performance to be able to follow the lessons" (pp. 57-58). However, the researchers also found a couple of negative effects to be that "learners might get used to just being taught in their L1", it "can affect teachers who only speak English", and that "students may not pay attention anymore" (Memory, et al., 2018, p. 58).



I contacted Dr. Daniele Moore, one of the main researchers in the plurilingual field. She has previously done research regarding code-switching. When asking her about her experience with the use of code-switching in the classroom, she stated that "...CS is important for learning, as it highlights points of tension in the learning process, opens up for meaning and content negotiation, and enriches the conceptualization/decentration (as you access new concepts through two or more languages)" (D. Moore, Direct communication, 2021).

### *Factors that influence code-switching in EFL classrooms*

Even though EFL programs do their best to promote an English-only environment, code-switching will always have a place in their class. There has been research carried out to find out the factors that influence students and teachers to recur to this tool. Results from the study factors of code switching among bilingual English students reported by Bista (2010), showed that some factors are "there are no similar words in the target language, they didn't know the word, to fill a gap in communication, because it's easier to speak, to avoid misunderstandings, to add emphasis, and for privacy" (p. 12).

Furthermore, in an entry from FluentU (Gardner, n.d.), they describe some reasons why teachers code-switch in their classes. The first reason they mention is to address complex topics. When a lesson is too complicated for students to understand in the target language, teachers may switch to the native language to briefly explain. The second reason is to build rapport. As previously mentioned, students may feel stressed with an English-only environment thus teachers sometimes try to create a relaxed and supportive environment at the beginning of the class to chat in the students' native language. The last reason mentioned is to clarify instructions. When assigning a task, if the instructions seem to be too confusing for students, the teacher will utilize their first language to clarify any doubts, this is done to save time because in a class time is limited.

Masna (2020) reports another research study about factors that lead students to code-switch in an EFL classroom. It was found that one of the reasons for using the mother tongue was that students felt more comfortable speaking in their native language. The second reason was that students use it among their friends to get their message across without complications. The third reason mentioned was to avoid misunderstandings so that people around them could understand them. The last reason was that code-switching was used to communicate important information that could not be explained in the target language.

## Reflection and Conclusion

In Mexican EFL programs, teachers are asked to only use English, there are some cases where Spanish is permitted. However, the belief that students should be completely immersed in English, so far to the extent of thinking in English, is the most notorious. Some teachers even place signs in the classroom that read things like "English only", "no Spanish", or other phrases of those sorts. The intent behind such practices is understandable, to push students and expose them to use the target language. Still, as a person who has been in the language learner's position, I know from experience that these situations can become stressful at some point. In addition, in some cases, students may feel intimidated, and this would result in lowering their participation instead of encouraging it. On the other hand, it is also known that every student's learning process is different, and this situation might affect them.

As mentioned before, developing a second language with only monolingual pedagogy is unrealistic. Even if the teacher carefully chooses every step, word, and explanation for the lesson to be completely given in English, plurilingual practices will always be present among students. In this case, students will make use of code-switching to ask the meaning, the direct translation, or to explain a concept that is too complicated for them to explain in the target language.

As teachers, it is our duty to find strategies that can improve classes and provide students with a more enjoyable environment so that their learning experience does not become hindered by stress or nervousness, and instead, they achieve better results. In the case of English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, it is common for students to become stressed during their classes. Learning a new language will always be an exciting and nerve-wracking experience. However, on top of the fear and shame that comes with mispronunciations or common grammatical mistakes, there are situations where students are not allowed to use their native language during class. This type of practice can make students have a harder time understanding what they are being taught, generating a sense of uneasiness or anxiety.

Some teachers affirm that English is best learned in an environment that obligates students to think and speak in the target language. Although it is true that students have better pronunciation and listening comprehension if they practice as much as possible, this may not work the

same way for all students. Throughout the multiple research projects regarding plurilingual methods that have been mentioned in this article, the authors agree that there are several benefits in the use of the first language.

Research on plurilingual instruction and code-switching can help teachers know different points of view regarding methods they can apply in their classroom. It is important to find a balance between the uses of the target language and the first language. As a result, teachers can have a wider variety of options for class activities, explanations, examples, and resources. Additionally, students can feel more comfortable when solving their doubts if they do it in their native language. A clear example is completing their ideas to avoid interrupting the flow of their conversation, then coming back to the part where they used Spanish and, with the teacher's help, translating it to English. In this imagined scenario, there are different instances where the first language can serve as a tool for a better comprehension of the target language.

It is also important to add that there must be a balance between the use of the first language and the target language. Code-switching should be considered a tool to fill in the gaps that could arise throughout the lesson. In a context, as described in this document, Spanish should not take over the lesson, the class focus should still be English. There is a huge risk in using more Spanish than English during the class though. There is a possibility students get used to relying too much on their first language. In consequence, students will not use the target language as much as they should. Therefore, teachers should make wise decisions on when the use of code-switching is necessary and beneficial! and when it is not.

Although there is a wide variety of research studies about the use of plurilingualism in the language classrooms, there are very few that were done about EFL students whose first language is Spanish and in the Mexican context. To improve our current programs in this context, it is necessary to expand our view of how language is developed. Nowadays with the help of new technologies and the current online modality, languages are becoming more globalized. Therefore, we need new language programs that are more linguistic and cultural inclusive in Mexico.

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