

The Applied Research of Code-Switching in Building Ecological English Classroom

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Abstract

Studying the educational problems from the perspective of ecology, educational ecology has important implications in second language acquisition. Advocating people first and dynamic balance, ecological English classroom is one of the new progresses in the application of educational ecology to teach practice. There are many ways to build ecological English classroom. Based on such educational ecology theories as the law of tolerance and the optimum principle, the flowerpot effect and the law of educational ecology niche, this paper explores the application of code-switching in building ecological English classroom and arrives at the conclusion that code-switching has the following functions as the function to adapt to linguistic reality, the function to strengthen the language teaching effects, the function of affinity, the regulatory function, the function of implication and the support function.

Key words: Code-switching; Educational ecology; Ecological classroom

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INTRODUCTION

In 1976, the concept “educational ecology” was first put forward by American educationist Cremin Lawrence in his book *Public Education*. He holds that educational ecology

is an inter-discipline of education and ecology and it is a new way for the studies of education by drawing on the regular patterns and research methods of ecology. It is a discipline to study the regular patterns of the mutual effects between education and external environment, among the elements of the internal systems and between the individual student and the real society (Cremin, 1980). Based on the ecological principles of entirety, contact and balance, educational ecology studies all kinds of education phenomena and their causes, exams the mutual relations between material and spiritual environments affecting education and discusses the basic law and ecological mechanism of education development in order to optimize education ecological environments and improve the efficiency of the education. As a boundary subject, educational ecology involves many subjects such as education, ecology, psychology and sociology etc., but its core concept is the ecological balance of education.

In China, the distinguishing characteristic of the development of educational ecology is to build ecological classroom. Against this background, this paper focuses on the functions of code switching in building ecological English classroom.

1. CODE SWITCHING

Such terms as dialect, language, style, standard language, pidgin and creole are declined to arouse motions, and variety is not quite neutral either, being by definition a variation on some other, perhaps more standard, language (Wardhaugh, 2000). In contrast, code is a cover term, more neutral and general, which can refer to any language semiotic system employed in communication, including a language or any varieties of language such as dialect and style. As a term in sociolinguistics, code-switching has no unified definition. However, the most frequently quoted one is that code-switching is a linguistic behavior of using two or more linguistic varieties in a single

communication to adapt to the situation. Since the 1960s, scholars, at home or abroad, have carried out static and dynamic researches on code-switching from different angles. Some scholars such as Gumperz conduct dynamic study on code-switching and classify it into situational code-switching and metaphorical code-switching. The Markedness Model proposed by Myers-Scotton reveals the social and psychological motivations that occur in code-switching. Meanwhile, Myers-Scotton re-clarifies the social situations more suitable for conversation.

In the middle of 1970s, the research of bilingual teaching boomed in America. Since then, the classroom code-switching has made its case, which accords with the Adaptation Theory proposed by Verschueren, the general secretary of International Pragmatics Association, in his book *Understanding Pragmatics*. In Verschueren's eyes, using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, for language-internal (i.e. structural) linguistic or language-external linguistic reasons (Verschueren, 2000), which is based on the properties of language itself, namely, variability, negotiability and adaptability. As one property of language, Verschueren defines adaptability as follows: "a property of language, which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choice from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs" (Ibid.). As a cognitive process, adaptability is the core of Adaptation Theory, while variability and negotiability are the content of adaptability, which uncover the fact that choices not made on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies. The Adaptation Theory reveals the dynamic process of using language, which is confirmed in second language acquisition. English class is not only a platform for teaching, but also for communication, so in order to overcome language barrier, English teachers should employ code-switching to approach points of satisfaction for foreign language communication in the class context.

2. ECOLOGICAL CLASSROOM

The research of educational ecology in the mainland China began at the end of 1980s. In the past twenty years, the research of educational ecology mainly focuses on two aspects: the macroscopic ecology and microscopic ecology. Macroscopic ecology of education aims at finding the developing direction and strategies of education by studying all kinds of environmental systems in the country and analyzing their functions and mutual relations with education and humans, while microscopic ecology of education mainly involves the specific issues such as the construction of schools and classrooms and analyzes the micro system such as school ecology, classroom ecology, academic ecology, ecological moral education, and so on.

From the perspective of educational ecology, classroom is a microscopic ecology, which consists of

such ecological factors as the teacher, students, and classroom teaching-and-learning environment etc.. Firstly, ecological classroom, with regard to its connotation, is a dynamic combination of and interaction between all kinds of individuals, groups (teachers and students) and multidimensional ecological factors (factors affecting classroom teaching). To be specific, ecological classroom weakens centralism and on the other hand, puts emphasis on interaction, harmonious coexistence and integrality between the teacher, the students and classroom environment. For example, the classrooms are clean and bright and the schoolyard has a peaceful and serene environment. Under such an high-quality explicit culture on campus, the teaching-learning subjects are relaxed and cheerful, and the effect of mental activity will improve. Teaching activities should be equal, democratic and harmonious interaction between the teacher and students. Only in this way, teacher-student interaction will form an effective cooperation in education, during which the teaching-learning subjects will develop harmoniously. Secondly, ecological classroom should include transfer and circulation of energy (mood and interest of teaching-learning subjects) and materials (knowledge and skills). According to ecological Psychologists, there is ecological psychology field between the teacher and the students in a classroom, in which there is a kind of special emotional connection between students and their teacher, so changes in one can cause changes in the other. Moreover, ecology holds that all the ecological factors are in dynamic state of mutual adaptation and inter-coordination. Consequently, teachers should teach students in accordance of their aptitude and the level of their understanding and acceptance, avoiding the "duck-stuffing" type of teaching method and the "all are the same" teaching method. Thus it can be seen that in comparison with the monotonous traditional classroom, ecological classroom is harmonious, evolutive, connecting and symbiotic, which accords with the learning and living habits of students. Its core is people first and dynamic balance.

3. BASED ON EDUCATIONAL ECOLOGY, A STUDY ON THE FUNCTIONS OF CODE-SWITCHING IN BUILDING ECOLOGICAL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

As an ecological system, ecological English classroom is an open microcosmic entire ecosystem. Compared with natural ecosystem, classroom is a special ecosystem, in which classroom ecological subjects, classroom ecological environment and teaching content interact with each other, forming a dynamic, balanced and harmonious relationship, building a classroom full of vigor and vitality and strengthening students' subjective initiative and the teaching effects. Accordingly, in order to promote the

development of the second foreign language education, nowadays English teachers pursue an organic ecological classroom, during which Chinese-English code-switching is indispensable. This paper intends to explore the function of code-switching in building ecological English classroom from the perspectives of microscopic educational ecology, which, in details, are the law of tolerance and the optimum principle, the law of flowerpot effect and the law of educational ecology niche.

3.1 Following the Law of Tolerance and the Optimum Principle, a study on the Functions of Code-Switching in Building Ecological English Classroom

In 1911, American ecologist Shelford put forward the law of tolerance. He points out that the creature has its upper and lower limits of tolerance for every kind of environmental factors and the creature's tolerance range for the environmental factors just exists between the upper and lower limits (Guan, 2003), which covers the optimal environmental conditions. Ecological English classroom also conforms to the law of tolerance and the optimum principle, in which all kinds of ecological factors have their tolerance degrees. If the degrees are exceeded or not reached, the negative effects will be produced. For example, English teacher should keep students' tolerance range in mind all the time, when distributing the class hour, determining the intensity of each class and the quantity of homework. In a word, English curriculum should comply with the optimum principle, with the help of which English classroom teaching effects can be improved.

In order to make sure that students have enough English input and are interested in learning English, English teacher should, in view of differences of students' tolerance ranges and optimum degrees, timely and moderately apply code-switching in classroom teaching to make sure that the quantity and the difficulty level of knowledge exist in the resistance range of most students. English teacher should give appropriate consideration to below-average students to maximize the English teaching effects. To be specific, following the law of tolerance and the optimum principle, the English teacher should exert the following functions of code-switching in ecological English classroom.

3.1.1 The Function to Adapt to Linguistic Reality

According to Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, Chinese-English code-switching adapts to linguistic reality in ecological English classroom. English and Chinese belong to the Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan families of languages respectively, so the two languages possess their similarities and their differences. Firstly, partial differences often manifest as partly corresponding meaning. For example, the color words in English and Chinese have different uses, different symbolic meanings and different values. Therefore, when teaching students how to use color words, the teacher need to translate black tea, brown sugar into 红茶、红糖 in Chinese. Only

by doing this, can the words be understood by students. Secondly, complete differences often manifest as lexical vacancy. For example, there are some Chinese words with Chinese characteristics, for instance, 铁饭碗、大跃进、一国两制 etc.. Literal translation, such as "iron rich bowl", "great leap forward" and "one country, two system", cannot express their connotation. Consequently, talking about the content reflecting the differences of Chinese and Western cultures, the teacher should duly and moderately apply code-switching in classroom teaching in order to make herself or himself understood and improve the expressive effect of language and last but not the least, ensure that students fully understand the lecture.

3.1.2 The Function to Strengthen the Language Teaching Effects

In the view of ecology, ecological factors, biological or non-biological, material or spiritual, connect with each other and restrict each other. They are still in the dynamic of mutual adaptation and coordination. If without considering other ecological factors' influences such as the acceptance of students, the teacher inputs too much information and knowledge that students don't know, the ecological environment which exceeds students' tolerance degrees will inevitably result in the unbalance of classroom ecology. So in order to ensure that students master the lecture, the English teacher should apply code-switching timely and moderately by ever and again observing students' expression and knowing how much teaching contents students understand and then. For example, when lecturing to students on the attributive clause, the English teacher says, "This is an attributive clause introduced by a relative pronoun, which can be used as an adjective to modify a noun or a pronoun". If the teacher explains it only in English, it is nearly impossible for students to understand it clearly. On the contrary, if the teacher applies code-switching by appending Chinese in teaching, students can grasp the grammar thoroughly. In addition, teaching grammar, the English teacher can use Chinese-English code-switching to eliminate students' boring feeling and naturally strengthen the effect of language teaching. It is helpful for students to memorize grammar and complies with students' mastery of grammar rules. For example, primary school English teachers often repeat the English formula that "I 是 am, you 是 are, is 跟着他她它", which is helpful for Chinese pupils to learn English grammar. As a consequence, code-switching can help English teachers adjust teaching and learning, strengthen the effect of language teaching and contribute to the dynamic stability in ecological English classroom.

3.2 Avoiding the Flowerpot Effect, a Study on the Functions of Code-Switching in Building Ecological English Classroom

Flowerpot is an half-natural and half-artificial eco-environment. On the one hand, it has significant

limitations in space; on the other hand, due to the artificial creation of suitable environmental conditions, the adaptive threshold of ecological factors may decrease. So deprived of people's good care, they can wither and at the worst die. In traditional English classrooms, the flowerpot effect is obvious. Compared with the real language environment, English class takes place in a flowerpot environment, in which students are soaked by the teacher's boring and lengthy explanation. Learning English in such man-made environment, students are in a passive state with learning enthusiasm depressed and pioneering spirit quashed. Traditional English teaching is anti-ecological, which urges English teachers to build ecological classroom directed at respecting life and emphasizing students' physical and mental harmony.

In order to get rid of the flowerpot effect and incubate a good environment of language ecology, English teachers should exert the following functions of code-switching in ecological English classroom to cultivate students' interest in English learning and improve the quality and effectiveness of teacher talk:

3.2.1 The Function of Affinity

Myers-Scotton identifies three types of social situations in code-switching: powerful situation, transactional situation and peer situation. The social distance between people diminishes in order. In order to get close to students emotionally and bridge the social distance between the teacher and students, the English teacher can switch from English to Chinese which students are more likely to accept, which realizes the transition from powerful situation or transactional situation to peer situation. By doing this, the teacher successfully converges with students in language and emotion, and most of all make teaching activities go on smoothly and efficiently in a harmonious ecological classroom. For example,

Teacher: Wang Quan, please tell us how to translate this sentence.

Student: Sorry, teacher. I don't know.

Teacher: Believe in yourself. 相信自己. Try again.

In this example, the teacher applied code-switching, making students feel the affinity of the teacher, arousing the enthusiasm of the student and correcting the student's mistake. This is good for communication and pushes forward the communication in teaching. Thus it can be seen that code-switching is indispensable in developing relationships and guarantee the teaching effects.

3.2.2 The Regulatory Function

The great educator Sukkomiinsky once said that the teacher's language accomplishment, to a large extent, determined the mental efficiency of students. In other words, the teacher can apply code-switching to adjust the classroom atmosphere. Firstly, code-switching can produce the humor effects which relieve the tense atmosphere of the classroom while creates a happy learning atmosphere, and dispels students' fear in English

learning while stirs their desire for studying activities. Secondly, resolving students' embarrassment and the feelings of discontent when unable to answer questions, code-switching, in an understatement way, makes the ecological classroom harmonious. For example, when talking about the subject of the passage in English, the teacher can insert a Chinese sentence "再唠10块钱的", a popular saying taken from a TV short sketch in China, to attract more students' attention, arouse their enthusiasm and sense of pleasure and improve the learning efficiency.

3.3 Applying the Law of Educational Ecology Niche, a Study on the Functions of Code-Switching in Building Ecological English Classroom

Whittaker (1975) holds that ecological niche refers to the time and spatial location of each species and the relative position of a species with other species within a community. Any species occupies a certain position in a community and performs a certain "character". Each species has its unique function and keeps the integrity and stability of the overall system.⁵ In English classroom, students occupy their corresponding ecological niches: winners, participants, followers, bystanders, laggards, and so on. There is an individual difference in their English ability. In consequence, the English teacher should attach importance to the richness of teaching content and the flexibility of teaching methods. In the teaching process, the English teacher should guide the students of different ecological niche to compete and cooperate with each other reasonably so as to help all the students achieve improvement.

3.3.1 The Function of Implication

In the microscopic environment, the English teacher occupies his or her niche and simultaneously plays the role of a knowledge provider, a student friend, a psychologist and a builder of ecological classroom, but also a social man who is a paragon of virtue and learning. Thus, English teachers must confine their words and behavior to social conventions. Based on this, the English teacher can apply code-switching to avoid social taboos involved in teaching activities.

3.3.2 The Support Function

In the 1930s, L. S. Vygotsky, Russian psychologist and philosopher, put forward Zone of Proximal Development theory, which is defined as the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.⁶ An associated concept is called Scaffolding Theory put forward by Wood, Bruner and Ross in 1976. In teaching methodology, scaffolding refers to the support from the teachers during the learning process. In ecological classroom, the English teacher should pay more attention to the students' individual differences and by providing a scaffold rather

than putting them in the goal directly, meet the learning needs of the students in different niches. It has been proved that because of different English proficiencies, proper code-switching can adjust the acceptability of language output, cover students' imperfections in language abilities. On the other hand, code-switching can provide a scaffold for emotional development, stimulate learning interest, reduce classroom anxiety and cultivate self-confidence and sense of accomplishment. During the process, teachers and students will finish the teaching task through coordination and students in different niches can achieve learning goals step by step.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of educational ecology, the paper explores the functions of code-switching in building ecological English classroom. However, frequent code-switching goes against the concept of ecological classroom, which will form students' habit of lazy learning. So in teaching activities, the English teacher should balance the frequency of code-switching and make it an effective means to build and maintain ecological classroom.

If natural ecology affects the living environment of human beings, educational ecology affects humanity itself and concerns the future of the society. As English teachers, we must take the responsibility to build up harmonious ecological English classroom with sustainable development and contribute to the improvement of the effects of English teaching.

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