Code-Switching in E-Distance Learning Education

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Abstract. Language plays an important role in the communication activities in the computer-mediated communication. In the computer-mediated communication literature, the term generally refers to communication modalities dependent on computer-based networks or meta-networks, particularly the Internet and commercial online services. Due to the revolution of technology in communication, a unique form of communication has emerged involving the use of new word forms, structures and style of expression. Therefore, this study examined the use of code-switching as a communicative strategy used in a discussion forum among the e-distance learning students in Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia. The data of this study were collected from messages posted by the students to their friends and lecturers. The online forums are platform for the students in this program to communicate with their fellow classmates, lecturers and other e-distance learning students. The messages posted by the students were analyzed to investigate the discourse functions of code-switching used in the forum. The study indicates that code-switching functions for various purposes such as to capture attention, to show respect and empathy. Students also code-switched for formulaic purposes and to indicate a shift in topic. This study hopes to enrich the knowledge on the study on code-switching in computer-mediated communication and to motivate other researchers to conduct further studies in this area.

Keywords: code-switching, computer-mediated communication, language choice, e-distance learning

1. Introduction

Within any complex society, the existence of different language codes and ways of speaking cannot be denied. These include all varieties, dialects or styles used in a particular socially-defined population, and the constraint which govern the choice among them. Code choice is the use of a language or language variety for specific communication purposes which can also reflect the speaker's attitude towards the language and the speakers of the language. A competent speaker needs to know the rules for language choice in any specific context. There are various factors that may influence the language choice such as the general subject area under discussion (e.g. religion, family, work), the role relationships between the participant (mother-daughter, boss-secretary) and the setting of the interaction (e.g. office, home). Topic however is often a primary determinant of language choice in multilingual context. Bilinguals have often learned about some topics through the medium of one language and other topics through the medium of the second, and thus only know the vocabulary to discuss a topic in one of their languages, or feel it is more "natural" to use one language for a particular topic (Saville-Troike, 2003). In addition to topic, appropriate language choice may depend on setting (including locale and time of the day) and participants (including their age, sex and social status). A bilingual child may regularly use English at school with her a teachers and friends and Bahasa Malaysia or Malay grandmother at home with parents and sibling. Language choice is also importantly influenced by social and political identity. Choice of varieties within a single language is governed by the same factors. Speakers may select from regional varieties in their repertoire depending on which geographical area and subgroup of the population they wish to identify.

Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural country and the language situation in Malaysia is extremely complex as one can find not only the presence of the national language Bahasa Malaysia or Malay and that of English but also code alternations between Malay and English, any of the Chinese vernaculars and English, an Indian vernacular, usually Tamil and English as well as scores of other code switching varieties (Jacobson, 2004). A good number of the present generation of Malaysians are bilingual of Malay-English due to the

national education policy which stipulates that the main medium of instruction is Malay and English as a compulsory second language (Asmah, 1982). Studies have shown that code-switching occurs in both formal and informal contexts of communication and has become a normal way of communicating among Malay-English bilinguals (Jacobson, 2004; Asmah, 1982; Bahiyah, 2003; Kamisah and Shameem, 2008; Morais, 1994; Nair-Venogopal, 2000). In the official language policy, only Malay is allowed to be used in meetings and addresses in functions organized by government or semi-government organizations, however, English is allowed if there are international audiences in conference. Such code-switching is permissible to show conformity with the national language policy and the inevitability of the use of English due to foreign guests (Asmah, 1982).

2. Background to the Study

E-learning, a type of learning that is considered important in the emerging knowledge of society. Hence, computer-mediated communication has been adopted in most e- learning setting. Computer-mediated communication refers to any form of communication enabled through the use of computers. In the computer-mediated communication literature, the term generally refers to communication modalities dependent on computer-based networks or meta-networks, particularly the Internet and commercial online services. Language plays an important role in the communication activities in the computer-mediated communication. Due to the revolution of technology in communication, a unique form of communication has emerged involving the use of new word forms, structures and style of expression.

The online discussion forum, an asynchronous mode of communication, is a platform for Universiti Teknologi MARA students who are in the e-distance learning program to discuss academic and non academic matters with their learning facilitators and classmates. The forum has no moderators, but the students are expected to abide to the ethical code published online (politeness and respect for others). Each course has its own discussion forum designed for them. All students who are studying part time, full time or e- distance learning at the Universiti Teknologi MARA are taught in English. Therefore, these students who are taking English courses are expected course to use English language either in offline or online communication. However, an interesting phenomenon seems to appear in the online discussion forum among the e-distance learning students; that is code-switching and the use of paralinguistic features. It appears that these students code-switch when they write their messages online in spite of the fact that the discussion forums are designed for English courses and should be written in English. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the use of code-switching as a communicative strategy used in the discussion forum.

3. Literature on code-switching in computer-mediated communication Malaysia in

The phenomenon of code-switching in computer-mediated communication has also gained popularity among researchers in Malaysia (Hadina and Shameem, 2007; Nor Azni, 2002; Norizah & Azirah, 2009). Research has been conducted on the linguistic features on the online communication especial on email messages. Nor Azni (2002) in her research on code choice and code-switching in organizational e-mail found that messages written in English were informal while Bahasa Malaysia messages were formal. She revealed that superiors were more likely to converse in English than in Bahasa Malaysia, while the converse was true of subordinates and code–switches occurred at any point in the written e-mail. She found that the majority of the participants started the message in Bahasa Malaysia and eventually code-switched to English. Messages written in English to executives switched to Bahasa Malaysia when the named recipient of a split was a non-executive. The change of code in the split to Bahasa Malaysia seemed to make the messages more official, formal and distancing. In addition, Azni added that some technical terms in Bahasa Malaysia also appeared in messages written in English. Thus, it is quite common for code-switching to occur even in professional workplace context.

Hadina and Shameem (2007) in their research on the language of electronic mail in Malaysian organizations discuss code-switching as an instance of the manifestation of power. The language of email can be ranged from highly informal to highly formal. Formal language refers to language use in documents

when writer distance themselves from the readers whereas informal language refers to language use in material or situation when writers try to establish personal relationship with the readers. According to the researchers, the language used in Malaysian organizations is formal although it might carry conversational tone. Sample of email messages from two organizations were taken and examined based on Holmes' definition of code-switching; code switching occurs within a domain or situation and a switch to another language signals group membership and shared ethnicity with addressee. A switch can also be motivated by identity and relationship between participants. Therefore, the language choice of the speakers depends not only on the how the speaker feels towards the person addressed, but also the social setting and function of the interaction. The switch can also reflect the social status and formality of the interaction. Based from the research, they discover that that email writers code switched from English to Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) when they were discussing religious issues. For example, instead of using 'subuh lecture', they preferred to use the term 'Kuliah Subuh'. This is possible as the participants in the email share a common frame of reference and a common background information. The researchers also identified code-switching as an indicator of power command by the writer. The main writer in the study was the person in charge of a religious event organized for the staff in her office, therefore, she would have the power to choose what language to use when writing the message as long as it was understood by others.

Norizah and Azirah (2009) in their studies of the features and language use in electronic English in Malaysia highlight how language has been used creatively online by different ethnic groups in Malaysia. The data was taken from a corpus of 2 million words collected from various electronic genres: blogs which are written for informal readers, chats from Malaysian chatrooms, instant messages, emails and text messages between friends. In their preliminary finding, many features of spoken Malaysian English as well as other varieties of linguistic features are found in the online communication. Intersentential and intrasentential code-switching occur between English and Malay, Chinese dialects, Tamil and Iban. According to the above researchers, the features are commonly found in spoken Malaysian English except the use of symbols like @, the use of emoticons for expressions and use of the Roman script to represent sounds in Chinese. Internet users also establish their identity through the use of features specific to the variety and through the medium that is used. The study however only offers a general overview of the use English on the Internet.

Although the above mentioned studies give meaningful insights to the studies of code-switching in computer-mediated communication, it is still definitely different to the current research as this research investigates the use of code-switching in academic setting specifically the discourse function of code-switching in discussion forums.

4. Data and Methodology

The primary source of the study is discussion forums taken from the e-distance learning program, Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia. Students who are taking diploma programs will have to go through a minimum of three semesters of English courses depending on the programs they are taking. All the first semester one students are therefore to take a proficiency course, BEL120 Consolidating Language Skills.

4.1. Participants-Students

Participants for this research were the students of Universiti Teknologi MARA studying in the e-distance learning program in Shah Alam campus. The participants were the first semester students in Diploma in Business Management. The postings indicate that participants code-switched between Malay and English in the same posting or post a complete messages in either Malay or English only. Some participants were more active on the threads as compared to others.

4.2. Posting collection

A total of 110 messages were collected from the Diploma of Business Management students from July 16 2009 till Oct 27 2009. Each course in the e-distance learning program is provided with its own discussion forum platform, thus the data was then collected from BEL120, an English course for the first semester students. The content of the messages were mainly about classes, exams, documentation, assignments to be submitted and rarely about everyday life. The e-learning students only attend seminar four or five times per

semester, therefore, they need to communicate online with their friends and learning instructors. Although there is no specific amount of posting or messages for them to write, it is consider important part in the syllabus of BEL120 as postings sent are given marks for participation. The allocation of 10% of the total marks is given for attendance and online participation. Data collected were then divided into 4 categories according to code choice posted; Malay posting, English posting, code-switching and others. Malay postings consisted of postings that were written in Malay language only, while English postings consisted of English language only. Code-switching postings consisted of intersentential code-switching and intrasentential code-switching between Malay and English language. The category 'others' on the hand consisted of messages posted using other languages or symbols only. The largest number of postings was from and English language only, followed by code-switching and Malay language posting. The least number was from 'others'.

5. Discourse functions of code-switching

5.1. Code-switching for formulaic discourse purposes:
- Greetings
    - A: Salam puan (Peace be with you madam)
    - B: Assalamualaikum Puan R (Peace be with you)
- Farewells
    - C: Wassalam (Regards)
    - D: Insyaallah (God willing)

The majority of students in this university are Malay and of course being a Muslim, some Arabic expressions are inserted in the beginning of the posting. The word 'salam' is a short form of 'assalamualaikum'. The meaning of assalamualaikum is equal to 'peace be upon you'. It is common in Muslim society to begin their conversation by giving 'salam' when they meet each other or even when they start their conversation over the phone. It is interesting to note that students in the discussion forum use Arabic words especially in the salutation and closing of their messages. The switching in Arabic may also indicate that the students are displaying their Muslim identity in their communication.

5.2. Switching to capture attention
- Switching to mark what is being said as jocular
    - T: jgn tuang klzzz ehhhh...hahahah(don't skip class)
    - S: I pay you twice boleh? ? hehe (Can I pay you twice? Hehe)

In the example shown, switching is used to indicate what is being said as a joke. T sent a message to the learning facilitator and asked about her assignment and ended her message by reminding her fellow classmates not to skip the next seminar. In the second example, S ordered a dictionary from the learning facilitator but she forgot the price. Therefore, she asked if she could pay in installment. The writer also used paralinguistic restitution such as multiple punctuations to indicate the message supposed to be a joke.

- Switching for idiomatic expression
    - B: Usaha eskalator kejayaan (hardwork escalates success)

The purpose of switching from English to Malay is to give more expressive impact on his posting. This is in agreement with Tay (1989 in Jayatilal, 1998) that the degree of personal involvement is a possible determining factor. The choice of code depends on the code that has the most colourful, most expressive and most economic way of repeating or elaborating. B posted a message encouraging her friend to work hard for the success of their studies.

5.3. Switching to show respect
- M: puan (madam)
- T: Noted pn (noted madam)

In this study, the use of expression 'puan' which means madam can be found in 53 messages out of 86 messages posted by the students. In Malay culture, students are expected to respect their teachers as they are the people who teach and give you the knowledge regardless of their age. It is interesting to note that the majority of the messages posted clearly shown the students respect by specifically addressing the learning facilitator as 'puan' which reflect the culture of the Malay society.

5.4. Switching for emphatic purposes

N: pengsan kalau x lepas exam nnt (I will faint if i do not pass the exam)

In this thread, students discussed the result of their first quiz. A student started the message telling her friends that she had only 4 correct answers out of 10 questions. N replied by saying that she got 6 correct answers and expressed how scared she was if she failed in the exam. In other words, she would collapse if she failed in the exam. N posted such message to her learning facilitator so that would understand her feelings and situation.

5.5. Switching to indicate a shift of topic

According to Gumperz (1982) topic may be discussed in either code but the choice is to add a flavor or to have better impact on the topic. Code-switching used to indicate a shift from formal to informal, official to personal, or serious to humorous (Jayatilal, 1998). L posted a message in Malay language by saying that she had just finished checking. However, he switched to English word 'answer' and 'hand out' as the topic discussed was related to their English course subject.

6. Conclusion

Primarily, the use of Arabic lexical item in the discussion forum indicates two important things; culture and religion. Firstly, it reflects their identity as Malay and being a Malay also means that the person is a Muslim. In Malaysia, once a baby is registered in the birth certificate as Malay, then she/he is also automatically registered as Muslim. It is something that is common among Malay to greet each other in Arabic although they might not know Arabic. In fact, Malay children are taught to greet others in such a way since they are small. Malay and English Code-switching serves to mark a formulaic expression and show respect to the elders and superiors. It is also used as a communicative strategy to capture readers' attention and help emphasize or clarify a message. Therefore, it can be said that that code-switching in this study occurs intentionally and not due to lack of competence in the base language. In conclusion, although this research is primarily on online discussion forum, the evidence shows that code-switching does occur in computer-mediated communication. I would like therefore to recommend that future research on code-switching in Malaysia be carried out on the comparison and contrast between the face-to-face interaction and computer-mediated communication.

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