

Code-Switching Patterns Among Bilingual Undergraduates in Academic Writing

D. Fulgencio¹

¹Cebu Technological University-Danao Campus, Danao City, Cebu, Philippines.

Abstract: Code-switching refers to the act of moving back and forth between two languages within one utterance or discourse. Code-switching occurs often within the discourse of bilingual university students. Even though code switching has been researched extensively when speaking in different languages, code switching in the academic writing of bilingual university students has not been sufficiently examined, especially beyond composition classes teaching young children or graduate-level dissertation writers. This paper aims to review the theoretical and empirical literature on code-switching and translanguaging in order to explore the functions of code-switching in the academic writing of bilingual undergraduates. Utilizing theoretical frameworks of code switching and translanguaging, the paper explores the patterns and functions of code switching in the academic writing of bilingual undergraduates. In addition, the paper examines how instructors perceive the phenomenon of code-switching and how code-switching reflects the conflict between academic writing expectations for monolingual English-only writing and multilingual repertoires of bilingual writers. The paper also examines code meshing as one of the pedagogical approaches that aims to resolve this conflict. Implications for writing instruction and future research are discussed.

Key Words: code-switching, translanguaging, bilingual undergraduates, academic writing, second language writing

Introduction

Bilingual and multilingual students have become a sizeable and increasing portion of undergraduate university populations all across the globe, especially those universities located in linguistically diverse areas and those that accept large numbers of international and heritage-language students. Such students commonly switch between their named languages in oral discourse, a practice called code-switching by linguists. What is not clear, however, is how frequently the same kind of linguistic flexibility appears in the domain of academic writing, which is expected to be produced in an institutionalized standard language, such as English, almost exclusively.

The purpose of this paper is to fill that gap by conducting a review and synthesis of the existing literature on code-switching and the related notion of translanguaging in relation to the academic writing of bilingual undergraduates (Wei, 2012). Instead of providing the results of empirical research itself, the paper attempts to sum up what has been said so far about the manifestations, reasons for, and perception of language switching in academic discourse by looking at the findings concerning young emergent bilinguals and postgraduates' academic writing to extrapolate them to the undergraduate context (Velasco & García, 2014).

There are three guiding questions for the review, which include: (a) What are the various forms of code switching found in bilingual students' academic texts, and in what way do they differ from code switching in speech? (b) What communicative/cognitive purposes does code-switching seem to serve for

the student writers? and (c) How do institutions of academia and teachers respond to code-switching in students' writings?

Theoretical Framework

There exist two theoretical traditions associated with research on code switching in writing. One of these is the structural-linguistic tradition. In this tradition, code switching is considered to be a rule-based grammatical phenomenon. The theory of equivalence constraint posits that code switching usually takes place only at places where the surface structures of the two languages converge and distinguishes between extrasentential and intersentential switches. The Matrix Language Frame model states that one language acts as the grammatical structure for bilingual speech while another language provides discrete elements in this structure. This model was originally conceived based on the spoken language, but has also been applied to written language later.

The second tradition is sociocultural and pedagogical and centers on the term translanguaging, which denotes the dynamic and integrative use of a bilingual's entire linguistic repertoire and not the switching between two separate and discrete languages (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Rafi & Morgan, 2023). While research into code-switching may seek to identify where and why switches take place within a linear text, research into translanguaging focuses on how multilingual students use their entire linguistic repertoire as a flexible toolkit to plan, draft, and revise academic text and the constraints placed by monolingual institutional conventions (Albarillo, 2018). This paper incorporates both traditions, using the structural approach to describe the nature of alternation in students' texts and translanguaging research to interpret its pedagogical importance (Canagarajah, 2011).

Forms of Code-Switching in Academic Writing

Studies on bilingual writer students, mostly based on young learners and graduate students but not undergraduates, have concluded that the phenomenon of language switching is uncommon in bilingual writers as compared to bilingual speech. For example, in his study of Spanish-English emergent bilingual first graders, reported that the code-switching behavior occurred much more in the oral discourse surrounding the writing process, such as planning and self-regulation discourse, than the actual writing product itself and that the two languages were not used in a symmetrical way: English language elements often intruded into the Spanish language discourse about writing, but the opposite was not true. This suggests the general trend in an additive bilingual setting, where the dominant language affects the other minority or heritage language unilaterally.

In postgraduate writing, a similar but distinct trend was reported in Chinese bilingual doctoral dissertation writers at a British university, in which written code-switching and translanguaging behaviors were concentrated in the early exploratory phase of the writing process in notes, outlines, and glosses and virtually absent from finished drafts (Zheng & Drybrough, 2023). The students utilized their first language to provide themselves with translations of the unknown vocabulary terms in English, to draft ideas before translating them into English, and to comment upon their sources; however, as the documents became closer to being submitted, there was convergence upon monolingual English. found similarly in younger bilingual writers that translanguaging was most observable during the planning and drafting phase and least observable in the finished product.

When it comes to undergraduates in particular, based on the literature from neighboring fields, it can be said that the use of visible code-switching in essays written by students is quite rare and usually intentional because of strong institutional encouragement for monolingual standard English. When it does

happen, it is generally done in one of several ways: single word or phrase insertions, typically nouns and expressions that cannot be accurately or culturally transferred into English; quotations of texts not in English, whether they are direct quotes or paraphrases; metalinguistic commentary where a term is mentioned in the student's first language and then defined or explained in English; and, in less formal writing, interventional code-switching for emphasis or humor. One of the few case studies of an undergraduate student's code-meshing when writing essays is that of a student from Saudi Arabia.

Functions of Code-Switching in Student Writing

In the literature, code switching in the writing process of bilingual students and writing discourse always tends to be purposeful and never random (Gort, 2012). Based on analysis, there are four main functions found across different studies on code switching used by bilingual students (San Ginés, 2016).

The first function of code-switching is evaluative or self-regulatory, as the writers switch between the two languages in order to evaluate or monitor their own writing process, such as moving from the weaker language to the stronger language to reflect on the structure of a particular text written in the weaker language. The second function of code switching is showing sociolinguistic or sociocultural proficiency, as writers use code switching to convey information about their identity, culture, or even address an imaginary bilingual reader who would understand a code switch better than a monolingual reader. The third function of code-switching is metalinguistic, which means that writers use it to provide a direct comparison or reflection on the two languages used Bodley, (2011). The fourth function of code switching is marking a change in topic, position, or grammar, similarly to how a paragraph change works in a monolingual text.

When a rhetorical aspect was added to this narrative, it became evident that code meshing, which means deliberately combining different languages within one piece of writing, can help implement recontextualization, voice, interactional and textualization rhetorics: the idea can be recontextualized through the presentation of it first in the first language and later in English, the writer can show her/his authorial voice by choosing not to translate certain terms in full, and interaction with non-English words can be used to create solidarity between the bilingual reader and the writer. In turn, Zheng found out that translanguaging can facilitate the process of self-regulation of the writer in the recursive stages of dissertation writing by helping to reduce cognitive load on a student who could write down complicated thoughts in his/her strongest language and then present them in English. In total, it seems like the change of language among bilingual undergraduate students is more often associated with certain rhetorical and cognitive strategies rather than poor English proficiency.

Institutional and Instructor Responses

The gap between the reality of multilingual students and the expectations of monolingual academic institutions is one of the common topics in the existing research. Examining the language preferences of foreign-born students in academic libraries, asserted that the cultural and linguistic background of students influenced their information seeking, reading, and processing of academic information, and stressed that the institutions functioning on the presumption of English monolinguality may exclude from their process exactly the linguistic skills which help bilingual students to become efficient researchers and thinkers. Further, suggested that the perception of bilingual individuals' languages as separate and independent systems, which have to be isolated from each other during any formal situation, distorts the reality of multilingual cognition and communication.

Another dimension that is worth considering is the perceptions held by the instructor. As the phenomenon of code-switching has negative connotations among monolingual readers as well as those

who belong to dominant groups in linguistic and cultural terms because of their tendency to view code-switching as an indicator of inadequate English language skills or professionalism, students who study two languages may feel compelled to avoid using code-switching in academic assignments for graded purposes despite its rhetorical potential in such situations. The problem is reinforced by the fact that the criteria used for assessing multilingual rhetorical techniques in the course of grading and evaluation are not usually clearly articulated.

Pedagogical Implications: Toward Code-Meshing Pedagogies

This dilemma has led many researchers to advocate pedagogical techniques where students' complete set of language skills is viewed as an asset in the process of academic writing and not as a problem that should be eradicated. Code meshing refers to a pedagogical technique whereby the teacher guides the students into recognizing and improving their natural ability to utilize their own translinguaging strategies; in other words, students develop metacognitive awareness of how mixing languages can benefit their writing process (Wright et al., 2015). Such an approach has been put forward within the framework of additive bilingual education, which considers a student's first language as an asset and not as a barrier.

Translation/glossing strategies used by postgraduate multilingual writers, such as first-language note-taking, first-language outlining, and bilingual glossing of technical terms when writing, provide a useful basis from which to begin teaching undergraduate writers how to write since they enable students to deploy their entire linguistic range at the mentally challenging initial phases of composition yet produce monolingual outcomes where needed. It is equally important for writing center tutors and composition instructors working with bilingual undergraduates to differentiate between instances of code-switching that indicate a certain rhetorical or cognitive strategy and instances of English language deficiencies while giving feedback, as this failure may lead to undermining an advanced form of bilingualism in the name of error correction.

Limitations of the Current Evidence Base

Most of the empirical literature discussed in this paper has been undertaken with populations that were not traditional undergraduate students: emerging bilingual children in dual language elementary schools who have graduated and postgraduate dissertation writers or individual cases involving undergraduate writers. Systematic studies of code-switching in undergraduate assignments are still quite rare. It is not, therefore, possible at this stage to make claims about the frequency of code-switching among bilingual undergraduate students, differences in patterns of code-switching depending on the discipline or type of assignment, or the effect of tutor feedback on such switching practices during the period of an entire degree program.

Conclusion

From what can be gathered from existing literature, code-switching in the context of academic writing by bilingual undergraduate students should not be regarded as a deficiency or even an error but rather as a calculated act, motivated by the same considerations that determine bilingual speech in terms of cognition, rhetoric, and identity issues, mediated by the constraints of academic writing genres and the monolingual setting of universities. In other words, structural theories of code switching can help identify where and when the switches take place, whereas the theory of translinguaging can help explain why such switches are important pedagogically: the switches show the whole linguistic resources of a bilingual student which the monolingual standards force him/her to abandon. The research involving analysis of coursework

writing done by bilingual students, including more language pairs, different disciplines, and institutions, could help put this knowledge into practice.

References

- Albarillo, F. (2018). Information code-switching: A study of language preferences in academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 79(5), 624. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.5.624>
- Bodley, M. S. (2011). Syntactic aspects of code-switching in Oxford. *Code-Switching in Early English*, 76, 115. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110253368.115>
- Canagarajah, S. (2011). Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging. *The modern language journal*, 95(3), 401-417. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01207.x>
- Creese, A., & Blackledge, A. (2015). Translanguaging and identity in educational settings. *Annual review of applied linguistics*, 35, 20-35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000233>
- Gort, M. (2012). Code-switching patterns in the writing-related talk of young emergent bilinguals. *Journal of literacy research*, 44(1), 45-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X11431626>
- Rafi, A. S. M., & Morgan, A. M. (2023). Translanguaging and power in academic writing discourse: The case of a Bangladeshi university. *Classroom Discourse*, 14(2), 192-214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2022.2046621>
- San Ginés, A. (2016). Review of the book by Gottfried Schweiger and Gunter Graf a Philosophical Examination of Social Justice and Child Poverty. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. *Dilemata*, (21), 285-289.
- Velasco, P., & García, O. (2014). Translanguaging and the writing of bilingual learners. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 37(1), 6-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2014.893270>
- Wei, L. (2012). Conceptual and methodological issues in bilingualism and multilingualism research. *The handbook of bilingualism and multilingualism*, 26-51. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118332382.ch2>
- Wright, W. E., Boun, S., & García, O. (2015). Introduction: Key concepts and issues in bilingual and multilingual education. *The handbook of bilingual and multilingual education*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118533406.ch1>
- Zheng, Z. Z., & Drybrough, A. G. (2023). Translanguaging in the academic writing process: Exploring Chinese bilingual postgraduate students' practices at a British university. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 65, 101269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2023.101269>