

Does Code Switching Work for Young Children? A Case Study of English Language Learners

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Abstract

The study examines if a code switching technique demonstrated by the teacher helps English language learners acquire a second language. Nineteen preschoolers from families speaking Spanish as their primary language participated in the study for seven weeks. Structured classroom observations, pre-and post-test checklists, anecdotal notes, and the Speaking Component Scale were used to measure children's scores in speaking, listening and writing in English. Data from the Speaking Component Scale showed an increase in grammar and expressive language scores after learning about the code switching technique. However, the children scored low in the reading component of identifying concepts about print and text features post-test. The code switching technique does appear to support the acquisition of a second language for English language learners.

Keywords: English language learners; Code Switching; Young children

1. Introduction

Teachers of young children are unsure of which teaching techniques and approaches are effective when it comes to teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). The United States Department of Education reported that there were approximately 11.2 million ELLs in school in 2009.¹² Many of these children speak English as their other language. It is critical to address the needs of this population by improving instruction in English that would help their school achievement. The present case study examined if code switching when demonstrated by the teacher helps ELLs acquire a second language. The study was guided by the following question:

1. Does code switching practice support young children from Hispanic backgrounds in acquiring a second language?
 - If yes, which techniques in code switching are effective in assisting young children in acquiring a second language?
 - If yes, which language skills (verbal or written communication) show improvement?

Code switching is defined as alternating between two languages or linguistic codes within a single sentence or conversation.¹⁰ In the present study, the code switching technique was used by the teacher switching between English and Spanish during opening circle, calendar, book reading, giving explanations, and instructions to the children.

1.1. Literature Review

Researchers have suggested educators should teach ELLs to recognize cognates and use visuals instead of focusing on grammar to help make connections to first language vocabulary.³ In addition, educators need to move away from teaching only grammar through structured activities. Kenny revealed ELLs use correct grammar but it is not always grammatically correct and observed words learned through the spoken pathway are likely to be learned more easily.⁶ Burns and Helman reported focusing on rote recitation of grammar rules can help ELLs understand English better.¹ On the other hand, Zhong-yuan and Shu-yuan reported listening skills are the most critical for students who are Chinese to learn English compared to reading, writing, and speaking. They studied fourth- and fifth- grade children from China who immigrated to the U.S. and found listening skills led to understanding the meaning in the correct context of speech.¹⁴

Educators should be aware ELLs process information differently than students who speak English as their primary language.⁵ The bilingual brain inhibits word candidates in non-target language and from target language in the Inhibiting Model. ELLs brains have to inhibit word candidates in the language they are not using at the current time and choose from words in their target language.¹¹ When thinking of a word, ELLs have to select between their native language and other languages before speaking.

Findings by Mede and Gurel suggest young children who are bilingual often have difficulties with pragmatic skills when using the code-switching technique. In addition they also display errors when choosing articles during cross-linguistic transfer.⁸

ELLs who were in the Transitional Bilingual Education program showed improvement in English oral vocabulary and early letter-word identification skills.² Most ELLs are able to express themselves in writing when they can think and write in their native language first and then move to English.¹³ This technique is called “code switching” or mixed language. Studies have shown that code switching is an effective strategy to support children from Hispanic backgrounds to learn English.⁴

2. Methodology

A total of 19 preschoolers from Spanish backgrounds in two classrooms participated in the study. The mean age of the children was 56 months (Table 1). The school is located in a rural area but has a high population of families speaking Spanish as their primary language.

Table 1. demographic information of the sample

Age (months)	Number of Children
36-47	1
48-59	13
60-72	5
Total	19
Mean age 56 months	

Data were collected for seven weeks for a total of 1,440 minutes. The ten observations lasted approximately two hours each. The children were observed during opening circle (which includes songs and calendar review), story time, and center time. The structured classroom observations were focused on how the teacher interacted with the children. During the observations, anecdotal notes and the Speaking Component Scale were used to assess the children’s writing, speaking, listening and reading skills.

Four sources were used in data collection:

1. Structured classroom observations
2. Anecdotal notes
3. Checklists from pre-and post-test on children’s writing, speaking, listening and reading
4. Speaking Component Scale (fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and expressive language)

Children were tested with a pre-and post-test in language skills (writing, speaking, listening, and reading). The results from the language skills showed children scored the highest in speaking. Speaking skills were further analyzed using the Speaking Component Scale to find out in which component of speech the children appeared to be most proficient.

3. Data

Data from pre- and post-test from the checklist on children’s writing, speaking, listening and reading were analyzed descriptively. Overall results showed children’s scores have increased in all language skill areas, except in the reading component. The portion of the reading component most children had difficulty with was identifying concepts about print and text features. Table 2 shows the frequencies of children’s scores in writing, speaking, listening, and reading.

Table 2. frequency children’s score in language skills in pre-and post-test

Writing	1		2		3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	5	16	6	15	4	12
Speaking	1		2		3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	15	19	8	13	7	15
Listening	1		2		3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	13	15	10	14	9	10
Reading	1		2		3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	11	15	15	9	10	14

*Writing 1 = Labels objects, pictures, diagrams; 2 = Produces icons, symbols, words, phrases, to convey messages; 3 = Draws in response to a prompt. Speaking 1 = Names objects, people and pictures; 2 = Answers W-H questions related to a story; 3 = Describes events, pictures, characters in a story. Listening 1 = Points to stated objects, pictures, words; 2 = Follows one-step oral directions; 3= Makes oral statements about objects, figures and illustrations. Reading 1 = Matches icons and symbols to words, phrases or environmental print; 2 = Identifies concepts about print and text features; 3= Show understanding and interest of materials.

Notes were transcribed and categorized according to four themes: 1. Teacher speaks in English and restates in Spanish; 2. Teacher mixed English and Spanish in explanations, directions, and answers to children’s questions; 3. Teacher reads in English and translates in Spanish; and 4. Children speak in Spanish and teacher translates in English. These themes are listed in the item descriptors in Tables 3 and 4. Data from pre- and post-test results of the language components and the Speaking Component Scale were analyzed descriptively to find out if the code switching technique used by the teachers increased children’s scores in speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

Data from all sources revealed the code switching technique does support the acquisition of English for young children from Hispanic backgrounds in this sample. Concrete learning and visual aids provided children with visual and auditory experiences. A combination of auditory and visual experiences appeared to be the most effective techniques used by the teacher in the present study. Most of the children also showed improvement in verbal communication.

Table 3 below shows the frequencies of the use of various techniques demonstrated by the teacher. The most frequent techniques the teacher used were teaching aids, reading the lines in English and restating in Spanish with highest frequencies of 10 and 10, respectively in rating “always.”

Table 3. frequency of teaching technique used by teacher

Teaching Technique	1	2	3	4	5
Use Teaching Aids	0	3	0	5	10
Personal Interaction with Students in English and Spanish	0	0	2	2	6
Listen to Students	0	0	0	2	8
Correct Student Mistakes in English	0	0	3	3	4
Read the Lines in English	0	0	0	0	5
Read the Lines in Spanish	2	4	4	0	4
State Information and Explain in English	0	0	0	0	2
Explain in Spanish	2	3	4	1	2
Ask Questions in English and Restate in Spanish	0	0	7	3	10
Ask Questions in Spanish and Restate in English	5	3	2	0	8
Total	9	13	22	16	59

*1 = Never; 2= Seldom; 3= Occasionally; 4 = Often; 5= Always

Data in Table 4 shown below supported the use of English as medium of communication among ELLs in both classes. The most frequent learning behavior the children used was simple speech, and pausing to find words with highest frequencies of 9 and 4, respectively in the rating “always.” Children often engaged in lessons by sitting properly and maintaining eye contact to listen to the teacher. In addition, the children often spoke using complete sentences, pronounced words correctly, and chose appropriate words in English.

Table 4. frequency of children’s learning behavior in English

Learning Behavior	1	2	3	4	5
Use Complete Sentences	1	1	5	2	1
Use Complete Utterances	1	0	3	4	2
Use Simple Speech	0	0	0	1	9
Pause to Find Words	0	1	3	2	4
Engage in the Lessons (Eye Contact)	0	0	2	5	3
Engage in the Lesson (Sit appropriately and Listen)	0	1	2	5	2
Pronounce Words Correctly	0	0	1	8	1
Choose Appropriate Words	0	0	1	7	2
Total	2	3	17	32	24

* 1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Often; 5 = Always

Table 5 below shows the overall children’s means and standard deviations on the pre- and post-test administrations of the Speaking Component Scale. Speaking components consisted of fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and expressive language. As shown, Class Two had a higher mean score on the post-test compared to Class One.

Table 5. overall scores of speaking components scale

Class	Pre-Test		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD
One	12.33	1.7	14.33	1.3
Two	9.23	1.4	16.85	2.5

The language component showed the highest scores among the language skills were in the speaking category. Therefore we further analyzed the results from the Speaking Component Scale to find out on which components of speech children scored the highest.

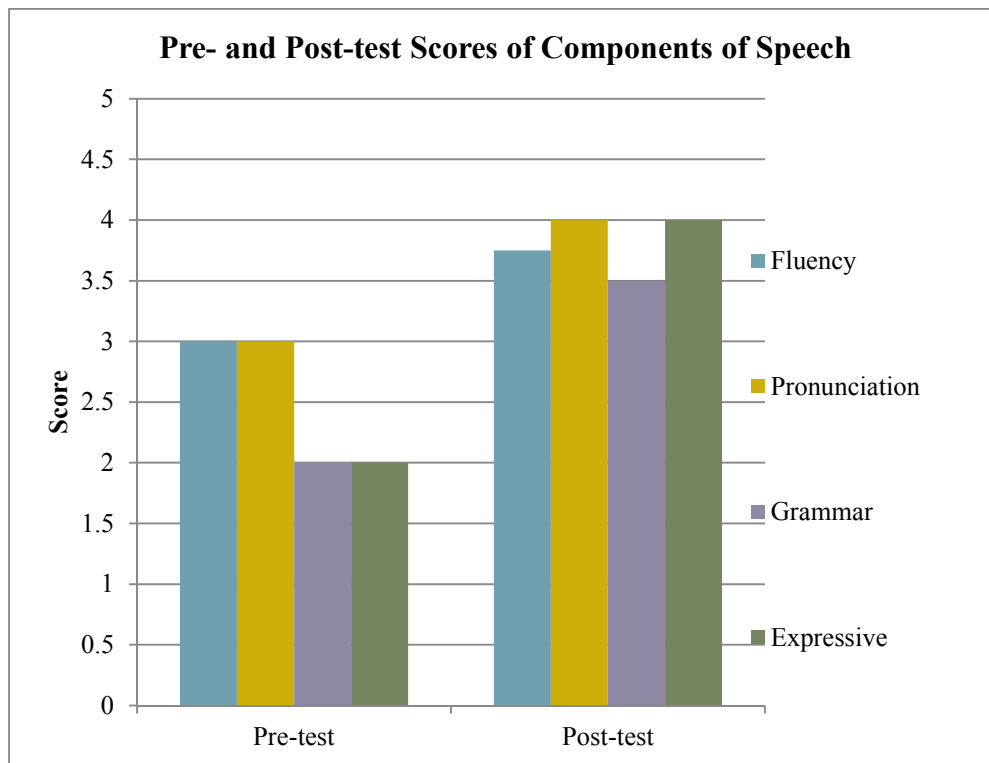


Figure 1. Pre- and Post-test Scores of Components of Speech
 Note: 1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Often; 5 = Always

Figure 1 shows the scores from the pre- and post-test administration of the Speaking Component Scale. Expressive language and grammar showed the highest incremental improvement of 2 points and 1.5 points, respectively.

4. Conclusion

Data from all the sources revealed the code switching technique does support the acquisition of a second language for young learners from Hispanic backgrounds in this sample. Concrete learning using visual aids provided children with both visual and auditory experiences. These practices appeared to be the most effective code switching technique used by the teacher. Songs on CDs, along with charts written in English and Spanish, and books with CDs in both English and Spanish, helped the children to figure out the words and sounds. The teacher restated questions and made statements in Spanish to help the children understand English. The children in this study benefitted from a

variety of instructional strategies, such as the use of technology to improve their listening skills to assist in the acquisition of English as a second language. Research conducted by Nero revealed the importance of preparing teachers to work with bilingual students based on ESL pedagogy. The ESL pedagogy proposed to train teachers is based upon three components including Language Identity, Awareness, and Development, also known as LIAD, to expand language acquisition in English Language Learners.⁹ Educators may want to consider the possibilities of hiring teacher candidates with experiences and backgrounds in relation to theories of language acquisition, language teaching and curriculum design for young children learning English as a second language.⁷

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