Circumventing Plagiarism: Building Trust via Code Switching

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Summary: When English Language Teachers (ELTs) ask students to do tasks that are above their linguistic levels, they may resort to plagiarism. I will describe a case study in which I employed code-switching to circumvent the temptation to plagiarize by building trust with my students and providing comprehensible input, which resulted in improved student performance and language acquisition..

Keywords: code switching, building trust, plagiarism, ChatGPT

Introduction

How does asking language learners to do tasks above their linguistic level impact the temptation to use ChatGPT to write essays or presentation scripts? How do we as English Language Teachers (ELTs) bridge the gaps between the curriculum and our students' linguistic levels to prevent plagiarism and build trust? One way to circumvent plagiarism and build trust is to code switch. In this article, I will describe a situation in which the curricula I had to follow was asking students to work above their linguistic levels, and consequently why and how I chose to intentionally lean into code switching to build trust with my students to prevent plagiarism.

The Case Study: the Issue

Spring Quarter of 2024, I was assigned to teach two content-based instruction, English support courses on sustainability to a group of students from Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. Ritsumeikan has been sending students every Spring Quarter to the University of Washington International and English Language Programs (UW IELP) for approximately 20 years. Following the pattern over the past 20 years, the 2024 students who entered the UW program had English skills ranging from high-beginner to intermediate levels. However, the current curricula for the 2 Spring Quarter courses, Academic Preparation for Sustainability, and Academic Listening and Speaking, are currently written for students with advanced linguistic levels (UW IELP, 2024). From my personal experience, having taught Japanese students for many years in Japan and the US, Japanese students will often either shut down or plagiarize when asked to do tasks above their linguistic levels. As I planned these courses, my main goal was to build trust and bridge the gap between the curricula and my students' linguistic levels to deter them from turning to plagiarism and/or shutting down. I wanted to build trust by using engaging, level-appropriate materials on sustainability. When I taught the Summer Quarter 4-week English support class "Business English" for this Ritsumeikan program on sustainability in 2023, I found myself code switching to quickly build trust with that cohort, who also had English skills ranging from high-beginner to intermediate. In 2024, I decided to intentionally lean into code switching mostly for the students' benefit (and somewhat to mine as a Japanese language learner).

The Case Study: the Curricula for English Support Courses

The Academic Preparation for Sustainability English support course meets Monday through Friday for 50 minutes over 10 weeks and expects the students, by the end of the course, to be able to "practice skills students use in the university classroom" (UW IELP, 2024) including:

- improving academic writing, reading, and listening skills building on sustainability,
- improving speaking skills (discussion and presentation) in the context of sustainability,
- applying critical thinking skills while analyzing issues in sustainability, and
- increasing academic vocabulary comprehension specifically for sustainability (UW IELP, 2024).

Further, the Academic Listening and Speaking course, which also meets Monday through Friday for 50 minutes per day for 10 weeks, expects the students, by the end of the course, to be able to:

- recognize relationships between main ideas and supporting details from spoken sources,
- develop note-taking skills and identify a speaker's opinion, intention, and tone,

- summarize and discuss information from spoken sources (e.g., TED Talks) using effective discussion skills,
- exchange ideas and opinions through discussion, and apply personal knowledge and experience to provide logical support, and
- become familiar with and use common phrases for use in presentations and in classroom communication (UW IELP, 2024).

In other words, the expectation for both courses is that all the students will be advanced users of English by the end of Spring Quarter. To bring high-beginning students to an advanced English level from the beginning of the quarter by the end is challenging because high-beginners enter the course being able to:

read and comprehend simple general English with short sentences, simple grammar, and simple vocabulary,

- read approximately at a US grade level 4,
- identify and understand main and supporting ideas,
- use clues to make predictions, guess meaning from context,
- identify type of text, and organization of ideas, and
- show control of basic verb tenses, simple and compound sentences in speaking (UW IELP, 2015).

For the students who are initially at an intermediate English level getting them to the advanced level by the end of the quarter is more realistic because they enter the course being able to:

- read general, academic English which has been somewhat simplified for English language learners,
- read an academic reading textbook for language learners and additional readings from magazines and websites,
- read approximately at US grade levels 7 ~ 12,
- show awareness of audience, style, and structure of texts,
- analyze ideas and information,
- connect ideas from texts to personal knowledge and experience,
- construct and discuss logically supported opinions on ideas and information in texts,
- apply increasingly sophisticated reading skills such as distinguishing fact versus opinion,
- show control of intermediate grammar (common verb tenses, a variety of sentence structures) in speaking, and
- begin to summarize (UW IELP, 2015).

Literature Review: Defining Code Switching and Its Changing Perceptions

Before I explain why I opted to lean into code switching (CS) to bridge the gap between the curricula and the students' linguistic levels, I will begin by defining code switching and then I will discuss how perceptions of CS have changed. Poplak's 1980 three-part definition of CS has been confirmed by Jendra (2010). The first type of CS is *intrasentential* CS: in which a word, phrase, or clause of a language one is learning (L2) is inserted into one's native language (L1). The second type is *intersentential* CS: characterized by inserting a word, phrase, or clause in of either the L1 or L2 into an utterance in the other language. The third and final type is *tag* CS: when L1 exclamations, terms of address, and/or discourse markers are mixed into L2 utterances.

Now that we understand how to define CS, let us turn to how the perceptions of CS have changed. Initially CS was not positively perceived by early researchers because it was viewed as an obstacle to language acquisition (Chaudron, 1988). However, more recent research acknowledges the positive role of CS as it aids in classroom management, language analysis, grammar explanations, error correction, comprehension checks, instructions, and cross-cultural issues (Gulzar, 2014).

Literature Review: Why CS?

Having defined CS and how perceptions of it have shifted, I will turn to why I chose to intentionally employ CS. I opted to lean into CS to bridge the gap between the curricula and the students' linguistic levels to build trust, provide comprehensible input, prevent plagiarism, and improve performance and language acquisition.

First, building student-teacher trust is crucial in language learning to create safe environments in which to take risks (Blum, 2020). CS enables instructors to build closer relationships with students because it allows for more natural, easier classroom interaction, which in turn encourages more active participation (Sakaria and Priyana, 2015). Furthermore, CS contributes to more supportive learning environments in which instructors can build solidarity and relationships with students (Widia, 2015). Building trust then allows teachers to focus on providing comprehensible input. Where the Grammar Translation Method is prevalent and when students' levels are low, students tend to use their L1 as a crutch (Bhatti, 2018). Thus, when instructors intentionally employ CS to improve L2 acquisition by pairing lower- and higher-level students, CS facilitates learning (Puspawati, 2018) because CS is particularly efficacious in clarifying abstract, difficult concepts (Bhatti, 2018).

Turning to circumventing plagiarism, when students' linguistic competencies are below the linguistic tasks they are being asked to do, they feel pressure to earn good grades, and/or they feel pressure to graduate, students may resort to plagiarism (Darwish and Sadeqi, 2016). Many English language learners (ELLs) plagiarize because writing is difficult: not only do ELLs lack the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage knowledge, they also struggle to come up with ideas (Darwish and Sadeqi, 2016). While some students are ignorant of what constitutes plagiarism, others are aware but lack the summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting skills to avoid it (Selemani et al, 2018). While CS allows instructors to quickly build trust, provide comprehensible input, and prevent plagiarism, it also improves student performance and language acquisition

because it facilitates understanding and production of complex ideas like sustainability (Maluleke, 2019).

Preliminary Methodology: Leaning into CS

As we can see from the literature review above, there are multiple reasons to employ CS, so now I will explain how I incorporated it. First, I scaffolded a lot of support and examples into both courses. For example, in Academic Preparation for Sustainability, I chose an intermediate level academic reading, writing, and vocabulary unit on climate change while I opted to use listening segments with transcripts and controllable speed for Academic Listening and Speaking. For both courses, I provided organizational language for agreeing ("I agree with the author because"), disagreeing ("I disagree because"), stating opinions ("I think that"), writing reflection papers, and giving presentations; and templates for notes and reflection papers. In addition, I employed a weekly team building activity of asking them to discuss a relationship-building question (e.g. aisle or window on the airplane, what is the scariest animal, what is the best sandwich or lunch, etc.) and to organize themselves in alphabetical order and count off by 5 to put them into weekly working groups of 3. The students contributed their own team-building activity: they played the Werewolf Game between classes. Finally, every day while the students worked on tasks in their weekly working groups, I sat with each group so quieter students could ask questions one-on-one. Now that I have explained the supports that I scaffolded throughout the courses, I will turn to how I incorporated CS: I kept a running vocabulary list on the board (English-English, English-Japanese), added the words to a running list on a Canvas Discussion Board to which the students contributed, and encouraged the students to keep vocabulary lists in their notes and allowed them to CS if they wanted. I also allowed students to CS during class: to translate, explain and discuss abstract concepts in sustainability in their L1 with one another as needed.

The Result

As a result of being intentional about employing CS, my students acquired the vocabulary and organizational language to talk about the complex issues around sustainability, including the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). Hopefully, they also returned to Japan being able to discuss the UN SDGs in English and Japanese, with positive associations of using English and thoughts of using it in daily life. On a personal level, I improved my academic competence in Japanese.

Discussion: Future Case Studies

I plan to replicate this study with the 2025 cohort of students. I plan to further clarify and define the methodology and to collect data as to how much language they acquired so that I can gather data to determine whether CS works for this group of students.

Conclusion

If you find yourself teaching a monolingual group and you have some fluency in their native language, CS might improve your relationship with your students and improve their English acquisition. If you are teaching a multilingual group, find out what your institution's policies are around CS and translating documents, and then consider allowing lower-level students to CS.

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