Motivations for Code-mixing Sinhala into English among Teenagers

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ABSTRACT

In bi/multi-lingual settings most individuals have the tendency to mix words from the languages that they have access to, which is termed code-mixing. The aim of this paper was to find out the motivations for code-mixing Sinhala into English among eighty teenagers aged 15 - 16 from two selected schools in Colombo 4. The participants were selected using the simple random sampling whilst the survey technique was employed to gather data of this study. The four psycholinguistic motivations - filling the lexical gaps which arise due to language deficits and the non-availability of English terms, the relative ease of accessibility and the medium-of-learning effect - were acknowledged as reasons for code-mixing by over 50% of the respondents. Filling the lexical gaps which occur owing to the non-availability of English words was identified as the most frequent psycholinguistic motivation for code-mixing by the respondents. On the other hand, three sociopragmatic motivations (taking into consideration the interlocutor's language proficiency, displaying affability and gaining peer recognition) were identified as motivations for code-mixing by more than 60% of the selected teenagers. Displaying membership of the social class and seeking attention were not distinguished as reasons for code-mixing by most of the respondents. The overall findings of the study gave perceptive insights into the teenager's use of English and their attitudes towards it.

Keywords — Code-mixing, Motivations, Teenagers

1. INTRODUCTION

In bi/multi-lingual settings speakers have the tendency to mix words from the languages that they have access to, which is termed code-mixing. Kachru (1983) defied the prevalent beliefs of his time and defined code-mixing as a strategy used for the transferring of linguistic units from one language to another [1]. Hock (1986) pointed out that code-mixing consists of the insertion of content word from one language into the grammatical structure of another [2]. Hamers and Blanc (1989) opined that code-mixing is a strategy that transfers elements of all linguistic levels and units ranging from a lexical item to a sentence [3]. Senaratne (2009) contended that these definitions reiterated that code-mixing refers to a strategy that transfers elements of all linguistic levels and units, ranging from a lexical item to a sentence [4].

There are two types of motivations for code-mixing: psycholinguistic and sociopragmatic. The psycholinguistic motivations include the following factors: filling the lexical gaps, the relative ease of accessibility and the medium-of-learning effect. Yen (2009) noted that speakers code-mix to fill the lexical gaps which arise due to their language incompetency and the non-availability of equivalent English terms [5]. Yen (2009) expressed that the frequency of usage for a word, influences its entrenchment in the mental lexicon, which leads to code-mixing [5]. The medium-of-learning-effect is inextricably linked to the aforementioned psycholinguistic motivations. Li (2008) argued that when a concept is introduced in language X, that concept is psycholinguistically mediated through language X, though the same idea is encountered later in language Y [6]. The sociopragmatic motivations include the following: displaying membership of the social class, the interlocutor's language proficiency, displaying affability, gaining peer recognition and seeking attention. Certain speakers use language, especially English, to exhibit his/her affiliations to the "upper class." A speaker may also choose to code-mix based on the level of competence of the interlocutor. Additionally, Tsui (2005) explained that code-mixing is employed to bridge the gap between interlocutors since mixing words is regarded as a form of conveying intimacy [7]. Furthermore, code-mixing is used to gain peer recognition as well as to arrest the attention of others.

Even though there is a great number of studies regarding code-mixing, there exists no adequate research conducted on its motivations among teenagers. This study, therefore, attempts to explore the motivations for code-mixing Sinhala into English among eighty teenagers aged 15 - 16, who attended two selected schools in Colombo 4.

2. METHODOLOGY

Eighty participants, including twenty six boys and fifty four girls, whose age ranged between 15 – 16, were selected for this study. The participants were selected for this study using the simple random sampling. The female

participants attended Holy Family Convent whereas the male participants were from St. Peter's College. Since both are "prestigious" semi-government schools which are located in Colombo 4, the vast majority of the students come from "middle" and "upper middle class" socio-economic fabrics. Not only that, the two selected schools have predominantly English-speaking environments because English is the First Language (L1) of the majority of students. The selected sample comprised of students whose L1 is English, but who follow the local curriculum in Sinhala medium.

The survey technique was employed to gather data for this study, which included nine questions on code-mixing Sinhala into English. The first four questions of the questionnaire were based on psycholinguistic motivations whilst the remaining five questions focused on sociopragmatic motivations. The participants were asked to tick the situations pertaining to the aforementioned psycholinguistic and sociopragmatic motivations. Afterward, the number of responses for each motivation was tabulated in order to investigate the reasons for code-mixing Sinhala into English among the selected group.

This study employed both primary and secondary data to arrive at the overall findings. The former were collected through the said questionnaire while the latter were mainly gathered through books and articles from journals. It should also be noted that the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all teenagers owing to the limited size of the sample chosen. The overall observations are limited in terms of time and methodology, since this study was conducted in May, 2014 using a selected instrument.

3. CONCLUSION

The researcher intended to find out the motivations for code-mixing Sinhala into English among eighty teenagers whose age ranged between 15 – 16. The participants' response for each question is illustrated in the chart given below:

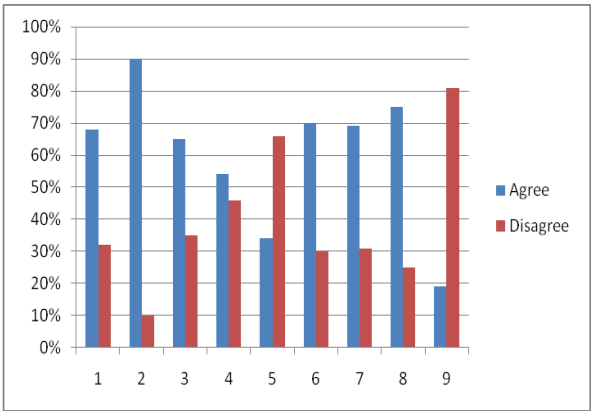

Table I: Keys to the Chart

Number	Question
1	Lexical gaps: due to language deficits
2	Lexical gaps: due to non-availability of English words
3	Relative ease of accessibility
4	Medium-of-learning effect
5	Displaying membership of the "high class"
6	Considering the interlocutor's language proficiency
7	Displaying affability
8	Gaining peer recognition
9	Seeking peer attention

This study revealed that nearly 70% participants code-mixed Sinhala into English due to lexical gaps which occurred as a result of their language deficits. The participants shared overwhelming agreement on engaging in code-mixing due to the non-availability of equivalent English words. Over 60% of the total participants admitted that the relative ease of accessibility stimulated them to engage in code-mixing. On the other hand, over 50% of the teenagers declared that the medium-of-learning effect triggered them to mix Sinhala words into English. Nevertheless, a considerable number of respondents (more than 40%) had not considered the medium-of-learning-effect as a motivation for code-mixing. Accordingly, the four psycholinguistic motivations (filling the lexical gaps which occur due to language deficits and non-existence of English equivalent terms, the relative ease of accessibility and the medium-of-learning effect) were acknowledged as reasons for code-mixing by over 50% of the total participants. Filling the lexical gaps due to the non-availability of English words was identified as the most frequent motivation for code-mixing amongst these motivations.

In addition, it was found out that almost 70% of these teenagers refuted the notion that code-mixing Sinhala into English would enable a speaker to display his/her association with the "elite class." On the contrary, 70% of the selected teenagers took into consideration the interlocutor's language proficiency prior to engaging in code-mixing. A great number of participants declared that they code-mixed Sinhala into English with the intention of being cordial to the interlocutors. Similarly, over 70% of the selected group used code-mixing to gain peer recognition. Conversely, the majority of teenagers (over 80%) denied that they used code-mixing to arrest the attention of peers. Accordingly, three sociopragmatic motivations (taking into consideration the interlocutor's language proficiency, displaying affability, gaining peer recognition) were acknowledged as reasons for code-mixing Sinhala into English by over 60% of the total

participants. However, displaying membership of the social class and seeking attention were not upheld as reasons for code-mixing by most of the participants.

The overall findings of this study manifested that the majority of teenagers code-mixed Sinhala into English with the intention of filling the lexical gaps which mainly arose due to the non-availability of equivalent English terms. This indicates that the participants were aware that certain sentiments cannot be aptly expressed in English, primarily due to cultural and regional disparities. The participants had no reservations about Sri Lankanizing the English language by adding a local flavour to it through code-mixing. It is evident that they did not venerate English as "a language of the West," to which the non-native speakers should never alter any of its form. Unlike the "conservative speakers" who intentionally shun code-mixing, the teenagers opted to adapt English to suit the local context by mixing Sinhala words to it. In fact, the teenagers were not hesitant to transgress the linguistic boundaries which are heavily protected by the "gatekeepers of Standard English." Moreover, the respondents admitted that certain Sinhala terms tend to get registered in the "mental dictionary" due to constant use. The respondents were solely interested in communicating in English, even if it requires occasional use of Sinhala terms. It further proves that the teenagers did not advocate the concept of "untainted English," as they were of the view that certain Sinhala terms are indeed a part of their English vocabulary. Thus, these teenagers were keen on raising their voice through code-mixing, contrary to their "traditional counterparts" who were virtually "voiceless," despite blindly adhering to grammatical rules and conventions of the English language.

On the other hand, the participants had a penchant for code-mixing when they were not familiar with the particular English words. The "privilege" of employing code-mixing as a means of "latent strategy" in times of occasional "language catastrophe" was enjoyed by the participants, even though they possessed a high level of competence in English. In the same manner, being aware that code-mixing can be used as a covert tactic to conceal one's English language discrepancies, would certainly boost the confidence of the Second Language (L2) learners of English, to speak in English sans trepidation. Hence, a speaker will not be marked for his/her language deficits as code-mixing would "assist" him/her from encountering any "language blockage." Therefore, the utility value of code-mixing Sinhala into English was rightly applied by the respondents, in spite of having a high level of competence in English.

Most participants claimed that they did not mix Sinhala words into English when speaking about their subjects taught in school. Presumably, these teenagers engaged in such discussions in Sinhala owing to their non-familiarity with the English terminologies of various disciplines. Moreover, they would have refrained from speaking in English as they can communicate at ease in Sinhala about subject-related discussions without code-mixing Sinhala into English. Thus, despite possessing a high aptitude of English, the selected group preferred speaking in Sinhala to English, to avoid any potential "impediment" in their conversations.

This study also gave insights into the polarized statuses of English and Sinhala languages in Sri Lanka. The former indubitably holds a superior position as it is regarded the "inherent property of the high class." On the contrary, the latter is not affixed any labels and possessing a smattering knowledge of it is considered a "mark of pride." The inaccessibility of the vast majority of Sri Lankans to English has amounted to the widespread notion that English is inextricably linked to the "elite class." Further, the English language is looked up to as the "badge of social prestige" simply because only a small number of Sri Lankans are privileged to use it as their L1. In this scenario, a speaker is immediately bestowed "a linkage to high social status" if s/he possesses competence in English. Not only that, such speakers are "generally said to have the tendency" to mix English words into Sinhala, on account of their "inept knowledge of the local language." A speaker may ideally exhibit one's social footing through code-mixing since language acts as the class marker in local contexts. Likewise, the teenagers were fully aware that a speaker can anticipate being the cynosure of any given setting by code-mixing English into Sinhala, not vice versa. Having appropriately recognized these popular claims, the respondents unanimously agreed that they did not intend to seek attention of the interlocutors through code-mixing Sinhala into English.

In addition, the participants admitted that code-mixing Sinhala into English was instrumental not only in gaining peer recognition but also in conveying intimacy. It can be inferred that such viewpoints stem from the celebration of code-mixing as a "fashionable phenomenon." Peer pressure too would have led them to code-mix English into Sinhala. The teenagers were able to perceive that the L2 learners of English generally maintained an emotional distance from the English language, which was in contrast with the attachment that they have fostered as L1 users of English. Therefore, these participants had the propensity to mix Sinhala words into English not only to obtain peer recognition but also to sound affable to the interlocutors.

On the other hand, the respondents were mindful of the level of competence of the interlocutors with

whom they used English. It shows that they prevented from mercilessly wielding English as a hegemonic weapon to the L2 learners of English, who were not very fluent in it. Instead, the respondents were interested in fashioning English into a comprehensible language to their counterparts, through code-mixing Sinhala into English. The participants' manner of thinking is highly laudable as it encourages the L2 learners of English, to use English devoid of inhibition. Nevertheless, the so-called not pot cases are often derided, especially for their "deviant pronunciation." The respondents' sensitization to the issues encountered by the L2 learners of English implied that they were not against shaping English into a "speaker-friendly language." Similarly, Gunesekera (2005) propagated that the acceptance of code-mixing signified the growing bilingualism of the English-speaking public in Sri Lanka, which would in turn make a positive impact on the acceptance and awareness of Sri Lankan English [8]. Interestingly, the teenagers' accommodating approach is largely analogous to the government's initiative *Speak English Our Way*, which endeavours to instil confidence in L2 learners of English in Sri Lanka to speak English in their daily activities. Thus, the democratization of the English language will be made possible through an attitudinal transformation which endorses code-mixing Sinhala into English as an integral component of Sri Lankan English.

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