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Code Switching and Code Mixing in an ESL Class: A Study of Undergraduates in a State University

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Code switching and code mixing exist in bilingual societies where people use two or more languages to communicate. Being able to speak more than one language, bilinguals can code-switch and mix as means of effectively conveying meaning. Code switching and mixing frequently occur in English classrooms in faculties of Arts in Sri Lankan universities, where the teachers use Sinhala or L1 to teach English as a second language. The effectiveness of using and mixing L1 and L2 has been debated over the years. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate when and why teachers in this context use code mixing and code switching. Two classroom observations were carried out, two language instructors were interviewed and 30 ESL students in an intermediate level group were given a questionnaire to gather data for the study. The students' views on the use of L1 were assessed using a questionnaire that contained five-point Likert scale items. The results showed that the informant teachers generally tried to code-switch as little as possible but that they did code-switch in some of those situations where the students preferred either a combination of Sinhala and English or only Sinhala. During instances where the students cannot understand the lessons when instructions or explanations are given only in English, the informant teachers switch to L1, to create a less intimidating atmosphere which was one of the observations of the study. All 30 students strongly agreed with the fact that L1 should be used to understand grammar rules and lexical areas. The informant teachers agree to some extent with the idea that learners will understand more if they were to use the L1 language of the learners to explain certain grammatical components. Both the informant teachers agree to some extent that learners will understand more, if she uses the L1 languages to explain the meanings of certain lexical item.

Key words: Code-Switching, Code-Mixing, ESL, L1, Undergraduates