

The Implementation of Code-meshing in College English Writing Instruction

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Abstract: English academic writing has always been a tough problem for Chinese college students, who have reached high level of cognitive ability while are still equipped with limited English proficiency. Code-meshing, as a translanguaging practice, can be employed in classrooms as a teaching and learning tool to help better express themselves, and thus improve students' English writing proficiency.

Keywords: Code-meshing; Translanguaging; Writing instruction; College English

1. Introduction

English academic writing has always been a tough problem for Chinese students, especially for those college students who have reached high level of cognitive ability, while are still equipped with limited English proficiency. They might feel restricted by limited language repertoire in English when they were trying very hard to express their own ideas and thoughts in writing assignments and could only keep referring to the dictionary. These troubles could interfere the flow of thinking while writing a piece of work in English, and even worse, we would give up our brilliant ideas and write something else just because they are easier to express in the unfamiliar language. Without doubt, this dilemma could lead to the inefficiency of English literacy development.

So, how can we get less restricted to our limited language proficiency when expressing ourselves through English writing? One unconscious practice by many students was to use both their mother language and English while taking notes or drafting some writing assignments. As Canagarajah (2011) defined, this practice is known as code meshing, an act of mixing languages other than English with standard written English in formal assignments and in daily communication^[1]. As a translanguaging practice in writing, it views all the languages an individual knows as his/her holistic and integrated language repertoire rather than separate language systems in the mind (García, 2009; Lee & Handsfield, 2018)^{[3][5]}.

2. Current code-meshing practice in-and-outside of the classroom

Code-meshing, though is relatively innovative in second language teaching, is not new outside of the classroom. As a translanguaging practice, it is actually a naturally occurring phenomenon among bilingual and multilingual people in their daily life (Canagarajah, 2011)^[1]. We can see a lot of code-meshing in pop song lyrics, TV commercials, magazine articles, as well as daily conversation between multilingual people, all of which students can experience almost every day. Although code-meshing may seem to be a naturally occurring phenomenon and does not need to be taught, a practice-based instruction should still be implemented to help students reduce potential errors in spontaneous translanguaging practices and improve the efficiency of its use in foreign language learning. Over the recent decade, more and more teachers and researchers have applied this practice into classroom instruction and proposed several feasible activities using code-meshing pedagogy in writing instruction. Fu (2009) has proved its advantages in raising students' confidence in writing when they are able to freely express themselves without language restrictions, and they can gradually become proficient writers in English with some support around code-meshing^[2]. Pacheco and Smith (2015) and Lee (2014) both applied code-meshing pedagogy in multimedia projects, in which students meshed English with their heritage languages in digital writing to convey nuanced meanings and to engage and negotiate with different audiences, and thus to raise their awareness of rhetorical functions in English writing^{[6][7]}. Moreover, Lee and Handsfield (2018) suggested an approach of using code-meshing to remix texts, that is to rewrite a monolingual text (e.g. a song, a book) by adding, changing, or removing portions, and then to analyze how the choices shift meaning for different readers^[5]. This code-meshing activity can support students to develop metalinguistic awareness as well as rhetorical writing skills, and at the same time raise their awareness of language equality.

3. Code-meshing practice in writing instruction

As I have mentioned earlier, many young adults in China struggle with English academic writing because of the imbalance between their cognitive level and their English language ability, and code-meshing might be a useful tool in writing instruction in an EFL classroom. However, since the traditional education in China perceives the use of Chinese or nonstandard English in English

writing as errors, and all the important standardized tests, such as Gaokao and College English Test, require students to use 100% grammatically correct standard English, students are not allowed to freely produce content with meshed language codes in high-stake formal circumstances. Therefore, code-meshing pedagogy might better be employed in classrooms as a teaching and learning tool during writing rather than a final product, combining with other instructional methods, such as communicative language teaching and translating, to help develop students' English literacy.

Considering most college students in China, syntax is not usually the problem, because teachers in China always put most emphasis on grammar instruction, while semantics and pragmatics in academic writing would be hard for them to handle. Therefore, the code-meshing approach can be used mainly to help them overcome these difficulties they encounter, such as argumentations and persuasive writing, and gradually improve their English writing skill. To help them better employ code-meshing in an instructional setting, it is necessary to first connect this translanguaging practice to their daily life and personal interests. For example, the teacher can show some examples of code-meshing from song lyrics by some popular singers, such as Jay Chou, and from famous TV commercials that are funny, and ask them if they have some similar experience of mixing both Chinese and English in one text. By exposing students with real-life examples from popular culture and from their daily life, the teacher aims to elicit their funds of knowledge and connect their prior knowledge to this newly introduced strategy. Then, the teacher can show them a model text which meshes English and Chinese in academic writing and discuss with them about the choices of different language codes in the text and the author's purposes of doing that, which prepares the students with a referable example and some underlying strategies before they start to code-mesh in formal writing by themselves.

After the students have understood the example, the teacher can model with the students through co-construction, in which a specific writing prompt will be used and a draft will be written together employing code-meshing. During this modelling process, the teacher will project the typing on the screen and encourage students to contribute their ideas to the collaborative writing. A lot of negotiation regarding code-meshing practices and word choices could be envisioned, which are also highly encouraged since these conversations could be perceived as where metalinguistic thinking takes place. Once the whole class finish the code-meshing draft, the teacher will lead the students to rewrite the text by translating the Chinese they have meshed in, as well as adding and deleting information as necessary, and finally produce a monolingual English academic writing piece, during which the teacher will act as a facilitator and provide necessary support. In this step, students will again have a lot of discussion and negotiation as they try to give the best translation, which will lead to their development of metalinguistic awareness and the transfer of first language literacy skills to English.

Conclusion

In this instructional activity, the teacher is not requiring students to do code-meshing in every piece of their writing but providing them with an alternative to facilitate their academic writing in English. With the integration of communicative language teaching and translating in collaborative writing, students can have more space to negotiate meanings, and develop their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic skills in English, as well as raise their metalinguistic awareness. Besides, it also gives students an opportunity to develop their first language literacy, which has been proved to be able to transfer to the L2 literacy ability (Herrera et al., 2010)^[4].

People learn foreign languages to bring more possibilities to their lives, not to put restrictions on their minds. Code-meshing, as a translanguaging practice, helps us employ our whole language repertoire through various literacy practices to better express ourselves, boost our foreign language learning over time, and, last but not least, propel us to become real multilingual global citizens.

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