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Relationship Between Oral English Proficiency and Attitudes Towards Code-Switching among Chinese English Learners

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Abstract: Globalization contributes to a larger number of bilinguals and multilinguals in the world and among those individuals, code-switching (CS), as a common linguistic phenomenon, is frequently used in real speeches. However, for monolinguals, CS can be seen negatively which would interfere a smooth conversation between monolinguals and foreign language speakers. This article investigates the relationship between oral English proficiency and the attitudes towards CS among Chinese English learners, aiming to give instructions for multilingual speakers in using CS when communicate with monolinguals. Through questionnaire and the following data analysis, the research discovers that oral English proficiency is positively related with attitudes towards CS among Chinese participants. Consequently, conclusion can be drawn that people with higher foreign oral language proficiency would have more positive attitudes and higher acceptance towards CS. Based on this result, suggestions for bilingual and multilingual speakers can be made that multilingual speakers can use CS with people with higher foreign language proficiency in daily communication more casually and assuredly, because they are higher possibility that they will not have great aversion or negative emotions towards this language phenomenon. On the contrary, when communicating with monolingual speakers, multilingual speakers should try to use CS as less as possible, even if sometimes it is difficult to express it in local language.

Keywords: Code-switching, Attitudes, Oral English Proficiency

1. Introduction

Due to globalization, frequent interaction and communication between different parts of world accelerates the integration of various aspects in the world. Language plays an essential role in this process so that the number of multilingual language users is increasing significantly. Code-switching (CS) refers to the practice of the alternating between two or more different languages within a single conversation, occurring at the level of words, phrases or even entire sentences. For those proficient in more than one language, CS naturally happens in their speeches. There are numerous influencing factors that affect individuals' attitudes towards CS. Whereas, as one of the key contributing factors, oral English proficiency is seldom mentioned in the previous studies. Hence, this research aims at exploring how does oral language proficiency affect individuals' attitude towards CS among Chinese English learners. By discovering the relationship between oral English proficiency and CS attitudes, this research is devoted to providing scientific theoretical guidance and effective practical references

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on how to use CS appropriately in speeches, so as to create a smooth communication for bilingual or multilingual language users when talking with monolingual language users.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, based on the existing literature and researches, this study analyzes various other influencing factors for attitudes towards CS in other researches and showcases the relationship between usage of CS and oral language proficiency in second language (L2) acquisition. Secondly, introduction of the research methods including participants, instruments, distribution and collection of the questionnaire and data analysis are demonstrated clearly. Thirdly, this research analyzes the research results and draw suggestions in the usage of CS and shed lights on the cautions in designing future studies in this field.

2. Literature Review

Weinreich defines CS as the alternating use of two or more languages or dialects within a single speech context [1]. CS is an extremely common phenomenon and it isn't confined to specific locales; rather, it's a widespread practice observed among multilingual or bilingual language learners worldwide [2]. This natural linguistic phenomenon has sparked varied perspectives among researchers. Many studies have criticized CS, attributing it to language deficiency or incompetency [3]. Bilingual individuals themselves would evaluate CS negatively and view CS as a sign of laziness [4]. Some suggest that CS reflects deficient cognitive control or a lack of sensitivity in choosing the appropriate language option [5]. However, Cheng et al. argued that CS serves to enhance communication and enrich the message's substance and essence [6]. Kanwal et al. also claimed in their study that CS can assist bilinguals to express themselves with wider language options, which result in a better understanding of the audience [7]. Consequently, it can be regarded as a valuable skill rather than a limitation. For example, in the realm of L2 acquisition, CS serves as a facilitator for language learning, showing a clear relationship between linguistic proficiency and its usage. Yow et al. conducted quantitative research in a language acquisition context, revealing that children who code-switch more tend to exhibit a wider variety of L2 words and higher L2 proficiency [8]. Additionally, in Patmasari et al.s research, students in a English as a foreign language (EFL) class all agreed on that CS can be used to improve their English proficiency [9]. This underscores that CS is not indicative of language incompetency; rather, it is significantly positively correlated with linguistic proficiency and can function as a scaffold for weaker language, aiding in the language acquisition process for young bilingual learners.

Attitudes towards CS is not a popular topic among all the studies about CS. In the past 13 years, among all the 168 studies about CS, there are only 33 articles' research objectives are about attitudes towards CS [10]. Among all the articles exploring factors in influencing attitudes towards CS, oral language proficiency is not the prevalent one either. In real communication scenarios, individuals' attitudes toward CS vary significantly due to socio-ideological and individual factors. For monolingual individuals, the use of CS may be perceived as extremely unnatural and artificial. However, it is inevitable for bilingual or multilingual to mix and switch between languages sometimes. Although it is commonly believed that a lack of competence is the fundamental reason for CS, there are also some other important influencing factors affecting individuals' attitudes towards CS, such as personal straits, social-biographical elements and raising environments, ethnic diversity and staying aboard duration. Those factors were proved to be more crucial in affecting CS attitudes in Dewaele et al.s article [11].

However, despite all the extensive research on other influencing factors in deciding attitudes towards CS, there still remains a gap of studies in exploring the relationship between attitudes toward CS and oral linguistic proficiency. This gap in the literature motivates the author's research, which aims to bridge this void and investigate the influence of oral English proficiency on attitudes toward CS in oral speeches.

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3. Method

3.1. Participants

The subjects of this study are English learners in China who have taken the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test in the past two years. A total of 65 people filled out the questionnaire and 42 of them have taken IELTS test in recent 2 years. Since gender and age are not considered factors in this study, such information is not collected. Since the data was collected through an online questionnaire, the location of the participants is not fixed. However, only 3 out of 42 participants are outside China.

3.2. Instrument

This study used two instruments, namely IELTS speaking scores and Dewaele et al.s CS Attitude Scale [11]. To facilitate the participants' understanding, the questionnaire was entirely in Chinese. IELTS speaking scores are used to measure the participants' English speaking proficiency. The reason for requiring the IELTS test taken within 2 years is to make sure the participants' current English speaking levels are consistent with their IELTS speaking score. The mean of the participants' IELTS speaking scores was 6.298, with a maximum score of 8 and a minimum score of 4.5. The participants' English proficiency generally belonged to the C1 level of the CEFR proficiency test, and they were English learners at a higher level.The first research question of this research is "What is the type of your attitudes towards CS". To measure it, this research directly uses Dewaele et al.s questionnaire, in which the five point Likert scale questions are used to measure participants' attitude types towards CS [11]. The specific types of the attitudes are reflected by the scores they get in this questionnaire. Data about it is elicited through the following questions: 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements about language switching?'

(1) It is a sign of incomplete linguistic competence;
(2) It annoys me when people switch between languages I don't know in my presence;
(3) It displays a distinct multicultural identity;
(4) It is a sign of arrogance;
(5) It is a way to show solidarity with a particular culture.

Participants were required to choose a response on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all 2 = not especially 3 = so-so 4 = quite a lot 5 = very much).

Where necessary, the scores were reversed so that a higher score indicates a more positive attitude towards CS. The original questionnaire has been gone through a Cronbach alpha analysis and it showcased a modest level of internal consistency (alpha = .60).

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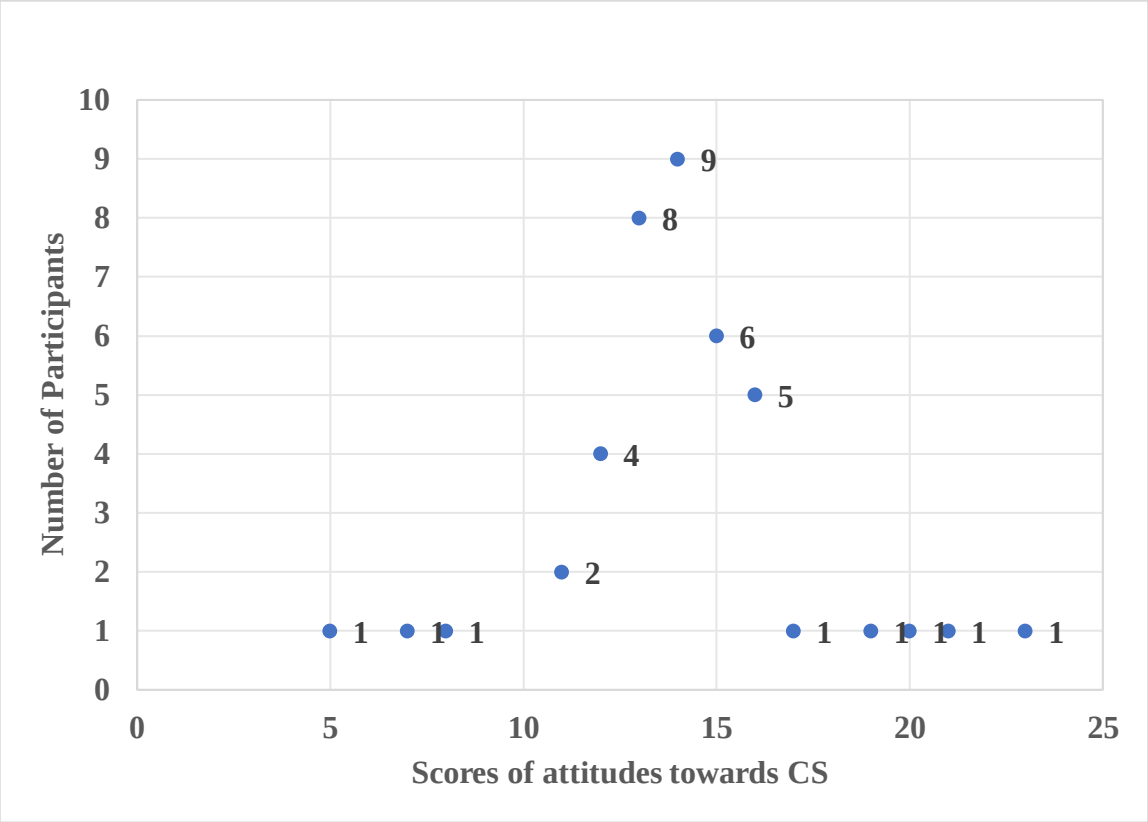


Figure 1: Profile of CS attitudes scores.

The scores among these participants ranged from 5 to 23 with a mean score of 14.048. As shown in Figure 1, the trendline of attitudes towards CS is curvilinear, with the vast majority of participants scored around 14.

3.3. Questionnaire Distribution and Collection

The questionnaire was made and distributed online. It was made in wjx.cn platform and then sent out publicly, spreading to potential participants in "wechat" app mostly. The questionnaire delivery process took 6 days and the response rate of it was 56.6%.

3.4. Data Analysis

IMS SPSS statistics 16.0 was used to analyze the data in this study. To answer the second research question "How is Oral English proficiency related to the attitudes towards CS", correlational analysis and linear regression analysis need to be used on the collected data. After analyzing the score of the CS attitudes questionnaire and the speaking score in their IELTS test taken in the recent two years, the research is able to conclude that if oral English proficiency have relationship with attitudes towards CS among Chinese English learners and how significant is the relationship between them.

3.5. Hypotheses

The expected outcome is that oral English proficiency is positively related to attitudes towards CS among Chinese English learners. Since the person who are more competent in speaking the targeted language can understand CS better in communication and have less language barrier, thus the research

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finding deduces that higher oral English proficiency can contribute to more positive attitude towards CS.

4. Result

The collected scores from the questionnaire show that participants' attitudes towards CS vary a lot. The scores range from 5 to 23, with an approximately 14 mean score. However, there is no clear boundary between positive or negative attitudes towards CS based on the scores of this questionnaire. Thus, it is unable to draw a clear conclusion that how many participants hold positive attitude towards CS and how many do not. However, what the scores do demonstrate is that the mean score of this group of participants is much lower than the score collected by Dewaele et al [11]. who created this original attitude towards CS scale. There can have numerous factors, for example, linguistic backgrounds, nationality and etc. that contribute to this outcome. One influencing fact that related to this research is that the language proficiency of that group of participants is much higher than that of this research's participants. All attendees in Dewaele et al.s research are multilinguals, which definitely showcases a higher level of oral language proficiency compared to the participants in this research [11].

After putting the English speaking scores in IELTS test and the overall score of those participants' attitudes towards CS into SPSS linear regression analysis, the result shows that oral English proficiency and attitudes towards CS are positively related among these Chinese English learners. $p=0.014<0.05$ Beta=0.378. This shows that oral English proficiency does affect attitudes towards CS, accounting for 14.3% of the influence. It can be seen that high-level English users are more receptive to CS than low-level English users. The calculated conclusion is consistent with the expected outcome.

5. Discussion

This study uses Chinese English learners as the research subjects to study the relationship between their English speaking ability and CS attitude. The study shows that English speaking proficiency is positively correlated with attitude towards CS. The possible underlying reasons for this can be that, firstly, more competent language speakers can understand the CS better. So when the interlocutors are using CS in conversation, higher-leveled language speakers may have less confusion in understanding, which lead to more positive attitudes. Secondly, since individuals with higher oral language proficiency can use foreign language much better, they can understand that CS happens automatically and naturally in speeches, not as a deliberate attempt by speakers to show off. Sometimes these competent language speakers would even use CS themselves, so that it is natural for them to accept CS better in real speeches than those with poor foreign language foundation.

According to this results, it is able to draw suggestions for the use of CS in daily communication. Multilingual speakers can use CS with people with higher foreign language proficiency in daily communication more assuredly, because they are more likely not to have aversion or negative emotions towards this language habit. On the contrary, when communicating with monolingual speakers, people should try to avoid using other languages for CS, even if sometimes they are not sure how to express it in local language.

The average IELTS English speaking score of the participants is about 6.2 points, which shows that the participants attending this research are relatively advanced English users in China. The lowest score is 4.5 points and that still much higher than the English level of most Chinese. Therefore, if CS is used for ordinary people without English or any other foreign language foundation at all in daily communication, it may have an extremely negative impact on leading smooth communication and leave a terrible impression for interlocutors. Therefore, the language advice given by this study to multilingual speakers is to have a preliminary understanding of the English or other foreign language

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level of the interlocutors before using CS. For high-level foreign language users, CS can be used more often. For listeners with poor language foundation, just use it less or as little as possible. Adjusting CS strategy according to the listener's English speaking level can be crucial when talking to Chinese English learners.

6. Conclusion

This article is written to explore the relationship between oral English proficiency and the attitudes towards CS among Chinese English learners. According to the fact that all the previous studies were mainly focused on other influencing factors of CS, the research sets out an excellent sample in studying oral language proficiency. By using questionnaire to measure participants' attitudes towards CS and their oral English proficiency, this research collected all the relevant information. SPSS is used to analyze the collected data and facilitates this research to make the conclusion through linear regression analysis. The result of the data analysis shows that oral English proficiency is positively related to the attitudes towards CS among all the participants. Based on the conclusion, suggestions of using CS can be made for bilinguals and multilinguals to better communicate with monolinguals. This research is very practical and useful, shedding light on the strategies for using CS among multilingual language users when talking to different interlocutors with different levels of oral English proficiency. However, this research also has its limitations due to some external factors. Firstly restricted by the rather limited time, the online questionnaire collection process was not done perfectly. The number of participants may also slightly affect the results of this research. Additionally, the diversity of English-speaking levels among these participants is rather limited, with individuals scoring higher than 8 and lower than 4.5 missing. Without these scores, it is difficult to draw a more universal conclusion. Consequently, this limitation could contribute to less representative results. The issues mentioned before need more attention in the design of future studies.

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