The use of teacher code-switching for very young EFL learners

Daeun Song and Jang Ho Lee

This study examines the relative effects of teacher code-switching and English-only instruction on the vocabulary learning of EFL preschoolers (age 5 and 6), along with their attitudes towards language choices in English learning. Seventy-two young EFL learners were engaged in storytelling activities, either in code-switching or English-only conditions, with the only difference between these conditions being the teacher’s brief use of children’s L1 for vocabulary teaching purposes. The post-test results show that a brief switch to the children’s L1 was more effective than English-only instruction for vocabulary acquisition, and this effect was maintained two weeks after instruction. As for the learners’ attitudes towards language choices, the preschoolers were found to overwhelmingly prefer to have some L1 use in learning English, and showed negative reactions towards English-only. These results provide the first piece of empirical evidence regarding the issue of teacher code-switching for very young learners.

Introduction

In many countries today, including Spain, China, and Korea, some children are introduced to and taught English at a very early age (four years old or earlier), with an assumption that speaking English fluently will lead to success in their future career (Shin and Crandall 2014). Research on teaching English to young learners (TEYL) has not kept up with the dramatic growth in its popularity. In TEYL research, one of the important pedagogical issues is whether or not to use the students’ L1 when teaching English, but this has received little scholarly attention so far. This issue has been fairly controversial, as in many contexts ‘teachers are required to use only the foreign language in their language lessons, or they feel that they ought to’ (Cameron 2001: 199), although students generally prefer to have some of their L1 used while learning English (for example, Macaro and Lee 2013).

Macaro (2014) suggests that three theoretical positions exist regarding the use of the L1 in target language (TL) teaching; the ‘virtual position’, the ‘maximal position’, and the ‘optimal position’.

The virtual position assumes that TL classrooms must mirror TL-speaking communities and that the L1 should never be used in TL teaching. The maximal position is similar to the virtual position, in that it does not support the use of the L1. However, it acknowledges the fact that no
classroom condition can be perfect, and that teacher and students might resort to using the L1 occasionally.

These positions are thus grounded in a monolingual orientation, which in turn supports TL-only instruction. Cook (2010) suggests that monolingualism has been adopted in several TL teaching approaches from the 20th century onward. Cameron (op.cit.: 199) further notes that TL-only policies are often ‘justified in terms of maximising learners’ exposure to the language’, without considering other factors.

In contrast to these positions, the optimal position (Macaro op.cit.; Hall and Cook 2012) proposed that the use of students’ L1 could contribute to TL learning, and researchers must explore the best ways of using the L1 with TL learners. From this optimal position, it is believed that a primary language in the TL classroom should be the TL (rather than students’ L1), if the goal of teaching the TL would be to enhance students’ communicative competence. Classroom participants’ limited use of the students’ L1 is known as classroom code-switching (CS) by those who support the optimal position, highlighting a judicious and principled use of the L1 in TL teaching. Recently, the optimal position has gained some support from empirical studies in the field, some of which are reviewed below.

A limited number of studies has examined the relative effects of using TL-only instruction or briefly switching to the students’ L1 to teach TL items (for example, Tian and Macaro 2012; Lee and Macaro 2013). The results of these studies showed that using CS in explaining the meaning of the target vocabulary during meaning-focused activities (i.e. listening or reading) was more effective in terms of the students’ TL vocabulary learning than using TL-only instruction. Another strand of research (for example, Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney 2008; Macaro and Lee op.cit.) explored TL learners’ attitudes towards teachers’ CS and TL-only instruction in learning a TL. The results of these studies have been consistent, in that students in general wished to have some degree of their L1 in learning a TL, and showed negative reactions towards TL-only instruction.

There is growing research suggesting that the use of CS might be beneficial to TL learning, and that students do not prefer to learn the TL through TL-only instruction. However, only a small number of studies has examined this issue in the context of TEYL (Inbar-Lourie 2010; Oga-Baldwin and Nakata 2014), leaving teachers of very young EFL learners with insufficient information regarding the use of CS. Most studies in the Special Issue of ELT Journal on TEYL (68/3) are limited to considering what activities should be used for young learners (in-class or outdoors). The present study addresses a missing but critical issue overlooked in these studies: the impact of the instruction language adopted in TEYL classrooms.

To this end, the present study aims to examine the relative effects of teacher CS and English-only (EO) instruction on the vocabulary learning of EFL preschoolers. Also, in order to address a call for studies on young learners’ perception towards using an L1 while learning a TL (Inbar-Lourie
op.cit.), the present study additionally investigated young EFL learners’ attitudes towards language choice when learning English. Research on this issue with these learners is also of theoretical interest, as it is generally assumed that young learners can make use of TL input with less difficulty and less hesitation compared to their older counterparts (Shin and Crandall op.cit.). This assumption generates a hypothesis that TL-only instruction (or CS) might have differential effects on younger learners. At the same time, some (for example, Cameron op.cit.) would argue that using TL-only instruction for this age of learners might not lead to greater gains, in view of the complexity involved in TL learning.

In the present study, we investigated one of such TEYL contexts, in which English (rather than children’s L1) was the primary medium of instruction and communication, and the children who participated in the study were familiar with the EO mode and the teacher’s brief switches to the children’s L1. This environment accords with the conceptualization of classroom CS, which refers to a brief and limited use of learners’ L1 for pedagogical purposes, with English remaining the primary language in classrooms. On the other hand, classroom CS was used in limited ways by the teacher, serving various functions such as teaching linguistic items, imposing discipline, describing a procedure for activities, and so forth. The teacher’s use of CS for teaching English vocabulary is the focus of the present study.

The present study raises the following research questions:

1. What are the relative effects of teacher CS and EO on the vocabulary acquisition and retention of EFL preschoolers in the context of storytelling activities?
2. What are the attitudes towards English teachers’ vocabulary instruction and language choice during English lessons among EFL preschoolers?

The study

The present study used a subset of data from the first author’s master’s thesis (Song 2017), which adopted a mixed-method design including a quasi-experiment, questionnaire survey, and classroom observation.

Participants

The participants in this study were 72 children, from four classes, in a private preschool in Daejeon, Republic of Korea. They were all L1-Korean learners of English. Table 1 presents the composition of the four classes that participated in the present study.

The children at this preschool had been learning English since they were four years old and were taught English twice a week, 30 minutes per session. In English lessons, the teachers mostly use English throughout the lesson. In teaching English, teachers use songs, storybooks, a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English-only (EO), n = 36</td>
<td>Class A (6 years old), n = 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class C (5 years old), n = 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code-switching (CS), n = 36</td>
<td>Class B (6 years old), n = 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class D (5 years old), n = 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The composition of the classes
whiteboard, realia, puppets, and props to engage with children, as well as physical activities based on the Total Physical Response approach or another similar method.

For the purpose of this study, two classes of 6-year-olds (Class A and B) were randomly allocated to either EO or CS conditions, with the same procedure being conducted with the two classes of 5-year-olds (Class C and D).

The authors chose four storybooks (see Appendix for the list of these storybooks) as target materials for their storytelling lessons. These texts were selected for the following reasons: they were found to be enjoyable among children around this age, in accordance with the first author’s teaching experience; they included repetitive patterns in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structures, which made them ideal language learning materials; and they were found to be unfamiliar to the children who participated in the present study, which was confirmed through talking with the children prior to the study. Children exhibited variation in their level of knowledge of the target words in their L1. Table 2 presents the title of each storybook, its author, and target words selected therein. As can be seen in Table 2, five target words were chosen from each storybook.

All of the classes were taught by the first author, who was the English teacher for the sampled preschool. In total, eight instructional sessions based on storytelling were given to the children, with two sessions dedicated to one storybook. In what follows, how each instructional session proceeded in both the EO and CS conditions will be described. Overall, teaching was conducted in EO for both conditions, except for vocabulary teaching where EO and CS were used for each condition (see below for details).

In the first session for each storybook, after the teacher checked attendance, she briefly talked about the topic of the target storybook, with an aim to activate children’s background knowledge about the topic. Thereafter the teacher showed the cover of the target storybook and asked the children to guess what the story might be about. The teacher then read the story twice, the first time reading only by showing the pictures and the second time drawing the children’s attention to both the pictures and the sentences written in the storybook. During the second reading, the teacher occasionally checked the children’s comprehension about the storyline and drew their attention to the target words. In explaining the meaning of the target words, the teacher maintained instruction in English in the EO condition, whereas, in the CS condition, she briefly switched to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the storybook</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Target words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willy the Dreamer</td>
<td>Anthony Browne</td>
<td>wrestler, painter, explorer, writer, scuba-diver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick as a Cricket</td>
<td>Audrey Wood and Don Wood</td>
<td>quick, busy, weak, strong, clam (sea creature)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’re Going on a Bear Hunt</td>
<td>Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury</td>
<td>hunt, grass, forest, mud, cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear?</td>
<td>Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle</td>
<td>polar bear, hippopotamus, leopard, peacock, walrus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Information about the selected storybook
The teacher switched back to English, once the explanation of the target word was given. After reading the storybook twice, the teacher and children talked about the storyline and details as a class, followed by reading the storybook in chorus.

The second session began with reading the storybook in chorus. The teacher and children discussed the content of the storybook and reviewed the target words learnt in the previous lesson. As in the case of the first session, the teacher only used English in the EO condition, while she switched to Korean in the CS condition when reviewing the vocabulary. The teacher then checked the children’s comprehension by asking them questions in English in both conditions. Thereafter, the post-reading activity, which was related to the theme of the target storybook, was conducted in English in both conditions. For example, in the case of ‘Willy the Dreamer’, the children talked about their dreams. Finally, either in a singing or chant format, the teacher and children read the story once more in chorus.

Generally, the children used Korean slightly more than English in both conditions. The teacher, on the other hand, used English only when giving instruction to and communicating with the children, except for vocabulary teaching in the CS condition.

**Instruments**

Two different instruments, which respectively aimed to measure children’s development of vocabulary learning and attitudes towards the teachers’ vocabulary instruction and language choices in English teaching were used. In the case of the vocabulary test, children were given a target word along with four different pictures, one of them being the correct picture to describe the target word. The format was the same for the pre-test, post-test, and delayed test of vocabulary, with the order of questions and options being shuffled in each test to minimize the practice effect. The reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of the post-test and delayed test was 0.70 and 0.80, respectively. The reliability of the pre-test was not calculated, as 72 per cent of the participants (n = 52) scored zero on the pre-test.

Regarding the questionnaire, six questionnaire items aimed to explore the children’s preference for the teachers’ vocabulary instruction and language choices in English classes. The items were designed based on a previous study on the same issue (Macaro and Lee op.cit.). In view of children’s cognitive maturity, instead of using a five-point Likert scale, the children were given three picture options for each statement: a smile face, which corresponds to a positive response; a neutral face, which corresponds to a moderate response; and a sad face, which corresponds to a negative response.

**Procedure**

The present study was carried out over a period of seven weeks. Before the study began, the first author obtained informed consent from all of the children’s parents via the sampled preschool. No parents decided to opt out of the present study. With informed consent secured, two classes in each age group were randomly assigned to either code-switching or English-only conditions.
In the first week, the children were given a vocabulary pre-test that included 20 target words. From the second week to the fifth week, the children were taught four stories during two 30-minute lessons per week. After two stories were taught, the children were given the first vocabulary post-test, consisting of the ten target words from the first two stories. After the other two stories were taught, the second vocabulary post-test was administered, with this test including the remaining ten target words. After the second vocabulary post-test was administered, the children were given instructions about the questionnaire, in Korean, by their homeroom teachers. They were asked to mark their responses on an individual answer sheet without the presence of the first author (i.e. the children’s English teacher). Two weeks after the second post-test, the children were given the delayed vocabulary test without any prior notice. This test consisted of all 20 target words.

Data analysis

For each vocabulary test, given at different points in time, an independent t-test was performed to examine whether there was any significant difference between the two groups (i.e. CS and EO) in their performance. The questionnaire data were analysed descriptively to explore the children’s preferences for vocabulary instruction and language choice in English lessons.

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the EO and CS groups’ performance on the vocabulary tests, which were given at three different points in time.

Overall, giving vocabulary instruction in the middle of storytelling was found to bring about large gains in remembering the target words. That is, even Class C (5-year-olds in the EO condition), which performed the worst among all four of the classes on both the post-test and delayed test, learnt more than 50 per cent of the target words. It is noteworthy that Class B and Class D in the CS condition retained about 85 per cent of the target words, even two weeks after instruction.

The difference between the CS and EO groups before instruction was examined via the result of the pre-test and the independent t-test confirmed no significant difference between them, \( t = 0.00, P > .05 \). On the other hand, the CS group was found to perform significantly better

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre-test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Post-test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Delayed test Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EO condition</td>
<td>Class A (6 years old, n = 16)</td>
<td>0.50 (0.52)</td>
<td>16.63 (1.31)</td>
<td>15.19 (1.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class C (5 years old, n = 20)</td>
<td>0.10 (0.31)</td>
<td>12.35 (2.08)</td>
<td>11.70 (2.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (n = 36)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.45)</td>
<td>14.25 (2.78)</td>
<td>13.25 (2.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS condition</td>
<td>Class B (6 years old, n = 15)</td>
<td>0.47 (0.52)</td>
<td>19.33 (0.82)</td>
<td>18.13 (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class D (5 years old, n = 21)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.36)</td>
<td>19.05 (0.74)</td>
<td>17.38 (1.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (n = 36)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.45)</td>
<td>19.17 (0.77)</td>
<td>17.69 (1.28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of the vocabulary tests

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than its EO counterpart on the post-test, $t = 10.22$, $P < .001$ and on the delayed test, $t = 8.98$, $P < .001$. These results suggest that switching to the children’s L1 was more effective than maintaining English-only instruction in terms of acquisition of the target English vocabulary, and this greater effectiveness was maintained over the two weeks after instruction.

When examining the vocabulary learning of the EO and CS groups in tandem with each age group, interesting patterns were further found, as illustrated in Figure 1. First, the CS groups, regardless of age, performed better than EO groups on the post-test and delayed test, which corresponded to the results of the $t$-tests above. Second, the two age groups in the CS condition performed very similarly on the post-test and delayed test. However, this was not the case with the EO group. That is, the six-year-olds group in the EO condition performed better than the five-year-olds in the same condition. These results together suggest that CS served as effective scaffolding for the five-year-old children, who were able to learn a similar amount of vocabulary compared to the six-year-olds. EO instruction, although it did bring about some degree of vocabulary learning, was more beneficial for six-year-olds, who had one more year of English learning experience.

Table 4 summarizes the two groups’ responses to the six questionnaire items, with three items addressing the children’s preference for vocabulary instruction and the other three addressing their preference for language choices during English lessons.

Overall, there was no noticeable difference between the CS and EO groups in the patterns of their responses to the questionnaire items. Regarding the vocabulary instruction, the children overwhelmingly preferred to have pictures when learning vocabulary and to be given instruction in their L1. It is noteworthy that more than 90 per cent of the students responded negatively to the idea of learning English vocabulary through English instruction.
As for the preference of language choices during English lessons, a group division emerged, with a minority of the children (about 11 to 17 per cent) showing a moderate reaction to their teacher’s and their own uses of English and the majority suggesting otherwise. As in the case of the vocabulary instruction, most of the learners (about 90 per cent) wanted their teacher to switch to their L1 during English lessons.

The aim of the present study was to examine the effects of teacher CS on the vocabulary learning of EFL preschoolers, along with the preschooler’s preference for English-only or L1 use while learning English. The results regarding the relative effectiveness of CS and EO instruction on vocabulary learning accorded with those of previous studies (Tian and Macaro op.cit.; Lee and Macaro op.cit.), pointing to a greater effectiveness of CS than EO instruction. This result thus lends weight to the ‘optimal’ position (Macaro op.cit.: 13) and suggests that the pedagogical value of using a student’s L1 should be explored further.

In addition, with sixth-grade students being the youngest population on which the effects of teacher CS had been examined to date (Lee and Macaro op.cit.), the results of the present study further indicate that the effectiveness of teacher CS is valid even for younger EFL learners. Therefore, the present study provides the first piece of empirical evidence regarding the controversial issue of whether very young EFL learners would benefit more from EO instruction or a limited use of the L1, although only one aspect of TL learning, vocabulary, was examined. In line with Shin and Crandall’s (op.cit.) suggestion regarding using the L1 with young English learners, the findings of the present study suggest that English teachers do need to consider using the L1 when teaching unfamiliar English words, instead of attempting to explain their meanings through lengthy explanation in the EO mode.

Regarding the issue of teacher CS, another original contribution of the present study has to do with the differential effects of EO and CS on learners of varying ages and learning experience. In the present study, CS served as an effective scaffold for the five-year-old children who performed similarly to their six-year-old counterparts, at least in the context of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire item</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About vocabulary instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like it when my teacher uses pictures when teaching vocabulary</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like it when my teacher uses English when teaching vocabulary</td>
<td>EO</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like it when my teacher uses Korean when teaching vocabulary</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like it when my teacher uses English when teaching vocabulary</td>
<td>EO</td>
<td>34 (94.4%)</td>
<td>2 (5.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About language choices</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to only use English during English lessons</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>30 (83.3%)</td>
<td>6 (16.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want my teacher to switch to Korean during English lessons</td>
<td>EO</td>
<td>31 (86.1%)</td>
<td>5 (13.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want my teacher to only use English during English lessons</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>32 (88.9%)</td>
<td>4 (11.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want my teacher to only use English during English lessons</td>
<td>EO</td>
<td>31 (86.1%)</td>
<td>5 (13.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
The results of the questionnaire items

Discussion

As for the preference of language choices during English lessons, a group division emerged, with a minority of the children (about 11 to 17 per cent) showing a moderate reaction to their teacher’s and their own uses of English and the majority suggesting otherwise. As in the case of the vocabulary instruction, most of the learners (about 90 per cent) wanted their teacher to switch to their L1 during English lessons.
learning vocabulary through storytelling. In general, a larger difference was observed between the EO and CS groups in the five-year-old cohort than between the EO and CS groups in the six-year-old cohort. This finding suggests that age or learning experience might be important factors to consider when adjusting the use of CS or EO when teaching English. For example, the six-year-old children’s better performance in comparison with their five-year-old counterparts in EO condition could be attributed to the former’s larger schemata in some of the target words. In other words, six-year-old children appeared to hold a small advantage in learning these target words through EO instruction, compared to five-year-old children.

Regarding the results of the questionnaire, the findings mirrored those of Macaro (1997), Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (op.cit.), and Macaro and Lee (op.cit.), in that TL learners are not in favour of TL-only instruction in general. In particular, the overall patterns of the responses found in the present study were similar to those of the sixth-grade EFL learners in Macaro and Lee’s study, who could also be considered young English learners. With learners’ attitudes towards learning environments being an important factor in learning a TL (Chavez 2003), young learners’ views must be taken into consideration in the decision-making process of CS use.

Finally, it can be suggested that teacher CS could lead to the development of a learner strategy. That is, at later stages without the presence of the teacher, it is possible that learners could strategically keep the usefulness of the L1 in mind when encountering unfamiliar English words in the text, and use CS in such a circumstance.

While there has been increasing interest in TEYL, research has not kept pace, leaving the issue of the language of instruction relatively unexplored. The value of teacher CS, which is indeed one of the most controversial issues in English teaching today, was examined in the present study, with very young EFL learners. In order to compare how the EO or CS instruction impacts upon the effectiveness of teacher’s vocabulary teaching, the present study conducted the careful experiment to isolate each condition. Whereas such tight control may not completely simulate a realistic classroom environment, the results of the present study provide valuable insights into the use of teacher CS in the TEYL context. Despite the need of further empirical evidence (e.g. different learner populations, target texts, types of vocabulary, etc.) to reassure its validity and accuracy, this study takes a small but significant step in supporting the use of teacher CS in the storytelling classroom for young learners.

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Conclusion

Teacher code-switching for young learners

References


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Appendix

The list of the storybooks used in the present study.


