Code Choice in the Language Classroom

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Code Choice in the Language Classroom

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To my wife, Ursula

and to the memory of Frank Donahue, a great professor, mentor, and friend

That should have done it, that should have made the Camel pack a vessel of symbolic truth unprecedented in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a virtual lunar Bible, compact, accessible, and concise, as befitting a transistorized age. But the Red Beards, excited now, had a masterpiece by the tail and didn't want to turn it loose. They decided to take a further, daring step. They would try sending a *word* from their dimension into ours.

> How carefully that word was chosen!
> The word that allows *yes*, the word that makes *no* possible.
> The word that puts the free in freedom and takes obligation out of love.
> The word that throws a window open after the final door is closed.
> The word upon which all adventure, all exhilaration, all meaning, all honor depends.
> The word that fires evolution's motor of mud.
> The word that the cocoon whispers to the caterpillar.
> The word that molecules recite before bonding.
> The word that separates that which is dead from that which is living.
> The word no mirror can turn around.
> In the beginning there was the word and the word was
>
> CHOICE

Tom Robbins, *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980: 190)

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Preface

Sins of the Dogma

The idea for this book originated, like many other scholarly projects related to adult instructed second language acquisition (SLA), in observations and experiences in the language classroom. Having been trained in Krashen/Terrell-style communicative approaches to the teaching of German (Krashen & Terrell, 1983/2000), over many years I diligently pursued a satisfactory approach to target language use. Although I became adept at producing interactionally modified learner input – thereby keeping almost all of my teacher-talk in German – I was often frustrated by many students' apparent unwillingness or inability to join me in the 'exclusive target-language use' endeavor, especially during pair or group activities. Complicating the matter was my increasing shift to a more task-based, learner-centered approach to classroom activities, because the more control I gave students over the content and direction of classroom communication, the greater their tendency to unabashedly employ English rather than German! I noticed that in order to keep students in the second language (L2), I often held the reins of communication tightly under control. Of course, this also was not satisfactory. So, at one point, I began integrating explicit 'strategies instruction' into my lessons, involving, for the most part, discussion (usually in English) on the importance of exclusive L2 use and ways to 'stay in the L2'. I sought to involve students in the process of creating a 'simulated L2 environment', as I sometimes called it. In short, at the very least, I succeeded in stigmatizing the use of English to such an extent that learners were oftentimes more enthusiastic to keep all communication in German than I was. In the long run, while many students demonstrated greater 'fluency' than those in my earlier classes, their 'accuracy' in verbal interactions remained as much of a problem as ever. But, for the time being, I was content with greater fluency and was not so concerned with (or aware of) other issues, such as language socialization or L2 literacy.

With this canned approach to classroom L2 use, I began working as a German language program director. I encouraged, and at times

attempted to require, graduate student instructors to adopt the approach. The attempt understandably, and in hindsight fortunately, failed. For into the mix came not only different levels and types of pedagogical training in and perspectives of second-language (L2) acquisition among the instructors, but also diverse teaching styles and personalities that did not connect with what I had to say about exclusive L2 use. It took some time for me to realize that this diversity of attitudes and personalities among the instructors was not only *not* a hindrance to providing undergraduates with effective, dynamic language instruction, it was, in fact, the key to it. For if the group of learners in a given language class is anything, it is a messy (for the researcher, anyway), complicated gathering that defies most attempts we make to fit square pegs into round holes. This became especially apparent in the occasional, candid remarks made by some students on course evaluations and elsewhere about the L2 use 'policies' in their classes. Some people expressed that they felt not only frustration about it, but even anxiety. These comments, along with many conversations with graduate student instructors and undergraduate students in the language classes, led me to rethink my position on exclusive L2 use, fueled also by my observations during classroom visits that even in the most stringent exclusive-L2-use classes, many learners *still* made frequent use of that forbidden code: English! Thus, over the last several years – guided in part by the pursuit to integrate sociocultural theory and ecological approaches into language teaching and program direction – my leitmotif in language teacher training has become the acknowledgment and encouragement of instructors to find their own groove in all pedagogical matters, including in their approach to L2 and English use, and to actively seek their individual classes' and students' groove in similar ways.

Now that I have unburdened myself of my earlier sin of dogmatic devotion to a rigid methodology of exclusive L2 use, we arrive at the central question that this book seeks to answer: how do we manage L2 and first language (L1) use in the language classroom, if it is to be managed at all? I believe that communication in the classroom is 'manageable' in many, but not all, regards, as I will show. In any case, the ambiguous verb 'manage' will be supplanted later on with the notions of affordances for learning through multiple code use, and curricular architectures as part of a multilingual classroom community of practice. Despite abandoning the 'exclusive' position, the process I went through to arrive at my post-exclusive-L2-use approach was instructive, and many aspects of the pedagogical model described here derive from the classroom practices I developed during that period of my career.

The question also arises of whether my own espousal of linguistic diversity implies a free-for-all of code use in the classroom. While it will be shown here that multiple codes are always at work in any language classroom regardless of explicit interventions, a theoretically motivated, principled approach to code choice can help teachers and students have what they need to regard the language classroom as a multilingual environment and as part of the 'real world'. For unlike language contact situations in the real world, language teachers have a good deal of control over the code choice conventions of the classroom, but primarily (or only) if the students are made partners in the co-construction and negotiation of those conventions. This book is about ways to think about and implement instruction that gives learners this important role.

This book is intended for adult L2 language teachers (secondary and university level), language program directors and coordinators, language curriculum designers and planners, and researchers in classroom SLA. As such, it would be useful as a coursebook on pedagogical methods and approaches for teachers in training. While I assume throughout some background knowledge of applied linguistics, I have attempted to define terms and discuss the key issues in this book in ways that are accessible and useful to language professionals not directly or frequently involved with the scholarly literature in linguistics, applied linguistics or theory. My first concern for all readers is that the ideas presented are not just well grounded in intellectual debates of the last few generations, but practicable in the classroom at the level of the curriculum, the lesson plan and the crucial moment-to-moment classroom interaction.

Organization of the Book

Developing a multilingual approach to classroom code choice requires our discussion to range into diverse directions, encompassing consideration of applied linguistics, sociocultural theory, bilingual studies and, of course, language pedagogy. It requires a coherent conceptual framework derived from theoretical approaches believed to facilitate successful L2 learning. To justify the multilingual approach proposed, we require empirical evidence of the imperative for it. And because, in my view, no scholarship on instructed L2 learning is worth much if it finds no application in the curriculum, we require a viable curricular framework that teachers can implement or adapt in their classrooms. Therefore, the book is divided into three parts. Part 1 consists of three chapters that establish a conceptual framework for a multilingual approach to language classroom communication. Chapter 1 offers a clarification of