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The Light Switch of Language: Code-Switching

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by Cierra Johnson

When people think of an Oreo, they automatically think of the cookie. Today, however, this derogatory term is often used to make black students feel singled out from their peers. The use of this slang is to define someone who is African American but "acts" white or Caucasian. White people are perceived to talk in a well-mannered voice and use what we call the Standard English dialect. On the other hand, black people use what we call "Black English." All my life, I have been to schools in great districts, which means most of the school's population was middle or upper-class white students. Therefore, I developed the skill of code-switching, because I could not talk to my peers how I would speak in my home or to people who are my race.

Code-switching is the ability to change dialects or languages based off your setting or audience. For example, at school, I would say, "I don't have any pets," but talking to someone of my race, I would say, "Don't nobody have no pets around here." My friends felt like I was changing my identity when I did code-switching, and it made them upset. But I switch my dialect based on my setting or audience because it's convenient for me. Code-switching has given me the ability to fit in with my peers at school and given me opportunities that wouldn't be available to me if I didn't obtain this skill. All students should be taught the skill code-switching, because it would decrease the identity gap by giving students equal opportunities.

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Teachers should teach code-switching to all students because it's already a part of our everyday lives, and it would be easier if students actually understood it. Code-Switching can happen in any setting or activity, so this skill can come in handy for the average student. At Midlands State University, the students and lecturers use code-switching to fight against the dominance of the English language. They use this skill to transition between two languages. Usually, it's their dominant language and their secondary language, English. And in this case, "[Code-switching] has become part and parcel of everyday official communication at the institution which students and lecturers cannot do without" (Tevedzerai 57). Another university also incorporates code-switching in their classrooms. At Sanata Dharma University, they realized that "Code-switching is utilized as one of the meaningful means of communication functioned to transform the rigid conversational encounters to become more flexible" (Wijaya 2). Even without students learning the concept of code-switching, it will come up numerous times in their daily lives. In addition, researchers agree on the importance of code-switching as a tool in understanding social and cultural roles, language in the classroom, critical thinking exercises, and interactions between children (Then and Ting 2). Code-switching is the key to observing the fundamentals of social and cultural functions.

If all students were able to code-switch, it would decrease pressure in discussions with peers. I came across a cartoon that revealed the perfect example of this. The first part of the cartoon showed a brown skinned girl talking to another brown skinned girl. The girl said, "So I was all, 'I don't got no pencil, but you might could give me yours!'" (Gonzalez 2014). In the next part of the cartoon, the girl was in the classroom, and it portrayed what she actually said, which

was, "I told him I didn't have a pencil, then I asked if I could borrow his" (Gonzalez 2014). After

analyzing the cartoon, I figured out the point the author wanted the audience to realize. The

girl didn't repeat what she said, because her audience had changed. She felt like she couldn't

speak proper English because of peer pressure. Black people are perceived to have slang in

their vocabulary and talk a certain way, or they get called out for it. In Edward's text, John

Ogbu's informants gave him some information on this topic. The informants stated, "when a

black person 'is talking proper, he or she is *puttin' on,* or pretending to be white" (Edwards 94).

As a result, he came up with something called the vendido phenomenon. The vendido

phenomenon is referred to as the "push-pull affect, which means that blacks will either

embrace Black English or hate it" (Edwards 94). This phenomenon is very accurate, and it is also

connected to code-switching. Some blacks choose when they want to embrace Black English . It

depends solely on their audience or setting, which is tied right back to code-switching. When

they pull, they are embracing their identity, their language. When they push, they are turning

away from it. Blacks tend to embrace their identity when they are around people that are in the

same group affiliation as them.

  Furthermore, the cartoon could be portrayed in another way. The girl may feel peer

pressured to speak in the standard English dialect because that's how her peers talk. She knows

there's no room for Black English in that setting. Code-switching can solve dilemmas like these.

The February 2020 edition of "Journal of English Teaching" states "the... proper use of code-

switching will also enable low proficient EFL learners to bravely communicate with their

teachers and peers" (Wijaya 3). This will lead to better grades, because students are more likely

to raise their hands and ask questions if they are comfortable speaking around their peers.

In a bilingual educational program, studies were done to show the affects of code-switching on bilingual children in the classroom. In the research, they used a tape recorder to record the different conversations in the classroom. One specific conversation stood out to me. The teacher asked a young boy where lava comes from. He simply answered that the lava comes out from the ground. The teacher asked what he meant, and the child then whispered in Spanish to another student, asking how to say volcano in English. The other child did not know, so the boy simply told his teacher he didn't know. The text claimed, "He clearly knew where the lava came from," because he asked his fellow classmate. He just didn't know how to relay this information back to his teacher (Pollard 9). This could lead to the child not wanting to answer questions in the classroom anymore, or make him unsure of his answer. If code-switching were taught to all students, it would ensure that these situations would not occur, because students would act as themselves in conversations. A researcher who dug more into a specific subject stated, "allowing learners to code-switch helps them to realize that mathematical concepts can be easily understood in their mother tongue" (Maluleke 6). Math can be seen as a difficult subject, especially for bilingual people. Teachers who are able to code-switch and incorporate the student's language into different word problems or activities help the child greatly. Not only are the words more familiar to them, but it gives the child confidence, because they can fully understand the task at hand.

Bilingual people are also another minority group that is affected by peer pressure. The ability to code-switch can help them by keeping a sense of their true self and still speak English.

In other words, they are still connected to their language and still able to improve their

language. Even though this is a great attribute, many teachers don't favor code-switching. In an

article discussing the affects code-switching has on bilingual people, the author stated, "English

teachers prefer not to use code-switching in their learning activities, despite its rich benefits,

because if they rely on their first language, the learners would not be able to improve their

desired language skills. This primary reason causes language teachers to become stronger

critics when it comes to the use of code-switching because it demonstrates the unwillingness of

learners to enhance their ability to put the target language into an active context" (Wijaya et al

2). To further explain this claim, teachers avoid using code-switching because they believe it

doesn't help bilingual people. They think that if the kids are able to code-switch, they would use

the language that they are more comfortable talking in more, which is true. Even though this is

true, this is one of the goals of code-switching. The children are able to interact with each other

using the language that is comfortable to them, but if they acquire the code-switching skill,

then they will be able to have access to their primary language and still be able to talk to others

when the opportunity presents itself. The findings contradict the pessimistic perception that

code-switching by children who are learning two languages is due to a lack of maturity.

Therefore, it promotes the perception that it's used during peer communication to expand their

communication skills. Although code-switching does rely on the first language, it also helps

students switch to their second language. I say this because there will be different scenarios

where the child will have to switch their language. Whether it will be in a lesson or in a

conversation between students, the child will have to use their skills to transfer their language

to another. As time goes by, the more the child does this, the better they will be with their primary and secondary languages. Therefore, they will develop their desired language skills. It just makes it easier for the student when they are speaking their own dialect.

Groups are singled out based on their differences simply because many group affiliations think they are better than others. Code-switching will help get rid of stereotypes. In *Language and Identity*, John Edwards stated, "differences [in dialects] have provided the fuel for unenlightened judgments of inferiority" (75). People are always comparing their groups to others. Those differences are what start the judgments in society today. Some statistical evidence Edwards stated in his text was, "While African-Americans make up approximately 12% of the US population, they make up an astounding 41% of the students in American schools and are labeled 'educably mentally retarded.' (p. 76).

Since many don't understand what we call "Black English," they use words to stereotype people. Many schools even misdiagnose people and put them in special education classes or assign helpers to them for this particular reason. During my freshman year of high school, I saw this happen firsthand. There was an African American boy that sat right next to me in my language class at the beginning of the semester. By the end of the week, he was moved out of our class and into a small group class with people who required special education classes, simply because of how he spoke. This is incorrect and unfair, because blacks are not "mentally retarded." They are just different. Upper classes already perceive us to be so, and events like this also widen that identity gap.

Even though code-switching can get rid of stereotypes, it can also do other things. Code-switching can make school easier for teachers and students. In Edward's text, *Language and Identity*, he noted that Black English is inaccessible to the general population and rarely learned by teachers (75). Many teachers don't understand Black English, which leaves blacks having lower grades than others, or not comprehending the lesson as well as others. Black English isn't available to us like the standard English dialect. We are pressured to learn this new dialect but taught by people who don't even know how to teach us. They don't even understand the dialect themselves.

As Julie Washington, a speech pathologist, pointed out in her interview with William Brennan, "Over the course of a school day, those moments have to add up" (Brennan 1). When teachers must stop and comprehend what the child is saying, it gets time-consuming. It makes it harder for the teacher to teach the student if they must familiarize themselves with this "Black English" dialect first. If code-switching was incorporated into lesson plans, it would give teachers a chance to learn and adapt, making it much easier for both students and teachers. Teachers can then pass that wisdom down over time in the lessons. As Then and Ting stated, "In teacher-facilitated language lessons, code-switching is not used for an explanation but for personalization and may be a quotation of students' use of other languages which is resourcefully incorporated into the lesson" (12). Teachers accommodate their lessons by using code-switching, so different groups of children can understand. Even though this is great on the teachers' part, this could be a problem for kids who don't understand code-switching, which is a reason it should be taught to all children. For a child that is not familiar with code-switching, it

would merely be confusing if their teacher did it. For example, if the child speaks a different language, shifting between the standard English dialect and the student's own language would cloud their mind with pieces of both. The teacher must be mindful of using code-switching in moderation.

As we make these changes in our schools, the gap in identity will decrease. Code-switching will give students opportunities that would only be available to upper-class people. In the text titled "Code-Switching to Navigate Social Class in Higher Education and Student Affairs" by Hanke Eran and Becki Elkins, the authors proposed, "We must challenge the idea that code-switching exists to move students from a deficit identity (lower or working-class) to a more normalized identity (middle class)" (44). Code-switching is needed to decrease this gap in identity. Code-switching helps people move up in class. Generally, white kids are mostly in the middle or upper classes. The majority of blacks and other culturally diverse kids are in the lower class. This is what decreases their opportunities. I say this because when it comes to jobs and other opportunities in life, firms and other businesses look at the upper classes to hire, giving the lower class less of a chance to achieve their desired goals.

Depending on one's point of view, code-switching can have different affects on students in the classroom. In a world where proper is seen as better, code-switching from any language to the standard English dialect in schools is helpful but does not remain true to who you are. An individual does not have to stray away from the way they are towards the individual they are perceived to be. However, it is essential to get treated fairly. Code-switching could be the solution to some difficulties that teachers and students come across in daily school

activities or interactions. It most frequently happens in schools to fit in and be accepted by

society. It's also a way to dissolve stereotypes. The change of code in schools happens because

of what society defines as right. Therefore, code-switching skills should be taught to all

students, because it will reduce the identity gap by giving students equal opportunities. As a

result, students will have the elements they need to be successful in life.

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