The effect of code-switching
in interactional language on task performance
in the English class

Jonathan Sell
Universidad de Alcalá

1. Introduction: premises and hypothesis

My research interests in rhetoric, and especially affective rhetoric, motivated this research activity into the effects on student performance of code-switching from L1 (in this case Spanish) and L2 (English) in the interpersonal language used by the teacher in class. For the purposes of this research activity I apply the conventional distinction between transactional language and interactional language (Brown and Yule 1983: 1-2) to my classroom practice as follows: transactional language is all language used in relation to the specific objectives and content of the class (introduction and explanation of class objectives and content, assignment and explanation of tasks, conduct and management of tasks, teacher comment and feedback on tasks, class discussion of tasks); interactional language is all language used for functions of establishing, maintaining and regulating interpersonal contact (terminology from Stern 1983: 225) through greetings and farewells, ice-breaking, digressions, and words of encouragement for the students when performing on tasks.

From the very beginning classical rhetoric, a prescriptive system of discourse whose goal was to persuade the receiver of any given message, emphasised the importance of establishing an affective relationship between sender and receiver; the success with which the sender achieved the aim of persuasion was considered to depend heavily on the quality of that affective relationship. The sender had constantly to be seeking and consolidating the favourable disposition or goodwill (*benevolentia*) of the receiver towards the sender him/herself and the matter or arguments to be presented. To this end were two chief strategies: the first, and most familiar to us today, was the *captatio benevolentiae*, which, usually towards the

185

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198

start of a linguistic act (whether spoken or written) would pay great attention to establishing good relations between receiver and sender by means of flattery, modesty, humour and so on; the second was the creation of an appropriate *ethos*, that is to say of a pervasive emotional mood or affective disposition in the receiver that would last the duration of the linguistic act. The nature of this *ethos* was determined by the nature of the matter to be presented; it was generated in the *captatio benevolentiae* and would be reinforced at intervals throughout the linguistic act by means of figures of affective rhetoric, digressions, appeals to the receiver, and so on, all of which served the rhetorical objective of *delectare*, "delighting".[1] The key point about the concern of classical rhetoric with the establishment of *ethos* is its implicit recognition (pre-Grice) that for the successful fulfilment of the sender's objectives it was essential to be able to count on the cooperation of the sender. This cooperation was earned by the generation of *ethos*, an appropriate and prevailing affective mood in the receivers.

What is the relevance of this to the current research activity? It will be seen that there is a close correspondence between the strategies adopted by the sender in rhetorical theory in order to generate a favourable disposition in the receivers and those I have defined above as comprising the interactional language used in the classroom. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that just as classical rhetoric considered the generation of ethos to be essential for the successful fulfilment of the sender's objectives (persuasion), so the generation of ethos in the classroom, that is to say of a congenial atmosphere and favourable disposition among the students to the teacher and to the content of the class should contribute to the successful fulfilment of the teacher's objectives for the class.

Thus the present research activity rests upon the following two premises:

1. Interactional speech acts helps to create a good working environment in the classroom and a favourable disposition in the students.
2. A good working environment and favourable disposition lead to the successful fulfilment of the teacher's objectives for the class.

---

[1] *Delectare* is, of course, a member of that triumvirate formed by the three pillars of successful persuasion: *docere, delectare* and *movere* ("teach" or "instruct", "delight" or "please" and "move" or "arouse"; for the classical sources and a useful synthesis of the theory of *captatio benevolentiae* and *ethos* see Lausberg I. 249-54.

In the context of the foreign language classroom, the following question related to the concept of code-switching arises: should the language of interaction be L1 or L2? If the function of interactional speech acts is perlocutionary, that is to say, if interactional speech acts are performed in order to produce an emotional affect in the students in such a way that they will be favourably disposed to the content of the class and therefore more liable to complete the tasks assigned them in class, should the language of interaction be L1 or L2? On the one hand, it seems perfectly logically that as the class content and tasks are presented, explained, and performed in L2, so the language of interaction should be L2. Thus L2 would be used for both transaction and interaction. But on the other hand, the use of L2 for interaction may be counterproductive in so far as, depending on the level of the students, it may offend against the Gricean conversational maxim of manner which, among other things, enjoins the sender to communicate in a clear and comprehensible way.[2] Because some students may find it difficult to interact in L2 for reasons of comprehension, the teacher may fail to capture their favourable disposition to the content of the class. I therefore derive a third premise:

3. For interaction to be successful, it needs to be clear, that is to say, it needs to be achieved in L1.

These three premises thus enable the following hypothesis to be formulated:

The objectives of an L2 class will be more successfully fulfilled when the language of interaction is L1 than when it is L2

The classroom research I present here is an attempt to demonstrate whether the hypothesis is sound or not.

2. Context of research activity

The research was conducted over a period of two days (6-7 November 2002) with two groups of first-year English Philology students at the University of Alcalá. The majority of the students were aged between 18 and 22 and came from a diversity of backgrounds. Their range of levels of competence in English extended

---

[2] As did classical rhetoric, for whom three of the four virtues of the orator were clarity, concision and aptness—Grice's manner, quantity and relation respectively (Grice 305-15). The fourth classical virtue was 'ornament', a dubious substitute for Grice's quality, until it is recalled that rhetoric is not concerned with truth but with persuasion

187

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198

from lower-intermediate to fluency, although the majority were at around the mid-intermediate level.

The course I teach these students is "Análisis y Producción Textual en Inglés", a compulsory first-year course, the aim of which is to familiarise them with how texts work and to improve their comprehension of texts and formal written skills. The course is therefore essentially devoted to reading and writing skills. This fact, together with the relatively unattractive content of the textbook used in class and the formality of the lecture hall (long, fixed tables and fixed chairs), means that it is important to generate a positive, congenial classroom atmosphere if the content of the course is to be covered with any degree of success.3

It is my customary practice to begin each class with a few minutes of good-natured ice-breaking chat, humorous observations regarding current affairs, gentle teasing, and so on—all in L2, with the occasional translation into L1 of new or difficult words and expressions. The remainder of each class will then be dedicated to the objectives, content and tasks I set for each class, always allowing for digressions, asides and the like, also in L2. I usually present and explain the objectives, content and tasks in L2 first and then, after estimating the degree to which all members of the class have understood, I may offer a gloss or translation in L1. In short, my habitual language of interaction is English (L2), while my habitual language of transaction is a mixture of English (L2) and Spanish (L1).

3. Didactic objectives and class plans during the research activity

On each of the two days of the research activity, each group had a one-hour class. The research activity was therefore carried out in four hours of class, two hours with each group, one hour per day. For each group's pair of classes my objectives and the content were the same. My objective was to encourage my students to produce rapid written responses in English to written stimuli and to introduce them to the idea that often, and especially when writing essays in exams, it is more important to produce a completed and cogent response than a definitive and/or truthful and/or interesting one. In other words, my objective was to get them used to completing written tasks under pressure of time. The two classes on each day proceeded as follows:

---

[3] The textbook in question is William Smalzer's *Write to be Read*.

Day 1:

10 mins:	INTERACTION. Greetings. Chat about the preceding long-weekend, mushroom-picking and the film "Sleepy Hollow", which many had seen on television. (Group A: L1: Group B L2)
10 mins:	TRANSACTION. A poem was read about friendship, after which I asked a few brief comprehension questions (Smalzer 74-6). (Both Groups: L2 + L1)
5 mins:	INTERACTION. Premeditated digression discussing whether the poem read was really a poem, and asking for ideas as to what a poem was. (Group A: L1: Group B L2)
10 mins:	TRANSACTION. I assigned the students the first task to be completed in groups (Task 1). Task 1 consisted in the production of a one or two sentence answer expressing their group's opinion regarding three 'What do you think?'-type questions related to the subject-matter of the poem. (Both groups L2 + L1)
	INTERACTION. While the students were working on Task 1, I passed around the class, offering encouragement, assistance, etc. (Group A: L1; Group B: L2)
5 mins:	TRANSACTION. Feedback on Task 1 and explanation of my objectives: to get the students to be able to produce written responses in short periods of time. (Both groups L2 + L1)
10 mins:	TRANSACTION. I assigned the students Task 2, also to be completed in groups. Task 2 involved the production of a similar set of three written answers, this time expressing how each group considered the writer of the poem would answer the questions. (Both groups: L2 + L1)
	INTERACTION. As with Task 1, I passed around the class, offering encouragement, assistance, etc. (Group A: L1; Group B: L2)
5 mins:	INTERACTION. Feedback about Task 2 (both groups L2 + L1) and farewells. (Group A: L1; Group B, L2)

Day 2:

15 mins:	INTERACTION. Greetings. Chat about Bonfire Night, Guy Fawkes and fundamentalism. (Group A: L2; Group B: L1)
15 mins:	TRANSACTION. We read an adapted version of Aesop's fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper, after which I asked some brief comprehension questions and requested some students to provide oral summaries (Smalzer 100-1). (Both Groups L2 + L1)
15 mins:	TRANSACTION. I assigned the students the only written task to be completed individually. The task consisted in the production of a paragraph giving their opinion on whether or not hard work is always rewarded and idleness punished. (Both Groups: L2 + L1)
	INTERACTION. While the students were working on the task, I

passed around the class, offering encouragement, assistance, etc. (Group A: L2; Group B: L1)

The remaining ten minutes or so of class on Day 2 were set aside for the students to fill in the questionnaire.

4. Method of research and assessment

At no point did I indicate to the students that research was under way in class. Apart from the inevitable variable of the content covered in class, the only variable I manipulated was the language used for interaction. As the programmes for Days 1 and 2 show (see above), on Day 1 I used Spanish for interaction with Group A and English for interaction with Group B, while on Day 2 I used English for interaction with Group A and Spanish for interaction with Group B. Otherwise, I switched between English and Spanish as is my custom for transactional purposes.

Apart from my deliberate manipulation of the language of interaction, the only other difference with respect to normal classes was that on Day 2, in the last ten or twelve minutes I asked those students in each group who had attended class on the two days of the research activity to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix). The questionnaire was intended to give the students an opportunity to express:

1) their degree of affective involvement in the class (Qs. 1, 8)
2) their reactions to interactional speech acts (Qs. 2, 9)
3) their reactions to the language used by me, their teacher (Qs. 3, 5, 6,)
4) their own evaluation of the effectiveness of the class and their performance in it (Qs. 4, 7)

The last three questions (10, 11 and 12) were added out of my own curiosity. The questionnaire included elements of both quantitative and qualitative research, in so far as it provided room for the students to add their own comments as and when necessary.

In addition to the questionnaire, I also observed during the classes the degree to which the various tasks assigned were successfully completed and tried to note down any other point of interest.

5. Results and interpretations

In each Group, 17 students attended class on the two days of the research activity. Thus I received a total of 34 completed questionnaires. The results may be

tabulated as follows:

a. <u>Affective involvement</u>

Q n .	Interaction in L1		
	Group A	Group B	Total
1	2	5	7
8	3	6	9

Q n .	Interaction in L2		
	Group A	Group B	Total
1	8	2	10
8	10	0	10

Q n .	No difference		
	Group A	Group B	Total
1	7	10	17
8	4	11	15

These results show a roughly equal range of responses across the two groups to two analogous questions relating to affective involvement. It suggests that a student's enjoyment of a class and degree of involvement in/commitment to it are very closely related. What is more, comparatively fewer students overall claimed to have been more affectively involved in those classes where interaction had been in L1 than either those who claimed to have enjoyed L2 interaction classes or those who were unable to differentiate the levels of affective involvement in the two classes. However, the marked preference expressed by both groups for the class

191

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198

given on Day 2 suggests that affective involvement is not a question of the code used in interactional communication.

b. <u>Reactions to interactional speech acts</u>

Qn.	"Yes"		
	Group A	Group B	Total
2	0	0	0
9	1	0	1

Qn.	"No"		
	Group A	Group B	Total
2	17	17	34
9	16	15	31

Qn.	"It depends"		
	Group A	Group B	Total
2	0	0	0
9	0	2	2

These results show a roughly equal range of responses to two analogous questions relating to non-content related material. All students think a teacher should talk about matters not directly related to classroom activities, and an overwhelming majority are happy when he does so. One student who answered "It depends" quite reasonably commented that it depended on how she felt on any particular day.

c. <u>Reactions to language used by teacher</u>

Qn.	"Yes"		
	Group A	Group B	Total
3	1	1	2
	1	3	4
5	4	2	6
6	11	11	22

Qn.	"No"		
	Group A	Group B	Total
3	3	2	5
5	5	4	9
6	0	3	3

Qn.	"It depends"		
	Group A	Group B	Total
3	2	1	3[4]
5	8	11	19
6	6	4	10

Of interest here is that while the majority of students confess that it helps them when their teacher speaks in Spanish (Qn.3), almost the same number claim that speaking and listening in English feels natural to them (Qn.6). The situation is further complicated by the majority of students who were undecided as to whether their teacher should always speak in English (Qn.5). One possible explanation could be that while most students have a high opinion of their level of proficiency

---

[4] One student in each group failed to answer this question.

193

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198

in English, they are unconsciously aware that their opinion may not quite be an accurate reflection of their real level. All, at some time, do need help; many are at that stage where they think they can manage for themselves, but actually cannot— and do not.

d. Effectiveness of class and of students' performance in it

Qn.	Interaction in L1		
	Group A	Group B	Total
4	1	6	7
7	1	5	6

Qn.	Interaction in L2		
	Group A	Group B	Total
4	11	0	11
7	11	2	13

Qn.	No difference		
	Group A	Group B	Total
4	5	11	16
7	5	9	14[5]

The range of these results roughly mirrors those for Tables a) ("Affective involvement"). This suggests that just as affective involvement is related to

---

[5] One student in Group B failed to answer.

enjoyment, so both are related to interest and effective working. Again, as in Tables a), the marked preference each Group gave to the class on Day 2 suggests that, like affective involvement, the effectiveness of the class and of student performance in it does not depend on the code used in interactional communication. As for the remaining questions, the answers to Qn. 10 and 11 would seem to confirm that the average level of the students is somewhere around mid- to upper-intermediate. According to Qn. 10, 12 students understand their teacher better in Spanish, 11 in English, while for another 11 it makes nor difference whether he uses L1 or L2.

According to Qn.11, 8 students think their teacher speaks in Spanish 75% of the time, 10 50%, and 16 25%. The fact that there seems to be some confusion on the matter suggests that so easily do the vast majority of the students assimilate L2, so naturally does communication in English come to them (as they claimed in their answers to Qn.6), that they really do not notice code-switches and that therefore their answers to Qn.11 are no more than guesswork. I would argue that those with greater proficiency in English (L2) are more sensitive to code-switching from L2 to L1 than the rest. Certainly, from my own direct observation, it was those students with the greatest degree of English fluency in each group who seemed most upset when I spoke predominantly in Spanish for the purposes of interaction. If this is so, the fact that almost half of the students coincide with my own view that in a normal class I probably use Spanish about 25% of the time, attests to the good average level of English competence.

Finally, in answer to Qn. 12, sixteen students noticed a difference between the two classes, other than a difference in content; eighteen did not. Significantly, of the sixteen who did notice a difference, none made any reference to my code-switching. Equally significantly, however, was the attention drawn by several students to two variables other than class content and linguistic code. Some students noticed a methodological difference, in so far as on Day 1 work had been done in groups whereas on Day 2 it had been individual—the strange thing being that from their answers to other questions, Day 2 had been more enjoyable, effective and so on. Do students prefer working on their own? In fact, do they prefer working? Others remarked that the subjects discussed at the start of class on Day 2 (Bonfire Night, religion) were interesting and enjoyable.

195

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198

As for my direct observation of successful achievement of the planned objectives, all students were able to complete with an increasing degree of success the tasks I set them over the two days.

6. Conclusions

The first two premises on which this research activity was based are borne out by the results. The validity of these two premises has been accepted for a long time, but it has been interesting to see them confirmed in my own classroom. In relation to this point, students want and expect their teachers to talk about and to introduce discussion of non-curricular matters.

The hypothesis has not been proven. In other words, my results do not show that for my students code-switching in interactional language has any effect on the favourable disposition of students, the creation of a positive classroom mood, and the production of effective work. However, this need not mean that my third premise is totally invalid. As I stated, and as they themselves perceived, the majority of my students may have sufficiently strong a grasp of English to be able to respond to interactional language regardless of the code it is expressed in. It would be fruitful, nonetheless, to carry on my own research activity over a longer period and to refine some of the phraseology of some of the questions on the questionnaire. It would also be fruitful to test the hypothesis on students with lower levels of English. There, incomprehensible interactional language may yet prove to be an impediment to the creation of favourable pupil/student dispositions, a positive working environment, and so on. Given that my students seem able to take it, I shall continue to use L2 for interaction; with other students it may not be such a good idea. In other words, further research into code-switching for interactional purposes may yet cast doubt on the view that L2 (in the present case, English) is the only language that should be used in the L2 classroom.

Finally, it has been reassuring for me to find that my students response to my use of Spanish in the classroom more or less confirms that my approach is the correct one for them. That is to say, it is my duty to try to let them understand first in L2; but it is also my duty, whenever necessary, to help them understand (and their right to understand) in L1.

196

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198

References

Brown, G. and G. Yule. 1983. *Discourse Analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grice, H.P. 1991. Logic and Conversation. In S. Davis (ed.), *Pragmatics: A Reader.* New York: Oxford University Press (pp. 305-15).

Lausberg, H. 1966 *Manual de Retórica Literaria.* Trans. José Pérez Riesco. 3 vols. Madrid: Gredos.

Smalzer, W. R. 1996. *Write to be Read: Reading, Reflection, and Writing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stern. H.H. 1983. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR "A. Y P. TEXTUAL" STUDENTS
07/11/2002

For each of the following questions, please indicate one of the answers provided. In some questions you may be asked to give more information. <u>You may write in Spanish or in English.</u>

     Name (optional):

     Group (A or B):

1. Which class did you enjoy more?
   Today's   Yesterday's   Both
2. Do you think your teacher should only talk about the material to be covered in class?
   Yes   No
3. Does it help you when your teacher speaks in Spanish?
   Yes   No
4. In which class were you able to learn and to work more effectively?
   Today's   Yesterday's   Both
5. Do you think your teacher should always speak in English?
   Yes   No   It depends
   If you have answered "It depends", what does it depend on?
6. Does it feel natural to you to speak and to be spoken to in English?
   Yes   No   It depends
   If you have answered "It depends", what does it depend on?
7. Which material covered in class was more interesting?
   Today's   Yesterday's   Both
8. Which class did you feel more involved in, more committed to?
   Today's   Yesterday's   Both
9. Do you feel unhappy when your teacher talks about things and asks you about things that are unrelated to class activities?

197

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198

Yes   No   It depends

If you have answered "It depends", what does it depend on?

10. Do you understand your teacher better when he speaks Spanish or English?

Spanish   English

11. What proportion of the time does your teacher normally speak in Spanish?

100% 75% 50% 25% 0%

12. Apart from the material covered, did you notice any difference between today's class and yesterday's?

Yes   No

If you have answered "Yes", try to describe or explain the difference.

Thank you for agreeing to answer this questionnaire.

198

The effect of code-switching in interactional language on task performance in the English class
Jonathan Sell, pp. 185-198