CODE-MIXING AND SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION TRAINING

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Research background

According to the 1996 government census, 89% of Hong Kong residents claim Cantonese as their first language. However, the form of Cantonese that is used in Hong Kong has been labeled as the most Westernized Chinese dialect (Zhuang 1996).

This study considers the influence of English code-mixing on Cantonese in the simultaneous interpretation (SI) of student interpreters. The impact of English on the Cantonese lexicon has been widely discused from historical, commercial, political and pedagogical perspectives. Yet the issue of code-mixing in SI with a focus on Cantonese has been virtually ignored in the literature. The two major reasons for this are that most interpreters in Hong Kong are not engaged in conference interpreting research (CIR) and that the Cantonese dialect is only used extensively in Hong Kong and is therefore of less concern to CIR communities in China, Taiwan or the West.

Code-mixing between Cantonese and English is pervasive among Hong Kong university students (Li 1996). Although English is the medium of instruction in most local secondary schools, teachers tend to use a mixture of English and Cantonese in classes as they find it more effective (Bauer and Benedict 1997). Students therefore become familiar with this form of code-mixing and use it from the early stages of their secondary education (Tung 1997). Moreover, knowledge is introduced to university students in English, which is the designated medium of instruction at all tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. However, as Cantonese is the major linguistic vehicle for communication among students, they tend to develop code-mixing habits (Pennington *et al.* 1992).

The Gravitational Model of linguistic availability, the Effort Model and SI training in Hong Kong

The Gravitational Model of linguistic availability breaks down an individual's command of a language into variable and invariable aspects. The invariable aspect is comprised of "language elements the availability of which is assumed to be constant or to vary very slowly, including most basic rules of grammar and

a small number of the most frequently used words in the language. The variable part includes at least dozens of rules and many thousands of words and idioms" (Gile 1995).

When applying the Gravitational Model to the SI process, conference interpreters naturally use vocabularies that are easily accessible. This can lead to the polarization of lexical systems, whereby interpreters use their basic vocabularies plus technical terms in their renditions (Gile 1995).

When confronted with an English-into-Chinese SI task, Hong Kong student interpreters with minimal SI training stumble over terms and expressions that are familiar to them in their English forms. As mentioned earlier, university students have a tendency to code-mix English words when conversing in Cantonese. This is more obvious when words that they frequently use in English are part of the source text.

Research methodology

The objective of this study is to test the following hypothesis: code-mixing can be used as an effort-reduction strategy to increase accuracy, fluency and completeness of SI delivery.

An experiment tested this hypothesis on a sample of twelve Cantonese-speaking third-year students who took "Introduction to Interpreting" in the second semester of their first year and "Sight Translation and Consecutive Interpreting" in their second year. All of the participants were female.

The experiment took place in the fourth week of the semester. The participants had already performed English-into-Cantonese SI tasks in the researcher's class. All twelve participants were volunteers and each gave consent that their performance could be used in academic research.

The twelve participants were randomly divided into two groups and were briefed on the general idea of the speech to be interpreted before the experiment took place. During the experiment, Group A – the control group – interpreted the speech into Cantonese. Group B – the experimental group – did likewise, but was allowed to use words and phrases in the source language.

The methodology incorporated an SI task of interpreting a 421-word video-taped English speech into Cantonese. Participants were seated individually in soundproof SI training booths and could choose to watch the video presentation on the large screen in the language laboratory or on the TV screen inside the booth.

The speaker was a native English-speaking Caucasian male, with a standard North American accent and a normal speaking speed. The speech was a university president's welcome address to first-year students that did not contain

any special terminology. Instead, it used English words and phrases that are often used by university students in Hong Kong.

The experiment took place in an SI training laboratory with six training booths. Group A took part in the experiment first. An audio signal was given to participants before the video was played. The researcher used a centrally-controlled SI training system to record the participants' interpretations on cassette tapes. When Group A finished the task, Group B took part in the experiment. All cassette tapes were collected for grading immediately after the two groups had completed the tasks.

The tapes were arranged randomly and number coding ensured that the participants remained anonymous when two professional conference interpreters with Cantonese A and English B in their language combinations graded the tapes. A very simple grading sheet allowed a rating of Good or Bad for each participant, with Good bearing a numerical value of 1 and Bad bearing numerical value of 0.

Criteria	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
Completeness						
Accuracy						
Fluency						
Grade	Good/Bad	Good/Bad	Good/Bad	Good/Bad	Good/Bad	Good/Bad

Table 1 – Grading Sheet

The two raters were summoned to a pre-assessment discussion, at which the researcher played English-into-Cantonese SI exercise recordings of students other than those who participated in the experiment. The purpose of this exposure and the ensuing discussion was to familiarise the raters with the assessment process and to generate common assessment criteria.

The raters and the resarcher discussed each example in terms of why it was a good or bad interpretation. After listening to more than twenty tapes, the consensus was that the criteria for assessment would be the completeness of the delivery, the accuracy of the meaning in the target language and the fluency of the rendition.

The acceptability of code-mixing was limited to words that Cantonese speakers normally say in English. However, there was some difficulty in distinguishing the English words that are commonly used by Cantonese speakers when conversing in Cantonese, and the raters were allowed to use their own judgments in such matters.

Results

A general hypothesis of whether simultaneous interpreters use code-mixing source-language words as an effort-reduction strategy to increase the accuracy, completeness and fluency of delivery guided the experiment. The overall score of Group A was worse than that of Group B.

Participant	Code-mix	Rater 1	Rater 2	Hesitation	Pauses	Unfinished sentences	Meaning errors
A1	0	Bad	Good	>5	>10	0	Yes
A2	0	Bad	Bad	>5	>10	>5	Yes
A3	0	Bad	Bad	>5	>10	>5	Yes
A4	0	Bad	Good	>5	>10	>5	Yes
A5	0	Good	Bad	>5	>10	>5	Yes
A6	0	Good	Good	>5	<10	0	Yes

Table 2 – Group A results

Participant	Code-mix	Rater 1	Rater 2	Hesitation	Pauses	Unfinished sentences	Meaning errors
B1	<5	Good	Good	<5	<10	0	No
B2	<5	Good	Bad	<5	<10	0	No
B3	<5	Good	Good	<5	<10	0	No
B4	<5	Good	Good	>5	<10	<5	No
B5	<5	Good	Good	<5	<10	0	No
B6	>5	Bad	Bad	>5	<10	<5	Yes

Table 3 – Group B results

As shown in Table 2, Group A received five Good grades when all participants did not code-mix English in the delivery. However, only one participant in Group A was awarded a Good grade by both raters. Two participants received a Bad grade from both raters, and three participants received one Good and one Bad grade.

The Group A participant who received a Good grade from both raters left no sentences unfinished in her delivery and paused relatively few times. However, all Group A participants erred in meaning during their performances.

Table 3 shows that the raters awarded 13 Good grades to Group B. One participant received a Bad grade from both raters and one received one Bad and one Good grade. Four participants were awarded a Good grade from both raters. All of the participants code-mixed the source language when performing the SI task.

In addition to not erring in meaning during their SI performances, all of the participants in Group B who received a Good grade from both raters left

relatively fewer sentences unfinished and hesitated less frequently than the control group participants.

Participant B6, who received a Bad grade from both raters, left more than five sentences unfinished and erred in meaning to the same degree. However, this participant used fewer source-language words when performing the SI task. Participant B4, who received a Good grade from both raters, also left more than five sentences unfinished but did not err in meaning during the task.

Discussion

The experiment supported the general hypothesis of this study. The participants from the experimental group, in which code-mixing was allowed, had relatively better SI performances than the participants from the control group. The two raters awarded more good grades to the experimental group than to the control group. These results indicate that when performing an SI task, code-mixing can be used as an effort management strategy to increase the accuracy, completeness and fluency of delivery.

SI is a very complex process, and code-mixing can allow interpreters the space to utter what they have heard rather than having to process the meaning of the message. When processing effort is reduced, extra effort can be devoted to listening or to delivery. Consequently, those participants who code-mixed the source language in the delivery performed better than those who did not.

However, what actually happened when the participants decided to code-mix the source language in the delivery? Did they turn their attention to listening or to uttering? How much effort was shifted among the different SI tasks? Moreover, will audiences accept a code-mixed SI delivery? Inter-disciplinary research can be a means to solve these and many other questions that current research cannot yet provide answers to.

The code-mixing of source languages in professional SI delivery might not be entirely desirable as it could well hinder audience comprehension, and might even seem like parroting. However, those participants who code-mixed in the experiment performed better in the SI task than those who did not. The implication of this finding is that code-mixing can be used as an effort management strategy for students who are starting to learn SI. New students should be instructed to code-mix source language words in their delivery to manage their distribution effort until they have learned sufficient SI skills.

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