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Emotional Support Skills through Adaptive Code Switching

in der Deutsche Amerikanischen Schule

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CST 431

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of adaptive code-switching to manage emotional situations with children. It does so by analyzing one student's service learning experience at a German-American school in the US Pacific Northwest. This case explains the practice and theories of adaptive code-switching and emotional support skill as means to manage crisis situations. This ability to switch between languages and language styles allows communicators to craft messages unique to each particular interaction. Through understanding how code switching helped manage emotionally stressful situations at this school, readers will gain better understanding of a tool that can help decrease anxiety, increase conversational comfort, and therefore facilitate in emotional recovery in a crisis setting.

Emotional Support Skills through Adaptive Code Switching

in der Deutsche Amerikanischen Schule

Every communicator draws on a variety of linguistic styles suited to the intention of their speech and conversational settings. This ability to switch between languages and language styles allows communicators to craft messages unique to each particular interaction. Code switching, or rather style shifting, may be used for a variety of reasons; filling linguistic gaps, expressing ethnic identity, and achieving particular discursive aims, among others (Bullock, 2009). Bilinguals, in particular, develop sociolinguistic competence because of their ability to engage in two foreign languages fluently. Their ability to adapt to cultural norms, expectations, and context through language enhances their ability to know when code switching is appropriate. Code switching, from a sociolinguistic perspective, affects many aspects of emotional and social life. The stress of an emotional situation is something that exposes the choice whether or not to switch styles. It is in the moments that we try to support those in an emotional turmoil that we seek to find the most comfortable language for both parties involved.

As an intern for the German-American school of Portland, I am surrounded by bilingual adults and children who consistently practice code switching. During my time at the school I notice that in emotional settings, adults code switch into the native language of the child. This allows the communicator to not only sympathize with the children, but also break down barriers in hopes to increase intimacy. This increased intimacy gives students the comfort they need in order to increase their confidence and recover from the emotional distress. This paper defines these emotional situations, defines code switching as a means for sociolinguistic enhancement, and compares how the two are

interconnected particularly with teacher/student contact. With increased knowledge of how code switching is used through bilingual teachers and students, individuals are able to better adapt to emotional situations in an intercultural communication setting.

Background

As an intern at a Pacific Northwest German-American school for the past four months, I have had the opportunity to work with young students who are learning the German language. The school was established in 1995 and runs from kindergarten to grade five. There are a total of 164 students in enrollment with a student to teacher ratio of eight to one. This German American school is a dual language program where both German and the American languages are taught and appreciated. The school immerses children into a German-speaking environment at a young age so that they can acquire their first foreign language skills in a playful way. This bi-national grade school combines both US and German standards of education. Its mission is to provide an excellent education experience that fosters cross-cultural understanding (German American School of Portland Website). The students of GPS develop fluency in both the German and English languages. The schools curriculum focuses on art, music, math, science, physical education, and extra curricular activities or after school clubs (i.e., Arbeitsgemeinschaften). This unique school provides ample opportunity for intercultural experience and development; setting up a service cite that provides a chance for me to analyze intercultural communication theories in action.

Emotional Support Skill

The ability to adapt to emotional situations is a skill that enhances supportive capabilities and increases the comfort level of the individuals involved. With a better

sense of how to react when another is emotionally distressed, the supporter is able to help assist in the sensitive process.

Although varied definitions have been proposed for the emotional support construct, most theorists have conceptualized emotional support as expressions of care, concern, affection, and interest, especially during times of stress or upset (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). The ultimate goal of the facilitator is to maintain the emotional level, and express support to the distressed. The helpers' intention to be supportive is a vital element of the support process, and the perception of this intention can be coupled with behavior that ranged from sensitive and effective to insensitive and dysfunctional (Burlison, 2003). Sensitive behavior is much more thought out and careful, taking into account the feelings of the distressed individual, and the situation at large. If someone who is under emotional distress is in a foreign atmosphere the helper must adapt to the surroundings and seek out ways to keep him or her content.

A key feature in most conceptions of emotional support is the intentional effort by a helper to assist a target in coping with a perceived state of affected distress (Burlison, 2003). This intentional action is important because it expresses the desire of the helper to engage in the emotional situation, use support skills to help, and ultimately change the emotional situation. Messages that convey a genuine sense of connection and understanding are perceived as sensitive and helpful, as are messages that express sincere sympathy, sorrow or condolence (Burlison, 2003). The complexities of human emotional life, coupled with the complexities of verbal code and social rules governing its use, create significant challenges for those who seek to develop skill in the provision of emotional support (Burlison, 2003).

Verbal codes can create barriers between the helper and the emotionally distressed, limiting the emotional support being offered, and the over all goal of intentional emotional connection. Conversation in emotional settings is important because it builds relationships strengthened by trust. Without comprehension of the language, conversations are weak in supporting an individual in a stressful surrounding. Burleson (2008) proposes a theory of *conversationally induced reappraisals* that states, “helper’s need to create and sustain a supportive conversational environment, an interactional context in which painful and upsetting matters can be safely discussed.” This supportive conversation is what gives the emotional situation momentum to move forward to the recovery process, a key factor in the overall coping mechanism.

When two people speak and understand the same language they share a common denominator. Language serves the larger cultural-ethnic identity function because it is an emblem of group solidarity (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2011). With language as such a powerful source of in-group and out-group representation, the effect of which language you choose to speak may change your identity altogether. Some cultural members develop enormous membership loyalty...but other members derive tremendous flexibility in their ability to code-switch (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2011). The flexibility, adaptability, and complexity of verbal communication make the delivery of sensitive support through this means a particularly important, but quite challenging, social skill (554). The verbal flexibility of code switching enhances the ability to adapt to different situations that ultimately increases the quality of communication.

Communication during a crisis setting increases the likelihood of feeling supported and comforted. Effective communicators must be aware of the surroundings of

the situation at hand, and adapt accordingly. The ability to adapt in a bilingual setting is far more difficult because language barriers may decrease the ability to connect with the person in a crisis, or the facilitator trying to assist the scenario (Burlinson, 2003). With a better understanding of emotional support skills, we can now turn to defining code switching, so that the two terms may be compared as interconnected in emotionally stressful situations.

Code Switching

Code switching refers to switching to another language or dialect to increase or decrease intergroup distance (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2011). It is a complicated process with key factors that attribute to the choice of choosing one language, rather than another. First, its linguistic manifestation may extend from the insertion of single words to the alternation of different languages for larger segments of discourse. Second, it is produced by bilinguals of differing degrees of proficiency who reside in various types of language contact settings, and as a consequence their CS might not be uniform (Bullock, 2012). Knowing when and where to switch codes is something that bilinguals have developed and engaged in naturally over time. While code switching is viewed as an index of bilingual proficiency among linguists, it is more commonly perceived by the general public as indicative of language degeneration (Bullock, 2012). Research of code switching has shown that it is not a breakdown of communication, but rather reflects the skillful manipulations of two language systems for various communication functions (Bullock, 2012). Code switching may also be referred to as style shifting, which is a sociolinguistic term referring to alternation between styles of speech included in a

linguistic repertoire of an individual speaker. Choosing the right “style” of language is also an important aspect to effective language communication (Thompson, 2011).

The social aspects of language, or sociolinguistics, represent the cultural norms and expectations placed on language. Because different languages hold different expectations, code switching may be difficult because it requires the ability to adapt culturally, as well as linguistically (Bullock, 2012). For example, speaking to an elder in English requires no different vocabulary, however, if using German, an entirely new vocabulary is enforced because of the cultural principles. In German, there is a formal tense used for people you do not know well, or the elderly, out of respect. These language ‘tenses’ complicate the theory of code switching and make it difficult for those trying to communicate back and forth between languages.

Multi-linguals have the ability to use multiple languages in any given conversation. This comes with the responsibility of choosing the appropriate language, and having the ability to adapt to a certain situation by choosing the correct language accordingly. Therefore, it is logical to look at code switching and emotional support skills as interconnected because the ability to hold a comfortable conversation is key, especially in a crisis situation. Choosing the appropriate language, and appropriate style allows the conversation to take place with limited apprehension or hesitation.

Procedure

Over the semester I interned at the school every Tuesday for two hours between 10am and 12pm. The classroom I work in includes children from ages three to four years old and is called the Löwen Klasse. There are a total of ten students in the classroom and of those ten; one student is a native German speaker. The teacher of the class is also a

German native and speaks primarily to the children in German. My duties at the school consist of the following: assisting the students at recess, ensuring safety during outside playtime, and assisting the teacher with any additional needs. For an hour of my stay at the GPS, the students are free to an hour recess; it is during this time that many of my observations take place. After each visit to the school I wrote down key findings and observations of the day in a journal. In this journal I also noted any new German vocabulary I learned, and anything special that caught my attention. This journal allowed me to document patterns in the different situations I observed at the school.

Findings

During my first few weeks at the school I spent much of my time observing the children at play during their outside recess hour. I was consistently making sure that the children were safe and often aided any child who had an accident or needed assistance. I found that although I was trying to utilize my German as much as possible, when a child was crying or hurt, I would switch to English to make sure the child understood what I was saying. As I observed how other teachers would handle these similar situations, I found that they, too, would speak in English to the child, even if they were native German speakers.

During outdoor play there is ample opportunity for accidents and other distressful situations to happen. With an outdoor playground facility and over twenty children from the ages of three to eight it comes as no surprise that several accidents happen a day. For example, the school provides tricycles to the students during playtime. About once a day an accident happens where a student falls off of his or her tricycle, or students fight over whose turn it is. Many of the common accidents include children falling down, a child

stealing another child's toy, or collisions between children. At such a young age, children are not afraid to express their emotion by crying, screaming, or yelling. When this happens, a teacher or volunteer, such as myself, hurry to attend to the students needs. It is these moments that have caught my interest in code switching and inspired me to investigate further the motivations and techniques behind code-switching, and how it may help in cultural adaptation. I have also chosen to focus on these accidents and stressful situations to better understand how language plays a part in emotional recovery.

Children at the age of three to four are in an extremely important developmental stage. Through independent exploration, structured activities, and hands-on learning, preschoolers develop early literacy, mathematics, science, and social skills, and in this schools case, foreign language skills. Such a sensitive progressive time requires understanding of emotional situations that the children may be exposed to. Exercising emotional support skills gives the children encouragement to persevere through hard times.

This school creates a unique situation for supporting children emotionally because of its bilingual structure. Although many of the children are in the process of learning German, few come to the school as native speakers. Because of this I found it interesting to observe whether the teachers were comforting the children in the German language or the English language, or both. This notion of code switching is what prompted my interest in analyzing the effects of using this theory with children to help them through emotional situations. Throughout the semester I have observed several different junctures at the GPS that have helped in developing key findings.

At the school, I was constantly surrounded with bilingual teachers and students who had the ability to switch from English to German at any given moment. For many of the teachers this switch was so fluid and natural that they were able to keep a conversation in either language with ease. Frau Fritz, the teacher of the preschool classroom, engages in code switching regularly. During lessons she may often switch to English to repeat what she was saying in German so that the students comprehend directions. The children in the class have a wide range of German skills, one child being completely fluent, to others who often avoid the German language altogether. The primary language Fritz engages in is German, although when a student does not comprehend direction, or needs additional attention she code switches to the English language.

Observations

At the school there are many 'crises' that happen during outdoor playtime that require a teacher to offer emotional support to a child. These situations included times of stress, injury, or frustration that cause the children to have extreme emotional reactions. Crying, screaming, and yelling may all take place, causing the teacher to initiate emotional support skills previously defined as 'expressions of care, concern, affection, and interest, especially during times of stress or upset' (Burlison, 2003). In some cases, the teacher is also required to reprimand that child for his or her misbehavior. This process looks slightly different than purely offering emotional support because it encourages behavior modification and offers less emotional support. A third scenario I often observed is mediation between two children who are arguing or emotionally frustrated with one another. During this situation a teacher must first mediate the

situation, and then offer emotional support to the children. I will now share three different observations at the school as key examples of emotional support, reprimand and emotional support, and mediation and emotional support, all significantly common occurrences at the school.

Emotional Support

On September 25th the following situation took place:

One of the children was using the restroom while many of the others were in line to wash their hand for lunch. One student, Garrett¹, was waiting to wash his hands with the others but was playing with the door to the bathroom. Not paying attention, he stuck his fingers into the crease of the door. As the child in the bathroom opened the door, Garrett's fingers were badly pinched. He let out a shriek of pain and immediately ran to Fritz sobbing. She shouted, "Garrett what happened?! Did your finger get caught in the door!?! Come here let me see it." She then proceeded to give Garrett an icepack and sat him on her lap for quite some time until his fingers felt better. She even gave his finger a kiss in hopes that it would make his finger feel better.

This painful accident required Fritz to give emotional support right away. The child was clearly traumatized by the accident and although Garrett's hands should not have been in the door, Fritz chose to comfort him to calm him down. Fritz consoled him on her lap for several minutes after the initial situation and all of the conversation that I observed was conducted in English, Garrett's native language. This soothing conversation was effective in calming Garrett down and giving him assurance that he would be just fine. As

¹ Names have been changed to insure privacy of the child.

previously stated, conversation in emotional settings is important because it builds relationships strengthened by trust (Burlison, 2003). The ability for Garrett and Frau Fritz to speak freely back and forth with one another increased the comfort level of the situation.

Mediation and Emotional Support

On November 13th 2012, the following situation took place:

Travis was playing on a tricycle with Jack who was pushing it behind him. The two boys ran up the hill, turned around and began moving quickly down the hill. They gained so much momentum that the bike began going too fast and hit one of the other students, Julia, who fell to the ground. Jack and Travis started laughing and ran away. After the initial shock of the impact, Julia began to cry hysterically. I rushed over to Julia but another teacher had already gotten to her. She said to the child in English, "What happened? Are you ok?" Julia responded, "Travis and Jack hit me!!" The teacher called over the two boys who were yelling back, "We did not!" The teacher kneeled down and instructed the boys to apologize to Julia. They said they were sorry and the teacher proceeded to console Julia, "Let me see your hands. I am sorry, come here." She then kneeled down, gave the student a long, tight hug, and rubbed the child's back until she stopped crying. She kissed Julia's hands that had been hurting from the fall, and sent her on her way to continue to play. All of her language prior to the accident was in German, once the accident occurred the teacher code-switched to the child's native language, English.

This is a standard situation at the GPS and happens regularly. During my first few visits at the GPS I did not think twice about the reactions to these types emotional situations, but felt as if they were natural and normal. Although the more I paid attention to how the teachers were responding, the more I felt that the teacher was choosing to mediate the situation first, encourage an apology, and then proceed to emotionally support the child.

Emotional situations also occurred in the classroom when a child would misbehave and need a punishment. Fritz primarily engages the students in German conversation; however, when a child misbehaves she often switches to English so the children are sure to understand. One last example of a code-switching situation I observed included an accident caused by a student's misbehavior.

Reprimand and Emotional Support

On November 27th the following situation took place:

This week when I arrived to the classroom there was a Christmas tree placed in the corner decorated with red ornaments and Christmas lights. The children were in the middle of 'free-time' when I arrived. One of the children, Joseph, was running around in circle near the tree. He lost his balance, ran into the tree, and fell down, knocking down the entire tree. The children screamed and the tree crashed into the ground, breaking many ornaments along the way. Frau Fritz yelled, "JOSEPH, what do you think you are doing?! Are you ok? You need to slow down!" Frau Fritz ran over to Joseph to make sure he was ok and brushed him off. Joseph did not cry during this encounter but looked surprised by the initial contact with the floor. Frau Fritz, after making sure he was ok, continued to scold him until placing him in timeout for the remainder of the free period.

Since Joseph's primary language is English, Fritz, as a competent communicator, switched to the language she knew he would understand right away. Although Joseph was misbehaving, Fritz still made sure that he was ok first, offering emotional support by running over to him and making sure he wasn't hurt. She then reprimanded him for his careless behavior, speaking in English to make sure he understood that his actions were unacceptable. Through these three observations we get a glimpse of how many emotional situations take place at the school and how the teachers are able to adapt to the setting quickly and competently. Many times when Fritz chose to code-switch she was doing so to get the students attention, or scold them. I have been consistently surrounded by code-switching during my time at the German American School and am fascinated by the motivations and skills needed in order to use this tool adaptively. By analyzing the emotional situations that I was observing and identifying emotional support skills, I was able to see if code switching is, in fact, instrumental during these stressful situations.

Implications and Discussion

Through my time at the school I have been able to come to conclusions about the use of code switching and its effects when applied in an emotional situation. Though my findings were applied directly to the scenarios at the school, code switching (also known as style shifting) can be applied on a broader scale as a means for emotional support for any bilingual communicator. Three different conclusions can be based on this analysis of how code switching was utilized in this setting as a tool in emotionally stressful circumstances with these children.

Code Switching to Minimize Anxiety

Emotionally distressful situations cause anxiety for those involved, and in many cases, for those who are observing. The most common emotion in these observations is anxiety, because of the element of surprise or fear (cite?). Anxiety makes someone want to escape the situation — fast. The heart beats quickly, the body might begin to perspire, and "butterflies" in the stomach soon follow. Anxiety stems from the anticipation of negative consequences (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). In the three observations, anxiety plays a role in both the student and the teachers reaction to the situation. In order to minimize the child's anxiety the teacher would use the native language of the child, in these cases, English. If the teacher were to continue to console the student in German, or any other language, the child would have struggled to understand the message, increasing the anxiety of the situation.

Speaking in a foreign language that you are currently learning requires concentration and preparation. Chakrabarti and Sengupta (2012) explored the level of anxiety of Indian learners who learn English as a second language, as well as the effect of anxiety on their language achievement. They found a negative correlation between anxiety and foreign language achievement, concluding that anxiety in a foreign language makes a learner feel less secure, more nervous and aggravated in using the language or taking a test (Chakrabarti & Sengupta, 2012).

The anxiety that is produced by practicing a foreign language creates more stress for communicators. In a crisis scenario, where stress is already increased significantly, encouraging someone to continue his or her foreign language practices would intensify the anxiety of the situation. Code switching to a language that the student is comfortable

with would lower the anxiety of using a foreign language, and allow the situation to focus more on the child's current emotional condition.

Code Switching for Conversational Comfort

Conversation in an emotionally distressful situation is extremely important among children. Children between the ages of 3 to 5 need consistent reassurance and affection to be able to develop into an emotionally competent being (Georgalidou, Kaili, & Celtek, 2010). Giving children emotional and physical support helps them grow to be proficient communicators in the future. In order to engage in a successful conversation, communicators must understand which language to engage in depending on the individual and current situation.

Within the definition of emotional support skills Burleson (2003) stated that creating a sustainable supportive conversational environment is important during upsetting matters. This way the one inflicted with pain is able to safely discuss their emotions and using the dialogue as a coping mechanism. Wei (2005) pointed out code switching is essentially a conversational activity. Although bilinguals may use code switching naturally in these settings, the ability to use the tool intentionally as a means for supporting someone under emotional distress increases ones communication competence. Creating a fluent conversation for the emotionally distressed increases intimacy between the person in need and the supporter.

Code Switching as an Emotional Support Skill

Code switching is a tool used by bilinguals that expands the opportunity for emotional support with those who speak the same language. Switching the language in order to accommodate someone who may not feel comfortable engaging in conversation

is a way to increase trust, intimacy, and support (Burlleson, 2003). Emotional support skills such as non-verbal communications (hugging, touching, etc.), or listening are commonly used and acknowledged tools already in the toolbox. Adding code switching as an emotional support skill for bilinguals would give meaning to the natural phenomenon that happens when a bilingual communicator switches his or her code to fit the person in need.

Switching ones code is possible not only in language shifts but style shifts as well. In a study done by Thompson (2011), code switching and style shifting were defined and compared as a means for establishing bilingual identity. Style shifting utilizes the language as a means to change ones identity for a specific situation. Style shifting is a sociolinguistic term referring to alternation between styles of speech included in a linguistic repertoire of an individual speaker. Style shifting happens within the speaker, initiated because of a need for a change in the sociolinguistic setting (Thompson, 2011). One may engage in this sort of style shifting because of the need to change their social role in a given circumstance. For example, at the school, Fritz took the role of the teacher for the majority of my observation period. However, in the three observations I share, her code or “style” shifted to a ‘motherly’ role. Comforting the students, kissing their injuries, or punishing them for ill behavior are all parental traits that Fritz took on during the stressful situations. Depending on the communicator and the communication scenario, an individual may need to adapt their code style to either a more masculine or feminine tone. This adaptation helps in increasing the emotional support that is required based on the circumstance.

Conclusion

Communication adaptability is the ability to change our interaction, behaviors, and goals to meet the specific needs of the situation. It signals mindful awareness of the other person's perspectives, interests, goals, and communication approach, plus our willingness to modify our behaviors and goals to adapt to the interaction situation (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2011). By mindfully code switching to an appropriate code and style, there is greater flexibility to be able to support any emotionally distressful situation. The ability to cognitively recognize code switching as a tool for emotional support helps communicators in managing stressful situations. Minimizing anxiety, creating comfortable conversation, and establishing the appropriate 'style', or code only helps in maintaining a controlled environment for the inflicted and the facilitator. The German-American School gave me a first-hand look at how this manifestation occurs and how the children were positively affected by an adult's ability to adaptively code-switch in stressful situations. The kids were able to recover quicker because of greater ability to understand the language "code" and receive the message. Bilingual or not, knowing and using the appropriate communication code for a situation at hand gives communicators the best chance to offer proper support to those needing it in that context.

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