

Why do Young People in Vietnam Use Expletive English Words While Speaking Vietnamese?

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Abstract: The young generation in Vietnam has been causing worries to society because of their habit of using gibberish expletive language. The following study is carried out to determine the motive of the present-day young people when they use expletive English word while speaking Vietnamese. By using both the survey questionnaires (N=489) for individuals and (n=15) for group interview, the study has come to two main conclusions. First, unlike to the common assumptions that youngsters like to use the expletive word just for “fun”, “stylish” or for “convenience”; the motive of the youngsters may stem from a series of reasons and more diverse elements. Secondly, this behavior may play the role as a trick in communicative activities, a measure taken to overcome their losses in learning and a mode to settle the inconveniences in reality. That is why, getting insight into these language behavior could bring about the useful conclusions for the teaching and learning of English in a capacity as a foreign language in Vietnam.

Keywords: Expletive language, young generation, English language education.

1. Introduction

The young generation in Vietnam is coming of age with plenty of social apprehension about their code-switching practices, characterized by Muysken [1] as the insertion of linguistic elements from one language (i.e. English) to another (i.e., Vietnamese). Below are several illustrative utterances of these practices, in which the incorporated English elements are italicized.

• *Damn, tao stupid quá, sorry mà!* (English lexical items inserted in a Vietnamese utterance);

• *Làm wen; làm shao; làm j* (English alphabetic system of English embedded in Vietnamese structure or spelling);

• *Like is afternoon!* (lexically English, but semantically Vietnamese, meaning: I'll do as you please);

• *2! hao-a-diu?* (phonetically Vietnamese, but semantically English: Hi! How are you); and

• The use of English in daily communications with speakers of Vietnamese.

More often than not, these practices are found “puzzling” [2, 3] by the previous generations. As a consequence, varied measures have been taken by teachers to eliminate these “nonsense” and “irrational” practices; nonetheless, they all have led to little success

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[2-4], posing a thorny pedagogical issue for Vietnamese educators today.

As among the first attempts to address this linguistic phenomenon, a case study was conducted to enquire into these code-switching practices. This article addresses a key question raised by the study and underlining the social concern today, which was “According to their own perceptions, why do the young people in Vietnam switch between English and Vietnamese?”. Presenting several findings of the study, the article argues that these linguistic switches are not merely for fun, convenience and stylishness as commonly assumed [3, 5, 6]. Indeed, there could be a wide range of factors inducing the young generation to switch between English and Vietnamese, some of which could carry significant implications for English language learning and teaching in Vietnam.

2. A Brief Review of the Literature on the Motives for Code-switching

According to the media reports in Vietnam, the reasons behind code-switching practices of the young generation were often reduced to its convenience in texting on phones, fun, and stylishness [3, 5, 6]. However, contemporary studies on code-switching and identity theories suggest that there could be a wide range of internal and external factors inducing code-switching.

In terms of external factors, or factors independent of particular speakers and circumstances, notable is the concept of “domain”, defined by Fishman [1972, cited in 7] as “institutional contexts and their congruent behavioural co-occurrences” which determines “who speaks what language to whom and when”. Common examples of domains include

public speaking, academic writing and daily conversation domains. However, this concept is not self-sufficient to account for code-switching as codes have been switched within domain boundaries as well (Sridhar, *ibid.*).

It is here that Myers-Scotton [8] proposes the concept of “indexicality” in the seminal Markedness Theory, whereby each code involved in code-switching is indexical of certain attributes, such as formal, official or authoritative. As the theory assumes that code-switchers are aware of this indexicality, or “a range of codes that would be appropriate for a particular type of conversationalised exchange” [7], they are normally expected to select the “unmarked” choice, or the most conventional code choice complying with the expected sets of “rights and obligations” typical of that particular situation. Any selection other than the unmarked one becomes “marked”, which diverges from the sets of rights and obligations and hence “indexes” “particular implications and associations” [9] to the addressee(s).

In sum, this brief review suggests that there could be a wider range of factors inducing the young generation in Vietnam to switch between codes. However, the studies covered in this review often focus on the bilingual populations where English is commonly associated with certain domains or indexicality. In the context of Vietnam where English represents an emerging second language for most of the young generation, such domains and indexicality of English may not be as distinctive. It is this gap in the literature that this article aims to address.

3. Research Methods of the Case Study

To conduct the first investigation into the issue, this case study was conducted from 2000

to 2012. In the preliminary stage, 489 students born in the 1990s (characterized as the “young” generation in Vietnam) were randomly selected from an educational institution in Northern Vietnam to participate in a survey questionnaire. Based on their responses, 15 participants identified as “deviant” or “typical” cases [Caracelli & Greene, 1993, cited in 10] proceeded to the main stage of interviews and/or focus groups. As a result, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected.

While the statistical procedures were employed with the help of SPSS to analyse quantitative data, the qualitative data analysis drew on thematic analysis, defined by Gibson and Brown [11] as the process of data analysis according to “commonalities, relationships and differences”. In this process, responses from the participants were reduced via text segmentation

[12] to reveal important themes [Ryan & Bernard, 2003, cited in 12]. Finally, categories were created through conceptual clarifications [13] before these databits from the questionnaire and interviews were assigned to these categories [13].

4. The study findings: Motives for Code-switching among the Young People in Vietnam

4.1. Quantitative data

Via the questionnaire, a total of 485 responses were collected. As the participants were asked to reflect on the reasons why they switched between English and Vietnamese, their responses could be summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Motives for Code-switching (by Number of Participants)

	n (valid)	Frequencies	(Row) Percentages
To informalize	485	360	74.2%
To save time	485	346	71.3%
Automatically/ no clear reasons	485	270	55.7%
For popularity of uses	485	263	54.2%
To save money	485	192	39.6%
To say the sensitive, delicate, taboo	485	143	29.5%
To practice English	485	140	28.9%
Can't find Vietnamese equivalents	484	120	24.8%
For the ease of communication partner(s)	485	102	21%
For the preference of English in general	485	49	10.1%
To show English competence	485	41	8.5%
To formalize	485	30	6.2%
For other reasons	485	21	4.3%

As can be seen from this table, the majority of the participants claimed that their code-switching practices were to informalize the speech, save time, automatic and for the sake of popularity. Around one third of them switched between English and Vietnamese to save money, practise English or say the taboo. A quarter of the participants associated their code-switching practices with the difficulty to find

Vietnamese equivalents and the ease of communication partners. Only one out of ten participants at most attributed their practices to other reasons.

Although the code-switching practices and the motives for doing so are characterized as common and diverse by this table, these quantitative data added little to the media assumptions about code-switching, which

ascribed code-switching to mere convenience, fun and stylishness. It is here that the qualitative data presented below could be insightful by correcting these assumptions and beliefs regarding why the young generation switched between codes.

4.2. Qualitative data

Due to the limited scope of this article, presented below is a brief overview of three most important themes emerging from the thematic analysis of qualitative data of the study. Varied as they are, these themes commonly point out that there is much more about code-switching motives than a handful of reasons pointed out by the media reports.

- *Code-switching as a communication strategy*

By Table 1, the most common reason that around three quarters of them referred to was “informalize” the speech (74.2%), which apparently coincides with “fun” as suggested by most of the media reports. Nevertheless there exists a certain gap between the representation and connotation of “fun” implied by the media and informalization as specified in the questionnaire and perceived by certain respondents:

My choice [to switch between codes] depends on different phrases. For example, if we replace “comment”, or “stupid” with “bình luận”, “ngu” in Vietnamese, it could sound too serious. (A survey respondent)

While “fun”, as worded by the media, mainly connotes personal enjoyment and pleasure, “informalization” is more directed towards a communicative and interpersonal strategy of neutralization or toning-it-down as suggested by the respondent above. In this line of argument, code-switching is not linguistic ignorance as socially concerned about, or

indexical of certain fixed attributes as the Markedness theory suggests. Rather, it can represent skillful techniques and strategies depending on, and developed in particular interpersonal communications.

Similarly, the use of code-switching to say the taboo, difficult or sensitive by around one fourth of the participants (as indicated by Table 1) also relies on English as a tool of neutralization in specific circumstances:

Up to now I’m still using English in my blog entries, because maybe English distinguishes between *I* and *you* only, which makes it easier to express our emotions and conceal something (Mai, focus group participant).

Like my friend, when her grandpa passed away, but she was in America and she couldn’t come back ... I used English to write to her ... to make it feel less sorrowful (Huyen, second interview).

While personal pronouns in Vietnamese are invariably commensurate with the interlocutors’ emotions, social roles and statuses [14], their simplicity and neutrality in English seemed to lend Mai a resolution to address a wider, often unknown and more heterogeneous range of audiences on the Internet with ease and convenience. As for Huyen, English helped her in the attempt to steer away from the lived culture Vietnamese was embedded in. To be specific, she found Vietnamese a more difficult language to express her condolences, possibly by evoking unpleasant lived experiences with which these words were often associated. Given that the funeral custom in Vietnam relies on language among a range of other symbols to underline and even exaggerate sorrow and pain [14], such an attempt at disassociation was not without strong grounds.

- *Code-switching as English language learning*

Another minor but noteworthy theme suggested by more than forth of the survey participants is the role of code-switching in English language learning. While the importance of English language learning is undeniable in today's globalization, not everyone could gain equal or adequate access to English language learning resources [15-17], let alone authentic ones outside the classroom. With code-switching, these participants believed a solution could be found:

As for us, as foreign language learners, like [those in] my dorm room ... code-switching somewhat helps to improve our English ... I mean when we go out, we can't use English with others, we must still use Vietnamese. But I only use English to speak with Vietnamese people when talking with my friends or when chatting with friends for fun or for practising purposes only (Giang, first interview)

Because I find the environment for my communication in English was so scarce in the classroom. In class we communicate not totally in English. Sometimes using English like that [in code-switching constructions] helps me to memorize the knowledge we've forgotten for a while (Kim Anh, second interview)

Studying away from home and in an academic setting where authentic opportunities to practice English were scarce, both Giang and Kim Anh employed English in certain communications with her Vietnamese bilingual peers outside the classroom to construct a semi-authentic context where English could be used comfortably for practising purposes. As such an effort was made on a voluntary basis and out of the sparse resources at hand, it demonstrates an active and resourceful negotiation via code-switching to maximize access to English among the disadvantaged.

- *Code-switching for practical purposes and constraints*

By Table 1, a significant percentage of the participants switched between English and Vietnamese for its convenience. As this study set out to identify the particular grounds on which English was perceived as more convenient than Vietnamese, it found out that code-switching could indeed arise from the practices of in-class note-taking:

When we took notes, my teachers read and said "Using shorthand as much as possible, with any word possible, as long as you understand it. It doesn't matter if others get it or not because we are learning for ourselves (Kim, first interview)

When we were [school] students, my teacher also said that when we took notes we should use symbols like this and like that to save time ... I find [this type of writing] help me to take notes better ... it's only to be more convenient or something when we take notes or when we recorded what the teacher was saying (Giang, first interview)

Their responses suggested an association between passive textual practices common in Vietnam and the utilization of shorthand, code-switching included, as powerful literacy practices in response to the teacher-centeredness in classroom activities. Whereas the literature and particularly the media had often characterized code-switching as unwanted by educators; Kim Anh and Giang's narratives pointed out a paradox, in which certain textual practices inside the classrooms had been indeed conducive to code-switching.

It would be simplistic nonetheless to reduce code-switching to information-recording and educational contexts, or domains, only. Further inquiries have strongly affirmed such a

connection between texting on mobile phones and the practices of code-switching:

Because in texting messages, letter *j* is placed first so people find it faster to enter otherwise they do not:: want:: to use it at all (Giang, an interviewee)

It can be explained for making text-messaging faster. Instead of pressing four times for letters *qu* we need to press only once for letter *w* on the telephone (Linh, an interviewee)

Linh and Giang's justifications rationalize how code-switching could actually save time. As displayed in Figure 1, many standard mobile phones on Vietnamese market were designed and manufactured (or outsourced) by the West, thus encompassed the English letters *J* and *W*,

non-existent in the Vietnamese standard alphabet. What was even more interesting was the arrangement and distribution of these letters on the keypad together with the popular multi-tap textual entry system, which favours access to certain letters over others. A comparison between English and Vietnamese textual entries by the young in Table 2 sheds further light on how inserting English alphabetical letters could actually save time and energy through the reduced number of taps and the amount of finger movement, as well as the elimination of pauses which altogether characterize the advantage of English over Vietnamese. As such, code-switching in text-messaging could be legitimized as strategic textual practices under practical constraints of the situation.



Figure 1. A common multi-tap telephone keypad layout.

Table 2. Texting on Mobile Phones with Vietnamese Compared with English

Vietnamese letters/phonemes	(Perceived) Equivalents in English
Ph /f/ - One tap at key#7 to enter <i>P</i> - Moving to key#4 - Two consecutive taps at key#4 to enter <i>H</i>	F /f/ - Three consecutive taps at #3 to enter <i>F</i>
Gi /z/ - One tap at key#4 to enter <i>G</i> - Pause - Three consecutive taps at key#4 to enter <i>I</i>	J/ dʒ/ - One tap at key#5 to enter <i>J</i>
Qu /kw/ - Two consecutive taps at key#7 to enter <i>Q</i> - Moving to key#8 - Two consecutive taps at key#8 to enter <i>U</i>	W /w/ - One tap at key#9 to enter <i>W</i>

5. Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Studies

Within the scope of a case study, this study in general and the article in particular do not wish to generalize these findings to the whole population of the young people, or advocate all practices of code-switching by attributing them to more legitimate uses discussed above. What it reasonably suggests, however, is that much has been overlooked and even misunderstood concerning these code-switching practices. That is, while common assumptions often reduce code-switching practices of the young people to a handful of immature impetuses, mostly with negative connotations such as fun, stylishness and convenience, the article argues otherwise. It points out that in many circumstances, code-switching could represent a communication strategy, a solution to their much disadvantaged situation in English language learning, as well as to serve practical purposes of overcoming constraints in particular textual practices.

However, as the study primarily draws on the perceptions of the students, it is suggested that some conversational analysis techniques, in which their practices and the motives for doing so are examined in specific contexts, should also be taken into account in future studies. This will help to examine the local creation of social meaning of code-switchers as Auer [1984, cited in 18] advocates:

... situation was not a predetermined set of norms functioning solely as a constraint on linguistic performance ... [but] an interactively achieved phenomenon ... participants of conversational interaction continuously produced frames for subsequent activities, which in turn created new frames ... the meaning of code-switching must be interpreted with reference to the language choice in the preceding and following turns by the participants themselves.

Accordingly, more rigorous techniques on a wider scale would better capture the diverse motives for code-switching, which may vary widely according to specific individuals and situations. In this way, the interpretation of code-switching among the young people in Vietnam may not neatly fit the simple accounts of indexicality or domains as outlined above, but dynamically “built up in the conversation itself, and on the basis of similar cases in the coparticipants’ experience” as Auer [1990, cited in 8] suggests.

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Tại sao giới trẻ ở Việt Nam lại chêm xen tiếng Anh vào tiếng Việt?

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Tóm tắt: Thế hệ trẻ ở Việt Nam ngày nay đang khiến xã hội phải lo ngại vì thói quen chêm xen ngôn ngữ rất “khó hiểu” của mình. Nghiên cứu trường hợp dưới đây được tiến hành nhằm xác định động cơ của cơ giới trẻ ngày nay khi chêm xen tiếng Anh vào tiếng Việt. Thông qua bản câu hỏi (N=489), phỏng vấn cá nhân và phỏng vấn nhóm (n=15), nghiên cứu đã đưa ra hai kết luận chính. Thứ nhất, không giống với cách hiểu phổ biến thường cho rằng giới trẻ chêm xen ngôn ngữ là để cho “vui”, “sành điệu” và “thuận tiện”, động cơ của giới trẻ có thể bắt nguồn từ một loạt những nguyên nhân và yếu tố đa dạng hơn nhiều. Thứ hai, hành vi này có thể đóng vai trò là một thủ thuật trong giao tiếp, một biện pháp khắc phục những thiệt thòi trong học tập, và một phương thức giải quyết những bất tiện trong thực tiễn. Do đó, việc tìm hiểu động cơ dẫn đến hành vi ngôn ngữ này có thể mang lại những kết luận hữu ích cho việc dạy và học tiếng Anh với tư cách là một ngoại ngữ ở Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Chêm xen ngôn ngữ, thế hệ trẻ, dạy và học tiếng Anh.