

EFL Learners' Use of ICTs for e-communication and Language Choice: Factors Determine the Use of One Particular Language

استخدام متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتكنولوجيا الإعلام والاتصال من أجل التواصل الإلكتروني:
العوامل التي تحدد اختيار لغة معينة

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Abstract

In the era of Information and Communication Technologies, polyglots have the privilege in contacting more people from various countries and nationalities. EFL learners have that privilege to use more than one language in e-communication. This article investigates the different languages used by Algerian EFL learners for e-communication and the factors behind their choice of one language rather than the other. The researcher conducted semi- structured interviews with five doctorate students in the department of English at Algiers 2 University. These students are polyglots. English is their third language. This study revealed that they use three languages in e-communication in different levels. This study also revealed that there are various reasons that govern their use of one particular language such as: the interlocutors, the topic and the context of the e-communication.

Keywords: E-communication, EFL learners, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Language choice, Multilingualism.

المخلص: في عصر تكنولوجيا الإعلام والاتصال، يتمتع متعددي اللغات بامتياز الاتصال بمزيد من الأشخاص من مختلف البلدان والجنسيات. يتمتع دارسو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بهذا الامتياز لاستخدام أكثر من لغة في التواصل الإلكتروني. يبحث هذا المقال في اللغات المختلفة التي يستخدمها المتعلمين الجزائريين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عند استخدام التواصل الإلكتروني والعوامل الكامنة وراء اختيارهم لإحدى اللغات بدلاً من الأخرى. أجرى الباحث مقابلات مع خمسة طلاب دكتوراه في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الجزائر 2. هؤلاء الطلاب متعددو اللغات. اللغة الإنجليزية هي اللغة الثالثة. كشفت الدراسة الحالية عن استخدامهم للغات الثلاث في الاتصال الإلكتروني بمستويات مختلفة. كشفت هذه الدراسة أيضاً أن هناك أسباب مختلفة تحكم استخدامهم للغة معينة مثل المحاورين، الموضوع وسياق الاتصال الإلكتروني.

كلمات مفتاحية: اختيار اللغة، التواصل الإلكتروني، تعدد اللغات، متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، وسائل الإعلام والاتصال.

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1. INTRODUCTION

EFL learners need to use language in order to develop their linguistic and communicative competence as it can be used as a tool to make friends, learn about various cultures, develop their professional careers and to serve many other purposes. Whatever the cause behind language use by EFL learners is, many opportunities are offered to them to use language in the technology era, especially through e-communication tools. **Abu-Seileek & Rabab'ah (2013)** call for making use of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) as an option to promote EFL learning. They focus more on computer-mediated communication (CMC) as an important technique of (CALL). They argue; “One of the major goals of CMC is to help learners to be involved in interactive language learning activities.” (42-43) EFL learners as bilinguals or polyglots have more than one language to choose while using e-communication. Language choice or code choice can be related to different linguistic phenomena such as code-switching, code mixing, and borrowing. But the problem is in the exact meaning of each term as **Al-Khatib & Sabbah (2008, p. 39)** explain; “Though many authors have dealt with the process of code-switching, code mixing and borrowing, not all of them have provided clear-cut distinctions for such phenomena (Romaine 1989; Myers-Scotton 1990;1993; Poplack 1988)”. **Dweik & Qawar (2015, p. 04)** state that “It should be clear that many factors influence language choice, and may work either with or against each other, producing a complex web of interaction which makes the task of describing any language choice event extremely difficult. Various factors determine the use of one language rather than the other by EFL learners while using e-communication

2. Related Literature

2.1. ICTs and E-communication

ICT stands for Information and Communication Technology. It is defined as: “... a set of different tools and resources that are used to communicate, produce, distribute, store and manage information computer, Internet, broadcasting technologies (radio &television), telephones and wireless communication are examples of these technologies.” Blurton, 2002 cited in **Iqbal, Shawana & Saeed (2013, p. 39)**

E-communication is simply any kind of communication, either oral or written, that relies on Information and Communication Technologies. **Trziu & Vrabie (2015)** see that; “E-communication refers to the communication realized by electronic means, especially over computer networks. This type of communication has created the so-called ‘virtual space’ ” (551). They mention some e-communication tools such as e-mail, Youtube, Moodle and Wide World Web, and they explain how they can be used to learn a foreign language. They mention some disadvantages of e-communication such as security problems, synchronicity requirements and misunderstandings. They illustrate; “If a user omits important aspects- such as: thanks, greetings, punctuation, capitalization and well used grammar- just to save few moments, this reflects more a human problem rather than a technological one.” (554)

2.2. Studies conducted about e-communication

The importance of e-communication for EFL learners is not confirmed by all people. **Hufien & Yueh-chui (2010)** conducted a study to explore EFL learners’ perceptions about using CMC in their learning of English. The study reveals that participants see that the ‘artificial’ or ‘pseudo’ communication of CMC did not help them in developing the communicative skills in English. In contrast, **Averianova (2012)** ensures the importance of e-communication for EFL learners that it provides authentic, secure, and highly motivating learning environment, what makes the learner uninhibited, more active and more autonomous in this more student-centered and dynamic atmosphere. However, she emphasizes the importance of a specific type of literacy which its absence may lead to bad consequences. She sees that the problem is not in linguistic competence. What should be addressed in her opinion is the lack of comprehensibility, misunderstanding and miscommunication because of EF learners’ trial to be accepted in e-communication communities by emulating the distinctive discursive behavior. Consequently, they overindulge in the use of condensed writing, new forms of writing, abbreviations and emoticons and even the try to show their ignorance of syntax and orthography. Over time, such miscommunication may affect their relationships with the other communicators and their participation in online communities.

Abu-Seileek & Rabab'ah (2013) conducted a study to explore the discourse generated by EFL learners trying to help those learners to create social

interaction in the classroom by using synchronous CMC as an approach. They investigate the role of gender in relation to the synchronous CMC mode in shaping the quantity of discourse, lexical range and linguistic functions. This study found that female participants produced more words than males and more complex varieties and discourse functions also. According to them, CMC helps females who communicate less in real-life communication because they are shy students or because they belong to certain conservative societies. **Al-Khatib & Sabbah (2008, p. 38)** explain what is meant by synchronous and asynchronous CMC referring to Crystal's 2001 words. "CMC is divided into two types: first, the synchronous CMC, whereby the communication occurs 'in real time' (Crystal.2001:11), such as Real Time Chat (RTC). The second type is asynchronous CMC, whereby communication occurs 'in postponed time' (Crystal .2001:11) such as SMS and e-mails."

2.3. Language Choice

Polyglots can, and in some cases have to, choose one language to use in communication. "Whenever speakers of two or more languages come together, a decision has to be made about which of these languages is to be used." **Dweik & Qawar (2015, p. 04)** Some researchers deal with the phenomenon of language choice from a sociolinguistic perspective. **Gass (2008, p. 434)** states that "... one could make claims about code switching and code choice as markers of ethnic identity." Focusing also on identity, **Peuronen (2008, p. 20)** confirms; "Language alteration, in addition to various other linguistic and symbolic means, can be viewed as a significant resource for the construction of communities and identities in electronic environments." Multilingualism is a large field of study that tries to investigate all issues related to multilingual speakers and multilingualism in general. However, the focus on multilingual communications through electronic devices is quite recent. **Papalexakis, Nguyen, & Dorgruoz, (2014, p. 43)** discuss the issue; "Although multilingual communication has been widely studied through spoken data analyses, research on online communication is relatively recent." According to **Androutsopoulos (2006)** most of the studies concerned with code alteration in relation to computer-mediated settings focus on two main approaches. The first is about the use of more than one language or

code-switching “during a single communicative episode”. (340) The second interest is in the factors that govern language choice in a bilingual or multilingual community “such as participants, topic and setting”. (ibid)

Burt (1994) discusses the concept of code choice from an intercultural perspective. First, by summarizing the claims about the strategies of code choice according to the framework of Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT). Then, by describing “the explicitly pragmatic approaches of Brown and Levinson (1987) [the politeness theory] and M.C. Scotton (1983) [the theory of identity negotiation which was presented later as Markedness Model of Codes-switching] [...] which predicted a systematic socio-pragmatic ambiguity for any act of code choice in an intercultural conversation.” (335) Also, by describing “the details of research designed to uncover this ambiguity in bilingual listeners’ reactions to speakers who use different code strategies” (ibid), and finally, by giving the results of that research.

2.4. Language choice, code-switching, code-mixing and borrowing

Code-switching, code choice, code-mixing, and borrowing are terms that are confusing in many cases because there is no clear cut between them. **Dweik & Qawar (2015, p. 04)** define language choice as follows; “Language choice is a careful selection of word, phrase, clause or sentence of another language within the speaker’s linguistic repertoire. For bilinguals and polyglots, the occurrence of language choice seems natural, automatic and unplanned.” This means that they do not differentiate between ‘language choice’ and ‘code-switching’. It is true that ‘code-switching’ is present in almost all studies related to language choice, but many researchers deal with them as different concepts. **Kong, Bailey & K (2015)** deal with the two terms as different. They state; “In this chapter, ‘language choice’ refers to a multilingual student’s choice between his or her first language (L1) and English for a facebook post.” (03) According to them, code switching is” a specific type of language choice that involves the switching of languages within a thread of conversation.” (ibid). “Grosjean (1982:145) defines code-switching as ‘the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation’ ” **Al-Khatib & Sabbah (2008, p. 39)** **Gass (2008)** tries to make the difference between code-switching, code mixing and borrowing and she insists on the need to differentiate between them.

2.5. Factors determine language choice

Multilingual speakers have the opportunity to use more than one language in communication. There are different factors that determine the interlocutors' choice of one language rather than the other. **Kong, Bailey & K (2015)** state some of the reasons behind choosing one particular language such as appropriateness for expressing the content, addressing a specific audience, quoting something, using habitual expressions, and ignoring the appropriate word or expression in the other language. **Dweik & Qawar (2015, p. 04)** refer to David (2006) in order to mention various reasons behind language choice. They state; "David (2006) argues that language choice is triggered by factors such as social status, gender, educational attainment, ethnicity, age, occupation, rural and urban origin, speakers, topic, place, media and formality of the situation". In their words they specify the reasons as follows "Once a new language is learned, it becomes available as part of speakers' stylistic repertoire. The selected language depends on several factors that determine certain language choice or usage, like the topic, the social scene, the relative status of speakers, their aspiration and feelings of identity". (05) However, they claim that there should be more work to explain that issue; "Theoretically refined tools are needed to explain why language X is used in situation x, and why language Y is used in situation y. (04) **Al-Khatib & Sabbah (2008)** mention different reasons such as environmental setting, audience, and whether topics are embracing or uncomfortable.

3. The current study

3.1. Objectives and scope of the study

Although there are many studies that analyze various electronic messages between polyglots and investigate different phenomena such as code-switching, code mixing and borrowing, there were few researches that were based on interviewing EFL learners to discover the reasons that determine their choice of one language rather than the other, especially for Arabic native speakers. This study aims at investigating language choice by Algerian EFL learners when using e-communication. The Algerian EFL learners use the Algerian Arabic vernacular as their mother tongue and French as their second language. English is considered as their third (or foreign) language. As multilingual learners, they use

the three languages when they communicate through electronic devices. The current study tries to explore the factors that govern these learners' choice of one particular language when communicating with others through e-communication tools.

3.2. Methodology

The data of this study were collected from the answers of Algerian EFL learners who were interviewed by the researcher. This interview targeted five EFL students in their first year of doctorate, who were polyglots, to see how they use the three languages they know in e-communication and what determines their choice of one of these languages rather than the other. These interviewees who follow their studies in Applied Linguistics and TEFL in the Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages at Algiers 2 University, while French seems to be the most used language among teachers and learners at this university, which will be shown, through their answers in the interview, whether English is their most used language in e-communication or they use the other languages more. The interviewees are four females and one male. The participants' age is between twenty-five and twenty-eight. This study aims at finding answers to such questions but not to generalize the findings of the data collected.

As the interview was semi-structured, the data analysis was carried out both qualitatively and quantitatively. Numbers were used to see how many of the interviewees use e-communication, how many of them use code-switching, how many of them prefer oral e-communication and how many prefer written e-communication. The qualitative analysis was carried out to determine the e-communication tools used by the interviewees, the languages they use in e-communication, which is the most used language by each respondent and the factors that govern their use of one language rather than the other. In addition to that, the qualitative analysis tries to find a description of one of each of the interviewees' e-communication conversations that shows the interlocutors, the context of the topic and the language(s) used in such a conversation.

3.3. Interviewees' responses and discussion

The interviewees' responses are transcribed and presented after a small discussion on the part of the researcher. The discussion is presented in accordance with the highlighted themes. For ethical considerations, the interviewees have been given fake names.

3.3.1. Using e-communication

All respondents confirm that they use e-communication tools, and when they were asked to mention the e-communication tools that they use and the purposes behind using them their answers were as follows

Amel: I generally use Facebook, Messenger and yahoo email account... I use them for academic purposes, for private life ... send and receive emails, messages ... exchange information generally.

Rym: Facebook, Skype, Messenger, Viber, e-mail

And what for? ...mmm to exchange and get information and keep in touch with my colleagues and friends

Narimane: well, the possibility of implementing e-communication tools in the field of higher education is really helpful and beneficial in our process of learning... I mean... using e-communication tools in the different modules facilitates the task of the teacher and the learner too ... keeping in touch with the teacher through e-mails for example, asking questions for clarification or feedback...mmm, as a learner ... I really enjoy using modern technologies, I mean... learners are more engaged in the process of learning, when it comes to implementing the new technologies (laugh).. it's more fun and enjoyable... for instance; the possibility of sending my homework via e-mails seemed to be easier for me, since I'm accustomed with using the internet and I become more active when it comes to stuff related to technology... moreover, taking into consideration the limited time... e-communication tools are really relevant! ...I mean when we can send our homework via e-mail we'll get the chance to have more extra time to finish the work and not submitting it immediately to the teacher.. I usually send my homework using my smartphone... mmm sometimes even when I'm on my way to the classroom (laugh)... So...you know... doing my homework while having fun or chatting with friends or even consulting others for help is much easier...

Soumia: I mostly use messenger, viber ... email ... to communicate, to learn mmm and to be up to date with world news.

Yassine: Facebook... viber... for maintaining contact with friends and for easy access to unbiased and unedited news.

3.3.2. -Languages used in e-communication

Concerning the languages used in e-communication, all the interviewees declared that they use the three languages Arabic, French, and English.

Amel: English , French, and Algerian Arabic

Rym: French, English, Algerian dialect

Narimane : For the languages I use in e-communication...I do my best to use English only but sometimes I do not find the exact words so I tend to switch to French and I use Arabic very rarely

Soumia: The languages I use are Algerian Arabic, French, and English.

Yassine: English, French, Arabic.

3.3.3. The Frequency of Language Use

When the interviewees were asked to classify the languages they use in e-communication according to the frequency of use, their answers were different;

Amel: English .. most used , French.. more or less used , Algerian Arabic.. least used

Rym: the languages that I use in e-communication from the most used to the least used..

French, English, then Algerian dialect

Narimane: hmmm... for the classification of the languages from the most to the least used.. it would be: English, French, and then Arabic.

Soumia: the most used: Algerian Arabic, then French, then English

Yassine: I'd say English is the most used followed by both French and Arabic on equal footing.

3.3.4. Factors behind language choice in e-communication

The following question was concerned with the factors that determine the respondents' choice of language while using e-communication. Their answers were not very different

Amel: mmm... I generally use English with my classmates who know English like me ... I tend to use French in my everyday life and this happens

unconsciously because it is another language through which I feel at ease. It is the common use of this language which makes me use French ... I use Arabic when talking to my family and it is our native language and with the people who ignore other languages.

Rym: The choice of the language I use depends mainly on the interlocutor and the language that he understands and on the purpose of the interaction.

Narimane: The factors that determine my choice of language to be used in e-communication... well, the main one is that I'm learning the target language as simple as that... I want to develop my level of proficiency in using English(this is the main purpose) ... as they say practice makes perfect... as you know, the purpose of any language learner is to attain a native-like accent... and through practice, we can improve our command of the language... the more I use English? And the less the other languages, I feel like I'm developing my abilities in English... but as I said before, for clarification purposes the intervention of other languages is sometimes necessary and helpful

Soumia: The language I use very much depends on the interlocutor (whether he or she understands) and the topic, although I tend to code switch a lot... not sticking to one language exclusively.

Yassine: I would say... in addition to personal preferences, English , in a way, coerces itself due to its easy nature and compatibility with the web... not to say that other languages are incompatible...mmm but the English language is miles ahead when it comes to this.

3.3.5. Code-switching

All the interviewees state that they code-switch while using e-communication and the causes behind their code-switching are mainly to convey the meaning better or to clarify the ideas. When they were asked "why or when do you codes-witch?", their answers were as follows;

Amel: code-switching is not a lack... we express the information in other languages... you provide synonyms... opposites.

Rym: It's natural...sometimes while I communicate in Arabic, for instance, I don't know how I include English or French words.

Narimane: Well...I code-switch when I get stuck...hmmm sometimes the terminology creates barriers and code-switching is the clue... and I might also code-switch to clarify my idea or give an appropriate example.

Soumia: I don't know why... it is spontaneous ... being fluent in more than one language leads you to code-switch unconsciously

Yassine: mmm ... almost I code-switch all the time... I don't know why... for me ... I code-switch to convey the meaning better.

3.3.6. Written or oral conversation

All the interviewees, when were asked about their opinions, claimed that they prefer written conversations when it comes to e-communication, except for Yassine who said that he prefers oral e-communication.

3.3.7. E-communication conversations

When the participants were asked to describe one of their e-communication conversations, the following were their answers;

Amel: The interlocutors: me talking with a friend who is a math teacher... the context: enquiring about job news ...the languages used: French, Some English words, standard Arabic and Algerian Arabic

Rym: The interlocutors: me and a Colleague (a classmate)...the nature of the topic: Working on a presentation... the language used: English

Narimane: hmmm... well... for instance, an e-mail conversation... the interlocutors: the teacher and me as a learner... the languages used: teacher (English)... student (English and French) ... the nature of the topic: homework assignment.

Soumia: a conversation with a male friend who studies engineering and who has just graduated... topic: his dissertation theme... languages used: Algerian Arabic and French.

Yassine: topic: Narcissistic Personality Disorder... interlocutors: me and a close friend... context: personal and argumentative... language used: English.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed important facts about our case study EFL learners and their use of e-communication tools. They claim the use e-communication tools such as viber, messenger, and e-mail to contact friends and teachers, to learn and exchange information with others, and to be updated to world news. As polyglots, they confirm the use of the three languages; English, Arabic, and French in e-communication and the frequent use of codes-witch from one language to another mainly to clarify the meaning or to support their ideas. The factors that determine language choice according to the interviewees are mainly the interlocutors, the topic, the context, and sometimes it is just a matter of pleasure or to practice English in order to be more fluent. The findings of this study are similar to other studies from different parts of the world. This means that the Algerian EFL learners, as polyglots, do not differ from other multilingual people around the world. However, the findings of this study cannot be generalized and more studies with larger samples of participants need to be conducted in order to generalize the reached results.

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