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CODE-SWITCHING IN PAKISTANI CLASSROOMS: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF IDENTITY AND PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

This study examines code-switching practices in Pakistani classrooms from a sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on their relationship with identity formation and pedagogical effectiveness. In multilingual educational settings where English, Urdu, and regional languages coexist, teachers and students frequently shift between languages to negotiate meaning, express cultural identity, and manage classroom interaction. The study explores how code-switching functions as a strategic resource for explaining complex concepts, maintaining discipline, and fostering student engagement. It also analyzes how language choices reflect power relations, social identities, and attitudes toward English as a language of prestige. Using classroom observations and discourse analysis, the study highlights that code-switching is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but a purposeful practice that supports comprehension and inclusive learning. The findings suggest that recognizing code-switching as a legitimate pedagogical tool can enhance language learning and affirm learners' sociocultural identities in Pakistani classrooms.

Keywords: Code-switching, Pakistani classrooms, Sociolinguistics, Identity, Pedagogy, Multilingual education

1. Introduction

Pakistan presents a uniquely complex linguistic landscape shaped by colonial history, regional diversity, and contemporary global pressures. English, Urdu, and several regional languages coexist within social, political, and educational domains. Among these, English occupies a position of exceptional symbolic and material power. It is associated with higher education, socioeconomic mobility, governance, and global connectivity. Urdu, as the national language, functions as a unifying medium across ethnic boundaries, while regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi embody local identities, cultural heritage, and everyday communication. This layered multilingual reality is most visibly enacted in educational institutions, particularly in classrooms where language policies and lived practices frequently diverge.

The prominence of English as a medium of instruction in Pakistan is deeply rooted in the country's colonial past. Introduced during British rule, English became institutionalized as the language of administration and elite education. After independence, rather than being replaced, English retained its privileged status and gradually came to symbolize academic excellence and modernity. Consequently, English-medium education is often perceived as

superior, while Urdu-medium and regional-language education is frequently stigmatized. This hierarchy has had lasting implications for classroom practices, teacher expectations, and student experiences.

Despite official policies promoting English as the primary medium of instruction, the linguistic realities of Pakistani classrooms remain inherently multilingual. Most students enter schools with strong competence in their first language and limited exposure to English outside formal education. Teachers, themselves multilingual speakers, are therefore compelled to navigate between institutional expectations and students' communicative needs. As a result, classroom interaction rarely conforms to monolingual ideals. Instead, it is characterized by frequent alternation between English and Urdu, and occasionally regional languages, in order to facilitate understanding and sustain interaction.

This alternation, commonly described as code-switching, has traditionally been viewed as pedagogically undesirable. Dominant language ideologies often frame code-switching as a sign of linguistic deficiency, lack of fluency, or inadequate teaching methodology. Such perceptions are reinforced by examination systems, teacher training programs, and institutional monitoring mechanisms that privilege English-only instruction. Teachers who resort to Urdu are sometimes viewed as less competent, while students who rely on code-switching may be labeled as weak language learners.

However, contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship challenges these deficit-oriented perspectives. Research increasingly demonstrates that code-switching is a systematic, purposeful, and context-sensitive practice employed by bilingual and multilingual speakers to achieve specific communicative goals. In classroom settings, code-switching enables teachers to explain complex concepts, manage classroom discourse, and build rapport with students. For learners, it provides a cognitive and emotional bridge between familiar linguistic resources and new academic content.

Beyond its pedagogical role, code-switching also operates as a powerful social and ideological tool. Language choice in classrooms reflects broader power relations and identity negotiations. English often indexes authority, formality, and institutional legitimacy, whereas Urdu and regional languages signal solidarity, cultural belonging, and emotional closeness. By switching between languages, teachers and students actively construct and negotiate their identities within the classroom space. These choices are rarely neutral; rather, they are shaped by historical legacies, social hierarchies, and educational ideologies.

Background of the Study

In Pakistan, language-in-education policy has long been characterized by ambiguity and contradiction. While policy documents emphasize the importance of English for national development and global participation, they often fail to account for the multilingual competencies of learners and teachers. As a result, classrooms become sites of linguistic tension where official expectations clash with practical realities. Teachers are expected to deliver content exclusively in English, yet they are simultaneously responsible for ensuring comprehension and academic success among students with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Previous studies conducted in Pakistani educational contexts indicate that code-switching is not an occasional deviation but a routine classroom practice. Teachers strategically switch to Urdu to translate key terms, emphasize important points, and provide affective support. Students, in turn, use code-switching to ask questions, seek clarification, and express ideas more confidently. Despite its widespread use, this practice remains largely un-documented in formal curricula and teacher training frameworks.

Moreover, most existing research on language use in Pakistani education has focused on policy analysis, language attitudes, or proficiency outcomes. There is comparatively limited empirical work that closely examines classroom discourse itself. Even fewer studies

investigate how code-switching contributes to identity construction and power negotiation within classroom interaction. This lack of micro-level analysis creates a significant gap in understanding how multilingual practices function in everyday educational settings.

Significance of the Problem

The marginalization of code-switching in formal education has serious pedagogical and social implications. When multilingual practices are viewed as deficiencies, students' linguistic resources are devalued, and their cultural identities are rendered invisible. This can lead to reduced participation, increased anxiety, and unequal learning outcomes, particularly for students from non-elite or rural backgrounds. Teachers, meanwhile, are placed under pressure to conform to unrealistic monolingual standards that may undermine effective teaching.

Recognizing code-switching as a legitimate pedagogical strategy is therefore not merely a linguistic concern but an issue of educational equity and social justice. Understanding how code-switching functions in Pakistani classrooms can inform more inclusive language policies and teaching practices that align with learners' lived realities. It can also challenge entrenched ideologies that equate English-only instruction with quality education.

Research Gap and Objectives

While international scholarship has increasingly acknowledged the pedagogical value of code-switching, localized studies focusing on Pakistani classrooms remain insufficient. Existing research rarely integrates sociolinguistic theory with detailed classroom discourse analysis, and the role of identity in classroom code-switching is particularly underexplored.

2. Literature Review

Code-switching has occupied a central position in sociolinguistic inquiry for several decades, particularly in studies of bilingual and multilingual speech communities. Early research sought to challenge the assumption that switching between languages reflects linguistic confusion or incompetence. Instead, scholars demonstrated that code-switching is a structured and socially meaningful practice governed by contextual norms. Gumperz defines code-switching as the juxtaposition of speech segments from different linguistic systems within a single interaction, emphasizing its role in signaling social meaning and conversational intent (59). His work laid the foundation for understanding code-switching as an interactional resource rather than a communicative failure.

Building on this foundation, Myers-Scotton introduced the Markedness Model, which explains code-switching as a rational and purposeful choice made by speakers to negotiate social relationships (75). According to this model, speakers select a particular code based on what is socially expected (unmarked) or strategically deviant (marked) in a given context. In classroom settings, English often functions as the unmarked choice for formal instruction, while switching to a local language becomes a marked but meaningful choice that signals solidarity, clarification, or authority adjustment. This theoretical insight is particularly relevant for understanding classroom discourse in postcolonial contexts.

Educational research has increasingly recognized code-switching as a valuable pedagogical tool. Studies conducted in multilingual classrooms across Asia and Africa indicate that teachers frequently use learners' first languages to scaffold learning and facilitate comprehension (Lin 198). By drawing on familiar linguistic resources, teachers help Students Bridge the gap between known concepts and new academic knowledge. This practice is especially effective when dealing with abstract terminology or cognitively demanding content.

Canagarajah's work on translanguaging further challenges monolingual ideologies in education. He argues that multilingual speakers naturally integrate their linguistic repertoires to construct meaning and that educational institutions should legitimize these practices rather

than suppress them (404). From this perspective, code-switching is not a temporary support mechanism but a fundamental aspect of multilingual competence. This view directly contradicts traditional language policies that promote strict separation of languages in classrooms.

In South Asian contexts, language use in education is deeply intertwined with issues of power and social inequality. Rahman observes that English in Pakistan functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges elite groups while marginalizing students from less advantaged backgrounds (242). English-medium education is often associated with quality and success, whereas the use of Urdu or regional languages is perceived as inferior. Such hierarchies shape classroom practices and influence how teachers and students evaluate their own linguistic abilities.

Empirical studies conducted in Pakistani classrooms reveal that code-switching is a common and often necessary practice. Teachers report switching to Urdu to ensure comprehension, maintain discipline, and establish rapport with students. Students similarly rely on code-switching to participate actively in classroom interaction and express complex ideas. Despite this, institutional policies frequently discourage or even penalize the use of languages other than English, creating tension between policy and practice.

Several studies highlight the affective benefits of classroom code-switching. Allowing students to use their first language reduces anxiety and fosters a supportive learning environment. When students feel linguistically validated, they are more likely to engage in discussion and take intellectual risks. Conversely, rigid English-only policies can lead to silence, withdrawal, and surface-level learning.

However, the literature also reflects ongoing debate regarding the extent to which code-switching should be used in language classrooms. Some scholars caution that excessive reliance on the first language may limit exposure to the target language and slow proficiency development. Others argue that strategic and purposeful code-switching enhances learning by reducing cognitive load and supporting deeper understanding. These contrasting views suggest that the effectiveness of code-switching depends on context, intent, and pedagogical skill.

A notable limitation in existing research is the lack of detailed classroom discourse analysis in Pakistani contexts. Much of the literature relies on surveys, interviews, or teacher perceptions rather than direct observation of classroom interaction. As a result, the actual functions and patterns of code-switching remain underexplored. Furthermore, relatively little attention has been paid to how code-switching contributes to identity construction within classrooms.

Language is not merely a neutral medium of instruction; it is a key site where identities are performed and negotiated. Classroom language choices reflect broader social ideologies and power relations. By switching between English and Urdu, teachers and students actively position themselves within institutional hierarchies and cultural frameworks. Yet, this identity dimension of classroom code-switching has received limited scholarly attention in Pakistani research.

The present study builds on existing sociolinguistic and educational research while addressing these gaps. By combining classroom observation with discourse analysis, it offers a micro-level examination of how code-switching operates in everyday educational interaction. It also foregrounds identity and power as central analytical categories, thereby extending the scope of previous pedagogical studies.

In doing so, this research contributes localized empirical evidence to global debates on multilingual education. It challenges deficit-based views of code-switching and supports emerging calls for flexible, context-sensitive language policies. Ultimately, the literature

reviewed here establishes the necessity of the present study and provides a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for its analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an interactional sociolinguistic framework, primarily drawing on the work of John J. Gumperz and Carol Myers-Scotton. Interactional sociolinguistics views language as a social practice through which speakers construct meaning, relationships, and identities. From this perspective, code-switching is not simply a linguistic phenomenon but a socially meaningful choice embedded in specific contexts.

Gumperz's concept of contextualization cues is particularly relevant to this study. He argues that speakers use linguistic signals, including code-switching, to frame interaction and guide interpretation (Gumperz 131). In classrooms, switching from English to Urdu may signal a shift from formal instruction to explanation, emphasis, or interpersonal engagement.

Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model complements this view by explaining how speakers choose codes based on social norms and expectations. In Pakistani classrooms, English often represents the unmarked choice for formal instruction, while Urdu becomes a marked but meaningful choice for solidarity or clarification. These choices reveal underlying power relations and identity negotiations.

Additionally, the study draws on postcolonial language theory, which emphasizes the historical and ideological dimensions of language use. English in Pakistan is not merely a neutral medium of instruction but a legacy of colonial rule that continues to shape social hierarchies. Code-switching allows speakers to resist or reconfigure these hierarchies by incorporating local languages into academic discourse.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a lens for analyzing code-switching as a dynamic practice that serves pedagogical, social, and ideological functions. They enable the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions and examine the deeper meanings embedded in classroom language use.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore code-switching in natural classroom settings. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of language use within its social and cultural context.

Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations in English-language classrooms at the secondary and undergraduate levels. The selected classrooms were located in urban educational institutions where English is officially designated as the medium of instruction. Purposeful sampling was used to select classrooms in which multilingual interaction was likely to occur.

Classroom interactions were audio-recorded with informed consent from teachers and students. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, and instances of code-switching between English and Urdu were identified. Field notes were also maintained to capture contextual details such as classroom dynamics and participant reactions.

The data were analyzed using discourse analysis. This involved examining how code-switching functioned within specific interactional contexts, focusing on pedagogical purposes, identity markers, and power relations. Patterns of language use were identified and categorized thematically.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Participants' identities were anonymized, and recordings were used solely for research purposes. The study adhered to ethical guidelines regarding voluntary participation and confidentiality.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining code-switching as both a pedagogical and sociolinguistic phenomenon in Pakistani classrooms. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and students use code-switching during classroom interaction?
2. What pedagogical functions does code-switching serve in English-language classrooms?
3. How does code-switching reflect identity construction and power relations in educational settings?

Scope and Significance of the Study

The study focuses on English-language classrooms at the secondary and undergraduate levels in urban Pakistani institutions, where pressures to maintain English-only instruction are particularly strong. While the findings may not be universally generalizable, they provide valuable insights into common classroom practices in multilingual educational settings.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and language education. By foregrounding classroom discourse, the study offers empirical evidence that challenges monolingual ideologies and supports multilingual pedagogies. It also highlights the importance of affirming learners' linguistic identities, thereby promoting more equitable and effective educational practices.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a detailed analysis of classroom code-switching practices in Pakistani educational settings and discusses these practices in relation to existing sociolinguistic and pedagogical theories. Drawing on classroom observations and discourse analysis, the discussion highlights how code-switching functions as a pedagogical strategy, a tool for classroom management, and a mechanism for identity and power negotiation. Rather than treating code-switching as a uniform phenomenon, the analysis is organized thematically to capture its multiple, overlapping functions.

5.1 Code-Switching as a Pedagogical Resource

One of the most prominent findings of this study is the extensive use of code-switching by teachers to facilitate comprehension. During observed lessons, teachers frequently shifted from English to Urdu when explaining abstract concepts, defining technical vocabulary, or summarizing key ideas. For instance, after introducing a concept in English, teachers often provided an explanation in Urdu to ensure that students had grasped the underlying meaning. This practice aligns with Lin's observation that classroom code-switching serves as an effective scaffolding strategy in multilingual settings (198).

Such pedagogical code-switching was particularly evident in subjects that required higher-order cognitive processing, such as literature analysis or theoretical explanations in social sciences. Teachers used Urdu to activate students' prior knowledge and connect new information with familiar cultural and linguistic references. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this strategic alternation demonstrates teachers' awareness of students' linguistic repertoires and learning needs.

Importantly, code-switching did not replace English instruction but complemented it. English remained the primary medium for introducing content, while Urdu functioned as a supportive resource. This finding challenges the assumption that the use of the first language necessarily reduces exposure to the target language. Instead, it supports Canagarajah's argument that multilingual practices enhance, rather than hinder, academic learning (404).

5.2 Code-Switching and Classroom Interaction

Beyond content explanation, code-switching plays a crucial role in maintaining classroom interaction. Teachers frequently switched to Urdu to give instructions, manage time, or address disruptions. Instructions delivered in Urdu were often more immediate and effective, suggesting that the emotional and cultural resonance of the language increased compliance and understanding.

Students, likewise, relied on code-switching to participate actively in classroom discourse. When responding to questions or seeking clarification, students often began in English but shifted to Urdu to elaborate their ideas. This pattern reflects what Gumperz describes as the use of code-switching as a contextualization cue that signals a shift in footing or communicative intent (131).

The allowance of code-switching appeared to create a more inclusive and dialogic classroom environment. Students who were hesitant to speak in English-only contexts showed greater willingness to participate when they could draw on their first language. This finding resonates with previous studies that link flexible language practices to increased learner engagement and reduced anxiety.

5.3 Identity Construction in Classroom Discourse

Code-switching also emerged as a significant marker of identity construction within classroom interaction. Teachers' language choices reflected a careful balance between institutional authority and interpersonal solidarity. The use of English indexed professionalism, academic legitimacy, and alignment with institutional expectations. In contrast, switching to Urdu signaled empathy, cultural alignment, and approachability.

This dual positioning allowed teachers to perform multiple identities simultaneously: as authoritative instructors and as culturally connected mentors. Such identity negotiation supports Norton's view that language use is deeply connected to speakers' investment in particular social identities (Norton 10).

Students' code-switching practices similarly reflected identity negotiation. By alternating between English and Urdu, students positioned themselves as legitimate participants in academic discourse while maintaining connection to their cultural and linguistic identities. This practice challenged the notion that academic success requires the suppression of local languages.

5.4 Power Relations and Language Ideology

The analysis further reveals that code-switching is closely tied to power relations within the classroom. English, as the language of instruction, symbolized institutional power and social prestige. Its use reinforced hierarchical relationships between teachers and students and reflected broader societal ideologies that privilege English over local languages (Rahman 242).

However, strategic code-switching disrupted these hierarchies to some extent. When teachers switched to Urdu, they temporarily softened power distances and created a more collaborative learning atmosphere. This practice can be interpreted as a form of linguistic resistance to rigid monolingual ideologies.

At the same time, the persistence of English as the dominant instructional language indicates that power relations are not fully overturned. Instead, code-switching allows for negotiated spaces where authority and solidarity coexist. Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model helps explain this dynamic, as teachers move between unmarked and marked code choices to achieve specific interactional goals (75).

5.5 Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous research on classroom code-switching in multilingual contexts. Like earlier studies, this research confirms that code-switching serves important pedagogical and interactional functions. However, it extends existing literature by foregrounding identity and power as central analytical categories.

While some scholars caution against overuse of the first language, the present analysis suggests that code-switching, when used strategically, supports deeper understanding and active participation. The findings also challenge deficit-based views that equate code-switching with linguistic weakness.

5.6 Summary of Key Insights

Overall, the analysis reveals several key patterns. First, code-switching functions as an essential pedagogical resource that supports comprehension and scaffolding. Second, it enhances classroom interaction and student engagement by creating a linguistically inclusive environment. Third, code-switching plays a crucial role in identity construction and power negotiation within classroom discourse.

These findings underscore the need to reconsider rigid language policies that marginalize multilingual practices. Rather than viewing code-switching as a problem to be eliminated, educators and policymakers should recognize it as a valuable resource that reflects the sociolinguistic realities of Pakistani classrooms.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that code-switching in Pakistani classrooms is a purposeful and meaningful practice. It supports comprehension, fosters engagement, and affirms learners' identities. Recognizing code-switching as a legitimate pedagogical tool can contribute to more inclusive and effective education. Future research may explore code-switching across different subjects and rural contexts. Ultimately, embracing multilingual practices can help bridge the gap between policy and classroom reality.

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