

## THE ROLE OF CODE-SWITCHING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT ATERTIARY LEVEL IN LAHORE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the motives and functions of code-switching by English language teachers in Pakistan, focusing on its use in English language Teaching (ELT). Conducted in a reputable university in Lahore, the qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews with seven English language teachers. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three primary functions of code-switching: instructional, managerial, and fostering cordial relations. Teachers often code-switched due to students' limited English proficiency and recognized its role as a valuable tool for enhancing comprehension and learning. They emphasized that code-switching should be used purposefully to support students' understanding and educational progress.*

**Keywords:** Code-switching, bilingual classrooms, English language Teaching (ELT), English language

### **1. Introduction**

Code-switching (CS) is a common practice among bilinguals and according to Cambridge Dictionary, it is “the act of changing between two or more languages, dialects (forms of a language) or accents (ways of pronouncing words) when you are speaking”. Code-switching is defined in almost a similar way by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “the switching from the linguistic system of one language or dialect to that of another”. To describe in simple words, code-switching is defined as a linguistic behavior that involves alternating between two or more languages within the same discourse (Zainil& Arsyad, 2021). According to Silabanand Marpaung (2020), code-switching is a phenomenon which a bilingual speaker uses for meeting communication goals. Richard and Schmidt (2002) were of the view that when a speaker switches from one language to another, it is code-switching. This is done when a speaker initiates a conversation using one language and in the middle or towards the end of the sentence switches to another language.

Code-switching when done in aEnglish language classroom can be intentional or unintentional and plays a crucial role especially when the focus is on the second language (L2) learning. CS is done to clarify things that are not understood in the L2. Repetition is another factor; teachers sometime repeat for the sake of making students understand things. Explaining in L1 is a common thing among teachers with the purpose to assist students in their learning. Mostly it is done for complex concepts that are difficult for learners to comprehend. Teachers use CS to manage the class as well as to crack a joke or tell a story in L1 to freshen up the minds of students. This approach of teachers also helps in establishing a good rapport with students. So, it can be said that code-switching is done for the purpose of clarification and is also used for amusement. CS proves to be helpful for students who are struggling with understanding second language so this phenomenon assists them in their language (L2) learning. However, in some cases teachers may opt for code-switching when they themselves are not highly proficient in the second language, this causes them to switch between languages. All the above mentioned factors are intentional such that CS is doneconsciously and the speakers are aware of it. But when it comes to unintentional use of code-switching, it is done without the speakers realizing that they are doing it. First and foremost, it could be the lack of vocabulary in the target language so in order to continue the

flow of communication, switching into L1 takes place. Frequent use of CS also makes the speaker a habitual code-switching user and alternating between two languages takes the form of a common occurrence. People feel more comfortable in expressing their emotions in L1 so in this case CS is used unconsciously by teachers and students in order to convey the feelings accurately (Saqlain, 2021). Cultural similarity is another factor in which people look for those with similar L1 and this enables them to have effective communication and connection with peers and teachers. This study, therefore, defines code-switching as a common practice among bilingual people to alternatively use two languages while communicating.

The present study aims to examine the motives, functions and types of code-switching used by English language teachers. A lot of researches have been done on code-switching; this study will contribute to the existing literature on code-switching in English language classrooms by giving an insight on the purpose of using code-switching from the teachers' point of view that are teaching in COMSATS University. This study will encourage future researchers to look at code-switching as an important tool in a language classroom and explore it in a broader way such that the study is limited to CS in a classroom setting so the future researchers need to consider the usage of CS outside the classroom and in a public setting. Within the classroom, the focus is to help the struggling language learners by clarifying things and explaining difficult concepts in L1 through code-switching and increasing student engagement however, it would be interesting to know the motives behind code-switching outside the classroom (formal or informal setup).

### **Research Objectives**

The following are the objectives of this research:

- 1) To explore the understanding of code-switching practices by the English language teachers.
- 2) To analyze the types of code-switching used by English language teachers.
- 3) To investigate the functions served by the teacher's code-switching in the English language classroom.
- 4) To inspect the motives behind English language teachers' usage of code-switching in the classroom.

### **Research Questions**

In order to investigate the role code-switching plays in the English language teaching, the present study intends to address the research questions that are as follows:

- 1) How do teachers interpret their code-switching practices in English language class?
- 2) What are the types of code-switching that the English language teachers use when they teach in the classroom?
- 3) What are the functions that the teacher's code-switching serves in English language classroom?
- 4) What are the motives of English language teachers when doing code-switching in the classroom?

## **2. Literature Review**

The teachers at the University in Lahore, Pakistan speak mainly two languages: Urdu and English, and they are proficient speakers of both languages. But their students attending English language classes are more proficient in the first language i.e. Urdu. In order to assist students from different backgrounds to perform well in L2, CS is used. However, there is a conflict whether code-switching should be used or not. Some researchers are against CS while others are in favor of it labeling it as essential for having proper understanding of concepts (Skinner, 1985). L1 is acquired since birth so the development of thoughts and ideas in the first language has already taken place. Skinner argues that "learners' thoughts and

ideas are already developed with the first language, such that its elimination prevents the formation of concepts in the learners' minds". It is, therefore, not practically possible to eliminate L1 while performing tasks in L2. On the contrary, few researchers think that using code-switching excessively in an English language classroom will lead to learners' poor performance in L2 as they will be having zero motivation to use L2 in classroom. Students imitate teachers; if teachers constantly switch between languages the students will also do the same having little to no chance to practice their second language in the class leading to low L2 proficiency (Ghaderi et al., 2024).

The contrast in the findings of the researchers claim code-switching to be a complex issue encouraging the future researches to focus on its beneficial and detrimental aspects in English language classrooms. Teachers can switch from L2 to L1 but they shouldn't allow the students to use L1 if we they want them to get better at L2. Apart from doing tasks, using L1 dictionaries for difficult words, and family members' use of L1 to help with the homework, L1 should not be used by the learners. The reason behind it is that "the overuse of L1 will not help the students to achieve their goal of learning a foreign language" (Zainil & Arsyad, 2021). So, the more the students will be motivated to use L2, the more they will practice and the more they will be good at it. Recent studies on the given subject also acknowledge the fact that CS plays a positive role in an English language teaching in terms of explaining difficult concepts, building positive student-teacher relationship, and managing the class. Explanation or clarification of concepts comes under the category of curriculum access which is one of the three functions of classroom code-switching as categorized by Ferguson (2003) and the other two functions according to him are classroom management and interpersonal relations. It is important to note that there is no definite number of functions of teachers' code-switching. Inbar-Lourie (2010) gave almost similar categorization of teachers' code-switching having instructional, managerial and affective purpose. On the contrary, Zainil & Arsyad (2021) classified the functions of teacher's code-switching under two umbrella terms, namely pedagogical and social. Different researchers have given different classifications of classroom code-switching functions. However, the function for every occurrence of code-switching is difficult to point out i.e. it could serve more than one function at a time. Or it could be the case of unconscious use of code-switching by the teachers and hence the functions of CS are unknown in this scenario. CS for instructional purpose – the classification of functions of CS as given by Inbar-Lourie (2010) involves explaining complex concepts and difficult vocabulary and clarifying things thereby assisting the students in their learning process. The findings of Makulloluwa (2013) research refer to similar purpose of "explaining difficult concepts, comparing and contrasting the two language systems, explaining grammatical points, and defining difficult vocabulary". The researchers investigated the functions of code-switching in a Turkish University and they found out that the teachers code-switched to Turkish in an English language classroom for educational purposes: to give information in addition to the content, to explain and emphasize on information and to help with task related problems (Ataş & Sağın-Şimş, 2021). So, CS helped with "clarifying difficult concepts, enhancing understanding of the content presented, and keeping learners engaged during lessons" (Shinga & Pillay, 2021). Bhatti et al. (2018) also concluded from their observations on teachers' use of CS that they do so "to explain difficult concepts and repeat instructions to those who have difficulty in understanding them in the target language".

Code-switching for managerial purpose is done to manage the students' behavior as well as the classroom environment in general. It is comparatively difficult to manage the classroom after the lecture is delivered then it is during the lecture. Post-lecture concerns

include “gaining students’ attention, disciplining students, admonishing students and clarifying home task instruction” and Chen & Rubinstein-Avila (2018) believe that all those mentioned things are “better conveyed in the native language”. Managing the classroom in L1 seems more natural as opposed to the use of L2 in disciplining the students. Moreover, studies have found L1 to be more effective in terms of classroom management as well as for disciplinary purpose (Sali, 2014). Third and most crucial of all functions of CS is to establish good teacher-student relation as Ferguson (2003) rightly points out that the classroom is more than just a place where learning takes place. It is more of a social setting where teachers and students interact with each other. He asserts that the teachers who only used English in classroom were “perceived as distant” and the students found it difficult to interact with them. However, the teachers who code-switched to L1 developed friendly relations with students which ultimately led to supportive classroom environment. Research findings have confirmed that teachers’ code-switching “helps to build rapport, give support to students, and decrease student anxiety” (Cahyani et al., 2018). Research done by Zhang (2021) exemplifies that code-switching is done by the teachers to shorten the distance between the students and teachers, create humor and maintain discipline in the class. Therefore, it is equally important for teachers to maintain good teacher-student relationship to help students with their academic concerns alongside teaching.

Furthermore, CS is done by inserting fillers in a sentence, by switching from one language to another at the beginning or end of a sentence or in the middle of a sentence named as tag switching, inter-sentential switching and intra-sentential switching respectively. All these three types of code-switching are crucial in terms of understanding how CS is done regularly. Tag switching refers to “placing a tag of a language into a sentence spoken in another language” (Murtiningsih, 2022). The tags can be placed at any position in a sentence e.g. “Oh my God, tum theek ho?”, “Jaagjao, Good Morning” etc. In inter-sentential switching, the speakers incorporate L1 in an L2 sentence or vice versa at the start or end of the sentence. One clause of a sentence is in one language and the other phrase is in another language e.g. “She has been doing exercise regularly lekin koi khaasfarqniparhraha” – the sentence starts in L2 and ends with L1. The last type is intra-sentential switching that occurs in the middle of a sentence such as in the examples, “raaste me bohat heavy traffic tha”, “me bohat excited hoo”, and “the weather is garam today”, “heavy and excited” are the L2 words used within L1 sentence whereas in the last example, “garam” is an L1 word used within L2 sentence. Different types of code-switching are used for different purposes. It might be habitual or just occurs in fluency by the speaker, in either case, the purpose is to convey information and feelings to the listener.

Apart from looking at the functions of code-switching, researchers have also paid attention to the teachers’ motives behind code-switching in English language classrooms. According to Ghaderi et al. (2024), code-switching is used by the teachers keeping in view the proficiency level of students. The learners at tertiary level are less likely to make mistakes in L2 because of their increased knowledge in L2 that has been gathered over the years of their academic life. So, the teachers may feel “that using code-switching is less required for learners with higher language proficiency because they have fewer problems comprehending and producing words and sentences in L2” (Ghaderi et al., 2024). Though, it does not mean that teachers don’t code-switch in tertiary level English language classrooms. In order to deal with students who are less proficient in L2, teachers opt for code-switching. Siniša (2016) is of the view that the use of code-switching in English language classrooms by teachers help create a positive relationship with students which leads to mutual understanding between teachers and students. When mutual understanding develops, students grasp the content easily



enabling them to perform well in academics. This proves that teachers code-switch depending on the needs and proficiency level of students. Puspawati (2018) also acknowledges that the teachers code-switch “to help learners better understand the foreign language and to make the content more accessible”. Another motive for code-switching is to enable the students to engage more and their engagement depends on the language in which they feel they can express more i.e. in L1. Increased participation leads to enhanced learning which is required for academic success. Bairmani et al. (2022) also pointed out the importance of socializing and providing ease to students in terms of helping them out with their L2 performance.

The way teachers interpret their code-switching is also very significant; the teachers think of their code-switching practices as time-saving because apparently explaining in L2 is time-consuming; it is difficult to cover contents within a limited class time so incorporating L1 helps them to cover more things in short time period (Saqlain, Gao Xiaoling, & Hussain). Atkinson (1987) and Tudor (1987) in their respective researches also pointed out that the “translation or L1 use is often determined as productive, time-saving technique.” After the lecture, teachers ask students in L1 whether they have understood or not for instance teachers with Urdu as L1 will be saying “samajhagai ha subko” to ensure that everybody is on the same page and understanding the content that is being taught. In cases like this, CS is intentional as the motive behind asking in L1 is to make sure the students are able to understand what has been taught in L2. There may be instances of unintentional CS where teachers just for the sake of flow of the lecture code-switch. There are some cases where the teachers’ interpretation of their code-switching differs from the observations made through audio/video recordings of lectures and interviews. The teachers at times are not aware of their code-switching and assume that they had delivered the lecture mostly in L2 whereas their assumption is denied through the observations. For instance, Zainil and Arsyad (2021) in their research found a contrast in teachers’ perceptions of code-switching that were revealed in the interviews and the observations of recordings of lectures. The teachers when asked in the interview about how many times they think they code-switched in the classroom said that they used code-switching 50-70% (they think they used L2 50-70%) which contradicted with the observations done through video recordings of lectures which disclosed that code-switching was done 20-30% (only 20-30% of L2 was used). So, to study the teacher’s interpretation or understanding of their code-switching practices in English language classrooms is one of the main objectives of this research.

### 3. Methodology

There are three different research methods used while conducting a research i.e. quantitative method, qualitative method and mixed-method (involves both qualitative and quantitative method). Quantitative method is used for collecting and analyzing data based on numerals and within this type of research, averages and predictions are made such that the results are generalized to wider population. Mixed-method research, on the other hand comprises of both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected and analyzed by the researchers. Qualitative method according to Creswell is “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1994). Qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Within qualitative method, this study conducts semi-structured interviews keeping in view the objectives of the research. There are three types of interviews conducted for research purpose i.e. structured, unstructured, and semi-structured and interviews. Structured interview is that interview in which questions are asked in an orderly manner. They tend to be close-

ended featuring answers in the form of yes or no and are considered to be formal. Open-ended structured interviews also exist but are less common. Unstructured interview is open-ended in which a pattern does exist but uniform questions are not required to be prepared by the interviewer. The questions asked will be spontaneous and hence can be taken as a casual interview. Semi-structured interview is a combination of structured and unstructured interview; although the interviewer asks pre-planned questions but still the element of flexibility is there just like in unstructured interview. This type of interview is also open-ended. The researcher employs semi-structured interviews which favor the comparison of participants on the basis of similar questions along with the addition of new things that need to be pinpointed within a research.

### 3.1 Research Participants

The participants are seven English language teachers who have done MS (Master of Science) and PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) in either English Literature or Linguistics and are teaching at the university level in Lahore, Pakistan. The selection of participants was done on the basis of the research aiming to find out the role of code-switching in English language teaching in English language class setup. So, for the research to be carried out effectively the participants will be the ones teaching English and not any other subject because the teachers that are teaching other subjects such as psychology, management science, computer science, and pharmacy etc. do not use English language quite frequently in the classroom. So, if the teachers that are teaching subjects other than English are included in the participants then the findings will not be appropriate.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews and for this purpose an interview book has been prepared in which open-ended questions were asked from the participants focusing on the teacher's perception of code-switching. The interviews were 5-6 minutes long and were audio recorded with the help of voice recorder app in the android phone. The audio recording of interviews was done with participants' consent. The interview addressed four main points: (1) teacher's interpretation of their code-switching practices; (2) what types of code-switching did the teachers used while teaching; (3) the functions of teacher's code-switching practices; and (4) the teacher's motives for code-switching. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in English as well as in the native language of the participants i.e. Urdu.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews conducted and were then transcribed with the help of an AI transcription service. The transcription includes each and every bit of the utterances that were recorded. The data was then analyzed using thematic analysis so the next step involves coding the transcripts to determine teachers' understanding of their code-switching practices as well as the functions and motives of their code-switching. Coding is followed by thematic approach with the purpose to find out the overarching themes that appeared in the data collected. And in the last step of thematic analysis, the explanation to those themes will be provided. The analysis revealed the functions, motives and types of code-switching used by English language teachers and what do they feel about their own code-switching.

#### Codes and Themes

No.	Codes	Themes
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Switching of linguistic codes from L1 to L2 or vice versa</li> <li>Should be done very little at</li> </ul>	Switching between languages

	tertiary level	
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarification</li> <li>• Explanation</li> <li>• Complex concepts</li> <li>• Repetition</li> <li>• Facilitate students</li> </ul>	A teaching strategy
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' understanding level</li> <li>• Limited L2 proficiency of students</li> <li>• Educational background</li> <li>• Anxiety and Nervousness</li> </ul>	Linguistic assistance
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crack a joke</li> <li>• Attention grabbing strategy</li> <li>• Engagement</li> <li>• Lack of vocabulary</li> </ul>	Classroom dynamics
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased participation</li> <li>• Clarity of complex concepts</li> <li>• Better understanding</li> <li>• Cordial relations with students</li> </ul>	Learning outcomes

### Theme 1: Switching between languages

Code-switching or switching between languages is commonly done in bilingual classrooms for various purposes. In Pakistani context, the switching occurs from English (foreign language) to Urdu (native language) or vice versa. Code-switching needs to be done keeping on view the educational level of students and the teachers who were interviewed were on the same page in terms of doing code-switching less often at tertiary level of education compared to primary or secondary educational level.

### Theme 2: A Teaching Strategy

The teachers viewed their code-switching practices differently; some do it to manage the class, few use it as an attention grabbing technique while others do code-switching to explain complex or difficult concepts to the learners. Teacher A, B, C, F, and G primarily did code-switching to provide assistance to students by explaining them concepts in the native language and enabling them to comprehend and learn those concepts. Teacher F said that she “code-switched to make students understand certain things, certain concepts, and ideas”. Sometimes, teachers present information in English and repeat it in the native language i.e. Urdu in Pakistani context. For the sake of repetition, teachers code-switch in order to let the students get clear understanding of the content. By doing so, they are facilitating the students and are creating a supportive classroom environment.

### Theme 3: Linguistic Assistance

When asked about how often code-switching should be done at primary, secondary, and tertiary level, the teachers were of the view that code-switching should be done keeping in view the students' capabilities. The level of education doesn't matter much as the students' understanding level and their proficiency in the foreign language matters the most. “The purpose of code-switching is to make students having different caliber and different proficiency levels understand the content” (Teacher C). It is advisable to do code-switching less often regardless of what the

level of students is; early years of life set the foundation for rest of the life so the exposure should be more of the desired language i.e. English in early years. At tertiary level, all the teachers believed that code-switching should be done less often. Sometimes, students have studied from Urdu medium schools so for such students, code-switching becomes necessary. Likewise, students who are less proficient in English tend to be anxious and nervous every time they are asked by their teachers to talk in English in classroom so code-switching is the perfect solution for them. However, the teachers still need to motivate the students to first try to speak in the target language.

#### **Theme 4: Classroom Dynamics**

Code-switching is also done to engage the students and to get the students to be attentive in the classroom because the lecture may become boring at times so it is advisable to crack a joke or share a story in the native language. Teacher B and G specifically switched to the native language to grab the attention of students. Teacher B while recalling her code-switching practices said that “in order to break the monotony of second language, I at times switch code and explain something in Urdu or at times tell them a joke in Urdu, my first language”. This helps not only to grab the attention of students but also helps students refresh their minds. The teachers may also switch to the native language because of them being unable to recall a specific word in the target language and they do so in order to maintain the flow. At times “we are running short of the relevant word, we switch our code” (Teacher D).

#### **Theme 5: Learning Outcomes**

All the teachers approved code-switching to be a significant tool for student learning and engagement as Teacher B and C illustrate that in order to develop interest in the lecture content it is crucial for teachers to help students grasp the content. Code-switching develops clarity of complex concepts which results in better understanding and learning. And it is only after learning that students engage as Teacher C rightly points out that “if the students understand only then they will engage”. The student’s engagement with teachers helps building cordial relations between them as Participant B also states that “CS helps with building cordial relations between teacher and students and I consider it as a positive sign as far as student’s engagement and learning is concerned”.

#### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the research, the researcher concluded that code-switching according to the teachers play a crucial role in students learning and engagement in the classroom. The teachers’ perceptions of their own code-switching practices aligned with the functions of code-switching given by Ferguson (2003) i.e. curriculum access, classroom management and interpersonal relations. The aforementioned functions were performed to explain complex concepts to students, maintain the decorum of classroom and help the students with limited English proficiency respectively. The findings about the motives behind code-switching as revealed by the semi-structured interviews were the students’ proficiency and understanding level. The students are the primary focus and therefore the attention is given to their needs; if the lecture in English is difficult for them to comprehend then code-switching can be done by the teachers to facilitate them. However, one thing that shouldn’t go unnoticed is that all the teachers agreed that code-switching needs to be done less often at graduate and postgraduate level. There is no doubt about the benefits of code-switching but still there needs to be a check that it’s not done unnecessarily. And the findings related to the types of CS being used by ENGLISH LANGUAGE teachers were that the teachers most often used inter-sentential and intra-sentential switching.

The limitation of this study is that the number of participants that were interviewed was small i.e. 7 English language teachers from only one public university in Lahore; in the



future the number of participants if increased may have different findings. Secondly, the direct observations were not made in this research; they would have definitely helped in finding out to which extent the responses from teachers aligned with their actions. The future researchers can increase the number of participants by including the teachers from more than one university to have more enhanced results related to this research. Although there are limitations in this study however, the findings do provide valuable insights into the motives and various functions that code-switching serves in English language teaching. The teachers were aware of their code-switching and considered it to be inevitable when teaching in an English language classroom in public university in Lahore. The study also gives awareness about the patterns of code-switching done by teachers such that it can be done both intentionally and unintentionally. The functions of code-switching were found to be favorable for students as they were better able to understand and learn. The study can prove to be beneficial for teachers especially if they are dealing with newly enrolled students; they can look at the needs of the students and employ code-switching – how much and on what occasions accordingly. This study, therefore, contributes to the existing literature on English language teaching by emphasizing on code-switching as an important teaching strategy in English language classrooms.

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