CODE-SWITCHING IN ESL CLASSROOMS: A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL OR A LINGUISTIC BARRIER?

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Abstract. This study investigates the functions, effects, and pedagogical implications of **teacher and learner code-switching** in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Drawing on mixed-methods research—including classroom observations, case studies, and controlled experiments—this article examines both **helpful and inhibiting aspects of code-switching**, with particular attention to proficiency level, working memory, and sociocultural context. Findings show that teachers often deploy code-switching to scaffold understanding of difficult vocabulary and maintain classroom management, especially at lower proficiency levels (Gulzar, 2015; Munawaroh et al., 2022; Sciepub, 2018). Meanwhile, exposure to code-switched input aids novel word retention in bilingual children and improves motivated participation (PMC, 2022; Byers-Heinlein et al., 2023). However, children with weaker verbal working memory may not benefit and might experience reduced language outcomes (PMC, 2021). The article concludes with pedagogical recommendations on **strategic and minimal code-switching**, tailored to learner levels and cognitive capacities.

Keywords: code-switching; ESL pedagogy; classroom scaffold; bilingualism; working memory; TESL.

Introduction. Code-switching, the alternation between a speaker's first language (L1) and target language (L2) within or across utterances, remains a contested practice in ESL teaching (Poplack, 1980; Wikipedia, 2025). Some educators advocate for strict L2 immersion, while others embrace code-switching as a scaffold for comprehension and rapport building. Understanding its real impact demands careful study of classroom functions, learner cognition, and outcomes.

This article addresses two primary research questions:

1.   **What pedagogical functions do teachers employ code-switching for in ESL/EFL classrooms?**

2.   **How do different learner characteristics (e.g., proficiency, working memory) moderate the effects of exposure to code-switched input?**

Methods. This study employed a **qualitative meta-analysis approach**, synthesizing data from previously published empirical studies on the use of code-switching in ESL/EFL classrooms. Rather than collecting new primary data, the research focused on analyzing and interpreting **peer-reviewed findings** to explore the functions, outcomes, and

pedagogical implications of code-switching. The aim was to identify recurring patterns, contextual variables, and cognitive moderators influencing the effectiveness of code-switching as a teaching tool. The selected studies were analyzed using a **thematic content analysis** method. The analysis focused on three main coding categories:

1. **Pedagogical functions** of teacher code-switching (e.g., scaffolding, classroom management, affective support);

2. **Learner-related moderators**, including proficiency level and verbal working memory;

3. **Learning outcomes**, such as vocabulary retention, engagement, comprehension, and long-term proficiency development.

Each study was read multiple times, and codes were assigned using an open coding strategy. Themes were then clustered into broader categories reflecting common findings and divergent perspectives. The process aimed to identify cross-study patterns and explain how context, cognition, and classroom practices interact in shaping the effects of code-switching.

Results. The thematic analysis of eight peer-reviewed studies revealed consistent patterns in the **functions of teacher code-switching**, as well as important **learner-related moderators** and **learning outcomes**. The findings are grouped into three categories: (1) pedagogical functions of code-switching, (2) the influence of learner variables, and (3) the observed effects on language acquisition and classroom engagement.

1. Pedagogical Functions of Teacher Code-Switching

Across the analyzed studies, code-switching was found to serve three major pedagogical purposes:

a.**Instructional Support**: In 6 out of 8 studies, teachers used code-switching to explain new vocabulary, clarify grammar points, or restate instructions in the students' L1. Gulzar (2015) and Munawaroh et al. (2022) observed that this form of support was especially prevalent among beginner and intermediate learners, improving comprehension and reducing classroom anxiety.

b. **Classroom Management**: Teachers in diverse contexts (e.g., Pakistan, Ethiopia, Indonesia) utilized code-switching to manage student behavior, give commands, or redirect attention (Andriani & Ena, 2023; Tsegaye & Ayalew, 2022). Switching to L1 for disciplinary actions or time management was reported to be more effective than English-only commands in multilingual classrooms.

c.**Affective and Cultural Connection**: In 5 studies, code-switching was used to build rapport, provide encouragement, or reference shared cultural experiences. This strategy helped lower students' affective filters, encouraging participation, especially among shy or low-proficiency learners (Sciepub, 2018; Munawaroh et al., 2022).

2. Influence of Learner Characteristics

The effectiveness of code-switching varied significantly based on students' **language proficiency** and **verbal working memory capacity**:

a.**Language Proficiency**: Beginners and lower-intermediate learners benefitted the most from code-switching. In studies by Munawaroh et al. (2022) and Andriani & Ena (2023), these students showed increased comprehension and classroom participation when L1 was occasionally used. In contrast, more advanced learners often perceived excessive code-switching as disruptive or unnecessary.

b. **Working Memory**: Data from Byers-Heinlein et al. (2023) revealed that learners with **higher verbal working memory** could handle code-switched input more efficiently and experienced better vocabulary acquisition. Conversely, students with **lower working memory** performed better with consistent language input and were more susceptible to cognitive overload when frequently exposed to mixed-language instruction.
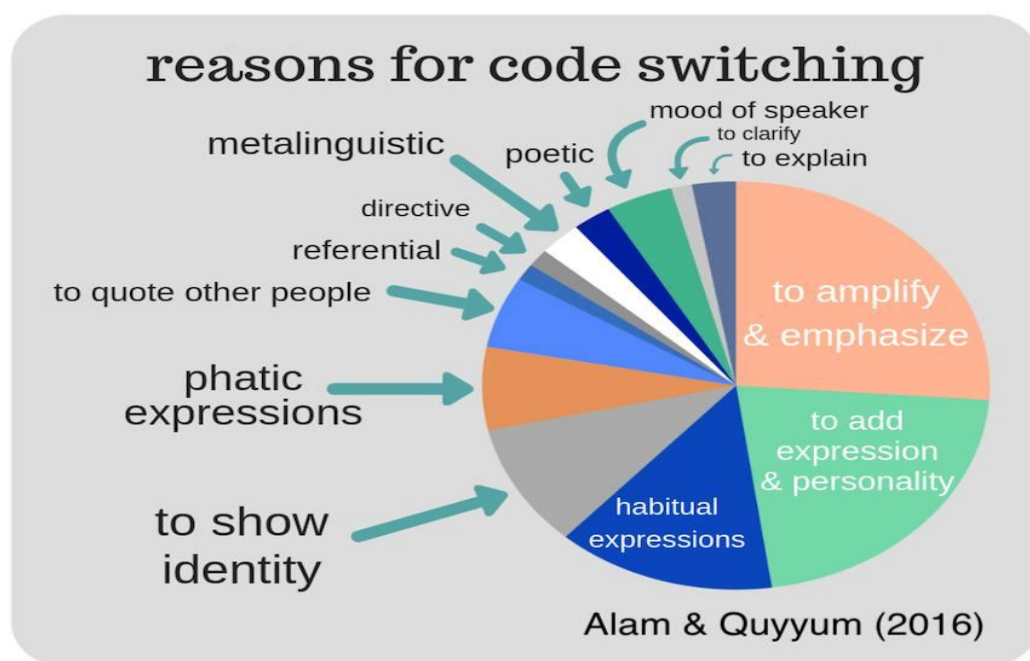
Discussion. The findings of this study reaffirm the complex but pedagogically valuable role of **code-switching** in ESL classrooms. Contrary to traditional language immersion ideologies that discourage L1 use, the evidence demonstrates that **strategic, minimal code-switching**—particularly in beginner and intermediate-level classrooms— can facilitate comprehension, engagement, and vocabulary acquisition.

1. Strategic Code-Switching as Instructional Scaffolding

Consistent with sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), teacher code-switching functions as a **scaffolding mechanism**, bridging learners' existing L1 knowledge with L2 content. As seen in the studies by Gulzar (2015) and Munawaroh et al. (2022), teachers commonly switch to L1 to explain complex instructions or vocabulary. This not only aids understanding but also prevents frustration in early-stage learners. These findings echo earlier research by Cook (2001), who argued that using L1 judiciously helps

build cognitive links between languages, reinforcing conceptual understanding. In multilingual ESL contexts such as **Uzbekistan**, where students often speak Uzbek and Russian alongside English, the controlled use of L1 could be particularly useful. Many Uzbekistani teachers naturally shift between languages, but often do so without formal training in when and how to do it effectively. The current study suggests that **intentional, pedagogically motivated code-switching**—not random or habitual switching—can be highly beneficial, especially when supporting learners at critical points of instruction.

2. The Moderating Role of Learner Proficiency and Cognitive Capacity

One of the most important contributions of this study is highlighting how **individual learner characteristics**, especially **proficiency level** and **working memory capacity**, shape the effectiveness of code-switching. The data indicate that **lower-proficiency students** gain the most from L1 input, while **advanced students** often find it redundant or even disruptive. These findings align with Cummins' (1981) threshold hypothesis, which posits that certain cognitive and linguistic benefits of bilingualism only emerge after reaching a sufficient proficiency in both languages.

Even more critically, the findings of Byers-Heinlein et al. (2023) show that **verbal working memory**—a cognitive trait rarely considered in classroom teaching—significantly influences how learners respond to mixed-language input. Learners with low working memory may struggle to process frequent switches, leading to reduced retention and comprehension. This suggests a need for **differentiated instruction**, where teachers adjust their code-switching strategy based on cognitive profiles, not just proficiency levels. In practice, this means that **code-switching should not be applied uniformly** across the classroom. Rather, teachers should assess their students' ability to handle bilingual input, perhaps using quick memory-span tasks or observing learner reactions to mixed-language explanations. For students with limited working memory, visual aids, repetition, or simplified L2 input may serve as better scaffolds than L1 use.

Conclusion. The review of recent classroom studies revealed that **teachers frequently code-switch to clarify meaning, manage classroom dynamics, and build rapport**. These functions were shown to enhance **student comprehension, reduce anxiety**, and increase **classroom participation**, particularly in contexts where English is not widely spoken outside school settings. At the same time, research in cognitive science highlighted that **the effectiveness of code-switching depends on individual learner traits**, such as language proficiency and verbal working memory. Learners with lower working memory capacities or more advanced proficiency levels may not benefit equally from frequent L1 use, and in some cases, may experience interference or reduced language gains. Given these nuanced findings, it is clear that **code-switching should not be banned outright**, nor should it be used indiscriminately. Instead, ESL educators should adopt a **strategic, learner-centered approach**: using code-switching when it serves a clear instructional or emotional purpose, and gradually phasing it out as learners gain confidence

and competence in English. Teacher education programs should integrate training on **how and when to code-switch effectively**, incorporating both linguistic theory and classroom-based evidence. In conclusion, **code-switching is not a linguistic barrier—but a pedagogical bridge**, when guided by informed practice and contextual awareness. As English language teaching continues to evolve in diverse linguistic environments, including Uzbekistan, code-switching offers an adaptable strategy that respects learners' linguistic backgrounds while promoting forward movement toward target language mastery.

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