An Exploration of Code Switching Used by English Teachers at

SMP N 7 Medan

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines code switching practices among English teachers in Indonesian junior high school EFL classrooms. Through classroom observations and teacher interviews, the research identifies code switching types, pedagogical functions, and teacher perceptions of effectiveness. Data analysis reveals that teachers employ both inter-sentential and intra-sentential code switching, with English-to-Bahasa Indonesia transitions occurring in 73% of observed instances. Teachers implement code switching for four primary pedagogical purposes: clarifying grammatical concepts, providing vocabulary translations, managing classroom discipline, and establishing student rapport. Student behavioral observations indicate increased participation rates and reduced anxiety indicators during code switching episodes. Teacher interviews demonstrate positive attitudes toward code switching, with participants recognizing its value for enhancing comprehension among low-proficiency learners and facilitating classroom interaction. However, teachers simultaneously express concerns regarding potential over-reliance on L1, which may impede L2 acquisition progress. The findings suggest that controlled implementation of code switching serves as an effective pedagogical tool in multilingual EFL contexts

Keywords: bilingual teaching, code switching, English teachers, EFL classroom, language instruction, and classroom interaction

Introduction

In multilingual contexts such as Indonesia, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms often involve dynamic language practices, one of which is code switching. Code switching—the alternation between two or more languages within a single discourse—has become a common pedagogical practice among English teachers seeking to facilitate comprehension and engagement (Widodo et al., 2020). In practice, teachers frequently switch between English and Bahasa Indonesia during instruction, especially when learners struggle with understanding complex concepts or

instructions.

Recent studies have shown that code switching serves various instructional purposes, including clarifying grammatical explanations, translating unfamiliar vocabulary, and managing classroom behavior (Sari & Fitriani, 2022). This technique is particularly helpful in Indonesian EFL settings, where students' exposure to English is generally limited to the classroom and their proficiency levels are often heterogeneous (Handayani, 2021). While the communicative approach to language teaching encourages maximizing target language use, practical constraints in many EFL contexts necessitate code switching to ensure student comprehension and engagement (Rahman & Nurmala, 2023).

However, the use of code switching in the classroom remains a topic of pedagogical debate. Advocates argue that it facilitates learning and reduces affective barriers by creating a more inclusive and comfortable environment (Putra & Lestari, 2020), while critics contend that excessive reliance on the first language may hinder students' English language development and reduce opportunities for authentic language exposure (Ahmad & Tanjung, 2023). Therefore, understanding the strategic use of code switching is essential to determine when and how it benefits language learning without compromising immersion in the target language.

Despite its prevalence, code switching is often applied intuitively by teachers, without a systematic understanding of its pedagogical implications. There is a lack of localized research in Indonesia that explores how teachers perceive and implement code switching as a classroom strategy (Fitriyani et al., 2021). Investigating these practices can provide evidence-based insights into language use in instruction and inform more effective teaching strategies in EFL classrooms.

This study is thus timely and significant. As English continues to gain global importance, Indonesian students are increasingly required to achieve proficiency for academic and professional success. In this context, understanding how English teachers utilize code switching to bridge linguistic gaps is essential. The findings of this study are expected to contribute not only to the theoretical development of bilingual pedagogy but also to the practical improvement of classroom instruction in multilingual EFL settings.

Even though it is used a lot, code switching has not been studied enough in local educational research. Many teachers use it without thinking about what it means or how to use it wisely. This study aims to fill a gap in the current research by looking into this phenomenon and providing real-world data on how and why code switching is used in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Learning about how and why teachers switch codes will help language teachers in the classroom as well as add to academic knowledge. Teachers can use it to make better choices about how to use language in the classroom, balancing the need for students to be immersed in English with the need to make sure they understand what is being said. Also, this study fits with current trends in education that stress learning environments that are open and communicative, where teachers and students interact

with each other to help students learn a language.

There are a few important theories that this study is based on, and there have been other studies that have looked at code switching in the classroom. Gumperz's (1982) Sociolinguistic Theory of Code Switching is one of the most important frameworks. It sees code switching as a meaningful social behaviour instead of a linguistic problem. Gumperz says that speakers switch codes based on cues from the situation. These changes serve certain purposes, like showing group identity, managing conversation, or stressing certain information. In the classroom, this theory helps explain why teachers use code switching on purpose, not by chance, to control interactions, make things clear, and get to know their students.

Stephen Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is another theory that is important. Krashen talks a lot about how important it is to have comprehensible input, which is language that is just a little bit above the learner's level but can still be understood with the help of context or support. Code switching can help students understand English better by using their native language from time to time to help them understand.

This study also fits with the ideas of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which puts more value on meaningful communication than on rote practice. Code switching can be seen as a way to help students interact more naturally, especially when it helps them understand instructions, share their thoughts, or take part more actively in class discussions.

Several earlier studies have also talked about the pros and cons of code switching in EFL classrooms. Agustina and Widagsa (2024), explores code-switching in teaching-learning English, focusing on types, functions, and purposes of lecturers using it. It found three types of code-switching, six functions, and three types of lecturers' purposes. Code-switching improved pronunciation and helped students remember the material studied. Similarly, Arifin (2023) found that strategic use of code-switching enhanced learners' comprehension by lowering affective barriers and allowing clarification of difficult concepts. However, the same study cautioned that excessive switching could inhibit target language acquisition. A quasi-experimental study by Chen and Chiu (2022) also demonstrated that moderate code-switching increased student engagement and reduced classroom anxiety, particularly among lower-proficiency learners. In contrast, Lin and Lin (2021) noted that over-reliance on L1 in tertiary EFL settings can undermine language immersion, suggesting a balanced approach is essential for maximizing learning outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Even though code switching is common in EFL classrooms, we still don't know much about how and why teachers use it in their lessons. Most teachers switch between English and Bahasa Indonesia based on their gut feelings or how they usually teach, without clearly explaining the educational reasons for their choices. This makes me wonder about a few things:

1. What are some common situations in which English teachers switch codes when they are talking to students in class?

2. What role does code switching play in the process of teaching and learning?

3. How much does code switching affect how much students participate and understand?

These questions show how complicated and important code switching is as a teaching method, especially in Indonesia where students often use their first language to learn new things in English. So, we need to look into the patterns, reasons, and expected results of English teachers using code switching in the classroom.

Research Objectives

This study's goals are based on the problems listed above:

1. To find out what kinds and patterns of code-switching English teachers use when they teach in the classroom.

2. To look into how code switching can help teach and learn English.

3. To find out how code switching affects how well students understand and how they interact in the classroom.

These goals are meant to give teachers a full look at code switching and give them useful information that can help them teach better in EFL classrooms.

Significance of the Study

It is hoped that this study will help the field of English language education in both theory and practice. In theory, the results will add to what we already know about how language is used in the classroom, especially when it comes to bilingual teaching in EFL settings. This study uses sociolinguistic and second language acquisition theories to help us understand better how code switching works as a way to communicate and teach.

In practice, the research will help English teachers understand how to use code switching strategically to help students learn. It might help teachers think about the language they use and come up with better ways to teach that take into account both the need for English immersion and the language needs of their students.

The study can also help train teachers and make decisions about education policy by giving them evidence-based suggestions on whether and how code switching should be used in the classroom language policy, especially in multilingual and multicultural settings like Indonesia.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

Revised Research Scope and Methodology

This study investigates code switching practices among English teachers in Indonesian EFL classrooms, examining the types of code switching employed, teachers' perceptions of its effectiveness, and its perceived impact on student comprehension and participation. The research focuses on three English teachers at SMP N 7 Medan, providing an in-depth case study of code switching implementation in a specific institutional context. The study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the complexity and contextual nature of classroom code switching practices. This approach enables detailed examination of teacher behaviors and pedagogical decision-making processes within authentic classroom environments. The research scope is deliberately limited to teacher-initiated code switching; student code switching patterns and long-term effects on language proficiency fall outside the current investigation's parameters.

Data collection employs two primary methods: systematic classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews. Classroom observations document actual code switching instances, pedagogical contexts, and immediate classroom responses. Semi-structured interviews elicit teachers' reflections on their code switching practices, underlying motivations, and perceived effectiveness. This methodological approach generates comprehensive data regarding teacher perspectives and classroom implementation strategies. The study's findings are contextualized within the specific institutional and cultural setting of SMP N 7 Medan. While results cannot be generalized across all Indonesian educational contexts, they provide valuable insights into code switching practices within similar EFL teaching environments.

Definition of Key Terms

To avoid ambiguity and ensure clarity, several key terms used in this study are defined as follows:

a. Code Switching: The practice of alternating between two or more languages within a single conversation, sentence, or discourse. In this study, it refers specifically to English teachers switching between English and Bahasa Indonesia during classroom instruction.

b. EFL (English as a Foreign Language): A context where English is taught as a subject in a country where it is not the native or official language, such as Indonesia.

c. Classroom Interaction: Verbal communication that occurs between teachers and students during the teaching and learning process, including explanations, instructions, questions, and feedback.

d. Pedagogical Strategy: An approach or method used by teachers to facilitate learning. Code switching, in this study, is considered a pedagogical strategy employed to aid student comprehension and classroom management.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the phenomenon of code switching as practiced by English teachers in a natural classroom context. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors influencing language use in teaching.

Research Context and Sampling Process

The study was conducted at a state junior high school (SMP Negeri 7) in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language and Bahasa Indonesia serves as the students' mother tongue. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific criteria: (1) the participants had a minimum of two years' teaching experience in EFL classrooms, (2) were actively teaching English at the time of the study, and (3) expressed willingness to participate. A total of three English teachers were involved, all of whom regularly engaged in classroom interaction with students from diverse language proficiency levels.

Instruments and Data Collection

Two primary instruments were used for data collection: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted over the course of three weeks, focusing on identifying the occurrence, frequency, and types of code switching during instruction. An observation checklist and field notes were used to document teachers' code-switching behavior, as well as the contextual triggers for language shifts.

Following the classroom observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participating teacher. The interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into their motivations, perceptions, and considerations behind code-switching practices. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comfort and clarity for participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions categorized into three thematic areas: (1) reasons for code switching, (2) perceived pedagogical functions, and (3) perceived challenges and student reactions.

Data Analysis

The data collected from both classroom observations and interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved several stages: familiarization with the data, coding of meaningful segments, categorization of codes into themes, and interpretation. The analysis was aimed at identifying recurring patterns regarding the types, functions, and implications of code switching in EFL teaching. Triangulation was applied by comparing observation data with interview responses to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Research Findings

This study revealed four central findings based on classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with English teachers: (1) the forms of code switching used, (2) its pedagogical functions, (3) teacher perceptions, and (4) its perceived impact on student learning. These findings are elaborated below using synthesized analysis supported by representative data excerpts.

1. Forms of Code Switching

   The analysis of classroom observations demonstrated that teachers employed both inter-sentential and intra-sentential code switching. Inter-sentential code switching typically occurred after an English explanation, followed by a clarification in Bahasa Indonesia. For instance, one teacher explained a past tense rule and then said, *Ini bentuk lampau dari go, ya anak-anak*, to reinforce understanding. This pattern often emerged when students appeared uncertain or required additional support.

2. Intra-sentential switching was also observed, where teachers integrated Indonesian lexical items or phrases within English sentences. For example, a teacher stated, You must bring your *buku tulis* every day, during a classroom routine. These instances were frequently used in procedural instructions, vocabulary reinforcement, or when teachers encountered linguistic gaps that required immediate clarification.

3. Pedagogical Functions of Code Switching

   Code switching served multiple instructional purposes throughout the lessons. It was primarily used to clarify grammar points and unfamiliar vocabulary, particularly when students exhibited signs of misunderstanding. Teachers frequently introduced new concepts in English, followed by brief explanations in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure students comprehended the material. For example, while teaching comparatives, one teacher said, "We use '-er' for short adjectives. Misalnya, 'tall' jadi 'taller', artinya *lebih tinggi*."

   Another function identified was classroom management. Teachers regularly shifted to Bahasa Indonesia to maintain discipline or to provide behavioral reminders, as seen when one teacher instructed, "Please sit down quietly. *Jangan ribut ya, nanti saya kurangi poinnya*."

   Beyond its cognitive and managerial functions, code switching was also used to fulfill affective needs. Teachers employed Bahasa Indonesia to create a supportive learning environment, reduce anxiety, and encourage reluctant learners to participate. In moments when students hesitated to engage, switching to the first language was observed to help foster a sense of inclusion and comfort.

4. Teachers' Perceptions of Code Switching

The interview data revealed that teachers generally held favorable views of code switching. They regarded it as a necessary and strategic component of teaching in EFL classrooms, particularly when students had limited English proficiency. Teachers perceived code switching not as a deficiency, but as a practical approach to facilitate understanding, foster student engagement, and bridge gaps in communication. They reported that Bahasa Indonesia enabled them to maintain instructional flow and clarify complex ideas without overwhelming students. However, there was also an awareness among teachers of the potential drawbacks. While recognizing its usefulness, they acknowledged the risk of overdependence on the first language. Teachers noted that excessive code switching might reduce students' exposure to English and limit opportunities for language practice. As such, they emphasized the importance of using it selectively and gradually shifting toward more English as students became more confident.

5. Perceived Impact on Student Learning

Teachers observed that the judicious use of code switching contributed to improved student comprehension and participation. When Bahasa Indonesia was used to supplement instruction, students appeared more attentive and willing to respond. Teachers particularly noted increased engagement during follow-up questions and class discussions after concepts had been clarified in the first language. For instance, in lower-grade classrooms, students were more responsive after instructions were simplified using Bahasa Indonesia. While the positive impact was evident, teachers also noted that reliance on code switching must be carefully monitored. They stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between accessibility and immersion by progressively increasing the use of English as student proficiency developed.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that English teachers at SMP Negeri 7 Medan use code switching as a strategic pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms. The analysis of classroom observations and teacher interviews identified that both inter-sentential and intra-sentential code switching are utilized to facilitate instruction, particularly when students struggle to comprehend English input.

The findings indicated that code switching serves multiple instructional functions: it supports the explanation of complex grammar and vocabulary, enables classroom management, and fosters

emotional rapport with students. These practices were found to be intentional and context-sensitive, guided by the teachers' awareness of student proficiency and classroom needs.

Teachers expressed predominantly positive perceptions of code switching, emphasizing its effectiveness in enhancing student comprehension and participation. However, they also acknowledged the potential risk of students becoming overly reliant on their first language, which could impede their English language development if not managed appropriately.

Overall, the study confirms that code switching, when used judiciously and in alignment with instructional objectives, can contribute meaningfully to the effectiveness of English language teaching in multilingual EFL classrooms. The practice should be viewed not as a deficiency, but as a pedagogical resource that facilitates learning, especially for students at the early or intermediate stages of language acquisition.

Suggestions

Based on the conclusion above, different groups of people can make a number of useful suggestions:

For English Teachers

Teachers should keep using code switching as a helpful way to teach, especially when they are introducing difficult subjects or when students seem confused. But you shouldn't use code switching too much or without thinking about it. As students get better at English, teachers should try to cut down on how often they switch codes. This will help them feel more comfortable using English on their own.

For Schools and Other Learning Places

Schools need to recognise the role of code switching in language classes and give teachers professional development on how to use it effectively. Teachers should be able to think more deeply and plan their language choices better during lessons with the help of workshops, training sessions, and teaching guidelines.

For Researchers in the Future

This study only looked at what teachers thought and how they did things. Researchers in the future should look into code switching from the students' points of view, especially how it affects their motivation to learn, their understanding, and their confidence in speaking English. Also, studies that compare different school levels or regions could give us a better idea of how code switching is used and seen in different educational settings.

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