

# The Role of Code-switching in Classroom Interaction: A Study in a Malaysian Public University

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## Abstract

Code-switching as a linguistic phenomenon has been extensively studied. However, it remains a grey area of research. This paper presents the findings and discussion of a preliminary study where a survey on code-switching practices in classroom interactions was conducted among the students of a public university in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia. It is a public university where English Language is its medium of instruction as well as the expected language of interaction. This survey was conducted to find out the usage and frequency of code-switching in classroom teaching and learning as perceived by 420 respondents. Findings indicate that despite English being the medium of instruction at the university, Malay Language was used interchangeably with English Language during classroom interaction. The findings also indicate that the usage of English Language is generally in the category of Intermediate, not High. Apart from that, the findings reveal that the practices of code-switching were quite frequent across the faculties, which ranged from 25% to 53%. This implies that code-switching is a means needed in classroom interaction. An in-depth study exploring the reasons for code-switching as well as the patterns of code-switching is recommended to further understand how it contributes to language learning.

## 1. Introduction

Various aspects of code-switching as a linguistic phenomenon occurring among bilingual or multilingual speakers have been extensively studied. However, its employment in classroom teaching and learning remains a debatable area of research. This is due to many stances, either positive or negative, on code-switching practices. Some researchers argue that code-switching can be considered an interference in ESL classrooms because it hinders the acquisition of the target language. On the other hand, others believe that it should be utilised as a tool in classroom interaction as it helps in many ways. This paper presents and discusses the findings of a preliminary study where a survey on code-switching practices in classroom interactions was conducted among the students of a public university in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia. It is a public university where English Language is its medium of instruction as well as the expected language of interaction. In this particular university, all lecturers and students are expected to use the English language in their classroom interaction.

### 1.1 Background of Study

Malaysia is a unique country where more than one language is spoken for everyday communication. Jayantilal (1998) describes Malaysia as a multilingual society in which "bilingualism is a common phenomenon", and the role of code-switching acts as a marker for bilingual interactions. As most Malaysians are fluent in at least two languages, code-switching is natural as many Malaysians code-switch from their mother tongue to the second language of Malaysians, which is English or vice versa, in their everyday communication. Yildiz and Su-Bergil (2021) highlight that code-switching is not only a common linguistic feature in multilingual communities but also serves as a strategic tool for enhancing communication and mutual understanding.

Just like code-switching happens in everyday interactions, it also happens in classroom settings. In a Malaysian classroom setting, as most students and instructors share the same native language (in the context of this paper, which refers to the Malay language), code-switching is an inevitable phenomenon. Zabrodska (2007) explains that if both students and instructor share the same language, it is only natural for the classroom to be a prospective setting for code-switching to take place, as, most often, "the process of code-switching can be exploited as part of the actual teaching methodology". Similarly, Karakaya and Dikilitaş (2020) highlight that educators often view code-switching as a pedagogical tool that facilitates comprehension, reinforces key concepts, and aids in classroom management. Even though lessons should be conducted in English, Malaysians tend to code-switch, using it strategically to enhance understanding.

In the context of this paper, the usage of the Malay and English languages, as well as the frequency of code-switching that occurs in classroom teaching and learning of respondents from a public university in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia, was investigated. It is a public university where the English Language is its medium of instruction as well as the expected language of interaction. Therefore, this study wished to investigate whether the English Language is used comprehensively in the lessons conducted in the university as perceived by respondents. As this was only a survey done to investigate that matter, an in-depth study exploring the reasons for code-switching and the patterns of code-switching is recommended to further understand how it contributes to language learning.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 What is Code-switching?

As discussed by Azlan and Narasuman (2013), Bista (2010) simply defines code as a language or a dialect. Therefore, code-switching can be defined as the switch of a language or a dialect to another. Zabrodska (2007) explains that the term code-switching, which was initially developed by Gumperz (1982), refers to "choices of verbal or non-verbal forms which depart from an established or expected pattern of communication". In other words, code-switching is the changing of one language to another in one's utterances. Yildiz and Su-Bergil (2021) also describe code-switching as a flexible linguistic strategy used by bilinguals and multilinguals, not only for communication but also to accommodate different social and contextual factors in discourse.

In Duran's (1994) study, Gumperz (1982) described code-switching as exchanges of a conversation that form one whole interaction. According to Gumperz, speakers fluently code-switch between their mother tongue and their second language without any interruption during a conversation. Even though the language changes, the flow, rhythm, intonation, and pitch level remain the same, suggesting that code-switching is a natural act for bilingual or multilingual speakers. Likewise, Karakaya and Dikilitaş (2020) highlight that code-switching is not only a subconscious linguistic process but also serves as a strategic tool for enhancing communication and maintaining discourse coherence, especially in multilingual settings.

### 2.2 Code-switching in ESL Classroom

In the context of ESL classroom teaching and learning, the question of whether the learners' first language (L1) should be legitimised as one of the tools for teaching the target language, and if so, to what extent and for what purpose, has been a controversial issue for a long time. Language teaching pedagogy tends to avoid the use of the native language (L1) in English as a Second Language (L2) classrooms, as it is often viewed as a hindrance to the process of acquiring L2. It is believed that the target language (L2) should be used exclusively in ESL classrooms for maximum retention of knowledge. This view is based on the monolingual approach in second language teaching, which emphasises the exclusive use of the target language while completely excluding students' native language. However, Yildiz and Su-Bergil (2021) argue that code-switching can serve as an effective pedagogical tool rather than a barrier, helping learners better grasp complex concepts, reduce anxiety, and facilitate overall comprehension in L2 learning. In a similar manner, Karakaya and Dikilitaş (2020) highlight that strategic code-switching by teachers can aid classroom management, improve student engagement, and reinforce the understanding of challenging subject matter without hindering language acquisition.

However, research has been done to highlight the positive effects of code-switching in classroom teaching and learning, for example, in a study conducted by Simasiku, Kasanda and Smit (2015). The findings of the study revealed that "teachers perceived code-switching as enhancing academic achievement because it enhanced learners' learning of the English language, improved the way learners answered questions, and enhanced teaching and learning of English as

a second language". The study proposed that by code-switching, students are more likely to participate in their lessons because they have an alternative language option to use. The study also stated that it is easier for students to understand the subject matter of the lesson by employing code-switching. This is due to their ability to interpret it in a language that they fully understand. Consequently, it will be easier for them to connect the lesson with their schemata, hence rendering full comprehension. This study is a good example of proving that code-switching should be considered as a means of interaction in classroom teaching and learning because it can enhance academic achievement.

A similar finding was also found in a study conducted by Uys and Van Dulm (2011) entitled Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies. In the study, code-switching was also found to fulfil both academic and social functions. Particularly, "code-switching is used (i) in explaining and clarifying subject content; (ii) in assisting learners in understanding and interpreting material; (iii) as a tool of teaching in confirming understanding and encouraging participation; (iv) in classroom management, such as maintaining learners' attention and reprimanding disruptive behaviour; and (v) for social functions, such as humour and as a marker of bilingual identity" (Uys & van Dulm, 2011). Based on the result, the study proposes that code-switching could be useful in classroom interaction. Building upon these insights, Hazaymeh (2022) conducted a study exploring teachers' perceptions of code-switching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The findings revealed that teachers view code-switching as a strategic tool to enhance student engagement and comprehension, particularly when navigating complex concepts. This contemporary perspective underscores the continued relevance of code-switching as an effective pedagogical approach in multilingual educational settings.

A recent study by Ng and Singh (2024) investigated the positive influences of code-switching on second language learning among TESL undergraduate students at a private university in Ipoh. The study revealed that code-switching enhanced students' understanding of a second language, motivated them to learn and speak English, and improved engagement and focus during lessons. These insights underscore the potential of code-switching as an effective strategy to enhance academic achievement in ESL classrooms.

### 3. Methodology

This preliminary study aims to investigate the usage of Malay and English languages, as well as the frequency of code-switching in classroom interactions among students at a public university in the southern region of Peninsular Malaysia. The study specifically examines the proportion of Malay and English usage and the frequency of code-switching as perceived by the respondents. To achieve this, the research is guided by two key questions: (1) What is the percentage of Malay and English language usage in classroom interaction as perceived by the respondents? and (2) What is the frequency of code-switching in classroom interaction as perceived by the respondents?

The study involved 420 respondents from four faculties: the Faculty of Business Management, the Faculty of Information Management, the Faculty of Accountancy, and the Faculty of Computer Science. These faculties were chosen to represent a diverse academic background and to provide a broader perspective on language use in different disciplines. The respondents were selected for the purpose of this survey to ensure a balanced representation of students from various fields of study.

As this is a preliminary study, data were collected through a survey instrument consisting of two key questions designed to address the research objectives. The first question focused on the percentage of Malay and English usage in classroom interactions, while the second examined the frequency of code-switching. The responses were analysed in terms of numerical values and percentages, which were then organised into tables based on faculty classifications. The findings were subsequently discussed to provide insights into language use patterns and code-switching tendencies in the academic setting.

### 4. Findings

This section presents the findings from the survey in the form of tables. Table 1 presents the findings for the first question, which is about the percentage of the usage of Malay and English Language in classroom interaction. Table 2 presents the findings for the second question, which is about the frequency of code-switching in classroom interaction.

**Table 1:** *Percentage of Usage of Malay and English Language in Classroom Interaction*

Language	Percentage of Usage	Faculty			
		Business Management (n=128)	Information Management (n=100)	Accountancy (n=96)	Computer Science (n=96)
Malay Language	Low (1-30%)	74(57.8%)	56(56%)	69(71.9%)	39(40.6%)

<b>English Language</b>	Intermediate (31-50%)	45(35.2%)	41(41%)	20(20.8%)	36(37.5%)
	High (51-100%)	9(7%)	3(3%)	7(7.3%)	21(21.9%)
	Low (1-40%)	8(6.25%)	3(3%)	7(7.3%)	21(21.9%)
	Intermediate (41-70%)	75(58.6%)	65(65%)	52(54%)	60(62.5%)
	High (71-100%)	45(35.2%)	32(32%)	37(38.5%)	15(15.6%)

**Table 2:** *Frequency of Code-switching in Classroom Interaction*

<b>Frequency of Code-Switching</b>	<b>Faculty</b>			
	Business Management (n=128)	Information Management (n=100)	Accountancy (n=96)	Computer Science (n=96)
<b>Very Often</b>	13(10%)	16(16%)	2(2.1%)	11(11.5%)
<b>Often</b>	41(32%)	53(53%)	24(25%)	31(32%)
<b>Seldom</b>	67(52%)	29(29%)	58(60%)	48(50%)
<b>Very Seldom</b>	7(5.5%)	2(2%)	12(12.5%)	6(6.25%)

Among the four faculties, the Faculty of Computer Science reported the highest usage of the Malay Language in classroom interaction. Conversely, it was found that the faculty reported the lowest usage of the English Language in classroom interaction. On the contrary, the Faculty of Accountancy is the faculty that showed the lowest usage of the Malay Language and the highest usage of the English Language. The findings also showed that the usage of the Malay Language across the four faculties is generally in the Low category, which is from 1% to 30%, while for the English Language, the usage is in the Intermediate category which is from 41% to 70%. The findings also reveal that the practice of code-switching was quite frequent across the faculties, which ranged from 25% to 53%.

#### 4.1 Discussion of the Findings

This section discusses the significant findings of the survey. As mentioned before, as English is the medium of interaction at the university, all the courses (except for courses under the Centre for Islamic Thought and Understanding) must be taught in English. Lecturers and students are expected to converse fully in English during classroom interaction. However, the results of the survey reveal that this is not the case. The results reveal that code-switching happens in classroom interaction. All respondents stated that their classroom interactions are done bilingually, interchangeably between the Malay and English languages. It is also done quite frequently. This is the most significant finding because it proves that the university policy of having English as its medium of interaction is not fully implemented.

Another interesting finding is that even though the Malay language usage in classroom interaction for all faculties is generally low, the usage of the English language is generally not high. Most of the respondents' answers reveal that the usage of English in classroom interaction is intermediate. This is unsettling because the usage of English should be high (if not fully) during classroom interaction. Lecturers and students are expected to converse in English during classroom interaction.

The findings of the survey also reveal that the usage of the Malay language in the category of high usage, according to the respondents from the Faculty of Computer Science, is quite large. Conversely, only a small percentage of the respondents from this faculty falls in the category of high usage of the English Language. This emphasises the findings of a study conducted by Simasiku, Kasanda and Smit (2015), which revealed that by code-switching, students are more likely to participate in their lessons, and it is easier for students to understand the subject matter as they are able to connect the lesson with their schemata, that later provide complete comprehension of the lessons. However, this is worrying because the students are in a Computer Science program where the terms used are mostly in English. Books and references for technological-based subjects like this are also mostly written in English. Therefore, these students need to have a good grasp of English. Hence, it brings out the question of why they are communicating a lot in the Malay language when they are supposed to be made familiar with the English Language.

### 5. Conclusion

The findings of the survey revealed that code-switching happened during classroom interaction with respondents. All respondents stated that their classroom interactions are done bilingually, interchangeably between the Malay and English languages. It is also done quite frequently. This implies that code-switching is a means needed in classroom interaction. An in-depth study exploring the reasons for code-switching as well as the patterns of code-switching is recommended to further understand how it contributes to language learning.

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### Conflict of Interest

We declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

### Author Contribution

*The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: **Study Conception and Design:** Nor Fadhilah Ahmad Powzi and Lina Zainal; **Data Collection:** Nor Fadhilah Ahmad Powzi; **Analysis and Interpretation of Results:** Nor Fadhilah Ahmad Powzi; **Draft Manuscript Preparation:** Nor Fadhilah Ahmad Powzi and Lina Zainal. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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