

Exploring Code-Switching Practices in Vietnamese Classrooms: An Introductory Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the nuanced practice of code-switching (CS) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Vietnam, examining its implications for language learning from both educators' and learners' perspectives. Through a mixed-methods approach involving surveys and interviews with 225 ESL students and eight experienced ESL lecturers at a renowned public university in Ho Chi Minh City, this research illuminates the multifaceted role of CS in enhancing comprehension, engagement, and linguistic proficiency. The findings reveal a general preference among students for a balanced use of English and Vietnamese, underscoring the pedagogical value of strategic CS in facilitating understanding and reducing the affective filter in language learning. Educators' narratives highlight the benefits and challenges of CS in maintaining English exposure while accommodating diverse learner needs. The study also uncovers emerging issues, such as the impact of digital and online learning environments on CS practices and the influence of external expectations on educators' language use decisions. By integrating insights from existing literature, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay between language use and educational outcomes in bilingual settings, advocating for flexible, learner-centered teaching approaches that accommodate the evolving landscape of language education.

Keywords: code-switching, bilingual education, English as a Foreign Language, Vietnamese classrooms

INTRODUCTION

The use of code-switching (CS) has garnered significant attention from both national and international scholars. Despite numerous research endeavors conducted on CS in various contexts, such as Aparece and Bacasmot (2023), Gallagher (2020), Goodman and Tastanbek (2021), Kumar, Nukapangu, and Hassan (2021), MacSwan and Faltis (2020), Muthusamy et al (2020), Shafi, Kazmi and Asif (2020), Siddiq et al (2020), Zainil and Arsyad (2021), most studies predominantly focus on countries other than Vietnam. These investigations offer insights into why CS occurrences occur in ESL contexts and highlight the potential benefits of employing CS in English language teaching. For instance, Aparece and Bacasmot (2023), Kumar, Nukapangu, and Hassan (2021), Kheder and Kaan (2021) suggest that CS can serve as a pedagogic tool to support low-proficiency students in language learning, while the findings of Adler, Valdés Kroff, and Novick (2020), Shafi, Kazmi and indicate its effectiveness in enhancing students' comprehension.

However, the applicability of these findings to Vietnam remains uncertain, as few studies have thoroughly explored CS in Vietnamese educational settings (Dinh & Pham, 2020; Le, 2022; Nguyen & Yuan, 2023; Vu, 2021). Moreover, existing research primarily focuses on teachers' perspectives on classroom code-switching, neglecting the valuable insights from learners' viewpoints. Therefore, there is a crucial need for further investigation in Vietnam to fully comprehend the intricacies of CS in ESL contexts.

Considering the gaps in current research and the distinct sociolinguistic environment of Vietnam, characterized by large class sizes and varied language proficiency, this study aims to bridge these gaps by exploring the viewpoints of both teachers and learners regarding code-switching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Vietnam. This research offers an in-depth analysis of code-switching's function and influence on language acquisition within this specific Vietnamese setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single discourse or conversation (Gardner-Chloros, 2020; Goodman &

Tastanbek, 2021; Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021; Younas, Afzaal, Noor, Khalid, & Naqvi, 2020). This linguistic phenomenon occurs when speakers seamlessly switch between linguistic codes based on contextual, social, or situational factors. Code-switching can manifest at various linguistic levels, including morphological, syntactic, and lexical, and serves diverse communicative functions. It reflects the complex interplay of language and identity in multilingual contexts and is a common practice in communities with multiple linguistic repertoires. Code-switching highlights the fluidity of linguistic boundaries in communication and underscores the dynamic nature of language use, showcasing how speakers navigate between different linguistic systems to convey meaning effectively.

Functions of mother tongue in previous studies (L1)

The functions of the mother tongue (L1) in language teaching encompass a spectrum of pedagogical strategies and approaches to enhance language learning outcomes. Drawing on a learner's first language can serve various purposes, ranging from scaffolding comprehension to fostering cultural connections. This section explores the multifaceted roles of the mother tongue in language instruction, supported by scholarly literature.

One primary function of the mother tongue in language teaching is to provide scaffolding and comprehension support for learners. De La Fuente and Goldenberg (2022) emphasize the importance of building on students' existing linguistic and cognitive skills in their first language to facilitate acquiring a second language. By using the mother tongue strategically, teachers can clarify complex concepts, explain grammar structures, and provide translations as needed, thereby promoting more profound understanding and comprehension (Beisenbayeva 2020; Hawa, Suryani, Susiani, Dauyah & Majid 2021; Neokleous, Krulatz & Xu 2022).

In addition, the mother tongue serves as a cultural and conceptual bridge that connects learners' existing knowledge and experiences with the target language (Alshayban & Alghammas, 2020; Gempeso & Mendez, 2021; Leighton, 2022). By incorporating elements of students' first language into language teaching, educators can contextualize language learning within familiar cultural frameworks, making it more meaningful and relevant

(Gardner-Chloros, 2020; Goodman & Tastanbek, 2021; Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021). This approach fosters a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity and promotes cross-cultural understanding among learners.

Code-switching in EFL classrooms

In the EFL classroom, code-switching— the alternation between languages or language varieties— serves various functions that influence language learning and classroom dynamics. Teachers can use code-switching to clarify instructions, explain complex concepts, or provide translations, particularly when learners encounter difficulties in understanding the target language (Nguyen, Yuan & Seed, 2022; Novianti & Said, 2021). This function aids in scaffolding comprehension and ensures learners grasp key concepts effectively (Köylü, 2020; May & Aziz, 2020). Code-switching enables teachers to incorporate learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into classroom discourse, contextualizing and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Treffers-Daller & Ongun, 2020). Educators draw on students' first language to bridge familiar cultural contexts and the target language learning environment (Akhtar, Baig, Aslam, Khan, Tayyaba & Iqbal, 2020; Treffers-Daller & Ongun, 2020).

Through code-switching, learners develop metalinguistic awareness as they compare and contrast linguistic features between their first language and the target language (Kremin, Alves, Orena, Polka, & Byers-Heinlein, 2022; Kuzyk, Friend, Severdija, Zesiger & Poulin-Dubois, 2020). This process facilitates reflection on language structures and enhances learners' ability to analyze and manipulate language forms (Zainil, & Arsyad, 2021). Code-switching can help maintain classroom dynamics by accommodating diverse language proficiencies and addressing individual learning needs (Liu, Garcia, Zhang, Khong, & Khudanpur, 2024). Allowing occasional use of the first language can alleviate anxiety, promote active participation, and create a supportive learning environment (Nawaz, Atta, & Naseem, 2023)

Code-switching is a transitional tool to facilitate learners' transition from the first to the target language (Ezeh, Umeh & Anyanwu, 2022; Sameen, Farid & Hussain, 2021). By

gradually reducing reliance on the first language over time, teachers encourage learners to engage more extensively in target language communication, fostering fluency and proficiency (Han, Li & Filippi, 2022; Broersma, Carter, Donnelly & Konopka, 2020). In summary, code-switching in the ESL classroom fulfills functions such as clarification and comprehension support, cultural and contextual clarification, promoting metalinguistic awareness, maintaining classroom dynamics, and facilitating language transition. These functions contribute to creating inclusive and effective learning environments that cater to the diverse linguistic needs of ESL learners, ultimately enhancing their language learning experiences and outcomes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate code-switching practices in EFL classrooms in 2023. The research method comprises surveys and interviews, targeting 225 ESL students representing diverse language backgrounds and proficiency levels, and 8 experienced ESL lecturers at a famous public university in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam, providing insights into their perspectives and practices related to code-switching. Convenience sampling was used to select students, ensuring representation across proficiency levels and demographic characteristics. Purposive sampling was employed to select lecturers with varied teaching experiences and expertise in EFL instruction.

To enrich the study with diverse perspectives, a structured questionnaire was designed and distributed electronically to collect quantitative data on students' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes regarding code-switching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers conducted face-to-face to explore their perspectives, strategies, and challenges regarding code-switching in ESL instruction. Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends in students' responses. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically to uncover recurring themes and patterns in lecturers' narratives.

FINDINGS

Students' perspectives toward teachers' code-switching from English to Vietnamese language in EFL classrooms

Items	1 (strongly disagree)	2 (disagree)	3 (neutral)	4 (agree)	5 (strongly agree)
1. I want a balance of English and Vietnamese.	11.56%	12%	11.2%	56.9%	8.5%
2. I want teachers to avoid using Vietnamese.	20%	37.5%	0	20%	23%
3. I enjoy lessons when teachers use code switching.	21%	19%	17.3%	19%	25%
4. I understand lessons better when teachers use L1 to explain difficult points.	0	11.2%	21.8%	40%	19%
5. I lose motivation when teachers use L1.	21%	20%	21%	19%	21%
6. I can't concentrate when teachers use English only.	0	22%	21%	14.7%	42%
7. I understand lessons better when teachers switch to L1 to deliver new lesson.	17.7%	21%	20%	21%	21%
8. I feel more active when teachers switch to L1 to assign tasks and assist me.	16.8%	19.5%	21%	21.7%	21.3%
9. I have difficulties when teachers don't use L1 to explain new concepts.	0	12%	20%	42%	26%
10. I want teachers to minimize L1.	18%	25%	16.5%	21.7%	21%

For item 1, most respondents (56.9%) agree with the statement, indicating a general preference for having a balance between English and Vietnamese in the context being surveyed. The percentages of respondents who strongly disagree, disagree, or are neutral are relatively similar, ranging from 11.2% to 12%. A smaller portion of the respondents (8.5%) strongly agree with the statement.

For item 2, the distribution of responses shows a somewhat polarized view with no neutrality. A significant portion (37.5%) disagrees with the idea of teachers avoiding Vietnamese, suggesting they see value in its use in the educational context. However, a

combined 43% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement, indicating a substantial preference for not using Vietnamese in teaching. This suggests a divide in opinions on the role of Vietnamese in the educational setting among the respondents.

For item 3, the highest percentage of respondents (37.5%) disagree with the statement, showing a general preference against avoiding Vietnamese in teaching. However, a considerable portion (43%) combined from those who agree and strongly agree, indicates a notable preference for limiting the use of Vietnamese by teachers. The lack of neutral responses (0%) suggests strong opinions among the respondents.

For item 4, the distribution of responses indicates a diverse range of opinions regarding code-switching in educational settings. While a significant portion of respondents (25%) strongly prefer lessons involving code-switching, there's also a notable percentage of respondents (21%) at the opposite end of the spectrum. This suggests that opinions on the use of code-switching in lessons vary considerably, with no single viewpoint dominating.

For item 5, the majority of respondents (59%), combined with those who agree and strongly agree, indicate a clear preference for teachers using the first language to explain difficult parts of lessons. A smaller portion of the survey participants either disagree (11.2%) or are neutral (21.8%) on this matter. The absence of respondents who strongly disagree (0%) highlights a general acceptance or favor towards the integration of L1 in teaching challenging concepts.

For item 6, the distribution of responses is notable even across the scale, suggesting no clear consensus among the respondents. This indicates that the impact of teachers using their first language on student motivation varies significantly among individuals, with roughly equal proportions of respondents feeling strongly one way or the other, and a significant portion remaining neutral.

For item 7, the data reveals a notable division in perspectives, with a substantial portion (42%) strongly feeling that exclusive use of English by teachers hinders their concentration. On the other hand, 22% do not believe that using only English impacts their ability to focus. The neutral responses (21%) suggest that for some, the language of instruction might not significantly influence their concentration levels. The absence of strong

disagreement indicates a general acknowledgment among the respondents of the potential challenges posed by using only English in an educational setting.

For item 8, the distribution shows a relatively even spread of opinions, with a slight majority (42%) leaning towards some form of agreement with the statement. This indicates that while a significant portion of respondents find switching to L1 helpful for understanding new lessons, there is also a considerable diversity in opinions, with no overwhelming consensus.

For item 9, the distribution of responses shows a relatively even split across all options, with no single perspective dominating. The data suggests a diverse set of opinions regarding the use of L1 in task assignments and assistance, reflecting varying levels of comfort and preference for L1 use in the classroom. The similar percentages across "Agree" and "Strongly agree" (totaling 43%) and "Disagree" and "Strongly disagree" (totaling 36.3%) highlight a balanced division in preferences towards the use of L1 for enhancing classroom engagement and activity.

For item 10, the distribution of responses shows a clear trend towards agreement with the statement, with a majority (68%) indicating some level of difficulty when teachers do not use L1 to explain new concepts. This suggests that many respondents rely on or prefer explanations in their first language to understand new material in an educational setting better.

In summary, the survey findings indicate mixed opinions on the use of English and Vietnamese in educational settings. There's a general preference for balancing both languages, with about 57% supporting this approach. Opinions are divided on avoiding Vietnamese in teaching, with nearly equal parts disagreeing and supporting the limitation of its use. Code-switching has diverse views, with no dominant preference. A majority favor using the first language to explain difficult concepts. There's no clear consensus on how using the first language affects student motivation, but there's a notable concern that exclusive use of English could hinder concentration for some students. While there's some support for integrating the first language in teaching, opinions vary widely on its extent and manner.

Teachers' perspectives towards code-switching

Teacher_01 (15 years of teaching experience) has primarily used code-switching **to clarify complex grammatical concepts and vocabulary**. She noted significant improvements in student comprehension and engagement when native language explanations are provided alongside English instructions. Challenges include **maintaining a balance to ensure sufficient English exposure**.

Teacher_02 (10 years of teaching experience) employs code-switching strategically **to build rapport and lower the affective filter among adult learners**. He found it particularly useful in discussing cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions. The main challenge cited is **ensuring that the use of the native language does not become a crutch that hinders English proficiency development**.

Teacher_03 (12 years of teaching experience) uses code-switching sparingly, mainly **to manage classroom behavior and give instructions to young learners**. She highlighted **the importance of creating an immersive English environment but recognize the need for occasional L1 use to ensure clarity and safety**. Challenges include resisting parental pressure for an "English-only" policy.

Teacher_04 (8 years of teaching experience) integrates code-switching in **discussions of complex business concepts and terminologies**. The challenge lies in maintaining academic rigor.

Teacher_05 (12 years of teaching experience) focuses on using code-switching for **critical thinking and debate exercises, allowing students to articulate complex thoughts more freely before expressing them in English**. The challenge is encouraging fluent speakers to stick to English.

Teacher_06_07 (6 years of teaching experience) leverages code-switching **to provide personalized feedback and explanations during online sessions**. The challenge is to adapt quickly to each student's linguistic background, especially when they are not fluent in the students' L1. Students report feeling more comfortable and supported when their tutor uses code-switching to clarify doubts, leading to a more effective learning experience.

Teacher_08 (9 years of teaching experience) uses code-switching *to facilitate literature and cultural studies discussions, connecting English texts with students' cultural backgrounds*. The challenge is ensuring that code-switching enriches the discussion without detracting from English language immersion.

In short, teachers utilize code-switching in diverse educational contexts, each noting specific benefits and challenges: 1) clarifying complex topics, enhancing comprehension and engagement but faces the challenge of ensuring enough English exposure; 2) building rapport and discussing cultural nuances, with a caution against over-reliance; conducting classroom management and giving clear instructions, contending with pressures for English-only policies; 3) facilitating complex discussions to providing personalized feedback; 4) navigating the balance between using the native language; 5) maintaining English proficiency and immersion.

DISCUSSIONS

The exploration of code-switching within Vietnamese classrooms unveils a complex interplay between this study's empirical findings and the wider academic conversation, as highlighted by the existing body of work on bilingual education and language teaching methodologies. This analysis weaves together these insights into cohesive themes, grounding them in the academic milieu through relevant literature citations.

A central theme emerging from both this study and extant research is the call for a nuanced use of the first language (L1) and the target language (L2), advocating for their balanced integration. This alignment is reflected in participants' preferences for seamlessly combining English and Vietnamese, mirroring the strategies endorsed by scholars like Goodman and Tastanbek (2021), and Ezeh, Umeh, and Anyanwu (2022). They advocate for the judicious use of L1 to support learning and improve understanding. Positive student responses to this approach, noted in research by Han, Li, and Filippi (2022), and Nguyen, Yuan, and Seed (2022), highlight the pedagogical benefits of using L1 as an auxiliary tool in language learning, demonstrating its role in fostering an inclusive and engaging educational atmosphere.

Another prominent theme is the functional utility of code-switching in demystifying complex ideas and promoting active participation. The enhanced comprehension observed in this study when L1 explanations are offered corroborates the literature's identification of code-switching's value in making instructions more accessible (Treffers-Daller & Ongun, 2020). This concurrence underlines the practical benefits of code-switching in teaching, serving as a linguistic conduit that boosts learner comprehension and involvement.

The research also uncovers new challenges and considerations, expanding the dialogue around code-switching. The varied student preferences and classroom dynamics revealed suggest a multifaceted educational environment where the impact of code-switching is significantly influenced by individual learner needs. This intricate perspective finds resonance in the work of Broersma, Carter, Donnelly, & Konopka (2020), who note the adaptive nature of code-switching to the fluid nature of classroom interactions. Moreover, external factors like parental expectations and policy limitations, as noted by a teacher in this study, add complexity to language use decisions, pointing to the broader socio-political context of bilingual education as discussed by Köylü (2020), May & Aziz (2020), and Kremin et al. (2022).

Both students and teachers recognize the value and challenges of code-switching and using both English and Vietnamese in educational settings. Students show mixed opinions on language use, with a preference for balancing English and Vietnamese and diverse views on the role of the native language in enhancing understanding and engagement. Conversely, teachers actively employ code-switching for various educational purposes, such as clarifying complex topics, building rapport, managing classrooms, and facilitating discussions. They acknowledge the benefits in terms of improved comprehension, engagement, and comfort, but also face challenges in maintaining English exposure, avoiding dependency on the native language, and navigating institutional or parental pressures for English-only policies. Both groups highlight the nuanced role of language in education, emphasizing the need for a strategic balance to maximize learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on bilingual education and language teaching strategies, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay between code-switching practices and language learning outcomes in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. The findings advocate for a nuanced understanding of code-switching, emphasizing its potential benefits while acknowledging the need for strategic application to cater to diverse learner needs and evolving educational contexts. To address the nuanced role of language in education, future actions could include developing a balanced code-switching framework, enhancing teacher training on effective bilingual strategies, and engaging parents to understand the benefits of a bilingual approach. Further research on code-switching's long-term effects on language proficiency is essential. Creating customized bilingual learning materials and leveraging technology can provide adaptive support for individual learners. Educational policies should be revisited to encourage strategic native language use, complemented by regular student feedback to tailor teaching methods. Additionally, fostering cross-cultural competencies and establishing professional networks for educators can promote shared learning and best practices in bilingual education, ultimately enhancing student learning experience and outcomes.

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