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AN INVESTIGATION ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TO THE USE OF CODE-SWITCHING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CLASSROOMS

Cristina Geovani Manik^{1*}, Herman Herman², Bertaria Sohnata Hutaauruk³

^{1,2,3}Department of English Education, Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, Indonesia

*Corresponding author's email: cristinageovani21@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates students' perceptions of code-switching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, focusing on how internal and external factors influence their attitudes and language use. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 60 Grade XI students from SMA YP HKBP 1 Pematangsiantar. The questionnaire measured perceptions related to internal factors such as confidence, motivation, and learning processes, as well as external factors including family background, peer influence, and classroom environment. The results indicate that most students view code-switching positively, reporting increased confidence and motivation when integrating Indonesian within English communication. Additionally, code-switching was found to reduce anxiety and enhance their ability to express ideas effectively. Social influences, especially peer behavior and classroom size, significantly affected their use of code-switching. Conversely, family influence was less impactful. These findings highlight that code-switching serves as both a communicative strategy and a supportive pedagogical tool in EFL learning. The study recommends that educators embrace code-switching to foster a more inclusive and effective language learning environment, particularly in multilingual contexts where students face challenges in expressing themselves solely in English. This research contributes to the understanding of bilingual communication dynamics in EFL settings and provides insights for language teaching practices that accommodate students' linguistic and cultural realities.

Keywords: code-switching, EFL classroom, student perception, bilingual communication, language learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

In the field of language education, the phenomenon of code-switching—the alternation between two or more languages within a conversation or utterance—has long been a subject of debate. Particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, where English is not the native language of either the teacher or the students, code-switching occurs frequently and often plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process (Sert, 2005; Judijanto et al., 2025). Traditionally viewed as a sign of linguistic deficiency or a pedagogical weakness, code-switching is increasingly being re-evaluated as a communicative strategy that reflects the dynamic realities of bilingual and multilingual learners (Cook, 2001).

The use of code-switching in EFL classrooms has become more visible in countries where English is taught as a foreign language, including Indonesia. In such contexts, teachers often switch between English and the students' first language (L1), usually Bahasa Indonesia or a regional language, to clarify instructions, explain grammar, or manage classroom behavior. For students, this linguistic shift can either facilitate understanding or create confusion, depending on how and when it is employed (Macaro, 2005). This dichotomy raises an important pedagogical question: How do learners perceive the effectiveness and appropriateness of code-switching in their English learning experience?

Student perception plays a critical role in language learning because it affects motivation, engagement, and the overall success of the learning process (Nainggolan et al., 2024; Cahyani et al., 2025). Learners' attitudes toward code-switching may influence how receptive they are to instructional methods that include it, and how competent they feel when navigating

between their first language and English. Previous studies have suggested that students often view code-switching positively when it helps them understand complex content or reduces classroom anxiety (Al-Nofaie, 2010). However, others argue that overreliance on code-switching may limit students' exposure to the target language and hinder immersion (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

In the Indonesian EFL context, the use of code-switching by teachers is both widespread and context-dependent. Many educators view it as a practical tool to bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps between students and the target language. Yet, despite its prevalence, relatively few studies have focused specifically on how students perceive code-switching in classroom interactions. Understanding students' viewpoints is crucial for evaluating whether this practice supports or undermines pedagogical goals. As Nguyen (2013) noted, a mismatch between teacher practice and student expectation can reduce the effectiveness of classroom communication.

Moreover, the sociolinguistic environment in Indonesia is uniquely multilingual, with students often speaking a local language at home, Bahasa Indonesia in public settings, and English in academic environments. This complex linguistic background creates a fertile ground for examining the nuanced functions of code-switching in EFL classrooms. Code-switching in this context is not merely a linguistic behavior, but a reflection of students' identity negotiation, cultural affiliation, and communicative adaptability (Canagarajah, 2006). Therefore, investigating students' perception of code-switching contributes to a deeper understanding of their linguistic reality and learning preferences.

This study is grounded in the assumption that students are not passive recipients of pedagogical methods, but active participants whose perceptions and attitudes shape the classroom experience. By focusing on learners' perspectives, this research aims to provide empirical evidence about the pedagogical implications of code-switching from the viewpoint of its primary beneficiaries—the students themselves. Such an approach aligns with current trends in learner-centered pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of incorporating student feedback into curriculum development and instructional strategies (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Thus, the primary objective of this study is to analyze EFL students' perceptions regarding the use of code-switching in the classroom, particularly in terms of its benefits, limitations, and situational appropriateness. By doing so, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do students perceive the use of code-switching by teachers in EFL classrooms? (2) In what classroom contexts do students find code-switching helpful or unhelpful? (3) What are the pedagogical implications of these perceptions for EFL instruction in multilingual settings like Indonesia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of code-switching has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shifting from being viewed as a sign of linguistic interference to a legitimate communicative and pedagogical strategy. In bilingual and multilingual settings, code-switching is defined as the intentional or unintentional alternation between two or more languages within the same discourse, sentence, or interaction (Poplack, 1980). In the classroom context, code-switching often reflects pragmatic choices made by both teachers and learners to manage

comprehension, bridge cultural gaps, or foster rapport (Auer, 1998). Scholars now recognize code-switching as a natural product of linguistic flexibility, particularly in EFL environments where both participants share a common L1.

In educational contexts, especially in non-native English-speaking countries, the strategic use of code-switching by teachers is seen as a way to mediate linguistic and cognitive challenges faced by learners. For instance, Ferguson (2003) emphasizes that code-switching is frequently employed to explain difficult concepts, give instructions, or assess student understanding more effectively. It allows the teacher to shift between the target language (English) and the students' first language (L1) to ensure that meaning is not lost, particularly when learners are at a beginner or intermediate proficiency level. However, this pragmatic benefit is still debated within the framework of language immersion theory, which promotes maximum exposure to the target language as a path to fluency.

From a learner-centered perspective, students' attitudes toward code-switching in the classroom have varied across cultural and educational contexts. In a study conducted in Malaysia, Gulzar (2014) found that the majority of students appreciated code-switching when it was used to clarify grammar rules, explain new vocabulary, or provide examples. Students reported feeling less anxious and more engaged when their teachers used their L1 strategically, especially during complex or abstract lessons. Conversely, some studies have shown that students may view frequent code-switching as a sign of a teacher's lack of confidence or a distraction from English exposure, suggesting that perception is highly context-dependent (Cahyani, de Courcy, & Barnett, 2018).

Another significant theme in the literature is the role of code-switching in

identity negotiation and classroom dynamics. Garcia and Wei (2014) argue that code-switching is not only a pedagogical act but also a discursive practice through which students assert their bilingual identities and negotiate cultural belonging. In multilingual classrooms, students often use code-switching to signal solidarity, resist authority, or align themselves with particular peer groups. Such sociolinguistic functions are especially relevant in Indonesian classrooms, where students often operate within a triadic linguistic reality—between regional languages, Bahasa Indonesia, and English (Zein, 2017).

Pedagogically, the literature also distinguishes between intra-sentential and inter-sentential code-switching and how students respond differently to each. According to Lin (2013), intra-sentential switching (within a sentence) is often perceived as more disruptive, especially when learners are unfamiliar with certain vocabulary items, while inter-sentential switching (between sentences) is generally more accepted as it mirrors natural pauses in conversation and reinforces meaning without interrupting the flow. Understanding these nuances helps educators assess not just whether to code-switch, but how and when to do so appropriately based on learners' preferences and proficiency levels.

Research has also raised concerns about the overuse of code-switching, particularly in EFL settings where it may unintentionally limit students' target language input. Sert (2019) points out that while code-switching can scaffold learning in the short term, it may reduce learners' opportunities to develop productive language skills, such as spontaneous speaking or critical thinking in English. Therefore, educators are advised to use code-switching judiciously and in alignment with communicative teaching goals.

In summary, the literature presents a balanced view of code-switching as both a beneficial and potentially problematic classroom practice, depending on how it is used and perceived. Most researchers agree that code-switching is not inherently detrimental to language learning but must be carefully aligned with students' cognitive needs, affective factors, and classroom context. This complexity underscores the importance of exploring students' perceptions, particularly in under-researched contexts like Indonesian EFL classrooms, to inform evidence-based teaching practices.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research approach to explore students' perceptions of code-switching in EFL classrooms. As Creswell (2023) emphasizes, qualitative research aims to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of a social phenomenon within their natural settings. The focus in this study was on gathering non-numerical data—specifically, students' opinions and experiences related to code-switching—through instruments that allowed for subjective insight. The research design followed an inductive logic, starting from specific observations and gradually building general themes based on students' responses. The qualitative nature of this study was particularly suitable for examining perceptions, attitudes, and the internal reasoning behind students' responses to the presence of bilingual language use in English learning environments.

2. Data Source

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that involves choosing individuals based on specific characteristics

relevant to the research focus. According to Arikunto (2010), the research participants are those from whom meaningful data can be derived. The study involved a total of 60 students from Grade XI at SMA YP HKBP 1 Pematangsiantar, specifically from classes XI-3 and XI-4. These classes were chosen for practical and pedagogical reasons: the researcher had previously conducted a teaching practicum in both classes and had already established familiarity and rapport with the students. Additionally, the frequent use of code-switching observed during the teaching practice in these classes made them ideal candidates for exploring learners' views on the phenomenon.

3. Research Instruments

To collect the necessary data, a structured questionnaire was developed and administered to the participants. Arikunto (2010) defines a research instrument as any tool used to collect data in a systematic and effective manner. In this case, the questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items, specifically designed to measure students' degrees of agreement or disagreement with various statements related to code-switching. The instrument incorporated 13 targeted indicators representing two key domains of perception: internal (e.g., motivation, interest, attention, confidence, learning strategies) and external (e.g., environment, peer influence, family background, and cultural exposure). Each item was linked to a specific type of code-switching (intra-sentential, inter-sentential, or tag-switching) to reflect the real linguistic behavior observed in classroom interactions.

4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered through a self-administered questionnaire, which students completed in the classroom under the researcher's supervision. This process ensured that students understood each item

and responded independently. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) explain, questionnaires are widely used in educational research for their efficiency in collecting consistent and structured responses from a group of respondents. The items were designed based on established Likert scale formats, allowing students to rate their perceptions across a four-point scale: from "Strongly Agree" (4) to "Strongly Disagree" (1). This approach made it possible to quantify qualitative perceptions, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and tendencies in students' responses.

The questionnaire comprised 13 key statements—8 relating to internal perception factors (such as motivation, prejudice, and interest), and 5 associated with external factors (such as cultural norms and peer behavior). All items were tied to common classroom expressions of code-switching to ensure relevance and clarity. The scale was adapted from Birmingham (2003, as cited in Simaremare et al., 2023), and the design allowed for both descriptive and comparative analysis of student responses across different types of code-switching.

5. Data Analysis Technique

Once the data were collected, the analysis process followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model (2014), which consists of three cyclical steps: data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions. In the first stage, data were condensed by organizing, coding, and summarizing student responses to focus on the most relevant aspects related to the research questions. The second stage involved the display of data using descriptive tables that visually presented frequencies and distribution of responses for each questionnaire item. These displays enabled the researcher to identify dominant

patterns and outliers in the students' perceptions.

In the final stage—conclusion drawing and verification—the researcher interpreted the data based on the recurring themes and patterns identified in the previous step. These interpretations were then compared to previous literature and theoretical frameworks to construct a well-supported understanding of how students perceive the use of code-switching in the EFL classroom. This rigorous qualitative approach ensured that the findings were both grounded in student experiences and aligned with broader pedagogical discussions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the questionnaire responses collected from 60 students regarding their perceptions of code-switching in the EFL classroom. The results are categorized based on internal factors (relating to personal feelings, motivation, learning processes, and individual attitudes) and external factors (environmental and social influences). The data are displayed in tabular form along with accompanying charts and detailed interpretation.

1. Confidence in switching - 98% agree
2. Motivation through switching - 92% agree
3. Learning process aided by switching - 98% agree
4. Style reflection - 67% agree
5. Avoiding judgment by switching - 87% agree
6. Better understanding by friends - 97% agree
7. Switching despite attention - 97% agree
8. Interest in discussions increased - 85% agree
9. Tag-switching for understanding - 80% agree
10. Switching to show effort - 90% agree

The internal factors reveal strong positive perceptions toward code-switching among the students. For example, 98% of students feel more confident when allowed to switch languages mid-sentence (Statement 1) and perceive code-switching as beneficial to their learning process (Statement 3). Motivation is also highly rated, with 92% agreeing that switching between English and Indonesian encourages them to speak more actively (Statement 2).

Interestingly, fewer students (67%) consider switching a reflection of their personal speaking style (Statement 4), suggesting some awareness of code-switching as a learning strategy rather than mere habit. Additionally, a majority (87%) admitted to avoiding English in favor of Indonesian to prevent negative judgments (Statement 5), highlighting affective barriers in language use.

Statements concerning social comprehension (6) and continued switching despite focused attention (7) scored very high (97%), indicating that switching is perceived as a useful tool for communication and learning even when students are engaged. The use of tag-switching (“kan” or “ya”) to check understanding (Statement 9) showed somewhat lower agreement (80%), which may reflect individual variation in language confidence or classroom norms. Lastly, switching to show effort in practicing English (Statement 10) was positively received by 90% of participants, demonstrating an awareness of code-switching as a communicative strategy rather than just a fallback.

Figure 1. Internal Factors – Percentage of Agreement (SA + A) per Statement

1. Family and friends influence - 37% agree
2. Influence of social media/internet - 63% agree
3. Classmate behavior influence - 90% agree
4. Comfort in switching in large classes - 98% agree
5. Partner's comprehension influence - 97% agree

Figure 2. External Factors – Percentage of Agreement (SA + A) per Statement

External factors showed a diverse range of influence on students' use of code-switching. Only 37% of participants agreed that their family and friends' language behavior at home motivated their switching (Statement 1), indicating that code-switching in EFL classrooms is more of a school-related phenomenon than a direct family influence.

Social media and internet exposure played a moderate role, with 63% acknowledging that they learned code-switching patterns from online sources (Statement 2). Peer influence was strong, as 90% agreed that frequent switching among classmates contributed to their own language choices (Statement 3).

Comfort and anxiety management emerged as critical external motivators; nearly all students (98%) felt switching into Indonesian eased embarrassment in large classes (Statement 4), showing code-switching's role as a social-emotional coping mechanism. Likewise, 97% reported switching languages when their conversation partner did not understand their English (Statement 5), underscoring code-switching as a pragmatic communication strategy.

Overall, the results indicate a predominantly positive perception toward code-switching among the EFL learners in the study. Both internal factors such as confidence and motivation, and external factors like classroom environment and peer influence, play significant roles in encouraging students to switch between

English and Indonesian. These findings suggest that code-switching is a multifaceted strategy that supports language learning and social interaction in EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that students generally hold positive perceptions toward the use of code-switching in EFL classrooms. Internally, code-switching was found to boost their confidence, motivation, and ability to express ideas more clearly. Students also saw it as a useful learning tool that helped reduce anxiety and made classroom interactions more engaging. Despite some variation in individual preferences, most students agreed that code-switching supports their language development and communication.

Externally, social and environmental factors played a significant role in shaping students' attitudes toward code-switching. Peer behavior and classroom dynamics strongly influenced their use of code-switching, while family influence was less pronounced. Additionally, code-switching served as a practical strategy to manage comprehension difficulties and social discomfort, particularly in large classes where students felt less confident speaking solely in English.

Overall, the findings suggest that code-switching is not merely a linguistic habit but an effective communicative and pedagogical strategy in EFL settings. Educators might consider acknowledging and integrating code-switching constructively to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, especially in multilingual classrooms where English is learned as a foreign language.

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