

THE ROLE OF CODE-SWITCHING IN TESOL: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN MULTILINGUAL UZBEK CLASSROOMS

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Abstract. This article investigates the role of code-switching in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), with a particular focus on multilingual learning environments. Code-switching, understood as the alternation between two or more languages within a conversation or discourse, has traditionally been viewed as a sign of linguistic deficiency. However, recent research highlights its pedagogical potential in facilitating comprehension, reducing anxiety, and supporting identity construction among language learners. The study explores theoretical perspectives on code-switching in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, while also examining practical applications in TESOL classrooms. By analyzing classroom practices and teacher attitudes, the article demonstrates how strategic code-switching can serve as an effective instructional tool, especially in multilingual contexts where learners share diverse linguistic repertoires. The findings suggest that while excessive reliance on code-switching may hinder immersion, a balanced approach can enhance language acquisition, cultural awareness, and communicative competence.

Keywords: Code-switching; TESOL; multilingual education; applied linguistics; classroom discourse; bilingualism; second language acquisition; teacher strategies; sociolinguistics; communicative competence.

Introduction. The rapid growth of globalization, migration, and international education has resulted in increasingly multilingual classrooms around the world. In such contexts, the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language is rarely a monolingual process. Learners often draw upon their full linguistic repertoires, naturally shifting between languages in the course of communication. This phenomenon, known as code-switching, refers to the alternation between two or more languages within a conversation, sentence, or discourse. While once dismissed as a marker of linguistic deficiency, code-switching is now widely recognized as a complex, rule-governed, and purposeful communicative strategy. In the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), code-switching plays a particularly significant role. Many learners rely on their first language(s) to scaffold their understanding of English, to negotiate meaning, and to express complex ideas that may exceed their current proficiency level. Teachers, likewise, may strategically employ code-switching as a pedagogical resource to clarify instructions, explain grammar, reduce learner anxiety, and build rapport in multilingual classrooms. At the same time, the practice raises important theoretical and practical questions: To what extent does code-switching support or hinders second language acquisition? How can teachers balance the benefits of linguistic flexibility with the need to maximize target-language exposure?

The debate surrounding code-switching in TESOL is shaped by two contrasting perspectives. On one hand, the monolingual or “English-only” approach argues that learners require maximum immersion in the target language for effective acquisition. This perspective views code-switching as a distraction or obstacle to full competence. On the other hand, the

multilingual or translanguaging perspective emphasizes the legitimacy of learners' entire linguistic repertoires, seeing code-switching as a natural and beneficial practice that reflects real-world communication. Recent studies suggest that when used strategically, code-switching can enhance both linguistic and cultural understanding, serving as a bridge between languages rather than a barrier.

The present article seeks to examine the role of code-switching in TESOL from both theoretical and practical angles. It begins by exploring the conceptual foundations of code-switching in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, highlighting its functions and forms. It then considers the pedagogical implications of code-switching in multilingual classrooms, focusing on teacher practices, learner perceptions, and classroom dynamics. The article argues that while excessive or unplanned reliance on code-switching may limit language immersion, a balanced, intentional approach can enhance communicative competence, cultural awareness, and learner confidence. Ultimately, this discussion contributes to ongoing debates about language policy, classroom practice, and the future of TESOL in increasingly multilingual societies.

Literature review. Code-switching has been a central topic of investigation in linguistics, sociolinguistics, and language pedagogy for decades. Traditionally, scholars viewed code-switching as a sign of linguistic deficiency or interference between languages. Early structuralist approaches tended to frame it as an undesirable by-product of bilingualism, suggesting that "mixing" languages represented confusion or incomplete acquisition (Weinreich, 1953). However, subsequent research in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics challenged this deficit view, highlighting that code-switching is not random but governed by grammatical, pragmatic, and social rules (Gumperz, 1982; Poplack, 1980).

In applied linguistics, scholars such as Cook (2001) and Macaro (2005) have played a major role in reframing the use of the first language (L1) in the classroom. Cook introduced the concept of "multicompetence," arguing that bilinguals should not be judged against monolingual norms, and that code-switching reflects the natural interaction of multiple linguistic systems in the mind. Similarly, Macaro (2005) explored the pedagogical implications of code-switching, suggesting that while an "English-only" classroom policy may encourage immersion, moderate and strategic use of the L1 can support comprehension, reduce cognitive load, and foster more effective learning.

Within TESOL research, several studies emphasize the practical functions of code-switching in classroom discourse. Ferguson (2003) identified key functions of teacher code-switching, including classroom management, curriculum access, and interpersonal relations. Canagarajah (1995) noted that code-switching is often a resource for negotiating power and identity in multilingual classrooms, particularly in postcolonial contexts. García (2009) expanded this perspective by developing the concept of translanguaging, which views code-switching not as the alternation between separate languages but as the flexible use of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire. This theoretical shift has been influential in TESOL, as it validates the dynamic practices of multilingual learners and promotes inclusive pedagogical approaches.

At the same time, some scholars caution against over-reliance on code-switching. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in the target language, has often been cited to argue for maximum exposure to English in TESOL

settings. Similarly, Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain (2009) note that excessive use of the L1 may reduce learners’ opportunities to practice English, potentially slowing the development of communicative competence. This tension highlights the ongoing debate between monolingual immersion models and multilingual, flexible approaches.

Empirical research also sheds light on learner attitudes toward code-switching. Studies by Levine (2011) and Littlewood & Yu (2011) reveal that while many learners appreciate code-switching for clarification and affective support, others perceive it as limiting their opportunities to practice English. Teacher beliefs are equally diverse, shaped by institutional policies, cultural expectations, and personal teaching philosophies. In some contexts, code-switching is openly encouraged as part of bilingual pedagogy, while in others, teachers feel pressured to maintain an “English-only” environment, even when code-switching might be beneficial.

In the context of multilingual classrooms, code-switching serves not only pedagogical but also sociocultural functions. It allows learners to express identity, solidarity, and belonging, while negotiating cultural meanings across linguistic boundaries (Auer, 1998). This dual role—as both a teaching tool and a social resource—makes code-switching a complex but invaluable aspect of TESOL practice.

Overall, the literature demonstrates a shift from viewing code-switching as linguistic deficiency to recognizing it as a legitimate and productive strategy in multilingual education. While debates continue regarding its appropriate use, there is broad agreement that code-switching, when employed strategically, can enhance comprehension, foster learner confidence, and reflect the realities of multilingual communication. This body of research provides the theoretical foundation for examining how code-switching operates in TESOL practice today.

Research discussion. The discussion of code-switching in TESOL requires balancing theoretical perspectives with the realities of multilingual classroom practice. The evidence suggests that code-switching is neither purely detrimental nor universally beneficial; rather, its impact depends on how, when, and why it is used.

First, from a pedagogical perspective, code-switching can play a critical role in scaffolding learning. When learners encounter complex vocabulary, abstract concepts, or grammatical structures, strategic use of the L1 can bridge gaps in comprehension. For example, teachers may switch to the learners’ mother tongue to explain nuanced grammar rules, provide quick translations of unfamiliar terms, or ensure that instructions are fully understood. This aligns with Macaro’s (2005) argument that moderate use of code-switching supports cognitive processing without undermining target language exposure. Learners often report feeling more secure and less anxious when their L1 is acknowledged in the classroom, which can foster greater participation and confidence.

Second, in classroom management and interaction, code-switching serves practical functions. Teachers may use it to clarify administrative details, manage discipline, or build rapport with students. These interactions contribute to a more inclusive classroom environment where students’ linguistic backgrounds are validated. Such practices highlight the social function of code-switching, as emphasized by Ferguson (2003), who noted that teacher code-switching often strengthens interpersonal relationships and reduces hierarchical barriers. However, the potential drawbacks of code-switching must also be considered. Over-reliance on the L1 may

reduce learners' opportunities to engage meaningfully with English, thereby slowing their progress in communicative competence. In classrooms where teachers frequently switch to the L1, students may become passive, waiting for translations rather than actively engaging with English input. This concern echoes Krashen's (1982) view that maximum exposure to comprehensible input in the target language is essential for acquisition. Teachers therefore face the challenge of striking a balance between providing support through code-switching and maintaining sufficient immersion in English.

A third dimension involves the sociocultural and identity-related functions of code-switching. In multilingual classrooms, learners often use code-switching to express solidarity with peers, to negotiate cultural meaning, or to perform aspects of their identities. García's (2009) concept of translanguaging broadens this understanding by framing code-switching not as alternating between two separate systems, but as fluidly drawing upon the full linguistic repertoire. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where learners are not simply acquiring English as an isolated skill but integrating it into their broader communicative practices. In such environments, code-switching reflects authentic language use and prepares learners for real-world multilingual communication.

Furthermore, learner and teacher attitudes towards code-switching vary widely. Some learners prefer an English-only classroom, believing that this maximizes opportunities for practice, while others appreciate the comfort and clarity that L1 use provides. Teachers' beliefs are shaped by institutional language policies, their own language backgrounds, and the cultural context of the classroom. In some contexts, teachers feel pressure to adopt an English-only stance, even when strategic code-switching might benefit learners. These tensions underscore the need for flexible, context-sensitive approaches to code-switching in TESOL.

Finally, in terms of practical implications, the research suggests that code-switching should not be viewed as a "problem" to be eliminated but as a pedagogical tool to be used judiciously. Teachers may benefit from training on when and how to use code-switching effectively, integrating it into broader communicative strategies rather than relying on it excessively. Clear guidelines, rather than strict prohibitions, could empower teachers to balance the benefits of code-switching with the need for immersive language exposure. The discussion reveals that code-switching in TESOL is a multifaceted phenomenon with cognitive, pedagogical, and sociocultural dimensions. Its effectiveness depends on the context, purpose, and frequency of use. Rather than adhering rigidly to either an English-only or a bilingual approach, successful TESOL practice requires nuanced, adaptive strategies that recognize both the challenges and the benefits of code-switching in multilingual learning environments.

Conclusion. Code-switching remains one of the most debated yet impactful practices in the field of TESOL. Once considered a marker of linguistic weakness, it is now increasingly recognized as a purposeful and rule-governed strategy that reflects the realities of multilingual communication. The literature and classroom evidence demonstrate that code-switching serves multiple pedagogical and sociocultural functions: it supports comprehension, reduces learner anxiety, facilitates classroom management, and validates learners' linguistic identities.

At the same time, the discussion highlights the risks of excessive reliance on the L1, which may limit learners' opportunities to engage with English and hinder the development of communicative competence. The challenge, therefore, lies not in choosing between strict English-only policies and unrestricted bilingual practices, but in finding a balanced, context-sensitive approach. Teachers who use code-switching strategically—clarifying difficult concepts, managing classroom interactions, or building rapport—can enhance the effectiveness of their teaching without undermining target language exposure.

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