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EXPLORING THE USE OF CODE-SWITCHING IN ENGLISH PRIMARY CLASSROOMS: PERSPECTIVE OF IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Nur Alyssa Diyana Binti Abdullah*[1], Nurhazlini Binti Rahmat[2]

[1&2] Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia, Malaysia

Corresponding Author*: *nurhazlini@uptm.edu.my*

ABSTRACT

Code-switching is a linguistic phenomenon where speakers alternate between languages within a conversation. It has been widely researched as a teaching tool in multilingual classrooms. This study explores the role of code-switching in primary school classrooms from the perspective of in-service teachers. In recent studies, it examines how teachers utilise code-switching to facilitate learning and address students' linguistic diversity (Rahmat, 2021). Employing mixed-methods, this research focuses on understanding behind code-switching, its perceived benefits and its potential challenges in fostering language acquisition and classroom interaction. Findings indicate that in-service teachers perceive code-switching as a beneficial yet situational tool, mainly used to aid comprehension, support lower-proficiency students, and manage classroom interactions. However, they also recognise the importance of limiting its use to ensure sufficient English language exposure. This study highlights the need for a balanced approach to code-switching in ESLinstruction, ensuring that its use remains purposeful and beneficial. Future research could examine how alternative teaching strategies can complement code-switching. Additionally, further studies could investigate students' perceptions of code-switching and its long-term impact on language development.

Keywords: code-switching, in-service teachers, primary school classrooms

INTRODUCTION

In multilingual societies like Malaysia, code-switching is the systematic alternation between two or more languages in conversation. It is a natural and frequent phenomenon, particularly in educational contexts. In ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms, this practice is not only common but also strategic, especially in helping students understand lessons

more effectively when English proficiency is still developing (S. Mahootian, 2006). In Malaysian primary schools, where Bahasa Malaysia remains the dominant language of communication, in-service English teachers often switch between English and Malay to facilitate better comprehension, maintain classroom engagement, and build rapport with students. Code-switching has been observed to function as a scaffolding tool that helps learners access content knowledge, clarify instructions, and enhance vocabulary understanding (Domede, 2023; Hafid & Margana, 2022). Teachers use it purposefully to manage classroom behavior, simplify complex content, and relate abstract English concepts to students' real-life experiences. This practice often creates a more inclusive and supportive environment where students are less intimidated to participate and express themselves (Hilda Adelina Alfi, 2023).

However, while many educators recognize the benefits of code-switching, it remains a debated instructional approach. Some scholars argue that frequent reliance on the students' first language can limit their exposure to English, ultimately slowing down language acquisition and hindering the development of full linguistic competence (Tiwari, 2024). Moreover, English language policies in some schools emphasize the use of English-only instruction, pressuring teachers to limit their use of Malay even when it could benefit student comprehension. This tension between pedagogical practicality and institutional expectations highlights the need for further investigation into how teachers perceive and apply code-switching in real classroom contexts. While previous studies have explored the linguistic functions and effects of code-switching in secondary or tertiary education, there is still a lack of research focusing specifically on the perspectives and classroom practices of in-service teachers at the primary level (Raki & Sulaiman, 2021). Given the crucial role that primary education plays in shaping foundational language skills, it is important to examine how English teachers at this stage navigate the complexities of bilingual instruction.

This study, therefore, aims to address this gap by exploring the role of code-switching in Malaysian primary school ESL classrooms from the perspective of in-service teachers. The research objectives are twofold: (1) to investigate in-service teachers' perspectives towards code-switching in primary school ESL classrooms, and (2) to explore the practice of code-switching among in-service teachers. To guide the research, the study is driven by the following research questions: (RQ1) What are in-service teachers' perspectives towards code-switching in primary school classrooms? and (RQ2) How do in-service teachers implement code-switching in ESL classrooms? By examining both beliefs and practices, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how code-switching operates as an instructional tool in Malaysian primary schools, and how it can be optimized to support English language development. The findings may also offer useful insights for curriculum developers, teacher educators, and policymakers in designing more flexible and effective language teaching strategies that acknowledge the realities of multilingual classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In multilingual contexts such as Malaysia, code-switching is the alternation between two or more languages in classroom discourse which is a common pedagogical tool, especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. In-service teachers in primary English classrooms often resort to code-switching to enhance student comprehension, maintain classroom control, and encourage student participation. May May and Abdul Aziz (2020) identified three primary functions of code-switching in ESL contexts: curriculum delivery, classroom management, and interpersonal interaction. Similarly, Lachmy Narayana Jogulu (2024) emphasized that code-switching in Malaysia's ESL classrooms positively influences students' language learning experience, comprehension, and comfort levels. However, while the practice is widespread, its long-term educational impact remains debated. Some researchers advocate its use for creating inclusive classrooms and improving comprehension, while others caution that it may limit students' exposure to the target language, thereby impeding language acquisition. Given the diverging opinions, it is essential to explore how in-service teachers perceive and implement code-switching in primary English classrooms, particularly in an ESL context.

Review of Related Theories

Code-Switching: Definitions and Functions

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Code-switching refers to the intentional shift between two or more languages during a conversation or instruction. In educational settings, this practice allows teachers to make abstract concepts more digestible and to manage diverse classrooms effectively. According to Seth (2005), code-switching helps teachers clarify lessons, provide translations, manage student behavior, and express empathy, thereby promoting a more inclusive learning environment. From a theoretical standpoint, sociocultural theory underpins the educational use of code-switching. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development suggests that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding through socially mediated learning—of which code-switching can be a tool (International Research Journal of Arts & Humanities, 2020). In this way, switching languages serves as a scaffold that bridges learners' prior linguistic knowledge with new English content.

Code-Switching: Pros and Cons

Sharma (2023) highlights both benefits and drawbacks of code-switching. On the positive side, it simplifies complex content, increases inclusivity, and encourages student engagement by connecting new material to the students' first language. Especially for young or beginner ESL learners, it serves as a critical support mechanism to overcome early linguistic barriers. Alicia (2023) further emphasized that code-switching enhances foreign language awareness and supports learners in acquiring English proficiency. Muneeb et al. (2024) also argued that switching codes helps learners express themselves more easily and boosts student-teacher interaction.

However, drawbacks exist. Over-reliance on the first language may limit immersion in the target language, thereby slowing students' English proficiency development. This is particularly problematic if students begin depending too heavily on translation rather than practicing direct comprehension in English. Therefore, code-switching should be used judiciously to ensure it aids learning without becoming a crutch.

Teacher Attitudes Towards Code-Switching

Teachers' views on code-switching vary widely and are influenced by factors such as their training, teaching experience, student demographics, and institutional language policies. Tamene and Desalegn (2022) reported that educators in Ethiopian EFL classrooms viewed code-switching positively, especially as a means of facilitating student understanding. Similarly, Zhang (2023) found that teacher attitudes are shaped by students' proficiency levels, national education systems, curriculum settings, and the teachers' own language abilities. While most teachers acknowledge code-switching as an efficient and supportive teaching method, others fear it may reduce students' engagement with English. Yıldız and Su Bergil (2021) recommend a balanced approach, where code-switching is strategically applied to support learning while maintaining focus on English language immersion.

Review of the Past Studies

Numerous studies have examined the use of code-switching in multilingual classrooms and its pedagogical value. Zhang (2023) observed that teachers use code-switching to explain difficult topics, translate vocabulary, and maintain classroom discipline. The sociocultural theoretical framework supports these findings, as code-switching is seen as an interactional tool that links new knowledge to students' existing linguistic and cultural background (International Research Journal of Arts & Humanities, 2020). Research has consistently shown that students benefit from code-switching practices, especially when introduced to complex English structures in early education stages.

Despite these findings, concerns about overuse persist. Sharma (2023) cautions that excessive switching could hinder students' ability to immerse in English. On the other hand, Muneeb et al. (2024) emphasize that code-switching fosters classroom engagement and encourages students to contribute actively. The research also notes that while many teachers use code-switching intuitively, few studies detail how it is applied practically in real-time instruction—particularly in Malaysian primary schools.

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Finally, there is a research gap concerning how in-service primary teachers in Malaysia perceive and implement code-switching. While global research is abundant, localized studies are limited. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating teachers' beliefs and practices regarding code-switching, providing insight into its instructional role and long-term implications for language acquisition in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the role of code-switching in Malaysian primary school classrooms from the perspectives of in-service teachers. It addresses two research questions: (1) What are in-service teachers' attitudes towards code-switching in primary school classrooms? and (2) How do in-service teachers implement code-switching in ESL classrooms? To answer these questions comprehensively, a **mixed-methods research design** was adopted, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This combination allows for the integration of numerical data with in-depth qualitative insights, offering a well-rounded perspective on teachers' practices and beliefs.

Research Design

The study utilised both a **questionnaire** and **interviews**. The questionnaire was adapted from Raki & Sulaiman (2021) to suit the scope of this research and distributed via Google Forms to in-service English teachers in an urban Kuala Lumpur school. It consisted of closed-ended items and Likert-scale questions to assess both perceptions and implementation of code-switching. Qualitative data were collected through **semi-structured interviews**, conducted online with a subset of participants. These individuals were selected based on their responses to the questionnaire, such as indicating frequent use of code-switching or offering distinctive viewpoints. The interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for **thematic analysis**.

Population and Sample

The **population** targeted in this study include in-service English language teachers working in primary schools in Kuala Lumpur. These teachers regularly deal with multilingual classrooms and are therefore highly relevant to the study. The **sample** was selected using **purposive sampling**, focusing on those actively teaching and likely to provide informative and reflective responses regarding code-switching. This approach ensured that the sample aligned with the study's aims while also being practically feasible.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was divided into three main sections, as summarised below:

Section	Description	Type of Items
A	Demographic information (gender, age, qualification, teaching experience)	Multiple choice

| B | Teachers' perspectives on code-switching in the classroom | 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) |
| C | Teachers' implementation of code-switching in practice | 5-point Likert scale (Never – Always) |

Table 3.0: Questionnaire Sections

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms for convenience and broader accessibility. The interview guide was developed from the questionnaire responses and included open-ended questions exploring reasons for code-switching, examples from practice, and perceived advantages or drawbacks. This combination of instruments ensured both breadth and depth in data collection.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection process followed a structured set of steps to ensure consistency and clarity:

Procedure
Step 1: Design questionnaire via Google Forms
Step 2: Distribute questionnaire to teachers
Step 3: Collect questionnaire responses
Step 4: Transfer data to Microsoft Excel
Step 5: Analyse quantitative data
Step 6: Select interview participants based on responses
Step 7: Construct interview guide
Step 8:Conduct online interviews
Step 9: Transcribe interview recordings
Step 10: Perform thematic analysis of qualitative data
Step 11: Combine quantitative and qualitative results
Step 12: Report findings and conclusions

This process allowed for systematic and effective data handling, ensuring that both forms of data complemented one another to provide a holistic analysis.

Data Analysis Methods

The data were analysed using appropriate techniques tailored to each method:

Table 3.2:
Data Analysis Methods

Stage	Questionnaire Data	Interview Data
Data Collection	Via Google Forms	Online interviews
Data Organisation	Responses transferred to Excel	Transcription of audio recordings
Data Analysis	Quantitative analysis in Microsoft Excel	Thematic analysis of transcribed data
Presentation	Findings reported using tables and charts	Findings reported using theme-based tables
Discussion	Supported with relevant literature	Supported with relevant literature

Combining both sets of data helped strengthen the accuracy and trustworthiness of the research findings.

This methodology chapter outlines the research design, population, instrumentation, and analysis methods adopted to investigate the use of code-switching in primary school ESL classrooms. The **mixed-methods approach** was selected to combine the generalisability of quantitative results with the nuanced understanding of qualitative inquiry. By drawing on both survey data and personal teacher insights, the study provides a comprehensive account of how code-switching is perceived and implemented by in-service teachers in multilingual contexts. The next chapter will present the findings and discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings and discussion from the data collected through questionnaires and interviews with in-service teachers regarding their use of code-switching in primary school ESL classrooms. The results are analysed in line with the research objectives and are structured around two research questions. Both quantitative and qualitative findings are interpreted and supported by relevant literature.

Demographic Findings

The participants of this study consisted entirely of female teachers, with no male respondents. This all-female sample may reflect the gender distribution in the teaching profession within the selected schools. The majority of teachers (75%) were aged between 40 and 49, with a small number aged 30–39 and 50–59. This indicates that most participants are mid-career educators with significant classroom experience.

In terms of academic qualifications, most teachers (92%) held a degree, while only one participant (8%) had a master's qualification. All respondents had over 11 years of teaching experience, with 58% having between 16 and 20 years. Additionally, 59% taught lower-level primary pupils (Years 1–3), 33% taught upper-level students (Years 4–6), and 8% taught across both levels. This background suggests that the sample consisted of experienced teachers working primarily with young learners.

Research Question 1: What are In-Service Teachers' Perspectives Towards Code-Switching?

Questionnaire Results

The survey results indicate that most teachers have a positive perception of code-switching. Over two-thirds (67%) agreed that code-switching supports language learning in ESL classrooms, with a further 8% strongly agreeing. This supports findings by May May and Abdul Aziz (2020), who noted that code-switching helps with curriculum delivery and student engagement.

Similarly, 59% agreed that code-switching should be integrated into ESL lessons, although 25% were neutral and 16% disagreed. These mixed views reflect the caution expressed by Lachmy Narayana Jogulu (2024), who argued that while code-switching improves comprehension, overuse might reduce English exposure.

When asked whether code-switching is inevitable in primary ESL classrooms, 84% agreed or strongly agreed, echoing Seth (2005), who described it as a necessary bridge between students' first language and English. A majority also believed that code-switching is especially helpful for students with low English proficiency, with 92% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this view.

However, some teachers expressed concerns. While 67% disagreed that using the first language harms English proficiency, 34% agreed or strongly agreed. This shows ongoing concern about student dependency, a topic discussed by Sharma (2023). Most teachers (67%) also rejected the idea that code-switching reflects linguistic weakness, viewing it instead as a deliberate and strategic choice, as supported by Tamene & Desalegn (2022).

Teachers were divided on the issue of code-switching increasing student dependence. While 50% agreed, 33% were neutral. Additionally, although 50% of teachers agreed that it should only be used as a last resort, a significant portion (42%) strongly agreed. These responses support the view that while code-switching is useful, it should not replace full English immersion (Yıldız & Su Bergil, 2021).

Lastly, 67% agreed that code-switching saves time, reflecting its practical benefits in simplifying explanations (Muneeb et al., 2024).

Interview Results

The interview data revealed that teachers generally saw code-switching as an effective way to support comprehension, especially for weaker students. One participant shared that switching to the students' native language helped clarify concepts

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when students seemed confused. This supports Seth (2005), who highlighted the value of code-switching for delivering clear explanations.

Many teachers also stated that code-switching increased classroom engagement. Students who were usually quiet became more willing to participate when they heard familiar words. This mirrors Muneeb et al. (2024), who noted its role in reducing learner anxiety.

Teachers also cited time-efficiency as a benefit. One teacher shared that code-switching reduced time spent explaining difficult points, allowing the class to progress more smoothly. However, some warned of the risks of overusing it, fearing that students may rely too heavily on their first language and not challenge themselves to improve in English, a concern also raised by Zhang (2023).

While one teacher emphasised that code-switching should not be seen as a weakness, but as a tool for better communication, others agreed that it should be used less over time. This gradual reduction strategy supports Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding, where support is reduced as learners become more capable.

Research Question 2: How Do In-Service Teachers Implement Code-Switching in ESL Classrooms?

Questionnaire Results

The data showed that most teachers use code-switching selectively and strategically. A large proportion (58%) stated they sometimes use it to explain lessons, while 50% also sometimes use it to give instructions for complex tasks. These findings support May May and Abdul Aziz (2020), who identified curriculum access as a key reason for switching codes.

Teachers also reported using code-switching for classroom management and student understanding. Around 50% of participants used it sometimes to check comprehension, explain grammar rules, or simplify difficult words—highlighting its supportive role. This aligns with findings by Zhang (2023), who reported its usefulness in behaviour management and instruction clarity.

Some teachers also used it to build rapport. 75% reported using code-switching occasionally to connect with students. Tamene & Desalegn (2022) found similar outcomes, noting how switching to students' native language can strengthen teacher-student relationships.

However, use was lower in non-academic areas. Many teachers rarely used code-switching for grouping students, maintaining classroom rules, or praising students, suggesting a preference to keep English as the main language for structure and routine. These findings reflect Sharma (2023), who cautioned against excessive use that may limit English exposure.

Interview Results

Interview findings echoed survey data. Teachers reported using code-switching most often to clarify instructions or vocabulary when students struggled. One teacher explained that if students looked confused during a lesson, she would switch languages briefly to ensure they understood. This supports Seth (2005), who saw code-switching as a strategy for improving clarity.

Teachers also described using code-switching to manage the class. One said that switching to the native language made students take instructions more seriously. Others reported that using their students' language helped build trust and comfort in the classroom, aligning with Tamene & Desalegn (2022).

A few teachers described using code-switching less as the school year progressed, helping students transition to English gradually. This echoes Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, where language support (like code-switching) is reduced as learners grow more independent.

Finally, teachers highlighted that code-switching could reduce anxiety and improve student confidence, especially during lessons that involved new or difficult content. However, they were mindful not to overuse it, as too much reliance could slow students' English development—consistent with concerns expressed in the literature (Sharma, 2023).

The findings from both the questionnaire and interviews suggest that in-service teachers perceive code-switching as a helpful and practical strategy in ESL classrooms, particularly for supporting comprehension, classroom management, and emotional comfort. However, most also believe that it should be used purposefully and not excessively. The combined data highlights that while code-switching serves as a bridge to learning, it must be balanced with strategies that support full English immersion. These conclusions align with the existing literature, affirming that code-switching, when applied strategically, can be a powerful tool for language development in multilingual classroom contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore in-service teachers' perspectives and implementation of code-switching in Malaysian primary school ESL classrooms. The findings from both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews revealed that most teachers perceive code-switching as a valuable teaching strategy, particularly for supporting comprehension, engaging low-proficiency learners, and managing the classroom environment. Teachers frequently use code-switching to explain complex instructions, introduce new vocabulary, and build rapport with their students, especially in lower-level classes where students are still developing basic English skills.

However, the study also highlighted that while code-switching is helpful, it should not be overused. Many teachers expressed concerns that frequent reliance on students' first language may limit their English exposure and slow language acquisition. As a result, most teachers reported using code-switching strategically—employing it when needed, but gradually reducing its use to promote more English immersion as students' proficiency improves. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which supports the idea that code-switching is most effective when applied thoughtfully and in moderation.

The study also underscored the need for a balanced teaching approach that considers both the benefits and the limitations of code-switching. Teachers recognise it as a bridge to understanding but also emphasise the importance of encouraging independent use of English in the classroom. Importantly, this research has contributed new insights into how experienced primary school teachers navigate language use in multilingual classrooms, providing practical implications for classroom practice and policy.

Future research is recommended to examine students' perspectives on code-switching, which would offer a more complete picture of its impact on language learning. In addition, studies that explore the effectiveness of professional training on code-switching strategies would be valuable in guiding teacher development and improving language teaching practices in ESL classrooms.

In conclusion, this study affirms that code-switching, when used strategically and in balance with immersive English teaching, can play a supportive role in enhancing language learning in primary school settings.

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