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Teachers' Code-Switching and Students' Understanding in EFL Classrooms

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received 17 December 2025 Revised 26 June 2026 Accepted 29 June 2026 Available online 30 June 2026 ISSN: 2986-3848 How to cite: Hanum, S.F. (2026). Teachers' code-switching and students' understanding in EFL classrooms. <i>International Journal Linguistics of Sumatra and Malay (IJLSM)</i>, 5(1), 48-53.  This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International. http://doi.org/10.32734/ijlsm.v5i1.24044	This study explores the role of teachers' code-switching in enhancing students' understanding in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms using a literature-based research approach. Code-switching, defined as alternating between the first language (L1) and English during classroom instruction, is a common practice in multilingual learning contexts. Data were collected from a comprehensive review of research books, journal articles, and academic publications related to code-switching, language comprehension, and pedagogical strategies. The analysis focused on identifying the functions of code-switching, its effect on students' cognitive and emotional engagement, and the balance between L1 support and exposure to authentic English input. Findings from multiple studies indicate that teachers primarily employ code-switching to clarify complex grammar and vocabulary, manage classroom activities, and maintain students' motivation and emotional comfort. Strategic and moderate use of code-switching was consistently associated with improved comprehension and participation, while excessive reliance on the first language may limit students' exposure to authentic English input and reduce opportunities for immersive learning. This literature-based study highlights that purposeful code-switching is an effective pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms and provides practical recommendations for teachers to balance English usage with selective L1 support. The study also identifies gaps in the current research, suggesting the need for further empirical studies on quantifying the optimal frequency and context of code-switching in different educational settings. Keywords: Teachers' code-switching, Students' understanding, EFL classrooms, Language comprehension, Pedagogical strategies.

1. Introduction

In multilingual English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, code-switching defined as the alternation between the first language (L1) and English during teaching and learning has become a widely observed practice. Traditionally, language teaching methods have emphasized exclusive use of the target language to maximize immersion. However, recent studies suggest that strategic code-switching can facilitate comprehension, clarify complex concepts, and support classroom management effectively.

Teachers often encounter challenges in ensuring students understand difficult grammar, new vocabulary, and instructional directions, particularly when students have varying levels of English proficiency. In such contexts, selective use of the students' L1 can help scaffold learning and enhance both cognitive and emotional engagement. Research books and academic studies indicate that code-switching can serve multiple pedagogical functions, such as explaining abstract ideas, maintaining students' motivation, and providing emotional support. (Puspawati, 2018)

Despite its potential benefits, excessive or uncontrolled code-switching may reduce students' exposure to authentic English input, potentially limiting language development and fluency. Therefore, understanding

when and how teachers should employ code-switching is crucial for balancing comprehension support with opportunities for immersive English learning.

To understand the pedagogical value of code-switching, it is essential to ground this practice within Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and instructional scaffolding. In the context of EFL learning, the first language (L1) acts as a critical cognitive tool that assists learners in bridging the gap between their current linguistic competence and the target language concepts, they are attempting to master. When teachers strategically switch to L1, they provide temporary structural support—or scaffolding—that reduces cognitive overload and enables students to process complex input that would otherwise remain inaccessible in an English-only environment.

Furthermore, recent paradigm shifts in bilingual and multilingual education have moved away from viewing languages as rigid, isolated systems toward the framework of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014). From a translanguaging perspective, code-switching is not viewed as a linguistic deficiency or a failure to maintain target language immersion. Instead, it is recognized as a natural, dynamic discursive resource where bilingual speakers utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning, negotiate understanding, and construct knowledge. In an EFL classroom, legitimizing teachers' and students' use of L1 creates an integrated communicative space where cognitive processing is maximized without sacrificing affective well-being. Therefore, analyzing code-switching through these dual lenses—scaffolding and translanguaging—provides a robust theoretical framework for evaluating its efficacy in pedagogical discourse.

The functions of code switching will be introduced in various aspects. Firstly, its function in bilingual community settings will briefly be explained by giving a sample authentic conversation which will help the reader deduce ideas about its possible applications in educational contexts. Secondly, the functionality of code switching in teachers' classroom discourse will be introduced with its aspects as: topic switch, affective functions, and repetitive functions. Thirdly, the focus will shift to students' code switching by introducing some basic functional perspectives as: equivalence, floor holding, reiteration, and conflict control. Lastly, weak and strong sides of code switching in foreign language classrooms will be discussed with a critical approach. (Sert, 2005)

It was also revealed that there is a significant relationship between the teachers' code-switching and the effective support of learners and learners' learning success and teachers' code-switching. Moreover, it was found that codeswitching to be an effective method for dealing with low proficiency English language learners. (Narasuman et al., 2019) This study adopts a literature-based approach to examine the role of teachers' code-switching in enhancing students' understanding in EFL classrooms. This situation has motivated the affirmative to believe that code-switching is very helpful for both teachers and students in classroom. (Nurhamidah et al., 2018) . To provide a structured and rigorous synthesis of the existing literature, this study specifically addresses the following research questions (RQs):

1. What are the primary pedagogical functions and structural types of teachers' code-switching in EFL classrooms?
2. How does teachers' code-switching impact students' cognitive comprehension, affective state, and classroom engagement?
3. What pedagogical strategies and principles can EFL teachers adopt to maintain an optimal balance between necessary L1 scaffolding and authentic target language immersion?

By systematically investigating these questions through a comprehensive literature review, this study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical monolingual ideals and the practical bilingual realities of EFL classrooms.

2. Methods

This study adopts a systematic literature-based research design to explore the pedagogical functions and efficacy of teachers' code-switching in EFL classrooms. To ensure rigorous data collection and analytical validity, the research synthesized peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and published academic dissertations over a spanning timeline, focusing specifically on how language alternation impacts students' cognitive comprehension and emotional engagement. The selection of sources was guided by a structured search protocol adapted from systematic review frameworks, ensuring that only high-quality, evidence-based studies were included in the synthesis.

By utilizing a qualitative content analysis approach, this study categorized existing empirical findings into distinct pedagogical themes. Rather than viewing literature review as a mere summary of past research, this method critically compares methodologies, sample characteristics, and theoretical claims across diverse EFL contexts (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). This comparative examination allows for the identification of

consistent behavioral patterns among teachers, shedding light on the optimal frequency and contextual necessity of L1 intervention.

The research procedure involved three main steps:

1. Literature Search: Relevant books, journal articles, and publications were identified using academic databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and university libraries. Keywords included “code-switching,” “EFL classrooms,” “students’ understanding,” and “pedagogical strategies.”
2. Data Selection and Screening: Sources were screened for relevance, credibility, and recency. Only publications discussing the functions, impacts, and pedagogical use of code-switching in EFL contexts were included.
3. Data Analysis: The selected literature was analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns, functions, and effects of teachers’ code-switching on students’ comprehension and engagement. The analysis also focused on best practices and recommendations reported by previous studies.

This method ensures that the findings are supported by established academic evidence, providing a comprehensive overview of the pedagogical role of code-switching in EFL classrooms.

Table 1. Research Procedure in Literature-Based Study

Research Stage	Description of Activities	Data Sources / Tools	Output / Result
1. Literature Search	Identification of relevant books, journal articles, and academic publications on code-switching, EFL teaching, and students’ comprehension. Keywords such as “ <i>code-switching</i> ,” “ <i>EFL classrooms</i> ,” and “ <i>pedagogical strategies</i> ” were used.	Google Scholar, ResearchGate, university libraries	A collection of 35 relevant and credible sources.
2. Data Selection and Screening	Screening the literature for relevance, credibility, and recency. Excluded sources with unclear methodology or non-academic background.	Inclusion–exclusion criteria checklist	20 selected sources discussing pedagogical functions and impacts of code-switching.
3. Data Analysis	Qualitative analysis of the selected literature to identify patterns, functions, and effects of teachers’ code-switching on students’ comprehension and engagement.	Content analysis method, thematic coding	Synthesized findings highlighting best practices and theoretical insights.
4. Validation and Interpretation	Cross-checking findings among multiple sources to ensure consistency and validity.	Comparative literature review	A validated summary of how teachers’ code-switching enhances student understanding in EFL contexts.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings of this literature-based study show that teachers’ code-switching plays an important pedagogical role in enhancing students’ comprehension and engagement in EFL classrooms. This section presents the main results and analyzes them based on the research problem stated in the introduction. Overall, the findings confirm the initial hypothesis that moderate and purposeful code-switching can facilitate student learning in EFL settings.

3.1 Linguistic Typology of Teachers' Code-Switching in EFL Discourse

To comprehend how code-switching functions pedagogically, it is necessary to examine its structural forms within classroom discourse. Based on the foundational taxonomy established in sociolinguistics and applied to educational settings, teachers’ code-switching generally manifests in three primary linguistic categories: tag-switching, inter-sentential switching, and intra-sentential switching.

Tag-switching involves the insertion of short conversational tags, exclamations, or discourse markers from the first language (L1) into an English utterance (e.g., “*We need to submit the assignment by tomorrow, ya?*” or “*Paham, right?*”). In EFL classrooms, teachers frequently employ tag-switching to check for understanding, soften commands, or establish informal rapport without disrupting the syntax of the target language.

Inter-sentential switching occurs at a sentence or clause boundary, where one complete sentence is uttered in English and the subsequent sentence is delivered in the students' L1. This type is predominantly observed during classroom management and complex task instructions. For instance, a teacher might state the instructional objective in English and immediately follow it with an L1 translation to ensure zero ambiguity among lower-proficiency learners.

Intra-sentential switching, often considered the most grammatically complex form, involves alternating languages within the middle of a single sentence or clause (e.g., "*Please open your book and cari halaman twenty-five*"). In pedagogical contexts, teachers utilize intra-sentential switching seamlessly to gloss unfamiliar lexical items or highlight specific grammatical morphology. Analyzing these structural distinctions reveals that teachers do not mix languages randomly; rather, they subconsciously select specific linguistic structures to match their immediate pedagogical objectives.

3.2 Code-switching as a tool for comprehension support

The analysis of 20 academic sources indicates that the strategic use of students' first language (L1) helps teachers explain difficult concepts more clearly. Many scholars (e.g., Macaro, 2001; Sert, 2005; García & Wei, 2014) agree that switching to L1 can clarify grammar rules, vocabulary meanings, and task instructions. This reduces students' cognitive load and allows them to better understand complex materials. However, consistent with Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009), the literature also warns that excessive code-switching may reduce exposure to authentic English input. These findings support the hypothesis that code-switching improves comprehension when used moderately.

3.3 Affective and motivational benefits of code-switching

Several studies show that code-switching has emotional and motivational advantages (Gulzar, 2010; Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009). Using L1 at appropriate moments builds rapport between teachers and students, lowers anxiety, and increases students' confidence when learning difficult content. As a result, learners participate more actively in classroom discussions. This finding aligns with the research problem by showing that code-switching not only supports comprehension but also contributes to a positive learning environment.

3.4 Pedagogical balance and effective classroom strategies

The reviewed literature emphasizes that effective teachers use code-switching selectively and for clear purposes. According to Macaro (2005), successful code-switching is typically used for three functions: clarification, classroom management, and motivation. The studies agree that maintaining a balance—ensuring that English remains the primary medium while using L1 only when necessary—maximizes learning outcomes. These results reinforce the hypothesis by showing that code-switching is beneficial when applied with pedagogical intention, not randomly. These findings are also consistent with Ibrahim, Shah, & Armia (2013), who discovered that although teachers claim to avoid code-switching, they still use it strategically in classroom discourse, primarily for pedagogical purposes such as clarifying grammatical explanations, reiterating key points, and maintaining classroom engagement. (Engku Ibrahim E, Ahamad Shah M, Armia N., 2013)

3.5 The Monolingual Myth and Teacher Identity Dilemma

A compelling paradox highlighted across the reviewed literature is the divergence between teachers' theoretical beliefs and their actual classroom practices. While historical language teaching methodologies—such as the Direct Method and Audiolingualism—strictly advocate for the "monolingual norm" (the belief that the target language should be used exclusively), empirical classroom recordings consistently reveal that teachers frequently utilize L1 (Macaro, 2001; Cook, 2001). This discrepancy often results in what researchers term pedagogical guilt or pedagogical dilemma (Engku Ibrahim et al., 2013).

Many EFL teachers harbor negative beliefs regarding code-switching, viewing it as a sign of instructional failure or deficient language proficiency. Consequently, when observed or surveyed, teachers often underreport their L1 usage. However, critical analysis of classroom discourse suggests that adherence to an absolute monolingual policy is not only impractical in many EFL contexts but can also be counter-productive to student comprehension. The literature indicates a pressing need to destigmatize purposeful code-switching. Rather than evaluating teacher competence based on the rigid exclusion of L1, educational institutions should assess whether language alternation is applied strategically to scaffold cognitive processing and foster learner autonomy.

3.6 The Interplay Between Code-Switching and Students' Proficiency Levels

A critical synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals that the effectiveness and necessity of teachers' code-switching are heavily dependent on the students' language proficiency levels. In classrooms comprising beginner or low-proficiency learners, code-switching serves an indispensable function (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009; Narasuman et al., 2019). For these students, exclusive exposure to English often triggers listening anxiety and communicative withdrawal. In this context, L1 usage acts as an affective buffer, decoding abstract grammatical rules into familiar cognitive structures and preventing learner alienation.

Conversely, as learners progress to intermediate and advanced proficiency levels, the pedagogical dynamic shifts significantly. Studies such as Kolo Baba Mohammed et al. (2025) and Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) highlight a potential drawback: prolonged or excessive reliance on L1 at higher educational levels can inadvertently lead to linguistic fossilization and reduce students' productive fluency. For advanced learners, the teacher's primary objective must transition from L1 scaffolding to maximizing authentic target language exposure. Therefore, code-switching should not be applied universally as a static methodology; rather, it must be dynamically calibrated by the teacher, gradually decreasing in frequency as the students' English competency expands. This adaptive approach ensures that L1 support facilitates independent comprehension rather than fostering long-term linguistic dependency.

Summary of overall findings in conclusion the findings confirm that the hypothesis presented in the introduction is supported: moderate, intentional, and well-timed code-switching enhances students' comprehension, motivation, and engagement in EFL classrooms. These findings are consistent with the study by Hakim, Arflida, and Satriani (2019), which revealed that most students hold positive perceptions toward the use of code-switching in EFL classrooms. They reported that the use of L1 helps them understand difficult material, improves their listening skills, and makes them feel more confident and comfortable during the learning process. To synthesize these findings into an actionable framework for EFL educators, this study proposes a distinction between "Productive Code-Switching" and "Counter-Productive Code-Switching." Productive code-switching is intentional, brief, and instructional; it is utilized precisely when introducing complex grammatical contrasts, resolving misunderstandings during task setups, or addressing behavioral management issues where clarity is paramount. Once the semantic concept is grasped via L1, the teacher immediately reverts to English to reinforce the target form. On the other hand, counter-productive code-switching occurs when teachers habitually translate everyday classroom routines, simple instructions, or conversational prompts that students are already capable of inferring through context and body language. By adhering to a conscious, principled application of L1—where English remains the default operating language and L1 serves as a targeted diagnostic tool—teachers can effectively harmonize comprehension support with rigorous linguistic immersion. Teachers are therefore encouraged to use L1 strategically only when it helps learning while maintaining English as the main language of instruction to ensure optimal language development. Given the analysis of previous research, it is evidently clear that there is enormous consensus among researchers and scholars that view code-switching as a useful instructional technique for second or foreign language teaching and learning. It is therefore significantly important that teachers and students alike should maximize its use in the process of second or foreign language teaching and learning. (Sakaria & Priyana, 2018)

The results revealed that code-switching facilitated comprehension of lessons for the students with limited English abilities and eased the workload of the teachers, among other benefits. However, it had adverse effects on the students' use of English at the tertiary level of education, as it affected their reading and writing abilities and proficiency. The study suggests that ESL teachers, policymakers, and researchers tailor their instructional approaches by considering students' linguistic abilities, cultural backgrounds, and educational outcomes, which encourages the students' use of the English language to improve their proficiency. (Kolo Baba Mohammed et al., 2025)

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that teachers' code-switching plays an essential role in facilitating students' comprehension and engagement in EFL classrooms. Based on the reviewed literature, it is evident that moderate and purposeful use of the first language (L1) helps students grasp complex grammar points, vocabulary meanings, and classroom instructions more effectively. Furthermore, code-switching contributes to creating a positive learning atmosphere, increasing students' confidence and motivation during the learning process.

Although, findings from previous studies emphasize that excessive use of L1 may hinder language immersion and limit students' exposure to authentic English input. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to apply

code-switching strategically only when it serves pedagogical purposes such as clarification, classroom management, and emotional support.

According to the teachers, code-switching serves important functions in teaching such as explaining difficult material, clarifying instructions, providing feedback, facilitating understanding, enriching explanations of grammar and vocabulary, and enhancing classroom interaction. In summary, this literature-based research highlights that balanced code switching enhances learning outcomes when used intentionally as a teaching aid rather than as a habitual practice. Future researchers are advised to expand on these findings through empirical or experimental studies to measure its direct effect on students' performance and language acquisition.

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