

# THE FUNCTIONS OF CODE-SWITCHING IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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## ABSTRACT

*Code-switching is a concept which has existed in bilingual and multilingual societies and it occurs quite frequently in English as a second or foreign language classes. Especially when the learners are all bilinguals or multilinguals and they have to switch back and forth between their mother tongue and a second or foreign language. This paper is driven by the three objectives. First, the study investigates the situations which trigger code-switching in EFL classes in Balkh and Kandahar Universities of Afghanistan. Secondly, it investigates the perception of Afghan EFL lecturers in these universities towards code-switching. Third, to find out how the EFL lecturers use code-switching as an effective strategy while teaching English in their classes. In this study, the qualitative research approach was used to collect data from four Afghan English language lecturers of the two universities via the interview method. The results of this study indicate that these Afghan EFL lecturers have a positive perception regarding code-switching and they are using it in certain situations which facilitate their teaching and students' learning of the content, however they also hold negative perception towards switching while teaching. The findings also show that the lecturers use code-switching in different situations such as*



*when dealing with cultural issues that tend to be difficult to explain only in the target language, explaining grammar and new vocabulary, giving clear instructions, and instructing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes.*

**Keywords:** *code-switching, EFL lecturers, perceptions, effective, teaching strategy*

## INTRODUCTION

English as an international language is popular in different countries around the world. In Afghanistan, it is a foreign language that people use for the purposes of travel, work and study. According to Library of Congress-Federal Research Division (2008), Afghanistan has two official languages: Pashto and Dari which are the medium of communication in everyday life. In Afghanistan universities the official national languages are used as the medium of instruction but in English language and literature departments both instructors and students are required to use English in the class. This indicates that in Afghan EFL classes there are bilingual and multi-lingual individuals who use two or more languages namely Dari/Pashto and English while communicating with one another and this quite often leads to code-switching. Valdes-Fallis (1977) declared that code switching refers to the use of more than one language simultaneously. According to Crystal (1987) code switching takes place when two speakers who are bilingual shift and interchange between two languages while talking. Auer (1998) also stated that code-switching is the alternate use of two or more languages in one episode of conversation.

There are various reasons why code-switching occurs in the classroom. The first reason is low proficiency in target language. This means that when bilingual and multi-lingual speakers who cannot find the proper and suitable word(s) from the target language (L2) which is equivalent to their first language or (L1), they switch to the other codes (Azlan & Suthagar, 2012). The second reason is effective communication and interaction in the class. According to Shartiely (2016), code-switching is an essential part of Tanzanian teachers' teaching process. They believe that code-switching is used to fill the linguistic gap between teachers and students. Hence, code-switching helps students comprehend the content of the lesson. In

addition, another claim for code-switching is lack of register. This refers to a particular set of vocabulary and phrase which does not exist in the first language of the speaker. Therefore, the speaker has to switch to a familiar language during a conversation (Muthusamy, 2009). In a language class, code-switching may have both positive and negative roles. When teachers and students switch codes in the teaching and learning process, this can assist students understand the concepts in their first language easily as Shartieli (2016) argued that code-switching can facilitate learning. Additionally, Alenezi (2010) also found that students in Kuwait University had a positive attitude towards code-switching. They prefer that both Arabic and English should be used as the medium of instruction in their classes. On the other hand, code switching could have a negative impact on student's language learning process. It can lead them to feel reluctant to use the target language in the class and be much more dependent on switching the code. This idea was supported by Cook (2001) who emphasized that use of first language in the class reduces the use of the target language. Additionally, according to Dykhanova (2015), who carried out a research on the functions of code-switching and attitudes towards it found that the attitudes of most teachers and students towards code-switching were negative. Most of the time teachers code-switched in order to translate and interpret the meaning of terminologies. They believe that code-switching does not elevate students' level of proficiency. The present study is directed by the following research objectives:

- To identify situations which trigger code switching among Afghan EFL lecturers
- To investigate the perception of Afghan EFL lecturers towards code switching
- To determine the effectiveness of code switching as a teaching strategy for EFL students from the lecturers' perspective

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Code-switching happens in a natural discourse in which more than one language exist between the speaker and the listener of a conversation and often this phenomenon happens because the speaker feels more convenient while speaking. This is a common phenomenon all over the world in

bilingual communities, in fact bilinguals find code-switching as an aid to strategise their communication (Macaro, 2005). Code-switching refers to the ability of bilinguals who alternate between the two languages effortlessly (Bullock & Toribio, 2009). Milroy and Muysken (1995) believe that code switching mainly belongs to the bilingual context in which speakers who know more than one language (bilinguals), code switch while having the same conversation. Meanwhile Trudgill (as cited by Sert, 2005) asserted that bilingual speakers code switch for the intention of dealing with, making an influence or describing a situation as desired, transfer their personal intention and meanings. Trudgill further claims that code switching is used in order to establish and maintain close interpersonal relationships between individuals in a community that is bilingual, or code-switching can also be perceived as a tool for establishing solidarity among individuals who share the same ethno-cultural identity.

### **Code-switching in classroom context**

The usage of more than one linguistic code alternatively by teacher, and student in the context of the classroom is called classroom code-switching (Lin, 2008). Similarly, Numan and Carter (as cited by Sert, 2005) define code-switching as the alternation between two languages by switching between them in classroom settings. Usually in the foreign language classroom the two languages include a native language and target language which is often a foreign language in which students seek to gain proficiency. According to Mattson and Burenhult (as cited by Sert, 2005) in the context of teaching a class, teachers' code-switch subconsciously and the teacher is usually not attentive to the functions or consequences of the code-switching phenomenon. Regardless of whether it is performed consciously or subconsciously, some basic functions of the phenomenon are found to be fruitful in the learning of a language and these functions include topic switch, affective functions and repetitive functions. In the instance of topic switch function, the teacher switches language based on the topic that is being discussed such as in grammar class where the teacher tries to describe a grammatical structure by switching to the native language of the students. The affective function of code switching is employed by teachers to establish rapport, close relations and solidarity with students. They may also use it at appropriate moments to utter words of encouragement and motivation. Lastly, the repetitive function of code switching enables teachers

to convey important knowledge to students by making it clearer to them. For instance, repeating instructions from the target language to the students' native language for clarification purposes. Likewise, Macaro (2005) proposes several purposes for which language teachers' code-switch in the L2 classrooms: (1) building rapport with students, (2) giving instructions for complex procedural activity, (3) controlling students' behaviour, (4) teaching grammar explicitly, (5) checking the comprehension of students for adapting the speed of teaching due to time pressure. On a similar note, Bista (2010) identified factors that affect code-switching in the classroom. The main factor identified that contribute to code-switching is low proficiency in the second language or target language. Other factors according to Bista include, easier to speak in native language than target language, prevention of misunderstanding, retention of privacy, and unfamiliarity with certain English words.

In addition, Obaidullah (2016) believes that as a result of code-switching to first language, the topic or subject of discussion in the classroom is more comprehensible regardless of whether the teacher or student had engaged in code-switching. Similarly, Ray (2015) asserted that code-switching and the use of native language is of great benefit to students even if they relate to higher proficiency classes. Ray also claimed that there might be various challenges to both learners and teachers due to the linguistic and cultural differences in an English classroom, but he believes with proper teacher training and education programmes, the challenges can be converted into beneficial resources that would make the class activities effective and inclusive. Additionally, in a study by Azlan and Suthagar (2013) it was revealed that three types of code switching (tag switching, inter-sentential switching and intra-sentential switching) were mostly used during classroom communication among students and between students and teacher.

Jingxia (2010) conducted a study that investigated the influence of code switching on Chinese in EFL classrooms in three Chinese universities. The study specifically sought the perception of teachers and students towards the influence, functions and patterns of code-switching. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative research types and questionnaires and classroom observation were used as data collection tools. The findings of the study indicated that code-switching to native Chinese language was a common phenomenon in the EFL classrooms. The data results also showed that the switching to first language plays a positive role in teaching and learning of the English language.

Another study by Obaidullah (2016) investigated the reasons for the first language usage in EFL classrooms and to study the perceptions of both teachers and students about code-switching. Survey method was used to collect data from 34 teachers and 175 students from two Bangladeshi universities (Northern University Bangladesh and Kulna University). The findings indicated that both teachers and students held positive attitudes towards code-switching and believed that it helps in effective learning and understanding of the lesson content. It was also revealed that teachers code-switch for facilitating better learning and teaching, however the same teachers discouraged students from code-switching frequently. Additionally, students showed satisfaction with their teachers who code-switched as it was making them feel more comfortable with their learning. Likewise, Ahmad and Jusoff (2009) conducted a study to investigate the learners' and teachers' perception of code-switching, the relationship of teachers' code-switching and learners' effective support, the relationship between the learning success of learners' and teachers' code-switching and the future use of code-switching in students' learning. The study collected data using a questionnaire from 275 low English proficiency learners in a public university in Malaysia. The findings showed that the learners' perceived code-switching as a positive strategy due to its various functions. 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 code-switching to be an effective method for dealing with low proficiency English language learners.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research design to present a more detailed account for the topic under investigation. According to Freankel, Wallen and Hyun (2012), a qualitative research tries to gather a detailed picture of a situation inductively. The design of the current study is a case study that is a type of qualitative research and is prevalent in social science (Starman, 2013). A case study is utilised by researchers to scrutinise a problem, issue, or an event. The method of data collection in this study was interview, so a structured interview was carried out to obtain data. A questionnaire which was adapted from Johansson (2013) a study on 'Code-switching in

the English classroom' was used to collect data from four EFL lecturers who are currently teaching at Kandahar and Balkh public Universities in Afghanistan. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions that were divided into two main parts: demographic information and open-ended questions regarding code switching. Two types of questions, close-ended and open-ended, were included in the interview. In this study, purposive sampling was used because the researchers were particularly interested in language teachers who switch codes in their EFL classes in the context of Afghanistan. Prior to the interview, the researchers sought the consent of the respondents and they were informed regarding the objectives of the study. A Skype interview was done with the respondents and their responses were transcribed and the themes were developed based on their responses.

## **RESULTS AND FINDING**

Based on three research questions the finding of this study is divided into three parts. The first part is on situations and context which trigger code-switching, second part focuses on the perception of Afghan EFL lecturers towards code-switching and the last part is on effectiveness of code switching as a teaching strategy for EFL students.

### **Situations Which Trigger Code Switching**

According to Shartiely (2016), code-switching is used in the class to facilitate learning and it is a crucial part in the teaching process in Tanzania. In this study, the participants who were EFL lecturers at Balkh University stated that they switch codes for better understanding and learning of students in the following situations: when students do not understand the instruction which is given in English, when the lecturer is talking about cultural aspect of an issue, and when the lecturers want to clarify some vague points, grammar, idiomatic expression and vocabulary in the target language. According to Malik (2014), 68.8% of the students in his study stated that code-switching facilitates better understanding of grammar and 72.4% agreed that code-switching assisted them in learning vocabulary. Mainly, Balkh University lecturers switch codes in order to ease and assist learning as one of the lecturers declared, "I switch from English to Persian,

the native language of students to make sure that my instructions are clear and understandable.” These lecturers also pointed out that there were no instances or situation when they always spoke in the students’ native language while in some certain situations they need to shift from English to students’ native language. Moreover, as Bista (2010) identified low level of students’ proficiency in target language as one reason for code-switching. The respondents in this study also highlighted that the main functions of code-switching in their classes was to provide an effective learning and teaching environment, and in consideration of the low proficiency level of their students. This way instructors can save time and convey their message effectively.

The EFL lecturers of Kandahar University have also pointed out similar circumstances in which they code switch while teaching. They code-switch more often while dealing with low proficiency level classes. Additionally, they code switch when explaining difficult and complex topics, subject or content and when talking about social and cultural issues. Macaro (2005) has also pointed out that speakers find themselves at ease by code switching while discussing topics related to linguistic and cultural context. One of the lectures also mentioned that he uses code switching strategy to reduce classroom anxiety as he said, “I shift to Pashto when I tell a joke related to the issue.” The results of a study by Horasan (2014) also confirmed that code-switching can be a useful tool for language learning in lower classes and it can be used for attracting the attention of students or for telling jokes. Another lecturer pointed out yet another situation that triggers code-switching in his class as he said, “When I feel so tired and exhausted, I conduct the whole session in the Pashto language.”

### **Perception of Afghan EFL Lecturers towards Code-Switching**

When Balkh University lecturers were asked regarding their perception towards code-switching, they mentioned that code-switching should be used appropriately, knowingly, carefully and only as a last resort. However, they asserted that it also depends on the level of the students. Most of the time when students’ level is low, teachers need to switch codes to explain the lesson as one of the respondents stated, “I look at the nature of code-switching as a strength where there are cases that you feel the need to use the native language of students.” Another optimistic perspective regarding

code-switching was that it decreases anxiety in students. These points were also supported by Selamat (2014) and Malik (2014) who also found that all the teachers in their study noted that code-switching lessens students' anxiety while learning English. Additionally, 88.3% of students reported that when their instructor switches code they feel more confident in learning English. Furthermore, these EFL lecturers believe that code-switching has its own advantages and disadvantages. Increasing learners' understanding especially lower level students, creating a meaningful learning environment, and enhancing students' engagement are the advantages of code-switching. However, code-switching can influence students learning negatively because it does not provide them with much needed practice and exposure to the target language. This disadvantage of code-switching was also pinpointed by Cook (2001) who found that the use of native language decreases the use of target language in the class. Moreover, one of the respondents in the present study pointed out that there are circumstances in Afghanistan when the teachers themselves have language deficiency, so they use students' first language because they themselves are not capable of conveying the lesson in English. As a result, students get used to using their first language and this makes them stop challenging themselves in learning the target language. According to EFL department guidelines teaching should be as far as possible in English. Balkh University lectures also agreed with the mentioned statement; however, all the respondents also mentioned that there would be circumstances when you have no option other than to utilise the power of multi-lingualism and code-switching.

Overall, the respondents held a positive perception towards code-switching as a strategy for language teaching, however, they have also highlighted some of the disadvantages as well. Several researchers believe that first language usage in target language class can facilitate target language learning, therefore code-switching should be adopted as a teaching strategy in English language classroom (Ray, 2015). One of the respondents said, "I believe it should be used in English classes because this is particularly effective for students who are under achievers and it can put them at ease in terms of language learning." Similarly another lecturer stated 'code-switching is beneficial because it facilitates both teaching and learning.' The advantages of using code switching according to the respondents includes, better comprehension of the subject matter being discussed or taught, facilitation of long term learning by students, motivation for students to

participate in classroom interaction and a means of building rapport with students. According to Ray (2015), code-switching is a student friendly strategy which helps eliminate learners fear of a subject matter and enables them to express themselves confidently.

One respondent from Kandahar University mentioned that ‘code-switching is useful in making communication easier and enhancing the learning of the target language’. The disadvantages of code-switching in an EFL context as pointed out by the respondents are limited practice in target language which will eventually weaken students’ fluency and competency of the target language, code-switching habit will negatively influence the native language of the students and it will negatively affect teachers’ motivation to learn new vocabulary in the target language. The findings of a study by Ríos and Campos (2013) also indicated that a portion of the respondents believed that code-switching hinders fluency in target language and inhibits vocabulary expansion making them lazy learners.

### **Effectiveness of Code Switching as a Teaching Strategy for EFL Students from Teachers’ the Perspective**

When the EFL lecturers of Balkh University were asked if they can teach a class effectively without code-switching, they mentioned that there are two different situations. For advanced level classes, it is completely possible to teach the class without code-switching, but for beginners and English for Specific Purpose (ESP) classes it is difficult to teach the class without code-switching. Basically, they believe that code-switching is an effective teaching strategy for beginner levels and ESP classes. One respondent asserted that, “Yes, in my ESP and beginner classes, I have to codeswitch. I mostly codeswitch to student’s mother tongue to provide definitions for some of the content words related to their discipline and to explain grammar.” Moreover, another respondent from Balkh University emphasized that code-switching is a helpful teaching strategy in building rapport with students and to have good control of the class which refers to classroom management. Ferguson (2009) also claimed that code-switching is used for classroom management purposes and interpersonal relationship. Similarly, the respondents from Kandahar University also perceived code-switching as an effective strategy for low level classes as students in these

classes may benefit from the intermitten use of the mother tongue. The findings of a study by Ahmad and Jusoff (2009) also show that code-switching is a beneficial and effective teaching strategy when teaching low proficiency students. The respondents further asserted that code-switching is useful when explaining complex topics, subject matter and cultural issues. One of the respondents mentioned that, “For the interactive teaching and learning environment, one of the most important technique is code-switching which has the biggest effect.” They also mentioned that code-switching helps them as teachers to build rapport with students which eventually leads to effective teaching.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this study, the respondents who are EFL lecturers from Balkh University and Kandahar University in Afghanistan had a positive view towards code-switching in certain circumstances. However, these lecturers also thought that code-switching can have a negative impact in language classrooms. Therefore, language teachers need to evaluate the role of code switching in their language classes so that they will be able to avoid its negative effects in their classes. On the other hand, there are some language teachers who are not aware of the positive and negative effects of code-switching and therefore, some may avoid it at cost all while others may overuse it. Administrators need to conduct periodic assesment of their instructors to ensure that they are proficient enough to conduct the classes. A lack or proficiency among instructors might lead to excessive use of code switching in the class. In such cases professional development programmes aimed at improving proficiency may be of some help for them.

## **CONCLUSION**

This case study was carried out to explore the function, perception and effectiveness of code-switching as a teaching strategy in EFL classes in the context of Afghanistan universities. The participants who were Afghan EFL lecturers stated that they switch code for various reasons, such as, giving clear instructions, talking about cultural issues, explaining grammar and new vocabular, and instructing ESP classes. They also pointed out to both positive and negative aspects of code-switching when it is used in language classes.

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