

# Code-Switching in the University Classrooms: Perceptions of English Teachers in China

Chengchieh Su<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Zhaqing University, Zhaqing, China

<sup>a</sup>2226767165@qq.com

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** This research undertakes an empirical investigation into English teachers' implementation of code-switching as a teaching strategy within university settings. A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 English language teachers at a university in Guangdong Province, China. The findings indicate that teachers hold a positive perception of code-switching as a teaching strategy, agreeing that the incorporation of students' mother tongue can facilitate their mastery of English. The survey revealed that teachers employed code-switching in various contexts, including Topic Switching, Translation, Economy Saving, Maintaining Classroom Discipline, Emotional Function, Checking Comprehension, with Translation being the most prevalent. However, the educators also cautioned that excessive reliance on code-switching may impede English language acquisition. The article concludes with several recommendations for enhancing English instruction at the university level.

**Keywords:** Code-switching, University settings, English teachers

## 1. Introduction

Code-switching pertains to the intricate linguistic occurrence where speakers employ two or more languages concurrently or alternately during the course of conversation. It encompasses a variety of elements such as linguistic, social, cultural, cognitive, psychological, and so on, and has elicited extensive notice in diverse related research domains (Heller, 1988; Gumperz, 1982; Auer, 1998; Appel & Muysken, 1987; Poplack, 1980; Milroy & Muysken, 1995; Canagaraja, 2006; Sevilla, 2005; Cook, 2001 among others) [1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]. Code-switching within the classroom denotes a teaching approach where teachers methodically alternate between the target language and the first language to assist learners in comprehending the target language. Language and pedagogical researchers are at odds regarding whether teachers ought to employ code-switching in the foreign language classroom. On one hand, learners gain mastery of the target language during the language acquisition process by continuously receiving stimuli from the target language and reacting to these stimuli. Consequently, teachers should utilize the target language as much as possible rather than the native language in foreign language classroom instruction, thereby providing students with more opportunities to communicate in the target language. Thus, appropriate and judicious utilization of the mother tongue in the classroom can not only effectively avert ambiguity in the target language but also maximize learners' understanding of the target language.

This paper endorses that employing code-switching as a teaching tactic in English classrooms can boost learners' comprehension and proficiency in English (Garcia, 2009; Lin, 2013; Macaro, 2001; Sert, 2023) [10][11][12][13]. There appear to be scarcely any empirical investigations regarding code-switching in English classrooms in China. This study probed into the English teachers' perceptions towards the employment of code-switching in university classrooms by means of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and put forward a set of pedagogical recommendations to assist university English teachers in effectively leveraging the native languages of the majority of learners to enhance English teaching and learning.

## 2. Literature Review

Gumperz (1982) introduced the concept of discourse strategies in his work, focusing on how code-switching functions in communication. He analyzed the social meanings within discourse, emphasizing the strategic nature of language use, particularly in bilingual and multilingual contexts. Through the analysis of natural communication, Gumperz demonstrated the various functions of code-switching,

including identity construction, emotional expression, and information transfer. His methods included recordings of real interactions and textual analysis, revealing the implicit meanings and social dynamics in communication <sup>[2]</sup>. Milroy & Muysken (1995) combined sociolinguistic theories with case studies to analyze the language choices and switches of bilingual speakers in specific social contexts. Their research methods included observing language use within communities and conducting dialogue analysis, which uncovered the relationship between language varieties and social identity <sup>[6]</sup>.

Poplack (1980) systematically defined the types of code-switching in her groundbreaking article, analyzing its grammatical structures and social semantics. She conducted a quantitative analysis comparing instances of switching between Spanish and English, introducing the concepts of embedded and alternational code-switching. Poplack's methods included detailed grammatical analysis of natural language data, exploring the strategies bilinguals employ in communication <sup>[5]</sup>. García (2009) examined the state of bilingual education, particularly the role of code-switching in teaching. She discussed how teachers and students in bilingual classrooms use code-switching to enhance understanding and learning. The book employed case studies and practical analysis, integrating educational theories to propose effective teaching strategies in multilingual contexts <sup>[10]</sup>. Sevilla (2005) focused her research on the phenomenon of code-switching in bilingual classrooms, exploring its impact on teaching and learning. Through classroom observations and teacher interviews, she analyzed how teachers use code-switching to promote student comprehension and participation, emphasizing the importance of flexible language use in multilingual educational environments <sup>[8]</sup>. Macaro (1997) examined second language exclusivity and adult learners' attitudes and found that students either felt demotivated when facing second language exclusivity or just "went along with it" <sup>[14]</sup>. Levine (2003) investigated the attitudes of both students and teachers, focusing on learner anxiety when confronted with the use of the target language. The study showed that although some students felt anxious when exposed to the target language, it was more beneficial to use the target language in teaching rather than relying on students' mother tongue <sup>[15]</sup>.

In China, research by Fang & Zhang (2005) revealed that code-switching frequently occurs in English classrooms, with the use of Chinese playing a crucial role in explaining English concepts <sup>[16]</sup>. Chen (2004) noted that when teachers incorporate students' mother tongue, it significantly aids their learning and self-expression in English <sup>[17]</sup>. Meji & Zhao (2010) probed into the views of English major students in a university. These students held the belief that the mother tongue had a functional part to play in English language classrooms <sup>[18]</sup>. Tian and Henneby (2016) investigated students' preferences regarding vocabulary teaching methods, which were either explained only in English or only in Chinese. Intriguingly, the results indicated that students favored a bilingual way of teaching new vocabularies as it could improve learning efficiency <sup>[19]</sup>. Furthermore, Yan (2017) conducted a survey among Science and Engineering students as well as Liberal Arts students at the same university, discovering that both freshmen and sophomores held a positive view of teachers' code-switching practices <sup>[20]</sup>.

In reviewing previous research, two gaps have been identified: (1) although research has explored code-switching and students' perceptions, most studies have focused on students' impressions of code-switching. However, there is less research on teachers' perceptions for using code-switching; (2) more research is needed to investigate teachers' views and understand the crucial factors that influence their perceptions. Understanding teachers' opinions is significant, as it provides pedagogical information and enhances the teaching abilities of second language teachers.

### 3. Research Method

The target of this survey is 15 Chinese teachers teaching English in a University in Guangdong Province, China. All the teachers have more than 10 years of English learning experience.

The research instrument for this survey was a self-administered questionnaire and it aimed to investigate the following questions:

- 1) What is the current situation of code-switching in university classrooms?
- 2) What are the functions of code-switching in university classrooms?

The first question is addressed by investigating teachers' perceptions and attitudes of the use of code-switching in the university classroom. The second question is composed of and draws on the functions proposed by Liu (2020) <sup>[21]</sup>.

The questionnaire was modified after a pilot study with 3 teachers, and 11 questions were finalized, including 6 single-choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question and 4 semi-structured interview

questions. For single-choice questions, a 5-point Likert scale was used to score teachers' agreement with statements about code-switching: 5 for "strongly agree," 4 for "agree," 3 for "no opinion," 2 for "disagree," and 1 for "strongly disagree." The maximum score for each question is 5 points and the minimum is 1.

#### 4. Research Results

##### 4.1. Survey Results

Table 1 shows the results of the statistical survey and questions investigated.

*Table 1: Questionnaire and interview results*

Single-choice question (N=15)		
1. Do you agree that teachers use code-switching in the English classroom?	Mean	Standard Deviation
	4.33	0.59
2. Do you think code-switching can improve comprehension and facilitate English teaching in the English classroom?	Mean	Standard Deviation
	4.8	0.4
3. Do you agree that code-switching enhances students' understanding and intake of English expertise?	Mean	Standard Deviation
	4.6	0.48
4. Do you agree that code-switching fosters teacher-student relationships?	Mean	Standard Deviation
	4	0.73
5. Do you agree that code-switching improves the classroom atmosphere?	Mean	Standard Deviation:
	3.8	0.54
6. Do you agree that teachers use code-switching frequently in the English classroom?	Mean	Standard Deviation
	3.2	0.54
Multiple-choice question (N=15)		
7. Do you think why teachers use code-switching in the English classroom?	(1) Topic Switching: 80 % (12/15) (2) Translation: 100 % (15/15) (3) Economy Saving: 80 % (12/15) (4) Maintaining Classroom Discipline: 67 % (10/15) (5) Emotional Function: 87 % (13/15) (6) Checking Comprehension: 73 % (11/15)	
Semi-structured interview questions	Common answers	
8. Have you ever tried code-switching during your English teaching in the classroom? If so, what benefits do you think it has brought to you? (You can talk about it from aspects such as students' understanding and classroom atmosphere.)	"For most students, using their mother tongue can clarify the requirements of classroom tasks more effectively and assist them in fulfilling those tasks successfully." "When teachers explain in Chinese what in-class activities students need to do, students can perform better."	

	<p>“Explaining new vocabulary, phrases, and idioms in the native language of the majority of students is more efficient.”</p> <p>“Code-switching has a favorable impact on the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students.”</p>
<p>9. When you use code-switching in English teaching, have you found some less-than-ideal situations? For example, issues regarding the impact on students’ language input.</p>	<p>“Teachers who overly rely on code-switching give learners the impression that they aren’t gaining any knowledge.”</p> <p>“Overusing Chinese has negative impacts on English learning.”</p> <p>“Excessive employment of Chinese fails to prompt them to think in English.”</p>
<p>10. Do you have any experience or advice to share regarding the use of code-switching in English teaching? Whether for new teachers or experienced ones, what points do you think are important to note?</p>	<p>“Refrain from overusing code-switching.”</p> <p>“It is advisable to use code-switching wisely and appropriately. For courses related to specific knowledge, more code-switching can be adopted.”</p> <p>“When the English expressions are rich in cultural information, it is more effective to explain them in Chinese.”</p>
<p>11. What challenges have you encountered when using code-switching in the English classroom? Are they from the teaching plan, students’ feedback or other aspects?</p>	<p>“The amount of time teachers should spend on code-switching, or what content should be taught with code-switching, is difficult to answer.”</p> <p>“There seems no unified standard to assess the effectiveness of code-switching in the classroom. We are not sure how to quantify and evaluate the impact of code-switching on student learning outcomes. Proper assessment tools and methods need to be developed to understand when, where, and how to use code-switching to best enhance learning effectiveness.”</p> <p>“A few education systems tend to implement one language teaching policies, especially encouraging the use of English exclusively in foreign language classrooms. This policy may restrict teachers from code-switching and even lead to criticism when they use their native language.”</p>

#### 4.2. Discussion

For the single-choice question, teachers expressed their agreement on using code-switching in the English classroom. They also strongly agree that code-switching can enhance comprehension and facilitate English teaching in the classroom. Moreover, it can improve students’ understanding and acquisition of English knowledge and foster teacher-student relationships. It should be noted that the mean value indicating teachers who agree that code-switching improves the classroom atmosphere is 3.8, while the mean for those who agree that teachers frequently use code-switching in the English classroom is 3.2. These two results suggest that the surveyed teachers do not highly agree that code-switching improves the classroom atmosphere, and they do not favor the frequent use of code-switching either.

In the investigation focused on teachers’ attitudes towards code-switching, a multiple-choice question was designed to explore which functions of code-switching were considered most relevant by the teachers. When analyzing the responses, it was found that for the multiple-choice question, there were several functions that stood out. The functions that the teachers chose with a significant percentage of more than 80% included “Topic Switching”, “Translation”, “Economy Saving”, and “Emotional Function”. This indicated a strong consensus among the teachers regarding the importance of these particular aspects of code-switching. Among these selected functions, “Translation” emerged as the one with the highest percentage. This implies that a large proportion of the teachers recognized the translation function as being of utmost importance within the context of code-switching. This finding is in line with Gumperz (1982) who demonstrated various functions of code-switching, including identity construction, emotional expression, and information transfer <sup>[2]</sup>. In this study, the prominent “Translation” function may also be

related to aspects such as information transfer, as it helps students better understand the target language. Malindi et al (2023) points out that for learners whose first language is not English and who use English as the medium of instruction, code-switching is inevitable in mathematics teaching and is a useful and effective teaching strategy. Malindi suggests introducing at least three languages in teacher training, making code-switching a formal teaching method, and including the learner's first language as part of the examination assessment <sup>[22]</sup>.

The teachers' answers to the question 8 indicate that code-switching during English teaching has several benefits. Firstly, it helps in clarifying classroom task requirements, enabling students to complete tasks more effectively. By using students' mother tongue, teachers can better communicate about activities, homework, and test requirements. Secondly, it is more efficient for explaining new vocabulary, phrases, and idioms in the students' native language. This likely aids in students' understanding and language acquisition. Finally, code-switching has a positive impact on the interpersonal relations between teachers and students, contributing to a more positive classroom atmosphere. This aspect of code-switching's positive impact on interpersonal relations may also be related to the findings of Milroy & Muysken (1995) who uncovered the relationship between language varieties and social identity. In the context of the classroom, code-switching could be influencing the social identity of both teachers and students, and thereby affecting their interpersonal relations. The language choices and switches made by teachers may be a way of establishing a certain social identity within the classroom environment <sup>[6]</sup>. Subon (2021) studied the attitudes of international business majors towards code-switching in oral presentations and believes that code-switching helps to overcome insufficient English proficiency. Most students admit that they often code-switch in oral presentations, mainly due to limited English vocabulary, etc <sup>[23]</sup>.

In terms of the question 9, the teachers' answers highlight some of the drawbacks associated with code-switching in English teaching. They indicate that overusing code-switching can have a negative impact on students' learning experience. When teachers rely too much on code-switching, students may feel as if they are not making progress in their language learning. Additionally, excessive use of the native language (in this case Chinese) can impede English language acquisition. It prevents students from developing the ability to think and reason in English, which is crucial for language proficiency. These responses suggest that while code-switching can have its benefits, as seen in other answers, it must be used judiciously to avoid these less-than-ideal situations and ensure that students receive sufficient English language input.

As to the question 10, the teachers' answers regarding the use of code-switching in English teaching provide valuable insights. Firstly, they emphasize the importance of avoiding overuse, indicating that moderation is key to its effectiveness. Secondly, they suggest that the amount of code-switching can vary depending on the type of course. For courses focused on specific knowledge, more code-switching may be appropriate. This shows an awareness of the different language needs in various instructional contexts. Finally, they note that for English expressions with strong cultural connotations, using Chinese for explanation can be more effective.

In response to question 11, the teachers' responses regarding the challenges of using code-switching in the English classroom reveal several key issues. Firstly, determining the appropriate amount of time and content for code-switching is a difficult task. There is a lack of clarity on how to balance the use of code-switching with the overall teaching plan. Secondly, the absence of a unified standard for assessing the effectiveness of code-switching poses a significant challenge. Without proper assessment tools and methods, it is difficult to understand the impact on student learning outcomes and make informed decisions about its use. Finally, some education systems' one-language teaching policies can restrict teachers from using code-switching. This not only limits their instructional options but may also lead to criticism, creating a difficult environment for teachers who believe in the potential benefits of code-switching. Overall, these challenges highlight the need for further research and guidance on the effective use of code-switching in the English classroom. Previous domestic research in China, such as Fang & Zhang (2005) who found that code-switching frequently occurs in English classrooms with Chinese playing an important role in explaining English concepts, and Chen (2004) who noted that incorporating students' mother tongue aids learning and self-expression, also provides valuable insights <sup>[16][17]</sup>. These studies, along with the current research, suggest that code-switching is an important aspect of English teaching in China. Future research could further explore how to better integrate these findings and optimize the use of code-switching in different educational settings across the country.

## 5. Pedagogical Implications

Several pedagogical implications can be drawn based on the research findings. Firstly, teachers should be aware of the benefits of code-switching, such as facilitating students' understanding of tasks, explaining vocabulary, and enhancing teacher-student relationships. However, they must also be cautious about its overuse, as excessive code-switching can impede students' English language acquisition. As they could not specify how much time should be devoted to code-switching, it further indicates that it is quality rather than quantity that matters in code-switching. Teachers need to find a balance and use code-switching judiciously according to the context, for example, teachers might use code-switching more in courses focused on specific content knowledge and less in listening and speaking classes. Secondly, there is a need for the development of proper assessment tools and methods to evaluate the effectiveness of code-switching. This would help teachers to better understand the impact on student learning outcomes and make more informed decisions about its use. Additionally, in the face of one-language teaching policies in some education systems, efforts should be made to advocate for the appropriate use of code-switching when it is beneficial for teaching and learning. Finally, teacher training programs could consider incorporating the topic of code-switching, including how to effectively use it and how to train teachers to make decisions about when and how to implement it, perhaps even introducing multiple languages to better prepare teachers for diverse classroom situations.

## 6. Conclusions

In light of the findings presented, this study explored code-switching among 15 English teachers in Guangdong, China, through surveys and interviews. Teachers view code-switching positively for aiding student comprehension and mastery of English, but warn against overuse, which may hinder English thinking and reasoning. They use it for translation, topic switching, and emotional expression, adjusting frequency based on course type. The study suggested developing assessment tools to measure code-switching's impact and incorporating it into teacher training for effective use. It offers insights for improving English teaching quality and guides future research on code-switching in education.

This study, while valuable, is limited in scope as it only examines a small sample of 15 English teachers from a single university in Guangdong Province. Consequently, its findings may not be universally applicable to the broader population of English teachers in Chinese universities. Additionally, the paper, although grounded in research from various regions within China, does not adequately account for the individual differences among teachers, such as their age, educational background, and cultural diversity. Furthermore, the methodology of this research is primarily reliant on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of actual teaching practices, future studies could benefit from incorporating additional methods, such as classroom observations and longitudinal studies. It is recommended that the aforementioned limitations be addressed in future research to enhance the depth and breadth of understanding in this field.

## References

- [1] Heller, M. *Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*[M]. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives* (pp. 1-25). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988.
- [2] Gumperz, J. *Discourse Strategies*[M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- [3] Auer, P. *Code-Switching in Conversation: Interaction and Identity*[M]. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- [4] Appel, R., & Muysken, P. *Language Contact and Bilingualism*[M]. London: Routledge, 1987.
- [5] Poplack, S. *Sometimes I'll Start a Sentence in Spanish Y TERMINO EN ESPAÑOL*[J]. *Linguistics*, 1980, 18(7-8), 581-618.
- [6] Milroy, L., & Muysken, P. *One Speaker, Two Languages: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Codeswitching* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- [7] Canagarajah, S. *Language Acquisition and Socialization in a Multilingual Environment*[M]. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* (pp. 335-350). Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- [8] Sevilla, J. *Code-Switching in a Bilingual Classroom*[J]. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2005, 8(2), 99-116.
- [9] Cook, V. *Using the First Language in the Classroom*[J]. *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue Canadienne des Langues Vivantes*, 2001, 57(3), 402-423.

- [10] García, O. *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective*[M]. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- [11] Lin, A. *Classroom Code-Switching: Three Decades of Research*[J]. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 4(1): 195–218, 2013.
- [12] Macaro, E. *Analysing Student Teachers' Codeswitching in Foreign Language Classrooms: Theories and Decision Making*[J]. *Modern Language Journal*, 2001, 85 (4), 531–548.
- [13] Sert, O. *Teachers' Interactional Practices in Managing Multilingual Classroom Settings: A Conversation Analytic Approach*[J]. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2023, 203, 68-85.
- [14] Macaro, E. *Target Language, Collaborative Learning and Autonomy*[M] (Vol. 5). Bristol, UK: *Multilingual Matters*, 1997.
- [15] Levine, G. *Student and Instructor Beliefs and Attitudes about Target Language Use. First Language Use and Anxiety: Report of a Questionnaire Study*[J]. *The Modern Language Journal*, 2003, 87(3), 343-364.
- [16] Fang, J., & Zhang, H. *Trial Analysis of Code-Switching in High School English Classroom*[J]. *Journal of Shandong Institute of Education*, 2005, 5(5), 60-62.
- [17] Chen, P. *A Survey of English Major Teachers' Code-Switching in the Classroom*[J]. *Journal of PLA Foreign Affairs College*, 2004, 5(5), 34-40.
- [18] Meji, H., & Zhao, X. *Code-Switching in English Courses in Chinese Universities*[J]. *The Modern Language Journal*, 2010, 94(3), 396-411.
- [19] Tian, L., & Hennebry, M. *Chinese Learners' Perceptions towards Teachers' Language Use in Lexical Explanations: A Comparison between Chinese-only and English-only Instructions*[J]. *System*, 2016, 63, 77-88.
- [20] Yan, X. *A Study on Students' Attitude toward Teacher's Code-Switching in English Reading and Writing Classes*[J]. *Industry and Technology Forum*, 2017, 1(1), 155-156.
- [21] Liu, R. *A Study of Teachers' Code-Switching in Middle School English Writing Classrooms*[D]. Hubei: Hubei Normal University, 2020.
- [22] Malindi, Z., Berington, Z. G., & Clever, N. *Impact of Code-Switching in Learning and Teaching of Mathematics: A South African Perspective*[J]. *E - Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 2023, 4(3), 181-195.
- [23] Subon, F., & Mohd Taib, S. S. *The Code-Switching Phenomenon during Oral Presentations among the Business Programme Students*[J]. *IAFOR Journal of Education: Undergraduate Education*, 2021, 9(5), 85-100.