CODE-SWITCHING IN VIRTUAL ELT CLASSROOMS: INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' INSIGHTS ON TEACHER DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Code-switching is a common practice in bilingual classrooms. However, its role in virtual English Language Teaching (ELT) and how students perceive it remain under-explored. This study explores how English teachers use code-switching in virtual English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, focusing on its functions and how students perceive it. A mixed methods approach was employed, with the research conducted in two phases. In the quantitative phase, a Likert-scale questionnaire was given to 11 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduate students to establish their general attitudes towards code-switching. The qualitative phase involved conducting semi-structured interviews with five participants to gain deeper insights into their beliefs and experiences. The findings suggest that students generally approve of code-switching, considering it to be helpful for comprehension and communication without significantly hindering English acquisition. This suggests that, when used strategically, code-switching can enhance the effectiveness of virtual classrooms. The study highlights the importance of integrating statistical and thematic data to gain a comprehensive understanding of student perspectives in bilingual learning environments.

Keywords: Code Switching, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Mixed Methods, Student Perceptions, Virtual ELT Classroom

INTRODUCTION

In English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, particularly in contexts where English is a foreign language, linguistic flexibility often plays a crucial role in facilitating communication. One common strategy employed by teachers is code-switching, whereby two or more languages are used alternately within a conversation or discourse. Hymes (1974) defines it as the alternating use of languages, speech styles or linguistic varieties, and Bokamba (1989) as the mixing of words, phrases, or sentences from different grammatical systems.

Moreover, in bilingual or multilingual societies such as Indonesia, code-switching is often employed in classrooms to assist students in grasping challenging concepts or to maintain their engagement. Teachers may switch between English and Indonesian to clarify meaning, simplify explanations and provide emotional support. While some scholars argue that code-switching can hinder full immersion in the target language, others believe it to be a powerful pedagogical tool, especially when used deliberately and strategically.

The strategic use of code-switching has become clearer in virtual learning, as it reduces anxiety caused by language barriers and other communication challenges more effectively than face-to-face learning. A 2022 study in the Philippines found that code-

switching significantly improved students' understanding and motivation in online classes, acting as a valuable tool for clarifying terminology and maintaining engagement when language and context barriers arise (Mortega, 2022).

In such contexts, using students' first language can help to reduce misunderstandings and enhance engagement in learning. Despite its increasing use in online English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, limited research has explored how students perceive this practice, particularly in terms of its instructional value, communicative function, and impact on language acquisition.

Furthermore, to address the existing research gap, this study takes a mixed methods approach, integrating quantitative data from student questionnaires with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. This approach offers a more thorough understanding of how students interpret their teachers' code-switching practices in virtual English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms by integrating both methods. The quantitative questionnaire identifies general patterns and trends in student attitudes, such as how frequently and effectively code-switching is perceived to occur. Meanwhile, the qualitative interviews explore the reasons behind these views in more depth, revealing personal experiences, contextual influences and emotional reactions that structured survey questions alone cannot capture. By examining both measurable trends and personal experiences, the study aims to capture the complexity of student attitudes towards this common yet frequently debated instructional practice. Specifically, it seeks to answer two central questions: How do students perceive the use of code-switching in virtual ELT classrooms? And how do they believe it influences their English language learning process?

Code-Switching in Language Education

Code-switching is defined as the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation or communication event. Hymes (1974) describes it as the use of different linguistic varieties in turn, whereas Bokamba (1989) sees it as mixing words, phrases or sentences from different grammatical systems. In bilingual and multilingual educational settings, teachers often use this practice to facilitate comprehension or build rapport with students (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2014). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, code-switching is often used to explain complex grammar rules, introduce new vocabulary or manage classroom interactions. Although it was traditionally considered to hinder target language immersion, contemporary scholars increasingly recognise its strategic pedagogical value (Setati et al., 2002; Brice, 2000).

Pedagogical and Affective Functions of Code-Switching

Extensive research confirms that code-switching serves instructional and emotional purposes in educational settings. For example, Cahyani et al. (2016) observed that Indonesian teachers commonly used code-switching to simplify difficult material and maintain student engagement during lessons. Similarly, Grant and Nguyen (2017) found that Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers used this strategy to deliver clearer instructions, alleviate learners' anxiety, and enhance motivation. Baker (2006) further highlights the practical benefits of code-switching, noting its effectiveness in replacing unfamiliar vocabulary, clarifying meaning, conveying cultural identity and maintaining conversational flow. Together, these studies demonstrate the versatility of

code-switching as a deliberate instructional technique and as a valuable means of fostering a supportive learning environment.

Students' Perceptions of Code-Switching

Research conducted in various educational settings indicates that students generally view code-switching as a helpful strategy rather than an obstacle to learning. In South Africa, Grobler (2017) found that many Grade 8 pupils were confused by the alternating use of indigenous languages and English, which negatively affected their comprehension and respect for teachers when overused. In EFL settings, Horasan (2022) found that both beginner students and teachers frequently engage in code-switching, primarily for metalinguistic purposes, and participants agreed that it is helpful at a lower level of proficiency, but should diminish as learners progress. Complementing these findings, mixed-methods studies in Indonesian EFL and ESP classes (Patmasari et al., 2022) reveal overwhelmingly positive student attitudes: students see code-switching as a means to enhance communication, clarify content, alleviate anxiety and boost confidence, particularly in lower-level and subject-specific courses. Overall, while code-switching is welcomed for its pedagogical benefits in comprehension and affective support, students and educators agree that it must be balanced and reduced as proficiency grows, in order to avoid overreliance.

However, research on code-switching in virtual English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in Indonesia still predominantly employs single-method approaches, such as interviews, observations or questionnaires, without fully integrating diverse methodologies. For instance, Setiawan and Surista (2024) employed a blend of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to examine students' perceptions of code-switching in face-to-face classes, yet they neglected to incorporate broader self-reported data or quantitative patterns in virtual environments. This study therefore addresses this methodological gap by combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews to offer a more comprehensive understanding of code-switching experiences in Indonesian virtual ELT contexts.

METHOD

A total of 11 EFL students took part in the questionnaire to help ensure the validity of the findings. Although the number of respondents was relatively small, the study was designed as an exploratory investigation rather than a statistically generalisable analysis. The questionnaire data were primarily used to identify general patterns and inform the selection of participants for the qualitative phase. This aligns with an explanatory sequential design, in which quantitative data act as a preliminary step to guide in-depth exploration. In this context, using a small sample size is acceptable, particularly when combined with rich qualitative interview data offering deeper insight into student perceptions and experiences. This study employed an explanatory sequential design as part of a mixed methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions of teachers' use of code-switching in virtual English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods in two consecutive phases.

In the first phase, the researchers adopted a quantitative approach, distributing a closed-ended questionnaire with a Likert scale. This was distributed to 11 English as a

Foreign Language (EFL) graduate students who had experienced code-switching in English Language Teaching (ELT) virtual classes. Although there were only 11 respondents, combining quantitative data with in-depth qualitative analysis allowed for a meaningful exploration of the research questions. The aim of this phase was to identify general trends and numerical data regarding students' attitudes towards code-switching. The data were analysed descriptively in terms of frequency and percentage.

In the second phase, a qualitative approach was adopted through semi-structured interviews. Five participants were purposively selected from the pool of questionnaire respondents who strongly endorsed code-switching practices. This sampling strategy was intended to explore supportive perspectives in greater depth. However, it is recognized that such an approach may lead to confirmation bias by disproportionately highlighting positive views. To address this limitation, the analysis involved comparing emerging themes with the broader range of survey responses, including those reflecting contrasting opinions. The interview data provided deeper insights into students' beliefs, motivations, and experiences about code-switching. The interview responses were analysed thematically to identify recurring themes and justifications, particularly about the influence of code-switching on engagement and comprehension.

The researchers were able to integrate data from both phases using a mixed-methods design, with the qualitative findings explaining and elaborating on patterns identified in the quantitative phase. This approach strengthened the validity of the findings, providing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how code-switching functions in virtual learning environments from pedagogical and affective perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed that most EFL students had a generally positive attitude towards code-switching in virtual ELT classrooms. Questionnaire responses suggested that students viewed code-switching as a useful tool for clarifying challenging concepts, alleviating anxiety and sustaining engagement during online learning. These trends were further supported by interview data, in which participants described code-switching as facilitating both understanding and participation. The findings, both quantitative and qualitative, offer complementary perspectives on how code-switching supports comprehension and fosters a more inclusive learning environment.

Students' General Perceptions of Code-Switching in Virtual Classrooms

Quantitative data from the questionnaire showed strong support for the use of code-switching. Over 80% of students agreed or strongly agreed that code-switching is used and supported in their virtual ELT classes. While 45.5% preferred full English instruction, 72.8% still acknowledged the strategic usefulness of code-switching.

Table 1 Code-Switching in Virtual Classrooms: Student Perspectives

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Code-switching is used during virtual classes	36.4%	45.5%	18.2%	0%	0%

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I support the use of code-switching	36.4%	54.5%	9.1%	0%	0%
I prefer full English	0%	45.5%	27.3%	27.3%	0%

Over 80% of students reported that their teachers use code-switching during virtual classes, and many of these students support this practice. This level of agreement suggests that students find code-switching a familiar and acceptable instructional method in online learning environments. Although a small number of students (27.3%) would prefer teachers to speak only in English, none of them strongly disagreed with code-switching.

This indicates a general trend whereby students recognise the functional value of switching to their first language (L1) when clarification is needed. This supports the arguments of Brice (2000) and Cook (2001) that code-switching is not a sign of language deficiency, but rather a strategic pedagogical choice — especially in bilingual settings. The results also reflect one of the primary functions of code-switching, as described by Baker (2006): to enhance understanding and maintain communication in contexts where full immersion in the target language could hinder learning. These results suggest that, although students are open to full exposure to English, they still recognise the value of using their first language. This is consistent with the views of Cook (2001) and Macaro (2014), who emphasise the pedagogical benefits of code switching. Interview data supported this view. One student commented:

> *"Code-switching helps us understand more easily, especially when a concept is too hard to catch in English." – Participant 1*

This statement highlights code-switching as an essential cognitive tool for language learning, especially when learners are finding it difficult to understand complex concepts in English. In the context of this study, which focuses on virtual classrooms, this function becomes increasingly important. Student interview data suggest that the absence of immediate face-to-face clarification can increase cognitive load and lead to disengagement. In these scenarios, reverting to a more familiar language — typically Bahasa Indonesia — enables students to access explanations swiftly and easily, bridging gaps in comprehension without depending on non-verbal cues or peer assistance. By reducing frustration and sustaining attention, this practice supports understanding and connects abstract content to learners' linguistic comfort zones. Consequently, in multilingual virtual settings, code-switching emerges as an adaptive pedagogical strategy that promotes accessibility and deepens conceptual clarity amid the challenges of remote instruction.

Code-Switching as a Tool for Comprehension and Communication

Quantitative findings showed that 90.9% of students agreed or strongly agreed that code-switching helped them understand the material. Additionally, 72.7% said it facilitates classroom communication.

Table 2 Code-Switching as a Comprehension and Communication Tool

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Code-switching helps me understand the material	54.5%	36.4%	9.1%	0%	0%
Code-switching facilitates classroom communication	18.2%	54.5%	9.1%	18.2%	0%

An overwhelming 90.9% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that code-switching helps them better understand lesson content. This reflects a widespread recognition that switching to the first language can help students grasp key ideas more quickly, especially when dealing with abstract or complex topics. Moreover, the fact that over 70% remained neutral or disagreed with the statement "Without code-switching, I struggle to understand" suggests that while students find it helpful, they may not always depend on it.

The belief that code-switching facilitates classroom communication (72.7% agree or strongly agree) underscores its role in promoting interaction—not just between teacher and student, but also among peers. This supports Setati et al. (2002), who argue that code-switching enhances exploratory dialogue and classroom negotiation of meaning.

These perceptions align with a sociocultural view of language learning, in which the use of L1 is seen as a scaffold that enables learners to build confidence and develop ideas before expressing them in the target language.

Interview responses confirmed this. Participant 3 noted:

"Sometimes we don't know the English word, so the teacher's switching helps us stay focused."

This statement emphasises the practical role of code-switching in language learning, whereby a teacher switches between languages to facilitate understanding and maintain engagement. When students struggle to recall or understand an English word, switching to a more familiar language can help to bridge communication gaps, reduce cognitive load, and prevent frustration over unfamiliar vocabulary from distracting them from the lesson. This technique facilitates smoother interaction and reinforces understanding by providing contextual meaning in both languages, making it an effective strategy in multilingual educational settings. This aligns with Baker's (2006) functions of code-switching—to clarify content and support communication.

Code-Switching and Its Impact on English Acquisition

Opinions on whether code-switching hindered language learning were more divided. 36.4% agreed that it could hinder acquisition, but 36.4% disagreed. Notably, most rejected the idea that code-switching is a "language error."

Table 3 Code-Switching's Impact on English Acquisition

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Code-switching hinders English acquisition	0%	36.4%	27.3%	27.3%	9.1%
Code-switching is a language error	0%	9.1%	18.2%	45.5%	27.3%

Opinions on whether code-switching hinders English acquisition were more divided. While 36.4% agreed that it could reduce language acquisition, 36.4% disagreed, and 27.3% were neutral. This mixed perception reflects an ongoing tension in language pedagogy: should the focus be on maximum exposure to the target language, or should the L1 be strategically used to support learning?

Interestingly, 72.8% of students either disagreed or remained neutral on the idea that code-switching should not be used. Additionally, 72.8% also rejected the view that code-switching is a "language error." This shows that the negative stigma once attached to code-switching (as mentioned by Amin, 2009 and Rickford, 2005) is weakening among learners who have experienced its practical benefits.

Overall, the results suggest that students do not perceive code-switching as a threat to language development but rather as a temporary support to assist understanding— particularly in complex or fast-paced virtual learning settings. This is consistent with Macaro (2014), who emphasizes the pedagogical benefits of code-switching when students and teachers share common educational goals.

Qualitative data underlined the important part that code-switching plays in improving students' understanding, motivation and readiness to take part in class discussions. Two interviewees explicitly stated that they felt more inclined to participate when instructors switched between English and Indonesian. As Participant 4 stated:

"We feel more confident speaking when the teacher uses both languages."

This suggests that code-switching has the potential to relieve the psychological burden often associated with using a second language, particularly in virtual classrooms where unfamiliarity and pressure can be more pronounced. However, the quantitative findings revealed that 36.4% of students viewed code-switching as an obstacle to language development. This discrepancy may be due to differing expectations and learning styles: while some students benefit emotionally and communicatively from using their first language, others see it as limiting their ability to fully immerse themselves in English. These findings highlight the importance of taking a balanced, context-aware approach to code-switching in language education.

Furthermore, several participants emphasised that code-switching facilitates smoother and more active classroom discussions. Participant 2 illustrated this by saying, 'If I don't understand in English, I can ask in Indonesian and then continue in English.' This bilingual flexibility enables learners to engage in classroom dialogue without fearing mistakes or misunderstandings, which can hinder communication in monolingual

instruction. It also allows key concepts to be clarified in L1 before transitioning back into English, promoting better conceptual understanding and active participation.

These insights align with those of Brice (2000), who argues that code-switching serves important pragmatic and communicative functions in the ESL classroom, and with Setati et al. (2002), who view code-switching **as** a strategic tool for exploratory talk — the kind of language used to develop and refine ideas collaboratively. In the context of online learning, where non-verbal cues and real-time interaction are limited, the strategic use of both languages is even more essential for maintaining engagement and participation. Therefore, code-switching supports not only comprehension, but also plays a vital role in sustaining students' motivation and enabling richer, more meaningful classroom interactions.

Although these results are based on a small group, they provide meaningful insights when viewed alongside qualitative data. The depth and consistency of the interview responses help to offset the limited scope of the quantitative phase.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' perceptions of teachers' code-switching practices in virtual English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, employing a mixed-methods approach. Overall, the findings revealed that students generally viewed code-switching positively in online learning environments. Rather than viewing the use of both English and Indonesian as a barrier, students regarded it as a helpful strategy that improved comprehension and classroom interaction, particularly when dealing with abstract or challenging content. Furthermore, students did not view code-switching as detrimental to their English development. In fact, many students felt that it eased anxiety, boosted motivation and encouraged active participation. This indicates that intentional code-switching can meaningfully support English language acquisition in digital contexts. Therefore, when applied thoughtfully, code-switching can enhance understanding and promote a more inclusive and engaging ELT experience in virtual classrooms.

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