

EFL Iraqi Teachers' Code-Switching in Classrooms of EFL Context: Functions and Motivations

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ABSTRACT:

This study sheds light on code-switching, which is explicated as the transition from one language to another with the aim of enhancing communication and conveying the message effectively. In fact, studies focusing specifically on code-switching by Iraqi EFL teachers in Iraqi universities are scarce, as the field has received scant scholarly attention. The current study examines the code-switching practices utilized by Iraqi teachers in their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. It aims to contribute to the understanding of code-switching among educators. The primary focus of this study is to understand why Iraqi teachers use code-switching as well as how and when it is used to enhance the English language teaching and learning process. A qualitative research method was adopted, employing two instruments: observation and semi-structured interviews. Three EFL teachers from Al-Nisour University College in Iraq participated in this study to explore their perceptions of why and how they employ code-switching. The findings revealed that code-switching significantly affected the students' English language skills. The study also demonstrated how code-switching facilitated the teaching process and highlighted instances when teachers chose to use it. Furthermore, the findings indicated that teachers employed code-switching for several key reasons: students' low proficiency in English, some teachers' limited English competence, some intricacies of language skills, class management, sharing the same first language, and heterogeneous classes. However, learners' low English ability, some teachers limited English competence, and heterogeneous classes were the most dominant factors causing code-switching practices. Although the implementation of code-switching is deemed a beneficial teaching strategy, it does not provide the optimal conditions for English language development.

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Introduction:

The Arabic language is the national language and the medium of instruction in Iraqi schools and universities, while English is the medium of instruction in EFL classrooms. Teachers who are proficient in English strive to use English extensively in their EFL classes to make students capable of utilizing English in their careers and daily activities. Moreover, it is crucial for students to improve their proficiency and mastery of the language, which may enable them to pursue further education. Besides, teachers, who frequently use English in their EFL classrooms, confirm that extensive use of English during lessons increases learners' exposure to the target language and could widely lead to foster better language acquisition. This is endorsed by Antonia Chandrasegaran, (1981, p. 12) who states:

"The importance of exposure to the Target Language as an aid in language learning cannot be lightly dismissed. Logic and evidence for research support the assumption that the more he reads in the language, the more he understands and the more he listens to the language, the more competent he is likely to become."

As Iraq is classified as an EFL country, English is typically taught as a foreign language in schools and universities. Students have to learn the English language because it is one of the main subjects in their universities, which is not used in their daily interactions (Sabti, Rashid & Turki, 2019). In most EFL classrooms of Iraqi universities, teachers tend to switch from English to Arabic language, which is the mother tongue of Iraq, in order to facilitate the learning process. This is attributed to the low proficiency level of both some teachers and students in English (Sabti et al., 2019). Sociolinguists describe this phenomenon as code-switching, which is employed as a tactic to deliver the meaning (Johansson, 2013). Nonetheless, teachers' proficiency in both languages impacts the extent to which the language is employed in classroom interactions (Ansah, 2014). Some individuals may apply code-switching unconsciously due to their multilingual abilities, whereas others do so to elucidate their explanations (Alnefaie & Gupta, 2024; Retnawati & Mujiyanto, 2015).

Mäkilähde (2016) describes code-switching as a phenomenon of multilingualism and a common topic in linguistics. It is defined in various ways, including as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59). Alternatively, it can be seen as "the movement by a speaker to and from one linguistic code to another" (Emeka & Nwobia, 2014, p. 2). Eldin (2014) characterizes code-switching as "the act of conversing in a language other than one's mother tongue" (p. 78). Furthermore, it can be understood as "the investigation of an individual's use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange" (Woolard, 2005, p. 74). Shana Poplack (1980) noted that code-switching occurs through "the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent" (p. 583). In summary, code-switching involves shifting from one language to another to enhance communication and effectively convey a message to the listener or reader.

English teachers in Iraq have long confronted challenges regarding the impact of using the first language in foreign language instruction. Adopting the employment of the first language in EFL classrooms is a significant step in creating a supportive learning environment, particularly in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. Given this context, the challenges posed by the influence of the first language often motivate Iraqi teachers to implement code-switching in their classrooms. This notion is endorsed by Bairmani et al. (2022) who stated that teachers employed code-switching to elucidate ideas and concepts more easily, accentuate significant points, use repetition to elucidate their lessons, take part in social interactions, check comprehension, and translate content.

Students' proficiency in English should not be overlooked, as some may struggle to understand the language due to a weak foundational knowledge. As a result, teachers often face challenges when trying to use only the target language, which may lead them to resort to code-switching to accommodate their students' lower levels of English proficiency. It is challenging to find research specifically examining code-switching by Iraqi EFL teachers in Iraqi universities, as this topic remains relatively underexplored. Therefore, this study was conducted to help fill this overlooked gap in the literature. In this context, the current study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1- Why do Iraqi teachers apply code-switching in EFL classrooms?
- 2- How does code-switching facilitate the process of teaching and learning in the Iraqi EFL classroom?

Literature Review:

Previous research has shown, teachers employed code-switching for a variety of reasons in classrooms that teach “English as a foreign language (EFL)” or “English as a second language (ESL)”. As reported in some studies (Sali, 2014; Temesgen & Hailu, 2022), academic, managerial, and social are the three main purposes of teacher’s code-switching in L2 contexts. Likewise, Inbar-Lourie (2010) delineated three primary objectives for code-switching: affective purpose, managerial, and instructional. Other academics have classified code-switching’s functions under two broader categories: social and pedagogical (Grant & Nguyen, 2017; Qian Xiaofang, 2017; Zainil & Arsyad, 2021). Overall, scholars concur that teachers employ code-switching to fulfil several different functions in the classroom, even though the specific classifications may differ.

Several studies referred to code-switching as academic purposes. For instance, Üstünel (2016) employed it in Turkish classrooms and discovered that teachers exploited it as a scaffolding strategy to support their students within their “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) in connection with specific pedagogical functions including, translating, interpreting, posing queries, checking understanding, and providing metalanguage information. Likewise, Ngoc and Yen (2018) revealed that teachers in Vietnam switched from English to Vietnamese for a variety of instructional functions. These included elucidating complex grammar and complex ideas, assessing students’ comprehension, translating L2 content into L1 equivalents, correcting student errors, and managing classroom interactions. A study conducted by Taşçı and Aksu Ataç (2020) who pinpointed that teachers used code-switching to present new material, compare linguistic structures, explain grammatical rules, explain complex concepts, and explain demanding vocabulary. Furthermore, Tsagari and Georgiou (2016) discovered that code-switching was frequently employed to compare the first and second languages, check students’ comprehension, elucidate grammar and other linguistic aspects, and translate words and sentences.

Although code-switching was used for the academic purposes, it also served several managerial functions in the classroom. Sali (2014) noted that teachers employed code-switching as a technique to effectively manage lessons and student behavior. By the same token, Temesgen and Hailu (2022) stated that non-academic issues, like capturing students’ interest, disciplining them, providing clarification on task instructions, are frequently better handled in the students’ native tongue, even though the main lesson content is normally presented in the official language of instruction. This shift to L1 usually occurs when students struggle to understand the foreign language. In a similar vein, Sali (2014) observed that teachers often resort to using their first language (L1) to manage the classroom when they are dissatisfied with students’ behavior or performance, as reprimanding their students using first language is perceived to have a greater impact. In particular, using L1 for disciplinary purposes appears to be more expressive, whereas target language use may not be as genuine and effective; instead turn into something artificial.

Although variations in the functions of using code-switching may vary across the literature, the above reviewed studies indicate a general consensus regarding the broad categorization of code-switching functions in teachers’ classroom discourse. Therefore,

instead of detailing every specific function identified in each study, this study will adopt a classification based on relevant prior findings, grouping teachers' code-switching into three main functions: academic, managerial, and social (e.g., heterogeneous class).

Methodology:

A qualitative research method was adopted using two instruments: observation and semi-structured interviews. Three English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from Al-Nisour University College in Iraq participated to explore their perceptions of the reasons and methods behind their use of code-switching. One of the teachers holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and has working experience of more than ten years, while the other two teachers have MA degrees in Linguistics with less than 5 years of working experience. According to Creswell (2017), the number of participants in observational studies may vary depending on the purpose of the research, often involving fewer participants, sometimes even as few as 1 to 5 individuals.

Two instruments were used in order to collect the data: classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observation was the first method employed to gather information from naturally occurring social situations, whereas the semi-structured interview served as the second instrument in this study. Kvale (1994) cited in Sabti et al. (2019), reported that "a semi-structured interview should contain a sequence of themes that were translated into questions developed in a way that was flexible to follow up answers. Such a type of interview is flexible, and thus, this flexibility may lead a researcher to produce new questions whenever interesting topics arise" (p. 1437).

Classroom observation aids the researcher in comprehending the issue in a naturalistic context. Burns (1995) reports that observation is a credible method that "helps the researcher to document and reflect systematically upon classroom interactions and events" (p. 80). In other words, observation is not only deemed as an effective data collection method but also provides reliable evidence to address research questions and accomplish research objectives. Based on this, observation is utilized in this study to understand how EFL teachers use the Arabic language in their EFL classrooms. The researcher allowed the EFL teachers to teach freely and handle the classroom predicaments to obtain accurate results. The researcher recorded events more precisely in order to note unexpected outcomes related to this issue.

A semi-structured interview is adopted as the second data method collection. A set of ten prepared questions were directed to the three teachers. The questions focused on the personal particulars of the teachers interviewed in relation to teaching an EFL classroom. The questions were also related to the teacher's academic and professional qualifications, training options overall teaching experience as well as teaching English experiences.

Findings:

Based on data collected through observation and semi-structured interviews, the findings outlined the teachers' perceptions regarding the reasons for using code-switching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and revealed how code-switching enhances the teaching and learning process in these settings.

Teachers' Perceptions Towards the Use of Code-Switching in EFL Classroom:

This study revealed that code-switching plays a significant role in enhancing the teaching and learning processes. In several lessons, some teachers introduce a topic and then

proceed to discuss and explain it using the Arabic language. Below, the researcher presents the results of interviews conducted with the teachers. These results describe the teachers' perceptions of code-switching in the EFL classroom, including their overall views on code-switching and the reasons behind its use in their instruction.

Teachers articulated their views on code-switching as follows:

- *Code-switching is applied to compensate for teachers' inability to recall words or phrases in English, leading them to switch to another language as a solution.*

While observing teachers in their classes, researcher noticed that some teachers struggle with teaching English in their EFL classes. This may be attributed to their lack of English proficiency, especially those who obtained their MA or PhD degrees during the COVID-19 pandemic. In effect, they obtained their degrees remotely, which diminished their understanding and undermined their ability to acquire knowledge thoroughly. In other words, they strive to obtain their academic degrees regardless of their focus on developing their linguistic and specialized skills. Consequently, this has negatively affected the quality of teaching and the performance of these teachers in the educational process.

- *We also use code-switching in our classes when I discover that my students are unable to understand the lesson effectively.*

It is necessary to underline the teachers' struggles with using English in their classes. They contend that they employ code-switching to enhance their students' learning outcomes and help them comprehend the topics being explained.

One teacher shed light on learners' low English proficiency levels. He said:

- *We usually resort to employing code-switching due to learners' limited proficiency in English. I try to use English in my class, but some students request to switch to English to better understand the lesson.*

Teachers reported that during classroom interaction, Arabic language was occasionally used to clarify complex concepts, compare linguistic structures of both languages, to elucidate grammar, to describe ambiguous vocabularies. Thus, the application of L1 in EFL classrooms demonstrated two essential functions: as a compensatory strategy to resolve inadequate comprehension of EFL acquisition as well as a strategy for promoting a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere. These two functions could positively motivate students to enhance their EFL acquisition. In other words, such functions primarily create a positive classroom, even when students have inadequate English skills. Additionally, having a positive classroom environment assists in lowering students' affective filter, which is one of the obstacles that adversely influences students' EFL acquisition. In addition, the employment of first language (L1) aids students to feel less stressed and less anxious, which in turn, can boost learners' motivation and self-confidence.

Teachers denoted to a heterogeneous class as one that includes students with varying abilities. They stated:

- *We sometimes rely on or use our mother tongue (code-switching) as we have different levels of students' abilities in English.*

Heterogeneous Class or "Mixed-Ability Class" is a major element that influenced teachers to employ code-switching during their lessons. In effect, this is attributed to the non-adherence of most Iraqi colleges/universities administrations to the regulations of the "Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Iraq" to accept students with similar levels of English proficiency, despite the availability of tests to determine their proficiency. This laxity is sometimes due to personal connections and favoritism to please influential figures in authority or the government, leading to significant disparities in student proficiency within classrooms. Besides that, a large number of private, for-profit colleges and universities accept students of all levels without regard to language proficiency, for the purpose of financial gain. As there was "a mixed-ability class" regardless of the causes, teachers used code-switching to address their students' varying English language needs and abilities, ultimately supporting their success in learning English.

Teachers referred to the importance and interference of the first language during teaching in EFL classes. They said:

- *Arabic language is a critical element that has a huge impact on the target language. Specifically, we sometimes resort to the mother tongue (Arabic language) to better understand the meaning of certain texts and try to switch from English to Arabic when confronting challenges in conveying the meaning or message to our students.*

All teachers focus on the interference of the first language, which plays a considerable role in employing code-switching. More accurately, language interference indicates the impact of an individual's first language on the target language. This impact may lead to the use of different aspects of language, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and even spelling.

Teachers also identified "class management" as another key factor that stimulates teachers to implement code-switching in EFL classrooms.

- *We often implement code-switching in order to manage the class by scolding our students when they misbehave during lessons.*

Teachers frequently switch between English and Arabic to manage the classroom and address student misbehavior during lessons. They often deploy code-switching to serve various purposes, including as a strategy to give instructions for classroom tasks, discipline their learners for misbehaving in their classrooms, provide reminders, alter topics, signify transitions between lessons, and capture students' attention.

Motivations Behind the Employment of Teachers' Code-switching

The study aimed to determine the causes of teachers' code-switching practices. The results showed that the three teachers' decision to use code-switching in their classes was influenced by a number of factors. These factors included the learners' low English ability, some teachers' limited English competence, some intricacies of language skills, class management, sharing the same first language, and heterogeneous classes. Among these, students' low English proficiency was a key factor influencing teachers' decisions to code-switch, which played a major role in prompting teachers to employ code-switching.

In this study, some teachers' limited English competence also turned to code-switching when they struggled to deliver clear and coherent explanations due to their limited English proficiency. Precisely, when they do not have adequate English language skills, they adopt Arabic to adjust their speech according to their language limitations, despite English being the main medium of instruction. The presence of mixed-ability classes is also a key and dominant factor that contributed to teachers' use of code-switching, which posed a significant challenge for teachers and led them to use it as a means to support their students' limited English proficiency.

Discussion:

The current study attempted to explore teachers' code-switching and the underlying reasons for their code-switching practices. The three teachers who took part in this research confirmed that utilizing the Arabic language would be a supportive and positive strategy to enhance students' EFL acquisition. In addition, they declared that it was unavoidable to apply L1 in EFL classrooms when teachers and students have the same first language. The results of this research disclosed that teachers' code-switching served two key functions: academic and managerial functions.

Based on the data analysis, Teachers deployed code-switching in their EFL classes. The initial purpose of teachers' code-switching was to transmit the lesson's contents to their students. Although the essential goal of an EFL classroom is to master English, not to use two languages, teachers used code-switching to enhance students' understanding, grammatical rules, elucidating vocabularies, recapitulation, correct errors, and compensating for teachers' incompetence. The findings of this study concur with the past research in the literature (Ataş & Sağın-Şimşek, 2021; Sali, 2014; Taşçı Aksu Ataç, 2020; Üstünel, 2016) in which they reported that code-switching is used to enhance students' inadequate proficiency in English as well as to compensate the teachers' incompetence. Besides that, this study backs a study conducted by Temesgen and Hailu (2022) who reported that code-switching is commonly deployed in naturalistic context to compensate linguistic deficiency of teachers. On the one hand, one of the reasons for implementing code-switching in this study was for the purpose of compensating linguistic deficiency of teachers which is deemed a serious indicator that may lead to the emergence of a scientifically poor society, as its repercussions will be on all sectors, such as health, education, and vocational fields. On the other hand, in brief, it can be said that the findings of this study corroborate Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory, which indicates that L1 is a crucial mediating factor for EFL learning process. In other words, teachers deployed code-switching as a scaffolding technique for purpose of assisting their students to master the materials rather than relying solely on English.

The study sought to pinpoint the motivations behind teachers' code-switching employment. The findings of this study revealed several factors that prompted the three teachers to use code-switching during their lessons. These factors included the learners' low English ability, some teachers' limited English competence, some intricacies of language skills, class management, sharing the same first language, and heterogeneous classes. Students' low English proficiency is one of these elements triggering teachers to employ code-switching. Observations accompanied by the three teachers' perspectives collected through interviews affirmed that students' low English proficiency significantly influenced their decision on whether to use code-switching. This study corroborates previous research (Bairmani et al., 2022, Temesgen & Hailu, 2022), which asserted that students' limited proficiency in English are a key factor triggering teachers to employ code-switching.

Teachers in this study also resorted to exploit code-switching when they are unable to provide coherent explanations of the lessons due to their limited proficiency in English language. Specifically, when they lack sufficient English language skills, they employ Arabic language to accommodate their speech based on their limited competence in English, even though English is the primary language of instruction. In other words, teachers relied on Arabic language to compensate for their inadequate English skills. The findings of this study align with previous studies (Ataş & Sağın-Şimşek, 2021, Bairmani et al., 2022, Temesgen & Hailu, 2022), which asserted that teachers' proficiency in English is a major element influencing their employment of code-switching.

Apart from what the above-mentioned, heterogeneous class or "mixed-ability class" is another factor that compelled the three teachers to utilize code-switching. The findings of this study significantly corroborate a study conducted by Temesgen and Hailu (2022), who reported that "the mixed-ability class" was a major obstacle that influenced them to use code-switching, and thus, they exploited Amharic to accommodate learners' limited English proficiency. This study is consistent with the point of view of accommodation theory, which states that "interlocutors adjust their speech and other forms of verbal or non-verbal communication to accommodate their conversation partners" (Sachdev, Giles & Pauwels, 2013 cited in Temesgen & Hailu, 2022, p. 19).

Conclusion:

This study inspected the code-switching functions of Iraqi EFL teachers and the reasons contributing to their code-switching rehearsals. Based on the findings, it was also observed that teachers tend to exploit the Arabic language at a level similar to that of their students to ensure effective learning. However, while this may serve the teachers' purpose, it definitely did not assist in enhancing students' language progression. In this case, the massive application of Arabic has not helped guide students toward becoming proficient English learners. It can be said that it does not provide the optimal conditions for language development. In another vein, code-switching might play a role in helping students with low English proficiency improve their English to make teaching easier. In fact, it is seen as an alternative method to avoid the frustration and hassle of dealing with such students. It can be said that students may understand the lessons better through constant translation and explanation in Arabic, and yet this approach may not drive them to become truly qualified in English. However, there is certainly a gap between students' interest in learning English and their low achievement in examinations. As observed, there seems to be a possible gap or missing link in the approaches many teachers use to teach English. Since English is a foreign language in the Iraqi syllabus, it cannot be taught using only English throughout the lessons. First-language support is a pivotal element in teaching, and the massive application of the Arabic language during lessons may, of course, vary depending on students' proficiency in English.

Teachers' limited competence in English could be another dominant factor contributing to the widespread use of the Arabic language during lessons. Specifically, teachers who feel the need to employ Arabic as an aid in their classrooms due to their limited competence in English should carefully consider its repercussions on students' language development. They need to be aware of the purposes of code-switching and avoid excessive reliance on it. As noted by Krashen (1989), using the mother tongue (L1) can facilitate the smooth delivery of English lesson content. Arabic can be a valuable resource if teachers know how and when to use it. For example, Arabic can be useful when making a contrastive analysis

of its grammatical features. By doing so, students will be able to understand the shared features, which can assist them in learning English.

A mixed-ability class is one of the key factors that contribute to the use of code-switching. Students in a mixed-ability class, also known as a heterogeneous class, have varying levels of knowledge, skills, and learning styles. Some students may pick up concepts rapidly in such classes, while others may need more time and assistance to fully comprehend the same content. This diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for teachers. On the one hand, designing lessons for such classes that meet the needs of every student can be challenging; this calls for flexible grouping, differentiated instruction, and individualized feedback. A mixed-ability environment, on the other hand, encourages peer learning, teamwork, and the growth of critical social skills. The current study recommends that teachers need to use strategies such as scaffolding, tiered assignments, and interactive exercises to keep each student engaged, interested and makes progress. By embracing the strengths of each student, a mixed-ability class can transform into an inclusive and effective learning environment.

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ملخص البحث:

تُسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على ظاهرة التحويل اللغوي، الذي يُعرّف بأنه الانتقال من لغة إلى أخرى بهدف تعزيز التواصل البشري والخطاب المؤثر. يتناول البحث الحالي استخدامات التحويل اللغوي لدى المعلمين العراقيين في صفوف اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية. حيث تركز الدراسة على نحو اساسي في المساهمة على فهم أسباب استخدام المعلمين العراقيين للتحويل اللغوي، وكيفية استخدامه ومتى يُستخدم لتحسين عملية تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنكليزية. وقد اعتمد البحث على منهج بحث نوعي، باستخدام أداتين: الملاحظة والمقابلات شبه المنظمة. شارك في هذه الدراسة ثلاثة مدرسين للغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية من كلية النسر الجامعة في العراق للوقوف على آرائهم حول اسباب وكيفية استخدامهم للتحويل اللغوي. كشفت النتائج أن ظاهرة الانتقال من لغة الى اخرى داخل الصف الدراسي أثر كثيراً على استخدام مهارات اللغة الإنكليزية من الطلبة. كما أظهرت الدراسة كيف سهّل التحويل اللغوي عملية التعليم وسلطت الضوء على الحالات والاسباب التي دفعت المعلمين استخدام التحويل اللغوي والتي تتلخص بالآتي: انخفاض كفاءة الطلبة في اللغة الإنكليزية، وكفاءة اللغة الإنكليزية المحدودة لدى بعض المعلمين، بعض تحديات استخدام المهارات اللغوية، إدارة الفصل، ومشاركة نفس اللغة الأم لأغراض التعلم، والفصول غير المتجانسة من حيث كفاءة الطلبة. وظهرت النتائج ان أكثر الاسباب التي اسردها المعلمين لأسباب استخدامهم التحويل اللغوي هو انخفاض كفاءة الطلبة في اللغة الإنكليزية، كفاءة اللغة الإنكليزية المحدودة لدى بعض المعلمين، والصفوف الدراسية غير المتجانسة من حيث كفاءة الطلبة. كما وتضمنت نتائج الدراسة حقيقة ان استخدام التحويل اللغوي يُعتبر استراتيجية تدريس مفيدة، إلا أنه لا يوفر الظروف المثلى لتطوير اللغة الإنكليزية لدى الطلبة المتعلمين.