

**CODE-SWITCHING PRACTICES AND LANGUAGE PREFERENCES
AMONG MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM:
A STUDY AT SEKOLAH INDONESIA KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA**

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Abstract: This study examines the use of code-switching in English classroom instruction at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), a transnational Indonesian school where English, Malay, and Indonesian are routinely used. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, data were collected through four weeks of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with three English teachers and selected students (Grades 10–12), and analysis of instructional documents and school language policies. The findings indicate that code-switching serves three main functions: pedagogical, social, and managerial. Pedagogically, it is used to clarify instructions, explain unfamiliar concepts, and support students' comprehension. Socially, code-switching facilitates classroom interaction and encourages student participation. Managerially, it assists teachers in managing classroom routines and transitions. These findings suggest that code-switching functions as a strategic communicative resource in multilingual classrooms rather than as an indicator of linguistic deficiency. The study contributes to discussions on multilingual pedagogy by highlighting how code-switching supports instructional effectiveness in overseas Indonesian school contexts.

Keywords: *classroom interaction, code-switching, language and culture, multilingual education, pedagogical strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Code-switching is a common linguistic practice in multilingual educational settings (Vilakazi et al., 2024) where speakers switch from one language to the other during a discourse. It is the task of teachers to stimulate the multilingual repertoire, and thus also the alternation between languages, that frequently takes place as a natural part of the classroom interaction (Suryaningsih, 2023). Through changing the languages, speakers can make difficult-to-understand ideas clearer, add emphasis in certain areas, and keep learners interested and involved (Brdarević-Čeljo et al., 2024). Additionally, the use of code switching can contribute to classroom management (Fachriyah, 2017), establishing a more inclusive space for learning and social bonding among participants. It is understood as “the switch between two languages in a single discourse, utterance or sign” (Mangila, 2019). Code-switching, as distinct from code-mixing, typically refers to intersentential alternation across sentence boundaries within the same speech event. In classroom interaction, particularly in multilingual settings, code-switching serves pedagogical and communicative functions such as facilitating comprehension, managing classroom discourse, and building socio-affective ties (Junaidi, 2020).

Students are also empowered to converse actively in class, and the social and cultural hierarchy is diminished (Yap et al., 2017). Zainil and Arsyad (2021) suggest that this phenomenon is closely related to students’ concern over maintaining face in communicative situations, particularly when using a second or foreign language. As a result, they fall back on their first language while having to communicate. This practice is especially salient in multilingual classrooms where students share a common first language while learning an additional language. In line with this, Zainuddin (2016) identifies four conditions under which Indonesian students switch to English: (a) lack of lexical equivalence, (b) displaying linguistic ability, (c) achieving specificity, and (d) maintaining fluency and preventing misunderstanding. These findings indicate that code-switching is not merely compensatory, but reflects strategic linguistic choices shaped by social roles, cultural identity, and situational demands.

Previous studies have explored code-switching in multilingual classrooms across diverse contexts, such as bilingual education programs (Cahyani et al., 2018), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting in Asia (Liu et al., 2025), and immersion programs (Rohman et al., 2025). In bilingual contexts, code-switching often functions as a

pedagogical scaffold, whereas in EFL classrooms it is frequently employed to facilitate comprehension and classroom interaction. Immersion programs, by contrast, tend to restrict code-switching to preserve target-language exposure. However, research focusing on Indonesian overseas schools remains limited.

For instance, studies in Catalan-Spanish bilingual classrooms in Spain demonstrate that code-switching functions as a cognitive tool for cross-linguistic knowledge transfer and conceptual development (Ramon-Casas et al., 2023). Also, research undertaken in Malaysian ESL classes reported that students doing strategic using L2 for the purpose of switching not only provided opportunities to understand but also promoted rapport and student motivation (Teh, 2025). While these international findings provide valuable insights, they do not fully capture the sociolinguistic complexity of Indonesian overseas schools. Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) represents a distinctive transnational educational context where Indonesian, Malay, and English coexist within institutional, cultural, and curricular frameworks. This convergence creates unique linguistic dynamics shaped not only by pedagogical considerations, but also by cross-border influences and symbolic negotiations of national identity.

Thus, the present study is based on sociolinguistic and bilingualism theories (Jegede, 2024), especially from the interactionist framework in which language choice occurs for practising communication as well as identity (Kasiyarno & Apriyanto, 2025). Studies in related multilingual school settings have found the interactionist approach to be useful for analysing code-switching patterns both structurally and non-structurally (Mustafayeva et al., 2025). Within this framework, code-switching is understood as an interactional resource through which teachers and learners construct meaning, manage classroom interaction, and position themselves socially. The interactionist perspective therefore informs both the analytical focus and the qualitative descriptive methodology adopted in this study. By examining code-switching practices among multilingual learners in English classrooms at SIKL, this research seeks to address an underexplored context in existing literature and contribute context-sensitive insights relevant to language policy, teacher development, and pedagogical practice in multilingual education settings.

Based on the issues outlined above, this study is guided by the following research questions: 1) What functions does code-switching serve in English classroom interactions at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur? 2) How do teachers and students employ code-

switching for pedagogical, social, and managerial purposes? 3) How does the transnational context of SIKL shape patterns of code-switching in classroom interaction? To address these research questions, the following section reviews relevant theoretical and empirical studies on code-switching in multilingual educational contexts.

Previous studies on code-switching have largely focused on pedagogical functions in bilingual classrooms (Cahyani et al., 2018; Mangila, 2019), affective and social dimensions in ESL contexts (Muslihati et al., 2023; Teh, 2025), and structural patterns of language alternation in immersion or EFL settings (Lam & Matthews, 2020; Ramon-Casas et al., 2023). However, these studies rarely address transnational Indonesian school contexts, where multilingual practices intersect with issues of national identity and cross-border language policy. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how code-switching functions simultaneously as a pedagogical strategy and an identity negotiation mechanism in overseas Indonesian schools such as SIKL.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Conceptualizing Code-Switching in Educational Contexts

The language alternation of speakers from two or more linguistic varieties in one discourse is termed code-switching (Mangila, 2019). Unlike code-mixing, code-switching generally denotes alternation across sentences or clauses within the same speech event (Suhartini & Nggawu, 2022). In educational contexts, particularly multilingual classrooms, code-switching extends beyond a structural linguistic phenomenon and functions as a pedagogical and interactional resource. Previous studies indicate that it supports comprehension, facilitates instructional clarity, and fosters socio-affective connections between teachers and learners (Muslihati et al., 2023), thereby contributing to effective classroom interaction and discourse management.

Functions and Motivations for Code-Switching

Many researchers have observed the different roles of code-switching in classroom conversations. Zainuddin (2016) identifies several motivations, including addressing lexical gaps, demonstrating linguistic competence, achieving specificity, and maintaining fluency to prevent communicative breakdown. In addition, students' language alternation has been linked to a 'cultural and social system of face', particularly in situations where learners share a common first language while using a second or

foreign language (Zainil & Arsyad, 2021). Collectively, these studies suggest that code-switching reflects the interplay between linguistic competence, social relationships, and cultural identity, positioning it as a strategic communicative choice rather than a sign of linguistic deficiency.

Code-Switching in International Educational Contexts

Research from a range of educational contexts emphasises the pedagogic value of code-switching. Bilingual Catalan-Spanish classrooms in Spain employed code-switching as a cognitive scaffold for conceptual understanding and knowledge transfer (Ramon-Casas et al., 2023). Similarly, studies in Malaysian ESL classrooms report that strategic language alternation enhances comprehension, classroom rapport, and learner engagement (Teh, 2025). While these findings demonstrate the benefits of code-switching across different contexts, they also indicate that its functions are shaped by institutional goals, language policies, and sociolinguistic environments, rather than being universally uniform.

Code-Switching in Indonesian and Foreign School Settings

Studies in Indonesia have reported code-switching in bilingual and EFL contexts (Cahyani et al., 2018; Rohman et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). However, research on Indonesian overseas schools remains scarce. In transnational institutions such as Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), students typically operate within a trilingual repertoire of Indonesian, Malay, and English resulting in distinctive code-switching patterns influenced by curriculum orientation, cross-border cultural exposure, and processes of national identity construction. This setting differs from both domestic Indonesian schools and host-country institutions, suggesting the need for context-sensitive analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on sociolinguistic and bilingual education views, specifically on the interactionist theory (Jegede, 2025; Kasiyarno & Apriyanto, 2025). This framework conceptualizes linguistic repertoire as a communicative resource through which speakers negotiate meaning, social relationships, and identity in interaction. Within classroom settings, interactionism enables the analysis of how code-switching emerges in response to pedagogical demands, affective considerations, and classroom management needs. As such, the interactionist perspective provides an analytical lens for examining

both the functions and contextual motivations of code-switching in multilingual learning environments.

Research Gap

Although code-switching in multilingual classrooms has been widely examined in both local and international contexts, limited attention has been given to its occurrence in Indonesian overseas schools such as SIKL. Existing studies largely focus on structural classifications or general functional categories, with relatively little emphasis on how teachers' and students' attitudes shape language alternation in transnational educational settings. Consequently, there remains a lack of empirical research that integrates pedagogical, social, and identity-oriented dimensions of code-switching within Indonesian overseas schools. By addressing this gap, the present study seeks to contribute context-based insights that can inform language policy, teacher preparation, and pedagogical practices in similar multilingual and transnational education contexts.

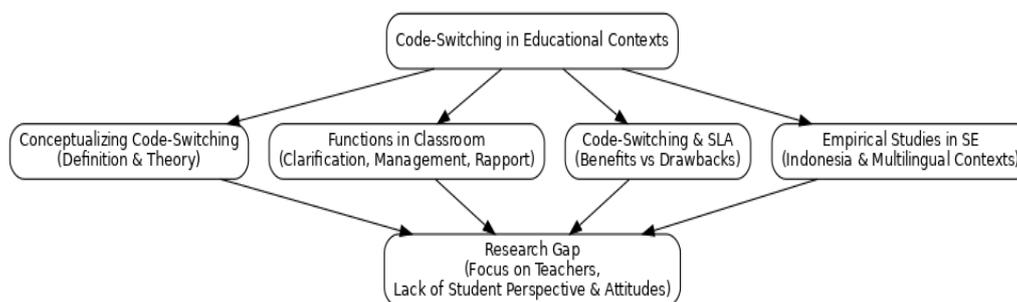


Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Research Gap

METHOD

The author decided to use a qualitative descriptive research method to study how code-switching is used and for what purposes in multilingual English lessons at the Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) because this method is believed to allow for careful observation of how language is used in real situations, taking into account the social, cultural, and educational factors related to code-switching. A qualitative descriptive design is appropriate for capturing naturally occurring interactional practices without manipulating instructional variables, thereby maintaining the authenticity of classroom communication.

Research Design

In the context of sociolinguistics and bilingual education, this study uses a qualitative descriptive design. This design enables an interactionist approach to

understanding how participants negotiate meaning and identity through language choice, as well as how their sociolinguistic backgrounds influence classroom interaction. Classroom observation is the first step in the historical sequence of this study, followed by interviews and document analysis. Observations were conducted in a non-participant (passive) manner to minimize researcher intervention in the learning process.

Data Sources

There were two primary data sources in this study. The first source consisted of four weeks of classroom observations involving three English teachers and sixty students from grades 10-12 who regularly use Indonesian, Malay, and English. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria that teachers were actively teaching English classes and students were enrolled in multilingual classroom settings at SIKL. The number of teachers and students reflects accessibility and the representativeness of multilingual classroom interaction within the school context. The second data source included supporting materials such as lesson plans, instructional materials, and school language policy documents. These documents provided contextual information regarding institutional language practices and expectations, complementing the observational and interview data.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicating that additional observations and interviews no longer produced substantially new patterns of code-switching functions. The inclusion of three English teachers and sixty students over a four-week observation period was considered sufficient to capture recurring interactional practices within multilingual English classrooms at SIKL. The study was limited to formal classroom interactions during English lessons and did not examine informal language use outside instructional settings, which constitutes a boundary of the present research.

Procedures for Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through several stages. Classroom observation were conducted passively to capture everyday instances of code-switching without taking part in the learning process. Different tools, such as audio recordings and field notes, were utilized to provide sufficient detail of the interactions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participating teachers and a selected group of students to explore their motivations and considerations when switching languages in different classroom

situations. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' responses. In addition, institutional documents related to language policy guidelines and teaching materials were analyzed to understand how institutional norms and expectations influenced language use in the classroom. All the data was copied word for word and analyzed for the common features and patterns that revolved around code-switching. Ethical issues such as the consent of the participants and their anonymity, were fully observed in the case of this research.

Data Analysis

All collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved several stages: data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, initial coding of code-switching instances, categorization of codes, and identification of recurring themes. A coding framework was developed inductively based on observed patterns and guided by existing literature on classroom code-switching. Through this process, instances of code-switching were categorized into three functional themes: pedagogical, social, and managerial.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing classroom observations, interview data, and document analysis. Member checking was conducted with participating teachers to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations were fully observed in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was ensured, and all data were used solely for academic research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Across the four week observation period, pedagogical code-switching emerged as the most frequent function, followed by social functions, while managerial functions appeared less frequently but consistently. Additionally, document analysis, such as lesson plans and school language policy, confirmed that bilingual communication was encouraged as part of inclusive classroom management.

Analysis of the observational and interview data indicates that pedagogical code-switching accounted for the majority of observed instances, particularly during instruction delivery, concept clarification, and task transitions. Social functions were moderately frequent and primarily occurred during student participation and teacher feedback, whereas managerial functions appeared mainly during classroom transitions and time management. In pedagogical contexts, teachers frequently alternated between Indonesian, Malay, and English to clarify instructions and explain unfamiliar concepts. For example, a teacher stated, “*Open your book halaman sepuluh,*” illustrating instructional scaffolding through code-switching.

Social functions of code-switching were observed in interactions aimed at maintaining rapport, reducing tension, and encouraging student participation. These instances commonly occurred during student responses, requests for clarification, and teacher feedback. Examples such as “*Miss, boleh saya answer in Bahasa?*” and “*Good job! Teruskan seperti ini*” demonstrate how language alternation was used to facilitate interpersonal communication and create a supportive classroom atmosphere. Compared to pedagogical functions, social code-switching appeared less frequently but was recurrent across different classroom situations.

Managerial code-switching was the least frequent category but remained a regular feature of classroom organization. This function was observed when teachers managed time, organized activities, and reminded students of classroom routines or schedules. Utterances such as “*Okay, we will discuss this after break time, ya*” and “*Don’t forget, besok ada quiz kecil ya*” exemplify the use of code-switching to regulate classroom flow and transitions. Table 1 presents representative excerpts categorized by dominant function and classroom context.

As summarized in Table 1, pedagogical code-switching constitutes the most dominant function, particularly during instruction delivery, clarification, and task transitions. Social functions appear with moderate frequency, mainly supporting participation and affective interaction, while managerial functions occur less frequently and are primarily associated with classroom organization and time management. This distribution indicates that code-switching in SIKL classrooms is systematically aligned with instructional priorities rather than occurring randomly.

Table 1. Examples of Code-Switching, Their Functions, and Contexts

| No | Code Switching Quotation | Function | Context |
|----|---|--|------------------------------|
| 1. | Teacher: “Open your book <i>halaman sepuluh.</i> ” | Pedagogical – Instruction delivery | Directing students to a page |
| 2. | Teacher: “Remember, <i>kalau tidak paham</i> , you can ask me anytime.” | Pedagogical – Clarification | Supporting comprehension |
| 3. | Student: “Miss, <i>boleh saya</i> answer in Bahasa?” | Social – Reducing awkwardness | Seeking permission |
| 4. | Student: “This one <i>susah</i> , Miss.” | Social – Expressing difficulty | Sharing challenges |
| 5. | Teacher: “Good job! <i>Teruskan seperti ini.</i> ” | Social – Encouragement | Praising performance |
| 6. | Teacher: “Okay, we will discuss this after break time, <i>ya.</i> ” | Managerial – Time management | Transition to next activity |
| 7. | Teacher: “Don’t forget, <i>besok ada quiz kecil ya.</i> ” | Managerial – Reminders | Informing schedule |
| 8. | Teacher: “ <i>Sekarang</i> , let’s try another example.” | Pedagogical – Transition between tasks | Moving to a new activity |

Discussion

This study demonstrates that code-switching in SIKL’s English classrooms functions as a strategic communicative resource rather than a random linguistic practice. Interpreted through an interactionist sociolinguistic framework, the findings indicate that teachers and students actively draw on their multilingual repertoires to negotiate meaning, participation, and classroom order. These results reinforce the view that language choice in multilingual classrooms is socially situated and purpose-driven (Jegede, 2025; Kasiyarno & Apriyanto, 2025).

From a pedagogical perspective, the dominance of pedagogical code-switching aligns with previous research emphasizing its role as a scaffolding mechanism in bilingual education. Similar to findings in Indonesian and other EFL contexts (Cahyani et al., 2018; Fachriyah, 2017; Mangila, 2019), teachers at SIKL employed Indonesian alongside English primarily to clarify instructions, explain unfamiliar concepts, and facilitate transitions between learning activities. This supports the interactionist view that learners’ comprehension is co-constructed through accessible linguistic resources rather than constrained by rigid monolingual norms. However, unlike studies conducted in mononational contexts, the pedagogical use of code-switching at SIKL occurs within a transnational school environment, where linguistic choices are shaped by students’

multilingual backgrounds and institutional expectations rather than solely by proficiency-related concerns.

The social and affective functions of code-switching further highlight its role in fostering inclusion and classroom rapport. Consistent with prior studies in Malaysian and Indonesian bilingual classrooms (Muslihati et al., 2023; Teh, 2025; Zainil & Arsyad, 2021), language alternation in SIKL was used to reduce learner anxiety, encourage participation, and soften hierarchical teacher–student relationships. From an interactionist standpoint, such practices reflect how speakers manage interpersonal alignment and emotional engagement through language choice. Rather than merely facilitating comprehension, code-switching in these instances serves to negotiate social positioning and participation rights within classroom discourse.

Managerial uses of code-switching, although less frequent than pedagogical functions, remain analytically significant. The use of Indonesian or mixed utterances to regulate classroom routines, manage time, and reinforce discipline echoes findings from bilingual school settings in Indonesia (Cahyani et al., 2018; Fachriyah, 2017). In the SIKL context, these managerial switches appear to prioritize efficiency and clarity, particularly in situations where exclusive use of English could delay task execution or lead to misunderstanding. This supports the view that code-switching operates as a pragmatic classroom management strategy in multilingual instructional environments.

While this study suggests that code-switching at SIKL may also carry symbolic meanings related to students' linguistic backgrounds, claims regarding the maintenance of national or cultural identity should be interpreted cautiously. Existing literature acknowledges that language choice can index identity and group affiliation in multilingual settings (Brdarević-Čeljo et al., 2024; Kasiyarno & Apriyanto, 2025); however, the present data do not allow for broad generalizations about identity formation. Rather, the findings indicate that code-switching functions as a flexible communicative resource within a specific institutional and sociolinguistic context, where Indonesian, Malay, and English coexist in daily classroom interaction.

The study involved a small number of teachers, a limited observation period, and a single institutional setting, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative design prioritizes depth of interactional analysis over frequency-based generalization. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of

research on multilingual classroom discourse by illustrating how code-switching at SIKL operates at pedagogical, social, and managerial levels. Rather than signaling linguistic deficiency, code-switching emerges as an adaptive and context-sensitive practice that supports learning, interaction, and classroom organization in a multilingual educational setting.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study demonstrates that code-switching in English classrooms at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) functions as a systematic communicative resource rather than an incidental language practice. The findings indicate that pedagogical, social, and managerial functions of code-switching are closely interconnected and shaped by classroom interactional needs within a multilingual setting. From an interactionist perspective, language alternation enables teachers and students to co-construct meaning, sustain participation, and manage classroom activities effectively. Importantly, the results suggest that code-switching supports instructional clarity and affective engagement without undermining English exposure, particularly in a trilingual environment involving English, Indonesian, and Malay. Rather than framing code-switching as a linguistic deficiency, this study positions it as a context-sensitive pedagogical strategy that responds to learners' communicative repertoires and institutional realities. While the findings are specific to SIKL, they offer empirical insight into how multilingual classrooms negotiate instructional effectiveness through flexible language use.

Based on the findings, several implications can be drawn. First, English teachers in multilingual schools are encouraged to employ code-switching strategically to facilitate comprehension, participation, and classroom management, while maintaining a principled focus on English development. Second, language policy formulation in overseas Indonesian schools may benefit from acknowledging code-switching as a pedagogical resource rather than restricting it through rigid monolingual norms. Third, teacher education programs should incorporate reflective training on multilingual classroom discourse to help teachers make informed decisions about language use. Finally, future research should involve broader participant groups, longer observation periods, and comparative school contexts to further examine the role of code-switching across instructional settings.

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