

Undergraduate ESL Learners' Perceptions of Code-Switching and its influence on Classroom participation in a Pakistani University

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Abstract

This study explores how learners' perceptions of code-switching in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms within a multilingual Pakistani context. Adopting a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 undergraduate learners selected through purposive sampling. This study investigates how code-switching influences confidence, classroom engagement, learning support, and communicative competence. The findings reveal that learners strategically employ code-switching to manage anxiety, overcome linguistic limitations, and maintain classroom interaction. The code-switching was found to function as an effective cognitive scaffold, particularly in grammar explanation, vocabulary learning, and clarification of tasks. Although learners recognised both the short-term advantages of code-switching for comprehension and participation, they also demonstrated a critical awareness of the possible long-term effects of code-switching on English fluency if overused. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory and the Communicative Competence framework, this study concludes that code-switching is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but a socially mediated and pedagogically valuable resource when used in moderation. The study offers implications for ELT pedagogy and language policy in multilingual educational settings.

Introduction

Code-switching is a common linguistic behaviour in multilingual societies. It is a process of changing languages between two or more when communicating (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2021). The language used as a second language in Pakistan is English, which is not commonly used in day-to-day social interaction. When they find English a challenge, a lot of students turn towards Sindhi or Urdu in a classroom to find the meaning, convey their ideas, and control communication. Consequently, code-switching will be a natural phenomenon in English language classes at the undergraduate level. Scholars can propose various ideas regarding the importance of code-switching in teaching a second language. There is also the argument that high frequency of the first language decreases exposure to English, and it limits the chances of immersion (Krashen et al., 2017). In this perspective, English-only teaching is favoured as it will help the students practise the target language. Nevertheless, this stance might not be able to meet the needs of students who are not so confident and do not have an opportunity to communicate their ideas in English. Such students may need language assistance to comprehend coursework, attend classes, engage in discussions and do classroom tasks.

A more favourable opinion is given by other researchers. The researchers see that code-switching can assist learners to gain understanding, to feel less anxious, and to engage (Simasiku, 2015; Zulfikar, 2019). Students can also use their first language when they cannot find the words, when they need to explain something or when they want to keep communication. Code-switching, in these instances, is also a communicative and cognitive technique and not a weakness. It also enables students to share cultural ideas, emotions and social relations which might not be easily shared in English.

In the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, there is a linguistically diverse classroom situation. Students also belong to various parts of Sindh and communicate either in Urdu, Sindhi or other languages that are used locally. Several students are reluctant to communicate in English. They experience difficulties in vocabulary, accuracy and fluency. This indecision usually causes less involvement, fear of errors, and minimal involvement. Code-switching is often adopted by students to cope with these challenges to get the lessons and stay in touch. There is little information on how students themselves see this practice, although this practice is widespread. This lack of knowledge is the main issue of this research. Most of the past studies in Pakistan have centred on the application of code-switching by educators. These studies look into instructional strategies, classroom management or the teachers' attitudes to bilingual support. The perceptions of learners are scarcely researched, despite students being the ones who use code-switching the most when interacting with their peers and with the instructor. Teachers and policymakers might not comprehend the impact that code-switching has on the learning experience of students, their levels of confidence, and engagement, without knowing what learners think of the practice.

This lack of consideration towards the views of learners also points to the rationale of the current study. The process of code-switching is not the same among learners depending on their backgrounds, proficiency, and classroom setting. Code-switching can be effective since it helps to comprehend and reduce stress among some learners. It can be viewed as an obstacle to fluency in the eyes of others or a short-term fix that cannot facilitate long-term progress. By capturing such views, the educators can be able to make sense of how the learners perceive the bilingual practices and the impact of such practices on their learning behaviour. The input of learners can also be used in making the classroom environments more inclusive, supportive, and effective. The paper thus aims to consider the perceptions of ESL undergraduates at the University of Sindh. Through their opinions, the study aims to learn the effects of code-switching on learning, communication, and involvement in English language classes. It also tries to demonstrate how code-switching is used as a linguistic, cognitive and social resource in multilingual environments.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore the undergraduate ESL learners' perceptions of code-switching in English language classrooms and their participation in their classrooms.

Objectives

- To explore how ESL undergraduate learners perceive the role of code-switching.
- To explore the influence of code-switching on undergraduate learners' participation

Research questions

1. What are the perceptions of ESL learners about the use of code-switching in their English language classroom?
2. In what ways does code-switching influence learners' participation in English language classes?

Literature Review

Code-switching is an old language behaviour that is identified as part of multilingualism, especially among ESL students. Because of language choice, they use various linguistic resources to establish meaning, make sure that they can be understood, and maintain communication. In Pakistan, where the English language is a second language and where English is not often used as a primary language of daily communication, code-switching between English, Urdu, and local languages is a dominant practice in classrooms (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2021). Recent research does not consider code-switching a weakness associated with bilingual competence anymore, but rather it is becoming a conceptualised means of learning, identity formation, and involvement in multilingual classrooms (Simasiku, 2015; Zulfikar et al., 2019).

The concept of Code-Switching in ESL Learning

Many studies show that code-switching helps learners understand lessons easily. The Input Hypothesis developed by Krashen underlines the significance of comprehensible input, a bit higher than the current level of proficiency of learners (Krashen et al., 2017). In this context, code-switching serves as an interim that enables the students to fill the linguistic gap and find meaning when they are overwhelmed by the instruction in English alone. Empirical research always indicates that L1 strategic shifts assist learners in acquiring more multidimensional concepts in a shorter time, particularly in classes with linguistic diversity or low achievers (Yan et al., 2024; Torres, 2025). Meanwhile, over-dependence on L1 can lead to a decrease in exposure to English and, therefore, limit the growth of fluency and negotiation strategies required to use the language independently (Azhar, 2024; Velasco, 2025). This dualism makes code-switching an activity that needs to be managed and not abolished.

Sociocultural and Identity Dimensions

In addition to cognitive aspects of code-switching, code-switching indicates the sociocultural identity of the bilingual learners. Interactional sociolinguistics by Gumperz (1982) demonstrates that the choice of language is an indicator of identity, solidarity, and group membership. Switching into Urdu or Sindhi in Pakistani classrooms can also be relational, such as lessening the social distance or establishing a rapport or even conveying culturally related meanings that might not translate well into English (Brar, 2025). The findings of Heller (1992) also shed more light on the power relations negotiated by language alternation. L1 can be used to indicate familiarity and common cultural experience, whereas English can be used to indicate English academic authority or prestige. This interaction shows that code-switching is more than a linguistic repercussion, but it is also a statement of social positioning in the classroom.

Efforts toward a functional approach to code-switching

The Markedness Model by Myers-Scotton (1993) explains that speakers choose languages based on social norms. Unmarked options (usually English in scholarly settings) are in line with the expectations of an institution, and marked shifts are intentional communicative/relational changes, including making a point, expressing empathy, or making things easier to understand to colleagues (Smith, 2024). To the learners, the marked switches to L1 are also a frequent aid in sustaining fluency in a time of lexical distress or emotional stress. Equally, code-switching facilitates cooperative learning through the provision of peer explanations, meaning negotiation and cooperative problem-solving. Students often say that bilingual dialogues will enable them to better resolve their misunderstandings and be more willing to engage in group engagement (Ramaila, 2025; Miller, 2025).

Types of Code-Switching

The taxonomy of the two, which is inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching, has been highly employed in the study of bilingual discourse (Poplack, 1980). Urdu-English bilingualism is particularly widespread in Pakistan, a country where the intra-sentential switching is especially prevalent among bilinguals, indicating their high level of bilingualism and strong linguistic interaction (Romaine, 1995). Pragmatic functions, including emphasis of attitudes, softening expressions or signalling humour, are commonly performed by means of tag-switching, a syntactically minimal process (Auer, 1998). These patterns suggest that the language alternation of the learners is cognitively mediated, as well as socially strategic.

Learners' Perceptions

Recent studies indicate that learners strongly believe that code-switching supports and does not hinder. According to Amanah et al. (2025) and Xiao et al. (2025), reported that student find it easier to follow lessons in L1 their which, reduce anxiety and enhance participate in classes, especially when it is necessary to discuss complicated academic materials, is enhanced.

Most students believe that code-switching is a kind of safety net which helps them to stay in touch with the world at the time when they do not know English well. Nevertheless, more advanced students occasionally consider using L1 frequently to be an obstacle to immersion and eventual fluency (Kakar and Sarwari, 2022). Such deviation shows the necessity of a pedagogical balance, in which L1 is applied as a scaffold without restricting the exposure to English.

Code-Switching in the Pakistani situation

The multilingual nature of Pakistan places code-switching as a natural form of communication (Ahmad et al., 2023). English has become a high-prestige institutional language, but it is not widely spoken in real life (Rehman et al., 2020; Gallagher & Scrivner, 2025). English-only policies in Pakistan may also raise concerns regarding equitable participation among learners with different linguistics background (Murad et al, 2024). As a result, students are willing to mediate their learning experiences in urban and rural institutions, but the latter have a higher level of dependence since exposure to English is lower (Deuchar

et al., 2021; Qasim, 2024). Research by the independent universities of Lahore and Karachi states that strategic bilingual education enhances understanding of specific coursework, such as business communication and professional English (Mirjat and John, 2024; Khanyile et al., 2025). These arguments have indicated that code-switching is not only compensatory but also pedagogically adaptive in Pakistani higher education.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Communicative Competence Framework (CCF) by Canale and Swain. One of the important theories of the Socio-cultural approach to learning is that learning is a socially mediated process, in which interaction and scaffolding help in language development (Vygotsky, 1978). In the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), code-switching serves as a tool to help students comprehend difficult concepts, relax the cognitive load, and gradually build their proficiency in English. In line with this, the Communicative Competence Framework (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983) posits that effective communicative skills rely on learners' four communicative competences, namely, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. In this regard, code-switching is a communicative tool which assists the learner to bridge the language gap, mediate meaning and maintain classroom engagement. The study synthesises these frameworks to conceptualise code-switching as a learning scaffolding and communicative strategy that will facilitate the learners' understanding, self-confidence, and involvement in the class in multilingual ESL contexts.

Research Gap

Even though the concept of code-switching has been considered a pedagogical practice in international studies, Pakistani research is overrepresented through a teacher-centred approach and quantitative or mixed-method studies (Rehman et al., 2020; Nawaz, 2023). There are very few studies which investigate the perception of the learners, particularly in universities of the public sector in Sindh, where the students are a mix of rural and multilingual backgrounds. The current literature also does not consider the emotional, identity-based and mental aspects of code-switching. The proposed research fills these gaps by documenting the lived experiences of the learners in a qualitative, phenomenological research design.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, viewing reality as socially constructed through learners' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In multilingual ESL classrooms, code-switching is a contextual and meaning-making practice shaped by culture, interaction and identity. Accordingly, a phenomenological methodology was employed to examine undergraduate ESL learners' lived experiences of code-switching, capturing its cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Figure 2: Using Sundre's Research Onion to structure Research Methodology (Sundre, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2029)

Population and Sampling

The targeted population is the ESL students in the English courses category at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. The diverse linguistic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds are represented in this population, which is why it is ideal when it comes to investigating the complex nature of code-switching.

To select the participants, purposive sampling was applied to select participants who actively engage in code-switching in classroom interactions. The purposive sampling method also ensured that those people who have rich and relevant experiences provided data that agrees with the research objective (Patton, 2015). 8 students between the ages of 18 and 25 were picked. This is a suitable size to conduct phenomenological research, which focuses on depth rather than breadth (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection Methods

Two supplementary data gathering techniques were used:

1. Semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to give their experiences freely and at the same time maintain uniformity among interviews. The interviews took 30–45 minutes and covered the attitudes, the motivation, emotional reactions, and the perceived impact of code-switching on the participation and understanding among the learners. The interviews were carried out in English, but the students were not restricted to using English only; they could refer to Urdu or Sindhi as well. All the interviews were audio-taped with permission and transcribed word-for-word.
2. Classroom observations gave some contextual information on naturalistic language behaviour. The researcher noted the process of the students negotiating meaning, communicating with their peers and reacting to the instructions using L1. The behavioural patterns observed were useful as they supplemented the interview data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied in six steps; Braun and Clarke (2006) described these steps to analyse the data:

Trustworthiness

The criteria of trustworthiness were applied based on the criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Triangulation and member checking were used to give credibility. The transferability of the results was facilitated by the fact that rich contextual descriptions were offered. An audit trail was used to document all research decisions, and this ensured dependability, whereas the reflexive journaling ensured that researcher bias was minimised to guarantee a high degree of confirmability.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institute of English Language and Literature Ethics Review Committee (ERC), University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan (Reference No IELL/ERC/2026/146, Approval Date 2nd August 2026). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Findings

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which resulted in the identification of 6 key themes that reflect ESL learners' perceptions and experiences of code-switching in English language classrooms.

Table 1
Alignment of Research Questions and Themes

Research Question	Themes Addressing the Question
RQ1: What is the perception of ESL learners about the use of code-switching in their English language classroom?	Theme 1: Learners' Comfort and Confidence using English Theme 2: Reason for Code-Switching (Strategic Competence) Theme 3: Code-Switching as Learning Support (Scaffolding in the ZPD) Theme 5: Perceived Disadvantages of Code-switching Theme 6: Sociolinguistic Patterns in Everyday Language Use
RQ2: In what ways does code-switching influence learners' participation in English language classes?	Theme 4: Influence of Code-Switching on Classroom Participation Theme 1: Learners' Comfort and Confidence using English

Learners' Comfort and Confidence using English

The results indicate that the contexts of comfort and confidence of learners in using English were dynamic and context-sensitive, and highly dependent on the social conditions. Confidence also impacted the classroom behaviour, level of participation, as well as the dependency on code-switching amongst learners. In general, the comfort and the confidence of the learners were critical in determining the ability of the learners to be willing to communicate in the English language, and the confidence did not occur uniformly among learners but varied according to the type of communicative situation they were in. Fear of making mistakes was also a major factor that affected the confidence of learners and, in many cases, would lead to hesitation, lack of participation, or silence.

Participant P3 explained

(Initially, I was not confident because I was afraid of making mistakes while speaking English) Participant 3.

The same participant also elaborated that,

P3

(“I needed to present in a class with more than 200 students in that class. Before, I did not give a presentation to a large audience, so at that time, I felt less confident and nervous.

The confidence of learners was also tested when it comes to communication with native speakers or the most proficient speakers of English.

Whenever I speak with a native speaker, I feel hesitant, and I am not very comfortable while speaking. Participant 3.

Such hesitation is a manifestation of the fact that confidence is formed not only by language skills but by social and linguistic dominance in relationships.

The other aspect that influenced the comfort and confidence of learners was the difficulty with accents and pronunciation.

(When I talk with people who speak English fluently, I feel less confident because they speak very fast, and I cannot respond properly.) participant 1

These responses indicate that confidence is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by comparison and interaction power, where native speakers are proficient and linguistically dominant. Moreover, pronunciation and accent variations also emerged as a significant barrier to learners. The participants said that they felt less comfortable when they could not understand or repeat some accents, especially those of native speakers. One participant explained:

These difficulties tended to make the learners use code-switching to preserve a communicative process and prevent a communication deadlock. The issues connected with the accent thus served to shape the confidence and involvement of learners as a significant social and communicative issue.

(Sometimes I do not understand the accent of English, and then I lose confidence while speaking) Participant 1

Another participant added.

(If I cannot pronounce words correctly, I prefer to switch to Urdu or Sindhi so that communication does not stop.) Participant 4.

These findings show that accent-related difficulties encourage code-switching as a strategy to maintain communicative flow and avoid breakdowns, reinforcing the social nature of confidence in language use.

Reason for Code-Switching (Strategic Competence)

The review revealed that the change to Urdu or Sindhi was clearly, functionally, and strategically motivated among the learners. Code-switching was not an unconscious practice but a strategic one that was applied to overcome communication challenges and keep communication going. The same theme was developed through the references of the participants to the vocabulary restriction and conceptual complexity, and pronunciation or accent-related issues. In addition, Vocabulary limitation was the most frequently reported trigger for code-switching. Participant 1 described this experience as follows:

P1: Quote (*"Whenever I speak with a teacher, I feel the need to use Urdu or Sindhi", "Whenever I can't make others understand my point of view"*).

Other participants also reported similar experiences, which showed that lexical gaps were a usual trigger for code-switching. Instead of quitting the communication, the learners switched to L1 so that continuity could be retained.

This demonstrates that code-switching functions as a compensatory strategy to address momentary lexical breakdown.

Moreover, Code-switching was also used by learners to explain complicated or abstract concepts. According to participant P5, *when I explain a difficult concept in Sindhi, another student better understands*.

Participant P4 also noted that *(I can understand some when I translate them into my native language)*.

These responses show that code-switching supports conceptual processing and meaning negotiations, particularly when English alone is insufficient for cognitive clarity.

However, Receptive difficulties were also dealt with through code-switching. Participant P4 observed that *(When I don't understand the teacher's English accent or pronunciation, I switch to another language to make sure I understand the message)*.

This shows that code-switching was employed as a repair strategy to address the difficulties in listening and ensure comprehension.

Code-Switching as Learning Support (Scaffolding in the ZPD)

The findings also indicated that the learners perceived code-switching as a fundamental learning support, specifically in the explanations made by the teacher and during instruction. This theme emerged from reference to grammar explanation, instruction clarification, and vocabulary mediation using L1.

Moreover, the respondents always claimed that grammar was easier to comprehend when explained in Urdu or Sindhi.

(Participant P7 said that Grammar becomes easy when it is explained in Urdu.)

Similarly, P2 recalled

(When the tense was explained in Sindhi, I suddenly understood it, P2)

These responses show that L1 use enhances conceptual clarity and facilitates grammatical understanding.

Moreover, Code-switching that was initiated by teachers was highly appreciated in the explanation of tasks. Participant P2 mentioned that *(when the teacher explains instructions in Sindhi, there is less confusion and the task becomes clear)*

This suggests that code-switching played a procedural role in ensuring task comprehension and effective classroom engagement.

In addition, Learners also relied on L1 to mediate learning vocabulary. Participant P6 said

(First, I understand the meaning of new English words in Urdu, and when I remember them in English)
participant 6

This indicates that learners used their first language to connect new vocabulary with an existing cognitive framework, supporting long-term retention.

Influence of Code Switching on Classroom Participation

The discussion showed that code-switching played a major role in the classroom involvement of learners. The respondents also stated that they were more willing to speak, were more engaged, and better able to share ideas when the use of Urdu or Sindhi was allowed. The use of code-switching allowed learners to continue as active participants in the classroom, especially in those circumstances where only speaking English caused a communicative strain.

P7: Quote *(“When I speak in English, I must pause to find the correct words and structure my sentences carefully, which makes my answer shorter. If I used Urdu or Sindhi, I could express my thoughts more gracefully and elaborate in detail. My answer would be longer and more complex because I am operating in a language where my vocabulary is naturally rich.*

This response shows that code-switching allows learners to maintain fluency, coherence, and depth of expression, which directly enhances classroom participation.

Moreover, according to the participants, code-switching decreased the communicative pressure and promoted participation. Participant P3 says that *(when I get confused in English, I ask my question in Urdu so that I do not stop participating)*,

Similarly, Participant P8 indicated that *(if I speak in Urdu, I can ask more questions and continue the discussion easily)*.

These narratives also indicate that code-switching functions as an anxiety-reducing strategy that prevents withdrawal from classroom interaction and sustains learners' engagement.

Moreover, another benefit of code-switching was that it allowed the learners to give longer, more explicit, and detailed answers. Participant P7 explained:

(In English, I take a lot of time to speak because I search for words, but in Urdu or Sindhi, I can explain everything clearly and fluently.) Participant 7

This suggests that code-switching facilitates discourse continuity and allows learners to express complex ideas that exceed their current English proficiency. As a result, learners are better able to organise thoughts, elaborate arguments, and remain communicatively active.

Perceived Disadvantages of Code-switching

As much as the participants significantly considered code-switching as an advantage, the analysis showed that there was a high degree of critical sensitivity towards the possible drawbacks of code-switching. This theme was created because learners were contemplating the danger of overdependence on their first language and how the same may affect their long-term proficiency in the English language. The respondents have shown the capability to consider such practice to be a supporting tool as well as a practice that needs to be controlled closely.

In addition, one of the recurrent concerns among participants was excessive reliance on Urdu or on Sindhi.

Participant P5 also warned that *(if we use too much Sindhi, we do not get enough practice in English)*

Another participant noted

(Sometimes students depend too much on Urdu and avoid speaking English.) Participant 2

These views indicate that learners are aware that habitual code-switching may reduce exposure to the target language and limit opportunities for English practice.

Moreover, participants also expressed concern that overuse of code-switching could negatively affect fluency development. Participant P7 stated:

(Only speaking English helps to improve fluency if we keep switching; fluency becomes slow.) participant 7

This reflects learners' understanding that sustained L2 use is necessary for developing automaticity, accuracy, and confidence in English.

Moreover, Learners perceive code-switching as beneficial in the short term, but potentially problematic if overused in the long term. Participant 6 explained

(Code-switching helps in understanding and participation, but if we always use it, we may not become fluent in English.) Participant 6.

This highlights learners' awareness of balancing immediate communicative comfort with long-term language development goals.

Sociolinguistic Patterns in Everyday Language Use

The findings revealed that code-switching was strongly related to learners' overall sociolinguistic practices outside of the classroom. The participants described home language use, peer interaction patterns, and context-specific language preferences, indicating that code-switching reflects their multilingual identities rather than classroom inadequacy.

Moreover, most of the participants indicated that they use Sindhi or Urdu as their native language at home. These practices in home languages created the basis of linguistics on which English was learned. L1 prevailing in domestic environments enhanced the multilingual orientation of the learners and affected their comfort level in language switching in school.

Moreover, Learners also described the flexible language missing in peer interactions.

Participant 2 explained

(With friends, we mix English, Urdu, and Sindhi.) participant 2

Participant 7 added

(We change languages depending on who we are talking to.)

This demonstrates that code-switching serves social functions such as meaning negotiation, solidarity, and intrapersonal bonding.

Participants also showed awareness of context-based language choice. Participant 6 noted:

(English is mostly used for assignments and online work, while Urdu or Sindhi is used in daily life).

This selective language use reflects sociolinguistic competence and understanding of contextual appropriateness.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings by examining undergraduate ESL learners' perception of code-switching in university English language classrooms. In contrast to the findings, where the themes emerged due to the data being provided, in this discussion, the importance of the findings in reference to the research questions, theoretical framework, and the existing literature is explained. Based on the Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the Communicative Competence Framework (Canale and Swain, 1980), the argument puts forward code-switching as a socially mediated, strategic, and pedagogically significant practice in the multilingual ESL setting.

Among the most important insights to be made based on the results, one can bring such an interpretation: code-switching is essential to minimise anxiety levels and help learners feel more confident when interacting in the classroom. The learners have self-reported that they felt more relaxed and ready to talk when they were given freedom to switch to their own language at some point where they were finding it linguistically challenging. Socioculturally, this is the mediational aspect of language as the first language as a psychological tool that allows learners to be occupied in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Instead of moving out of the interaction process, learners maintain participation, affective pressure and communicative flow by turning to code-switching. This meaning of the word is consistent with past research, which highlights the affective advantages of strategic L1 usage, especially in cases of alleviating anxiety and prompting learners to take risks in ESL classrooms (Simasiku, 2015; Zulfikar, 2019). The results also indicate that strict policies that enforce English as the sole language can unintentionally suppress the less proficient students and thus prevent any meaningful interaction and engagement.

Besides emotional regulation, the results reveal the fact that code-switching has a positive effect on classroom participation and interaction. According to the learners, the skills of switching between English and their first language helped them to ask questions, take part in dialogues, and express ideas more profoundly. In the Communicative Competence Framework, this behaviour represents strategic competence, which means the capacity of the learners to manage communication failures through the mobilisation of linguistic resources (Canale and Swain, 1980). Instead of considering code-switching as an absence of linguistic competence, the results reflect the communicative sensitivity and the ability of learners to be flexible in multilingual communication. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies that have indicated that meaning negotiation, concept clarification, and continuity in discourse are some of the ways learners code-switch in ESL classrooms (Canagarajah, 2011). Thus, the results challenge monolingual assumptions of language learning and support the idea that multilingual practices may improve, and not worsen, communicative effectiveness.

Another important pedagogical value of code-switching as a learning support mechanism is also described in the findings. Code-switching was viewed as one of the most valuable activities by learners in their perception in order to grasp complex grammar, acquire new vocabulary, and gain an understanding of task instructions. In the sociocultural perspective, this is a manifestation of the theoretical scaffolding principle of successive scaffolding of the learners towards self-performance in the target language (Vygotsky, 1978). The former language is used to limit cognitive load and assist in gaining better conceptual knowledge through the association of the new linguistic information with the previously acquired knowledge frameworks. This is aligned with the previous research, which proposes that the judicious use of L1 may facilitate meaning-making and learning effectiveness in ESL situations (Cook, 2010; Nawaz, 2023). Notably, students did not see code-switching as an alternative to studying English, but it was a temporary support that helped them to understand and communicate and eventually develop independence in using English.

One interpretation that is outstanding based on the findings is the awareness of the learners that there can be a limitation of too much code-switching. Respondents admitted that excessive use of their native language might limit their knowledge of English and postpone the acquisition of fluency. This critical consciousness implies that learners are thoughtful and purposeful users of language, who can manage the short-term communicative maintenance and long-term language growth objectives. This explanation is in line with Krashen's perspective that success in target language learning should be supported and exposed to a target language through enough comprehensible input (Krashen et al., 2017). These results reveal that students are aware of the significance of controlled and conscious code-switching, which supports the stance that good multilingual pedagogy presupposes guided and disciplined language use, and not ad hoc switching.

Moreover, the results show that code-switching is directly related to sociolinguistic identities of learners and daily language practices. The fact that learners use English, Urdu, and Sindhi as a means of communication demonstrates more general socio-cultural standards in which multilingualism is an inherent and appreciated tool of communication. In terms of sociolinguistics, the process of language selection would serve as an indicator of identity, solidarity and situational aptness (Gumperz, 1982). In the Pakistani scenario, where multilingualism is interwoven in social life, code-switching in classes reflects the language practices in the real world, as opposed to the manifestation of pedagogical inefficiency. This reading shows the necessity to recognise the linguistic repertoires of learners and legitimise multilingual identities in school, and at the same time, develop the English language effectively.

Comprehensively, the results lead to the accumulating literature where code-switching is viewed as a strategic, socially, and pedagogically useful practice in ESL classrooms. This qualitative study can be seen as an improvement on the existing research that mainly relied on teacher practices or quantitative performance, as it foregrounds the perspectives of learners. These findings can be used to explain sociocultural and communicative competence theories, indicating that the learning of language is essentially interactive, emotionally mediated, and socially embedded. The paper proves that, in its

moderate and strategic use, code-switching can facilitate self-confidence, engagement, understanding, and communication prompts without compromising the development of language in the long-term. These observations point to the necessity to have more flexible, inclusive and context-sensitive language policy and teaching practices in multilingual ESL classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the understanding of code-switching as perceived by undergraduate ESL students in English language classrooms and the role of code-switching in communication, learning, and participation. The results indicate that code-switching is not an accidental or lacking process but a resource that is strategic, socially mediated and pedagogically significant. Code-switching helped learners to deal with emotional difficulties, to surmount language barriers, assist learning, and maintain communication in the classroom.

This paper has shown that the social context and the communicative pressure influenced the comfort and the confidence of learners in using English and resulted in the utilisation of the first language as a protective and enabling mechanism. The role of code-switching was compensatory in nature because it enabled the learners to continue interacting and express themselves. In addition, the application of Urdu or Sindhi as a learning aid enhanced comprehension in the Zone of Proximal Development of learners, therefore demonstrating its application as a learning aid and not as a learning replacement for English.

Although learners have recognised the advantages of code-switching, they further indicated that they are aware of the disadvantages that it may have, especially when it is abused. This is an indication of a delicate perception of the necessity to strike a balance between communicative aid in the short term and language development objectives in the long term. Also, the sociolinguistic activities of learners revealed that code-switching was a part of their multilingual classifications and daily language and practices, which supported the thesis that it is not to be considered an inadequacy in the classroom.

Generally, the results confirm sociocultural and communicative competence viewpoints that acknowledge language learning as a socially located process. The proposed research is part of the continuously increasing literature supporting the use of multilingual pedagogies and opposing the monolingual beliefs in ESL situations. Understanding code-switching as a valid and useful tool, teachers will be able to establish more supportive, inclusive, and successful language learning settings.

Recommendations

Based on the research of this paper, pedagogical and institutional suggestions are offered. To begin with, English language teachers need to be more flexible and context-sensitive in the use of language in the classroom. Code-switching can be controlled, especially when explaining grammar, giving instructions and understanding complex ideas at the beginning. These practices have the potential to decrease the level of anxiety among learners and encourage the active integration of learners without compromising exposure to English.

Second, teacher training programmes must also feature multilingual pedagogy and sociocultural modules in learning a language. Teachers need to be shown the way to utilise the first language of learners as a scaffold, but slowly motivate them to use English more.

Institutionally, the strict English-only policies need to be reviewed, particularly where there are multilingual settings. The language policies must recognise the linguistic realities of the learners and promote the inclusion of classroom practices which encourage confidence and engagement.

Lastly, it is suggested to conduct future studies to determine the views of teachers toward code-switching, use mixed-method or longitudinal designs, and investigate the long-term effects of controlled code-switching on the development of language proficiency.

Declarations

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institute of English Language and Literature Ethics Review Committee (ERC), University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan (Reference No IELL/ERC/2026/146, Approval Date 2nd August 2026). This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and conditions stipulated by the committee for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Consent to publish

Not applicable

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Author Contribution

Research done by Naila she collected data collection, writeup formatting under the supervision of Assistant Professor Dr Saima Jafri

Data Availability

The supporting data in terms of the anonymised interview data of this study are not publicly available since it has a confidentiality agreement with the subject. Nonetheless, the data can be acquired with the help of the respective author, Naila Wagan, nailawagan23@gmail.com, with a reasonable request and with the approval of the research supervisor.

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Figures

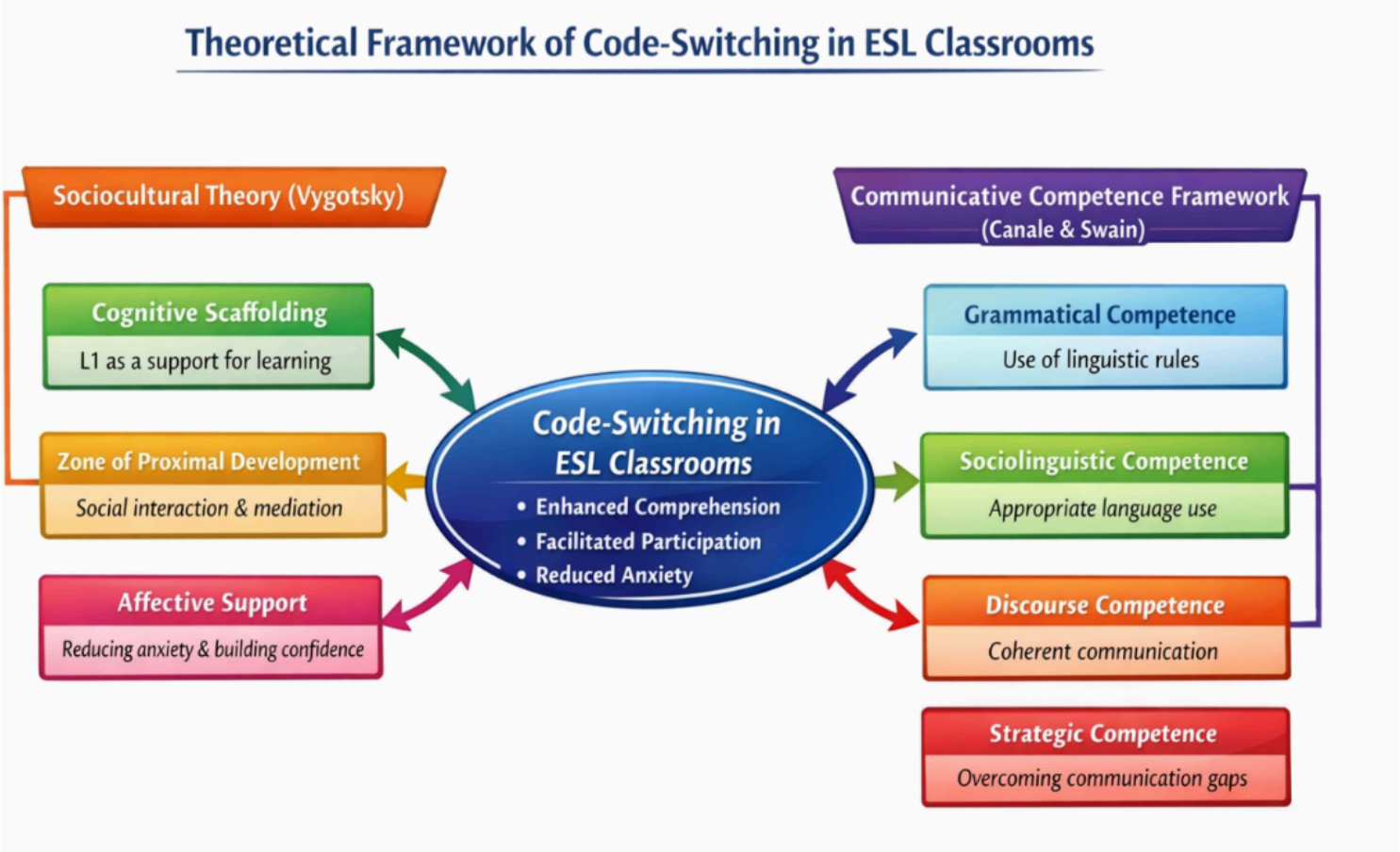


Figure 1

Theoretical framework of code-switching in ESL Classrooms. Source Author

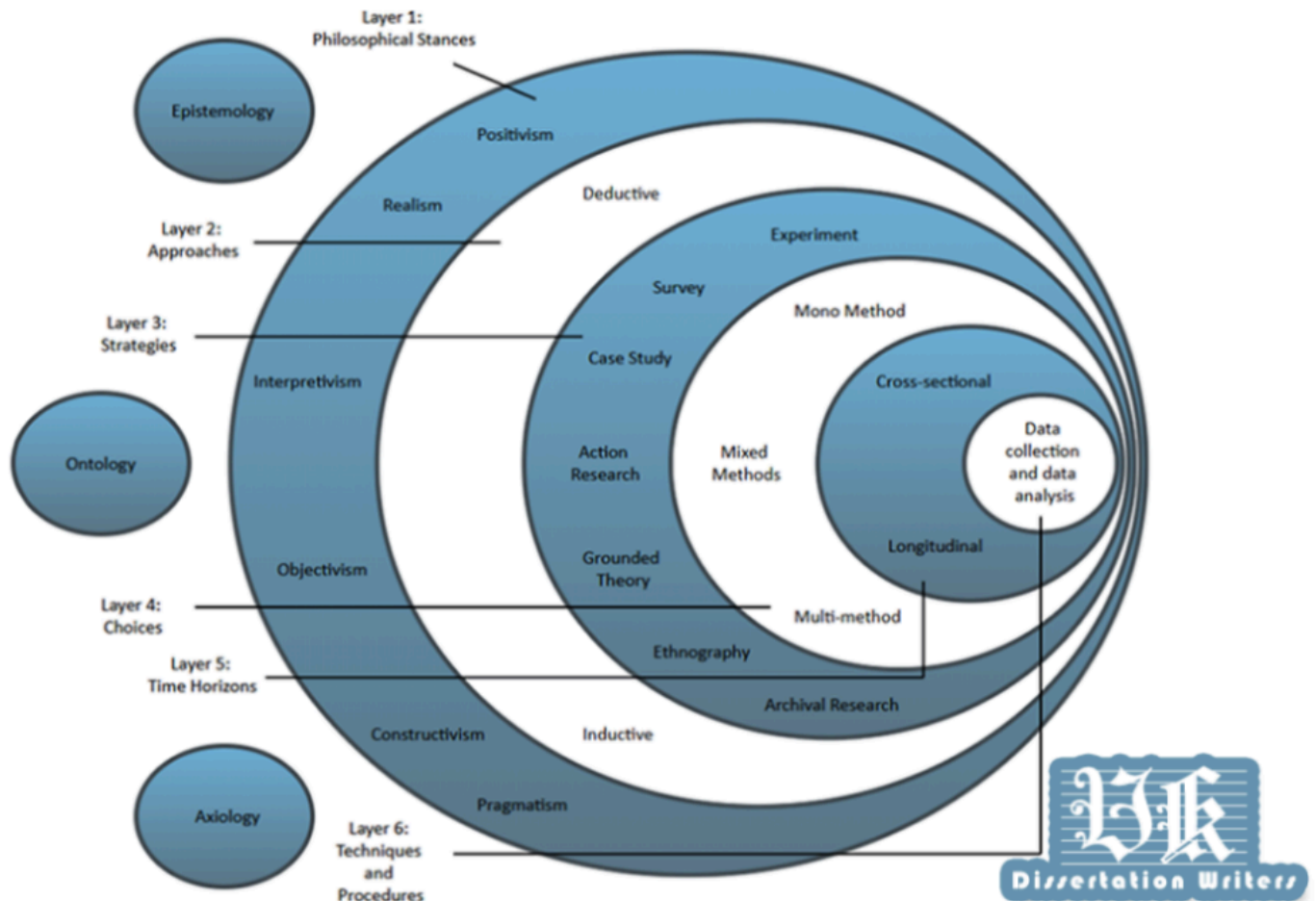


Figure 2

Using Sundre's Research Onion to structure Research Methodology (Sundre, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2029)

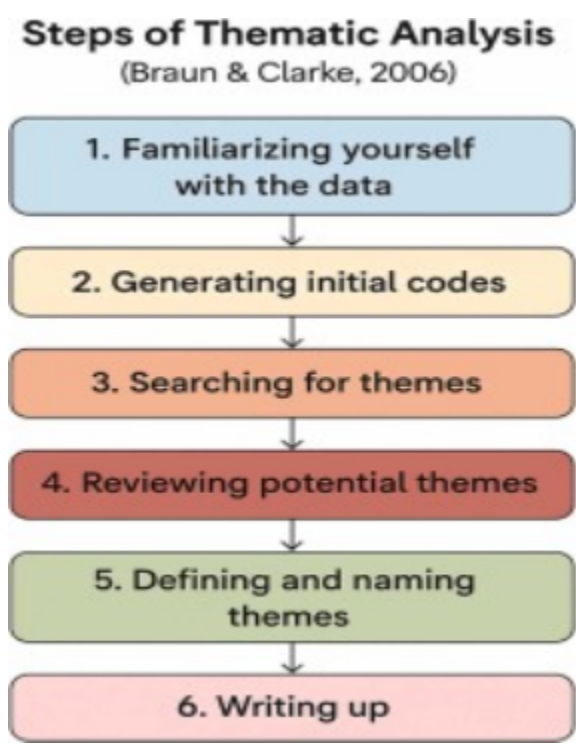


Figure 3

Figure 2 Steps of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

