

## Code-Switching Patterns in Multilingual Classrooms: A Study of Pedagogical Strategies

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### Abstract:

In multilingual classrooms, code-switching—the alternation between two or more languages during communication—has emerged as a key linguistic and pedagogical phenomenon. This study examines the patterns and functions of code-switching in Iraqi classrooms, where Arabic, Kurdish, and English frequently intersect in educational settings. Through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups, the research identifies the pedagogical strategies that support effective teaching and learning in a linguistically diverse environment. Findings suggest that code-switching serves a range of functions including clarification, classroom management, content reinforcement, and student engagement. The article concludes with implications for teacher training and language policy in Iraq's evolving education system.

**Keywords:** *Code-Switching, Multilingual Education, Language Alternation, Classroom Interaction, Pedagogical Strategies, Bilingual Teaching*

## 1. Introduction

Iraq is a country characterized by rich linguistic and cultural diversity, where multiple languages coexist within the social, political, and educational spheres. The two official languages—Arabic and Kurdish—dominate government and public life, while Turkmen, Syriac, and Armenian are also recognized in certain regions. Moreover, English plays an increasingly prominent role, particularly in private and international education sectors, as well as in higher education institutions aiming for global academic standards. In such a linguistically layered environment, communication within classrooms often reflects the multilingual realities of both students and teachers (Albirini, 2011).

One of the most prevalent linguistic practices in Iraqi classrooms is code-switching, defined as the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversation, sentence, or utterance. This phenomenon is commonly observed in classrooms where students and teachers share proficiency in multiple languages, particularly in regions where Kurdish and Arabic coexist, or in English-medium instruction (EMI) settings where students are not fully proficient in English (García & Wei, 2014).

Historically, code-switching was viewed through a deficit lens, associated with linguistic incompetence or a lack of fluency in the target language (Gumperz, 1982). However, contemporary sociolinguistic research has increasingly positioned code-switching as a strategic and purposeful act, often employed by teachers to clarify concepts, manage classroom behavior, build rapport, or scaffold learning. In multilingual contexts like Iraq, where language policies, identity politics, and resource disparities intersect, code-switching is not merely a linguistic choice—it is a pedagogical necessity and a cultural negotiation.

This study aims to investigate the patterns, purposes, and pedagogical functions of code-switching in Iraqi multilingual classrooms. Drawing on classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups across primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How frequently and in what contexts does code-switching occur in Iraqi classrooms?
- What are the pedagogical motivations behind teachers' and students' use of multiple languages?
- How do students perceive code-switching in terms of learning effectiveness and language development?

By analyzing the real-world practices of code-switching in Iraqi educational settings, this study contributes to a broader understanding of language-in-education policies, bilingual teaching strategies, and the role of linguistic diversity in shaping inclusive, effective, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Setati, Adler, Reed, & Bapoo, 2002).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definitions and Theoretical Perspectives

Code-switching is broadly defined as the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single discourse, which can occur at various linguistic levels—between sentences (inter-sentential), within a sentence (intra-sentential), or even within individual words (tag-

switching). Gumperz (1982) emphasized that code-switching is not arbitrary, but rather follows sociolinguistic and contextual rules governed by social relationships, discourse functions, and conversational cues (Ferguson, 1959).

From a pedagogical perspective, scholars such as Garcia and Wei (2014) argue that code-switching (often reframed as translanguaging) allows for dynamic bilingual practices that enable students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires to construct knowledge. This theoretical lens suggests that multilingual speakers fluidly shift across languages to enhance cognition, negotiate meaning, and express identity—especially in educational settings that promote inclusive and responsive instruction (Al Rashid, 2024).

## 2.2 Code-Switching in Education

Empirical studies in multilingual educational contexts have increasingly challenged the notion that code-switching hinders language development. Instead, it is often portrayed as a strategic instructional tool. For example, Setati et al. (2002) found that in South African classrooms, teachers used code-switching to bridge conceptual gaps in math and science instruction, particularly when learners were not yet proficient in the language of instruction. Similarly, research in Malaysian schools revealed that code-switching helped reduce affective barriers and improved student engagement in English language classrooms (Gill, 2005).

In Arab-majority educational contexts, studies by Albirini (2011) and Suleiman (2003) highlight that code-switching between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), colloquial Arabic, and English is a pragmatic response to curriculum demands and students' proficiency levels. Teachers often switch to Arabic to clarify complex content or use English terminology when referencing academic subjects like science and technology. These practices reflect a functional multilingualism rather than linguistic deficiency (Kowalskie, 2025).

Recent research also underscores the role of teacher beliefs and institutional norms in shaping code-switching practices. While some educators embrace code-switching as an effective pedagogical strategy, others perceive it as a deviation from language policy or fear it may undermine target language acquisition (Hassan & Jafar, 2024). In sum, the literature supports the idea that code-switching—when used intentionally—can scaffold learning, support classroom management, and promote inclusive participation, especially in contexts like Iraq where linguistic diversity intersects with educational complexity (Shukur, 2025).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the patterns and pedagogical roles of code-switching in multilingual classrooms. The research was carried out in five secondary schools and two public universities located across the Kurdistan Region and central Iraq, encompassing urban and semi-urban educational settings. These sites were selected to reflect diverse linguistic environments, including Arabic-, Kurdish-, and English-medium instruction.

The participant sample comprised a total of 90 individuals:

- **18 teachers** (10 from secondary schools and 8 from university faculties)

- **72 students** across different grade levels and majors, including both science and humanities streams.

Participants were purposefully selected to ensure variation in language use, instructional approaches, and regional context. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical approval was obtained from the respective institutional review boards.

Data collection occurred over a three-month period and involved three main instruments:

- **Classroom Observations:** A total of 30 classroom sessions were observed (each lasting 40–60 minutes). Field notes and audio recordings captured instances of code-switching, teacher-student interactions, and lesson delivery strategies.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Each teacher participated in an in-depth interview (approx. 45 minutes), which explored their beliefs, motivations, and perceived effectiveness of code-switching in instruction.
- **Student Focus Groups:** Twelve focus groups (6–7 students each) were conducted to gather student perspectives on the frequency, purpose, and impact of code-switching on their learning experience.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Data were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software. A thematic analysis approach was employed, combining both inductive and deductive coding to capture emergent themes and align them with pre-established pedagogical categories.

Code-switching was examined through two analytical lenses:

- **Conversational Analysis (CA):** This framework helped identify the structural features and interactional contexts of code-switching, such as turn-taking, repair sequences, and topic shifts.
- **Pedagogical Function Coding:** Based on previous studies (e.g., Macaro, 2005), code-switching instances were categorized by function—e.g., clarification, translation, discipline management, emphasis, and relationship-building.

Triangulation across data sources (observations, interviews, focus groups) ensured credibility and consistency. Patterns of code-switching were compared across language-medium classrooms, and variations were explored by subject matter, teacher background, and institutional language policies.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Types of Code-Switching Observed

Analysis of classroom interactions revealed three primary forms of code-switching commonly used by both teachers and students in the multilingual Iraqi classrooms studied. These forms reflect both linguistic complexity and pragmatic instructional intent.

### **Intersentential Switching**

This type involved shifting between languages at sentence boundaries. Teachers often used intersentential switching to repeat or summarize content for emphasis or clarity. For example, an English-medium teacher would deliver an explanation in English, followed by a Kurdish or Arabic summary to ensure comprehension among students with varying language proficiencies. This switching was particularly evident in science and mathematics lessons, where technical terminology was introduced in English and then explained in students' first language. Students also used intersentential switching when responding to questions—starting an answer in English and finishing it in Kurdish or Arabic, depending on their confidence and the teacher's language use (Othman, 2015).

### **Intrasentential Switching**

In this form, languages were mixed within a single sentence, often inserting key academic terms from English into otherwise Arabic or Kurdish sentences. This was common in both secondary and tertiary settings, where English is the language of instruction for many subjects. For instance, students might say, "This is a reaction when the substance changes," combining Kurdish grammar with the English word "reaction." Teachers also engaged in this form to reinforce terminology while maintaining the flow of explanation in the local language. This practice helped bridge gaps between academic discourse and students' native linguistic resources (Abdul Qadir, 2025).

### **Tag-Switching**

Tag-switching was frequently observed in both teacher and student speech, usually involving the insertion of discourse markers or short phrases such as "okay," "you know," or "right?" at the end of sentences in Arabic or Kurdish. These tags served several communicative purposes: checking comprehension, maintaining engagement, and softening directives or corrections. For example, a teacher might instruct in Arabic, ending with an English "understood?" to prompt affirmation. Tag-switching appeared to be an effective interpersonal strategy, contributing to classroom rapport and reducing perceived formality (Mohamedamin, 2025). Overall, the prevalence of all three types of switching indicated not random linguistic behavior but deliberate, context-sensitive practices aimed at enhancing clarity, engagement, and subject understanding across languages.

## **4.2 Functions of Code-Switching in Iraqi Classrooms**

Thematic analysis of teacher interviews and classroom observations identified five core pedagogical functions for code-switching, demonstrating its strategic and student-centered use.

### **Clarification and Translation**

Teachers frequently used code-switching to clarify technical or abstract academic content—especially in science, mathematics, and social studies. When students struggled with complex terms introduced in English, teachers would rephrase or translate them into Arabic or Kurdish. For example, a biology teacher might explain mitosis in English and then provide an Arabic summary

to ensure concept mastery. This form of switching served as a scaffold for content comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

### **Classroom Management**

Teachers often reverted to the students' first language when issuing instructions, managing transitions, or addressing behavioral issues. This ensured clarity and compliance, especially in fast-paced or emotionally charged classroom moments. Using a familiar language for directives increased the immediacy and authority of the message.

### **Reinforcement and Emphasis**

Key academic terms or definitions were often repeated in multiple languages to reinforce learning. This dual-language approach was common in test preparation and revision sessions, where accuracy and **retention were critical. Teachers intentionally used both English and Arabic/Kurdish terms to** strengthen conceptual understanding and align with standardized assessments.

### **Building Rapport**

Teachers strategically code-switched to connect with students on a more personal level. Shifting to Kurdish or Arabic, especially in informal moments, created a sense of cultural familiarity and emotional safety. This helped establish trust, particularly in schools serving Kurdish-majority communities, where the teacher's use of the home language was perceived as respectful and inclusive.

### **Encouraging Participation**

By reducing linguistic barriers, code-switching lowered students' affective filter—the emotional block that inhibits communication. Teachers encouraged students to participate in discussions using any language they felt comfortable with, which promoted active engagement and reduced anxiety in multilingual classrooms.

## **4.3 Student Perspectives**

Student focus group responses consistently emphasized the positive emotional and cognitive impact of code-switching. Many students reported feeling more confident and less anxious when teachers used their home language to explain challenging material. For example, one student noted, "When the teacher switches to Kurdish, I feel like I understand better and can ask questions without fear." Others expressed that code-switching helped them bridge gaps between everyday language and academic concepts, making lessons more relevant and accessible. Overall, students viewed the practice not as a weakness, but as a helpful and inclusive strategy that enhanced their learning experience (Abd & Ahmed, 2023)

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore that code-switching in Iraqi classrooms is not merely incidental or symptomatic of linguistic deficiency but rather a deliberate and functional pedagogical strategy. Teachers use code-switching to bridge linguistic gaps, make complex content more accessible, and connect with students across cultural and linguistic divides. These results are consistent with broader international research (e.g., Garcia & Wei, 2014; Setati et al., 2002), which highlights how multilingual teachers in postcolonial or linguistically stratified contexts use multiple languages as a resource rather than a hindrance (Mustafa, 2021).

In Iraq's unique linguistic landscape—where Arabic and Kurdish hold official status and English plays a growing role in academic and professional domains—code-switching is both a pragmatic and symbolic act. It reflects not only cognitive scaffolding strategies but also socio-political realities. For instance, when a teacher shifts between Kurdish and Arabic, they are not simply facilitating comprehension but also acknowledging students' linguistic identities and fostering an inclusive classroom environment. This is especially important in regions where linguistic identity is closely linked to historical marginalization or political autonomy movements (Surchi, 2024).

Furthermore, code-switching appears to serve an affective function, reducing students' anxiety and enhancing their willingness to participate. This aligns with Krashen's (1982) concept of the affective filter, which suggests that emotional comfort facilitates language acquisition and deeper learning. In Iraqi classrooms, especially where English is a foreign language and often associated with academic pressure, switching to a familiar language reduces cognitive load and promotes student confidence and engagement (Al Khafaji & Yousif, 2022).

However, the benefits of code-switching must be balanced with strategic language planning. Overreliance on the students' first language may limit exposure to the target language and hinder language acquisition over time. Therefore, teacher training programs should incorporate modules on intentional bilingual pedagogy, helping educators know when, why, and how to switch languages to maximize both linguistic and academic outcomes (Nader, Saadi, & Abdulqadir, 2024).

The broader implication is that monolingual instructional policies in multilingual societies are often misaligned with classroom realities. Policies that discourage code-switching in favor of rigid language separation may inadvertently disadvantage students by ignoring the communicative resources they bring to the classroom. Instead, a plurilingual approach, which views language mixing as a cognitive and social asset, is more appropriate for contexts like Iraq (Faris, 2023). Ultimately, promoting flexible and inclusive language practices through informed pedagogical choices can contribute to more equitable and culturally responsive education systems across multilingual regions.

## 6. Implications for Practice and Policy

### 6.1 Teacher Training

Teacher education programs in Iraq should include modules on multilingual pedagogy and sociolinguistic awareness. Training teachers to recognize when and how to switch codes for instructional benefit is essential.

### 6.2 Language Policy Reform

National language policies should acknowledge the multilingual realities of Iraqi classrooms and support flexible language use. Rather than restricting code-switching, policies should promote context-responsive bilingual or trilingual education (Faeq, 2025).

### **6.3 Curriculum Design**

Textbooks and learning materials should reflect the linguistic diversity of the classroom and include multilingual glossaries, examples, and culturally relevant content that supports strategic code-switching.

## **7. Conclusion**

In multilingual Iraqi classrooms, code-switching has proven to be a powerful and context-sensitive pedagogical tool that enhances both teaching efficacy and student engagement. This study has demonstrated that rather than being a symptom of linguistic deficiency or disorganization, code-switching serves essential functions—clarifying complex concepts, managing classrooms, reinforcing understanding, and fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging (Mirah, 2025).

The strategic use of multiple languages in instruction reflects the reality of Iraq's diverse linguistic environment, where Arabic, Kurdish, English, and local dialects intersect daily in social and academic life. Teachers who are able to navigate and integrate these languages contribute not only to improved comprehension but also to greater cultural responsiveness and student-centered learning. For students, especially those who face linguistic barriers or anxiety around academic language, hearing familiar terms and expressions in their home language can be a validating and empowering experience (Karim, 2022).

Crucially, code-switching also plays a role in identity affirmation and social cohesion. In a country where language is often closely tied to ethnic, regional, and political identities, the deliberate incorporation of students' languages in the classroom can signal respect, inclusivity, and mutual understanding. It transforms the classroom into a space where diverse identities are not just accommodated but embraced, which can foster deeper engagement and motivation (John, 2025).

As Iraq continues to reform and modernize its education system, there is a strong case for institutional recognition and support for multilingual teaching practices. This includes moving beyond outdated monolingual policies and providing teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills and theoretical grounding to use code-switching effectively. Professional development should include training on when and how to switch languages to support learning objectives, how to balance exposure to the target language, and how to create linguistically inclusive environments that reflect Iraq's multilingual reality (Saeed, 2021). In summary, embracing code-switching is not simply a matter of linguistic preference—it is a pedagogical necessity and a step toward educational equity. By legitimizing and leveraging linguistic diversity in classrooms, Iraq can foster more inclusive, effective, and culturally responsive education systems. Moving forward, continued research, policy support, and classroom innovation will be key to ensuring that multilingualism is harnessed as a strength rather than seen as a challenge.

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