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# EFL learners' code-switching: Why do they switch the language?

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to figure out the factors that influence EFL learners' code-switching. In collecting data, a semi-structured interview was conducted in which involved five EFL learners as the participants. Those participants were selected through the purposive sampling method: being second-semester students of the English Language Education Department of Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, and taking Basic Speaking class. Semi-structured interviewed was applied to collect the data needed. The finding of this study showed that all participants employed code-switching in their class. The reasons for EFL learners' code-switching were influenced by participants' roles and relationships, selected topics, and interactions. Thus, code-switching was regarded as a useful strategy that helped the learners convey their ideas to be fully understood and meaningful in the interaction process.

**Keywords:** *Code-switching, EFL learners, Interaction*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Definition of code-switching

Code-switching, or language mixing, occurs “when a speaker alternates between two or more language varieties in a single conversation” (Shartiely, 2016, p. 215). Mabule (2015, p. 340) agrees that code-switching is “the shifting by a speaker from language A to language B”. Moreover, most researchers do not differentiate between code-switching and code-mixing; they have the same definition and context (Suek,

2017). Hasan and Akhand (2015) argue that code-switching is used synonymously with code-mixing. Thus, it can be concluded that code-switching and code-mixing are alike; they have the same concept. Nowadays, code-switching normally occurs not only in bilinguals' speech, but also in bilinguals' electronic discourse (Halim & Maros, 2014). It is common that code-switching naturally happens in a bilingual setting (Suek, 2017). Bullock and Toribio (2009, as cited in Grima, 2013) add that bilinguals are able to separate their language communicative ability in speech production such as knowing when both first language and a second language are being used or when to switch to another language or code.

### 1.2. Types of code-switching

There are three types of code-switching, namely: extrasentential, intersentential, and intrasentential (Poplack 2000, as cited in Mabule, 2015, p. 342). Extrasentential switching is “the insertion of tag elements from one language into a monolingual discourse in another language” (Mabule, 2015, p. 343). The example below is extrasentential code-switching in Bahasa Indonesia's conversation.

Teacher: *Jawaban kamu sudah benar semua*, great!  
(All of your answers are correct)

Teacher: *Kalau sudah selesai diisi, latihannya boleh dikumpulkan*, okay?  
(If the worksheet has been filled completely, you may submit it).

The examples above show the tagging of the English language inserted into Bahasa Indonesia. The second type of code-switching is intersentential. Intersentential code-switching “involves switching at sentential boundaries where one clause or sentence is in one language and the next clause or sentence is in the other” (Al-Heeti & Al-Abdely, 2016, p. 11). Yusuf, Fata, and Chyntia (2018) add that “inter-sentential switching occurs when a speaker switches from one language to another between different sentences” (p. 2). It can be defined that inter-sentential switching occurs outside the sentence. An example of inter-sentential switching is:

*Aku harus selalu membawa kameraku kemanapun! Bagiku, sebuah foto bisa menggambarkan banyak cerita, tergantung siapa yang melihat foto tersebut.*

I would go with my camera! I love capturing beautiful things or special moments and sharing with people. (Saraswati & Octavita, 2016, p. 44).

Finally, another type of code-switching is intrasentential. Intrasentential code-switching is “characterized by a switch from one language to another language within a single utterance” (Mabule, 2015, p. 343). This type of code-switching occurs inside a sentence. An example of intrasentential code-switching is:

Teacher: “*Apa ini pentingnya? Kenapa harus mempelajari ini? Kenapa kita harus mempelajari telling time?*” (Rinda, 2014, p. 7)

### 1.3. The function of code-switching

Bilinguals, in this case, EFL learners tend to switch to another code when they meet other bilinguals who are from the same ethnic or social background. Bilinguals will switch to an ethnic code to express their identification with the group members (Trisnawati, 2017) even though they are not very proficient (Holmes, 2008). Furthermore, bilinguals from the same background tend to switch language to address each other to show their respect. For instance, in an international university or campus, usually, a Moslem student switches to the Arabic language whenever s/he meets other Moslem students from any countries; s/he will say “*Assalamu ‘alaikum*, how are you?” rather than saying “*Hello*” or “*Hi*” to respect and address those students who have the same background as her/him as a Moslem. In this case, intrasentential code-switching is employed.

Not only does code-switching occur in a social context, but it also takes place in an educational context. Many bilinguals will switch language while being involved in the educational process. Code-switching is commonly used by EFL learners and lecturers on the campus to indicate how educated or smart they are because they are able to use English in their part of speech. For example, students on the campus will say ‘*saya ada meeting tentang kegiatan workshop dengan dosen*’ [I have a meeting about a workshop with the lecturer] when they want to meet the lecturer. It seems that code-switching is used to show other people that they have the ability in speaking English, and this is part of self-pride and prestige (Sadighian & Rahmi, 2011)

Another function of code-switching is to convey well the ideas to each other when speaking. As stated by Nerghes (2011, as cited in Mukti & Muljani, 2016) bilingual speakers consider the notion that when associated with strong arguments, code-switching can be an effective strategy in which some ideas can be better conveyed in one language than another that leads to systematic processing of information. The concept argued by Nerghes is in accordance with the notion identified by Al Hayek (2016) explaining that bilinguals will switch language or code because they think that some ideas are more meaningful and understandable to be conveyed in one primary language.

## 2. Literature review

There are some previous researchers examining code-switching among bilingual learners. Wijayanti (2014) investigated code-switching phenomena among university students at Sampoerna University. The research was conducted to reveal the reasons for the learners in switching their language from Bahasa Indonesia to other languages or vice versa. It was figured out that learners switched their code or language was caused by two factors, internal factors such as their preference of mother tongue, and external factor such as considering the interlocutor (Wijayanti, 2014).

Another research about code-switching within the EFL context was conducted by Khiarunnisa (2016) figuring out that code-switching by the teacher was used as a useful strategy in transferring effective ideas from the teacher to students. Another research under the code-switching theme was also conducted in a secondary school setting. It indicated that code-switching was not only applied by learners but also by teachers. It was found that teachers hold a positive belief and agreed that the use of code-switching in the EFL classroom would contribute to the smooth flow of the classroom interaction (Suganda, Loeneto, & Zuraida, 2018).

Thus, it is clear that code-switching is familiarly used by both teachers and learners in order to achieve meaningful and effective classroom interaction. In line with this, Horasan (2014) argues that code-switching is used by teachers and students to convey their idea in the English teaching-learning process in the classroom. Bista (2010) also adds that most bilingual students in the classroom switch the language/code to overcome their incompetence in a second language. Thus, in an educational setting such as school and university, code-switching frequently occurs.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Research design*

This study employed qualitative approach. Creswell (2014, p. 22) states “a qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. In collecting data, five EFL learners were interviewed. Thus, semi-structured interview was carried out in order to get information as deep as possible. This type of interview is applicable because it gives chances for both interviewer and participants to discuss flexibly and participants could express their perceptions and experiences freely and extensively. Interviews were done face to face and fully recorded.

#### *3.2. Participants*

This study involved five EFL learners as the participants. They were selected by using the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is “selective or subjective sampling, reflects a group of sampling techniques that rely on the judgment of the researcher when it comes to selecting the units (e.g. people, case/organizations, events, pieces of data) that are to be studied” (Sharma, 2017, p. 751). Those participants were selected since they took speaking class; they applied code-switching while speaking in the classroom; and overall they had a very good score in speaking class. Those EFL learners were the second-semester students of the English Language Education Department of Ar-Raniry State Islamic University (Universitas Islam Negeri) Banda Aceh, of 2019/2020 academic year. Five elements were asked to the learners in the interview, as adopted from Suganda et al (2018), they were: (1) their perception on the use of code-switching in speaking class, (2) the language they use in the class, (3) the switching of English and Indonesian or vice versa in speaking class, (4) the factors of

their code-switching in learning, and (5) their performance related to their use of code-switching. It took 25 minutes on average to interview each participant. The questions were formulated both in English and in Indonesian, and the participants responded in the language of their choice. Mostly they answered in English mixed with Indonesian.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

The data analysis was based on interview results. Five EFL learners participated cooperatively in the interview. Based on the interview results, the reasons for learners' code-switching are categorized as the following themes:

##### 4.1. Participants' role and relationship

When learners were involved in a conversation with their close friends they tended to use Bahasa Indonesia even though at that time it was in English speaking class. All participants agreed that they were comfortable to speak more Bahasa Indonesia than English. They needed to switch the language from English to the Indonesian language because they thought that their friends would understand it very well and then they could speak easily. For example, the participant said:

GS: *“when I am in a formal place like in the class I switch my language from Bahasa Indonesia to English, but when I talk to my friends I mix the language, about eighty per cent I use Bahasa Indonesia”*

In line with the point above, one participant added that she used more Bahasa Indonesia in speaking class when she was talking to her friends. She said:

NF: *“sometimes... I am dominant... to use English in speaking class, um...because the lecturer uses English in the class, but when I talk with my friends I don't use English, because maybe they can't understand what I say”*.

Additionally, not only did participants switch the language when they were talking with close friends, but they also switched the language when talking to their relatives, as stated by the participant below:

HN: *“In my family, I try to talk in English to my sister at home, because I want to practice my English, but sometimes I talk to her in Bahasa Indonesia, but I try to add some 'istilah', um... I mean English vocabulary to say about something.”*

The participant agreed that code-switching was better to be used when they needed to talk to their close persons such as friends and relatives. Thus, the setting, such as in the classroom or at home, influenced the participants to switch the language. As agreed by Heltai (2018), setting also influences those bilinguals to switch their language in spite of the social relation between them.

#### 4.2. Topic selection

Bilingual speakers are able to discuss any topics in different languages. They will switch the language in order that people around them understand well what they are talking about. This idea can be found from participants' statements:

NA: *"code-switching is important... because when we don't know the vocabulary in English we need to switch the language, and then um.... the audience will understand what we say, although I can't speak English very well, I can use Bahasa Indonesia"*.

These examples concur with Bani Bili (2017) stating that bilingual speakers consider the notion that code-switching is a strategy in which some ideas can be better conveyed in one language than another. The same as the statement above, one participant added that:

AL: *"because when I don't know one word and then I get stuck when speaking and then the audience will not be able to understand, and then we need to switch some words into Bahasa Indonesia to make them understand what are talking about."*

Al Hayek (2016) explains that bilinguals would be motivated to code-switch because they think that some ideas are more meaningful and understandable to be conveyed in one primary language. Besides that, Holmes (2008) argues that particular topics are often easier to be discussed in one code rather than another. This is what is happening to students, for example, who are taking linguistics unit/subject. Some linguistics' words such as 'complement', 'phrase', and 'finite' are easier to be used rather than the terms of students' first language in discussing the topic about the elements of a clause. This argument has a relation with the concept argued by Kim (2006) identifying that the topic of discourse influences bilinguals to switch their codes or language. The arguments and examples above are reinforced by Chin and Wigglesworth (2007); they explain that topic is another key factor influencing language switching for many bilingual speakers. Therefore, switching makes topics easier and more understandable to be explained; so that bilingual learners can get the points of the topic they are discussing.

#### 4.3. Interaction

In interacting in their group, there is a trend for EFL learners to switch their language. Boztepe (2003) argues that bilinguals' code-switching is also affected by their tendency in making requests and commands to each other. It means that during an interaction, bilingual speakers switch their codes or language to emphasize their utterances to be understood by others. This phenomenon normally happens when bilingual speakers have a good relationship with each other, such as friends and family members. The participants stated that:

GS: *“When I talk to my friends and my family I mix the language. Sometimes I want to imitate the way my friends talk in the classroom, I want to be fluent in speaking like my friends.”*

NA: *“in daily, in interaction in the classroom when speaking class, I will use more Bahasa Indonesia, I don’t want to feel ‘blank’ in communicating with my friends with English vocabulary, so I will use Bahasa Indonesia”.*

NF: *“Sometimes I switch the language from Bahasa Indonesia to English when I interact with my sister, my sister is an English teacher, and she understands what I said. But I don’t try to speak English with my mom because she cannot speak English”.*

HN: *“in globalization era like nowadays, I think I need to speak more English in interaction, that’s why I try to add more English words in my life such as when speaking with my sister and my friends”.*

Liu, Ahn, Baek, and Ok (2004) explain that code-switching is a useful strategy in classroom interaction. This idea has a good point which reminds us that code-switching is needed in the interaction process in the classroom. For example, in interacting with students, teachers tend to switch the language in order to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way. From this notion, it can be suggested that not only does social interaction influence bilinguals’ code-switching, but the interaction occurring in the teaching-learning process also contributes to code-switching. Thus, it can be argued that the interaction process influences EFL learners’ code-switching in any circumstantial events such as in a group, in a classroom, even at home.

## 5. Conclusion

There are many studies investigating bilinguals’ phenomena; and code-switching is one of those phenomena that normally occur among EFL learners. Code-switching means bilingual speakers change or mix certain speeches and codes with another language in communication. Thus, most researchers consider and agree that ‘code-switching’ is not different from ‘code-mixing’. EFL learners will use code-switching influenced by many factors. Code-switching commonly occurs because of participant features.

Code-switching is one of the effective strategies which can be used by EFL learners to interpret their intention or purposes in communication. Besides that, code-switching is useful to avoid misunderstanding in communication and to clarify important information that cannot be explained in one language or code. So, it is clear that through the code-switching practices, EFL learners could be able to express their meaningful message or sense of the classroom as bilinguals. Finally, perhaps, further research is needed to investigate deeply and address the gap between code-mixing/code-

switching and code-borrowing in which all of these kinds commonly exist among EFL learners.

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