

# Assessing Code-Switching in Multilingual College Classrooms Through Contextual Use of English

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## Abstract:

This study explores the code-switching practices of first-year Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) students, during English-medium instruction in multilingual classrooms. Anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory, and García and Wei's concept of translanguaging, the research investigates the classroom situations that prompt students to switch from English to their native or local languages, their motivations for doing so, and the communicative functions these language shifts serve. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with fifteen randomly selected BEED students during the 2024–2025 academic year. The findings reveal that code-switching is a strategic and purposeful act employed to clarify concepts, express emotions, reduce anxiety, and enhance classroom participation. First, students most code-switched during group tasks, peer discussions, and presentations to ensure understanding and maintain the flow of communication. Second, their primary motivations included the desire for clarity, increased comfort, and greater confidence in expressing ideas. Finally, code-switching served multiple communicative functions such as cognitive, emotional, and social such as organizing thoughts, overcoming vocabulary gaps, and fostering peer solidarity. Rather than indicating linguistic deficiency, code-switching emerged as a valuable pedagogical tool that supports meaningful learning and inclusive classroom discourse in a multilingual educational setting.

**Keywords — code-switching, multilingual classrooms, English-medium instruction, translanguaging, sociocultural theory, communication accommodation**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, the mastery of the English language has become a significant marker of academic and professional advancement. Educational institutions across the globe, especially in multilingual nations like the Philippines, have embraced English instruction as a core element of their curricula. However, the multilingual realities of these classrooms create dynamic linguistic environments where learners interact using a diverse range of languages. Within such environments, code-switching the practice of alternating between two or more languages within a conversation has emerged as a prominent feature of

communication, particularly in English instruction. This study investigates the role, function, and pedagogical implications of code-switching in multilingual college classrooms, with a specific focus on first-year students in the Philippine context.

The Philippines stands as a paradigmatic example of linguistic diversity. As an archipelagic nation with over 7,000 islands, it is home to an impressive 186 languages, including 184 living languages and 2 classified as extinct (Department of Linguistics - UP Diliman, 2021). Among the living languages, 175 are indigenous, and 9 are non-indigenous. Filipino (based on Tagalog) and English serve as the official languages of the country, while numerous regional languages such as Cebuano,

Hiligaynon, Ilocano, Waray, Kapampangan, and others are spoken across different provinces. This complex linguistic ecosystem fosters widespread bilingualism and multilingualism, with many Filipinos demonstrating proficiency in two or more languages. Martin (2014) and Mangila (2018), drawing on Li Wei's expanded notion of bilingualism, highlight that bilingual or multilingual competence does not necessarily imply equal proficiency in each language but involves the ability to alternate between languages according to context, purpose, and audience.

In educational settings, this linguistic change displays itself in a variety of ways, the most notable of which is code-switching. Classrooms, particularly those in higher education, serve as microcosms of this multilingual landscape, with students bringing not only their native languages but also varied levels of fluency in Filipino and English. First-year college students who are moving from high school to tertiary education sometimes face complex linguistic and academic challenges. Their communicative methods usually incorporate code-switching, which serves as both a natural form of expression and a means of negotiating meaning in academic discourse.

Code-switching, once considered an indication of language deficiency or casual speech, is now being re-evaluated as a complex linguistic, cognitive, and social technique. According to Bautista (2004) and Sert (2005), code-switching in the classroom improves comprehension, increases student engagement, overcomes linguistic gaps, and contextualizes complicated learning content. Teachers may switch languages to explain instructions, elaborate on topics, or address student issues, whereas students may code-switch to better articulate their thoughts, seek explanation, or establish relationships with classmates and instructors. Such activities are especially important in content-based instruction, where students are expected to interact with complicated texts and abstract concepts in a second language.

Recent study emphasizes the pedagogical benefits of code-switching in multilingual situations. García and Wei (2014) argue that translanguaging, which involves multilingual speakers using their entire

language repertoire to convey meaning, is vital for cognitive processing and learner empowerment. Similarly, Canagarajah (2011) argues that allowing students to switch between languages in academic settings promotes identity formation, critical thinking, and inclusive classroom practices. These theoretical viewpoints advocate for a change away from language separation and toward language integration, pushing educators to understand the strategic and functional roles that code-switching plays in meaning-making, particularly in linguistically varied settings.

As a result, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the contextual usage of English in student code-switching, focusing on the underlying reasons, patterns, and classroom implications of this activity among first-year college students. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of code-switching's role as a communicative and instructional tool in Philippine higher education.

## **II. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The current study used a qualitative case study design to investigate first-year college students' code-switching practices in English language classrooms at IBA College of Mindanao, Inc. This analytical approach enabled a thorough and contextualized knowledge of students' real language use and communicative behavior in a multilingual educational setting. Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on numerical data, the qualitative design prioritized student experiences and the meanings behind their linguistic choices. To ensure fairness and reduce selection bias, the researcher used simple random sampling to choose fifteen (15) first-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) program for the academic year 2024-2025. Each students had an equal chance of being selected, and all participants were multilingual, speaking Cebuano as their first language and learning English and Filipino in formal school.

The primary sources of data for the study were semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. These fifteen BEED students formed the core of the research, and their code-switching

behaviours during regular English-medium classes, along with their interview responses, comprised the main data set. Data collection involved two key methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a guide composed of five open-ended questions centered on the reasons for and effects of code-switching. Each interview lasted approximately three to five minutes and was conducted in either English or Cebuano, based on the participant's comfort. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Second, classroom observations were carried out over the course of one week using a structured checklist. During these observations, the researcher noted the frequency of code-switching, its context, and the purposes it served such as clarification, emphasis, or engagement as well as how peers and instructors responded to these language shifts.

The information collected were analyzed using discourse analysis to discover recurring themes and patterns in students' language behavior. The interpretation was based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory, and García and Wei's idea of translanguaging. These theoretical frameworks helped us comprehend the cognitive, social, and pedagogical aspects of code-switching in the classroom. Ethical considerations were present throughout the investigation. Participants were properly informed about the research objectives, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. All participants provided written agreement, and their identities were safeguarded with pseudonyms. All collected data was securely saved to ensure confidentiality and participant privacy.

### **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The evidence gathered throughout this investigation is presented, evaluated, and interpreted in this chapter.

**Research Question #1: In what classroom situations do students switch from English to their native or local language during English-medium instruction?**

When participating in group activities, peer discussions, and vocabulary explanations, students were seen speaking in their mother tongue. Speaking Cebuano made it easier for students to solve these circumstances, which call for rapid thinking and collaboration. When they came across unusual English vocabulary or wanted to be sure that others understood what they were saying, they often shifted between languages, such as:

*'Murag 'barrier' man guro? Like when the message doesn't reach the receiver properly, mao na ang communication breakdown'*

*'Oo, and sometimes, even tone matters. Lisod pud kung serious kaayo imong tingog, nya friendly diay imong intention.'*

*'Ah okay, so kana diay ang reason why we need to consider the receiver. Kung dili nila masabtan, walay point ang message.'*

*'Exactly. Mao bitaw we use different strategies depending sa audience. Like kung bata imong kaistorya, kinahanglan simple ra ang explanation.'*

This conduct indicates that in certain educational contexts, code-switching served as a teaching tool. It reduced miscommunications during tasks and allowed students to engage more fully. Switching between languages allowed students to comprehend ideas, close language gaps, and remain interested in the course material rather than disrupting the flow of instruction (Canagarajah, 2011).

**Research Question #2: What motivates students to switch languages while speaking or presenting in English in multilingual college classrooms?**

Comfort, clarity, and confidence were the main drivers of code-switching. When speaking in front of others, students said that speaking in their native tongue helped them feel less anxious. Additionally, it gave students greater freedom to express themselves without worrying about grammar errors (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009).

*'For example, when we speak in front of a crowd, that's verbal communication. Pero kung mag-smile ka or mag-nod ka sa imong kaistorya, non-verbal na siya.'*

*'Communication is effective when the message is understood. Mao bitaw nga kung lisod na kaayo i-express in English, mas maayo nga mag-Binisaya ko para klaro ang punto'*

*'Non-verbal cues include gestures, facial expressions, and posture. Like kung serious imong nawong, murag di ganahan imong kaistorya mo-approach nimo.'*

Several individuals used code-switching to avoid hesitancy and maintain the flow of the discourse. They were able to better explain their answers and feel in control of the situation (Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2005).

### **Research Question #3: What communicative functions does code-switching serve when students shift from English to another language?**

Code-switching performed several essential roles. Cognitively, it helped students organize their ideas, translate vocabulary, and explain difficult ideas. On an emotional level, it reduced anxiety and gave kids greater freedom to express themselves. Socially, it created a more friendly and welcoming atmosphere where peers could support and understand one another (Gumperz, 1982).

*'The process of communication starts with the sender. Siya ang source sa message. Sa among balay, usually si Mama ang mag-initiate og storya, especially kung naay problema.'*

*'Ma'am, pwede ko mag-Binisaya? Lisod man i-explain kung unsa ang noise. Ang noise kay kanang mga sagabal sa pagsabot sa message, like saba nga background or even wrong choice of words.'*

*'Communication involves feedback, diba? Like kung imong istorya, then the person reacts or responds. Sa group chat gani, kung walay reply, maglagot ko, kay walay feedback, murag walay communication.'*

Code-switching was not a sign of low English proficiency, as these functions demonstrate. It was even used by high-achieving students to clarify their answers and improve class discussions (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

## **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The study clearly demonstrated that code-switching is essential and helpful in multilingual college classes where English is the primary language of teaching. Code-switching became a strategic linguistic technique that students employed to better navigate academic challenges rather than a symptom of a lack of English ability. It was most used in cooperative learning activities like oral presentations and group debates when quick and precise communication was required. To ensure peer understanding, bridge vocabulary gaps, and explain concepts, all of which directly aided in the learning process, students frequently turned to their native language.

Furthermore, the data gathered shows that the demand for clarity, comfort, and the confidence to express one's thoughts without worrying about criticism were the main reasons why students switched codes. These incentives reflect the emotional and cognitive sides of code-switching as students transition from high school to college. Rather than limiting learning, code-switching promoted deeper engagement, reduced fear, and gave students the confidence to express difficult ideas (García & Wei, 2014; Mohebbi & Alavi, 2017).

Furthermore, code-switching served communicative purposes beyond personal understanding. It reinforced the idea that language choice is a societal as well as a technical decision by encouraging peer solidarity, emotional expressiveness, and mutual assistance. Students demonstrated the pedagogical potential of adopting multilingual practices in the classroom by using their entire linguistic repertoire to improve comprehension and interpersonal connections (Palviainen & Mård-Miettinen, 2015).

The study indicates that students are more likely to participate actively, perform with confidence, and feel appreciated for their linguistic identities when teachers acknowledge and encourage code-switching as a valid teaching approach. More inclusive and productive learning environments are produced in classrooms that abandon strict English-only regulations and embrace flexible language

policy. In these situations, code-switching serves as a bridge rather than a barrier, bridging languages, fostering comprehension, and equipping students to be successful in the classroom and in everyday conversation.

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