

## **Original Research Article**

# **Code-Switching in University English Classrooms: Business English Students' Perceptions of ESP Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the perceptions of Business English students at Zhaoqing University regarding code-switching in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms. Survey results indicate that students generally view code-switching as a helpful tool for improving comprehension, fostering teacher-student relationships, and enhancing classroom atmosphere. Key functions of code-switching include translation, topic switching, and checking comprehension. While students appreciate the role of code-switching in clarifying complex concepts, there are concerns that excessive use of the native language may impede language development. The study recommends the judicious use of code-switching to balance support for comprehension with practice in the target language. Future research should address the study's limitations, including its small sample size and lack of teacher behavior analysis, for a deeper understanding of code-switching in ESP settings.

*Keywords: code-switching; ESP learners; Business English; pedagogical strategy*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The term code-switching was first coined by Hans Vogt (1954), gaining considerable attention as sociolinguistics emerged as a prominent field in the 1960s. By the 1970s, it became a key area of study across multiple academic fields. Gumperz (1982) described code-switching as the use of languages from different grammatical systems within a single conversation. Meanwhile, Milroy and Muysken (1995) and Bullock and Toribio (2009) saw it as the switching between languages within sentences or larger discourse units. Poplack (1980) emphasized its linguistic characteristics, highlighting the influence of both extralinguistic and intralinguistic factors on this alternation. Trudgill (2003) characterized code-switching as a process in which bilingual speakers switch between languages or dialects during conversations. Auer (1984) focused on the functional role of language alternation, while Verschueren (1999) examined its pragmatic importance, describing it as a frequent strategy in bilingual communities. The most widely accepted definition, according to Myers-Scotton (1993), is that code-switching involves the use of two or more languages within the same conversation, often even within a single sentence.

Classroom code-switching refers to the practice where teachers alternate between the target language and students' native language to aid understanding. The strategic use of the first language can help prevent confusion in the target language and deepen students' comprehension. This approach encourages greater student engagement and interaction with

the teacher, a point supported by studies (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2012). Research on classroom code-switching began in the 1970s, initially focusing on quantitative analysis and its effects on bilingual education for minority children. Wong-Fillmore (1980) found that the use of L1 in classrooms was influenced by the personalized nature of teacher-student interactions. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) contributed to the field by developing interaction analysis systems and classroom discourse models. Milk (1981) and Guthrie (1984) broadened the scope of research by incorporating ethnographic and socio-interactional linguistic approaches to understand the motivations behind teachers' use of L1. Merritt (1992) explored how teachers' language choices are shaped by both the students' cultural backgrounds and external factors like school policies and classroom management, particularly in Kenyan schools.

Canagarajah (1995) categorized the functions of code-switching into micro-level (such as classroom management and knowledge transmission) and macro-level (such as social education) functions. Flyman-Mattson and Burenhult (1999) identified five specific functions of code-switching in interactions between teachers and Swedish students learning French. Further studies also explored how code-switching influences student identity and their perceptions of learning (Carless, 2008; Ellwood, 2008). Ovando and Carols (2012) suggested that the flexible use of code-switching can enhance language literacy, while Becker (2001) highlighted its importance in conveying meaning and improving language proficiency. Cook (2001) examined the pedagogical advantages of code-switching, while Fakeye (2002) emphasized its positive impact on classroom flow and linguistic competence. Sert (2005) argued that when used effectively, code-switching can help maintain linguistic continuity and support language development in bilingual settings.

Sittattrakul and Laovoravit (2018) explored the functions of code-switching by teachers in Thai aviation ESP (English for Specific Purposes) classrooms and its psychological benefits and impact on student learning success. They found that code-switching was frequently used in English aviation business classes, mainly to explain grammar, introduce new vocabulary, or make students feel more relaxed. Most low-level students viewed code-switching as a helpful strategy for psychological comfort and learning success. However, higher-level students felt it was less beneficial and should be minimized, as excessive code-switching could slow down the acquisition of the target language. Khoumssi (2024) investigated Moroccan university ESP teachers' attitudes toward code-switching in the classroom and analyzed their code-switching patterns. The study also explored students' perspectives on teachers' use of code-switching. The results showed that most ESP teachers had a positive attitude toward code-switching but saw it as a rare and last-resort strategy. They believed that using the first language (L1) hindered students' English output, promoted laziness, and reduced teacher creativity. In contrast, students favored code-switching, viewing it as an effective teaching and learning tool. They suggested that occasional translation of technical terms into French or Arabic would help them better understand the content. Wu (2013) studied teachers' code-switching in Chinese ESP classrooms, focusing on its features, functions, and impact on English teaching. The findings indicated that all teachers involved in the study engaged in code-switching in their ESP classrooms. Code-switching primarily serves three functional categories: subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations. In terms of language use, teachers tended to code-switch using phrases, clauses, nouns, and adverbs. Additionally, teachers frequently used code-switching to translate business English terms, explain difficult concepts in teaching, and manage classroom activities.

There appears to be a gap in empirical research on code-switching among ESP learners in university courses in China. Given that students are both active participants in the learning process and recipients of teachers' instructions, understanding their views on the use of

code-switching by teachers is essential. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of ESP learners, specifically business English majors, regarding their teachers' use of code-switching in the classroom through a questionnaire survey. Based on the findings, the study also offers a set of pedagogical recommendations to help university instructors effectively integrate the native language of the majority of students into their teaching, with the goal of improving both English instruction and learning outcomes.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The survey targeted 33 Business English majors at Zhaoqing University in Guangdong Province, China. The students' ages ranged from 20 to 22, with an average age of 21. All the students have more than 10 years of English learning experience. Before distributing the questionnaires, the researcher explained the meaning of code-switching to all of them.

The research instrument for this survey was a self-administered questionnaire and it aims to investigate the following questions:

1. What is the current situation of code-switching in ESP classrooms?
2. What are the functions of code-switching in ESP classrooms?

The first question is addressed by investigating students' perceptions of teachers' use of code-switching in the ESP classroom, as well as the impact of code-switching on three aspects: understanding and intake of ESP expertise, teacher-student relationships, and classroom climate. The second question draws on the functions proposed by Liu (2020).

The questionnaire was modified after a pilot study with 5 students, and 10 questions were finalized, including 6 single-choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question and 3 open-ended questions. For single-choice questions, a 5-point Likert scale was used to score students' agreement with statements about code-switching: 5 for "strongly agree," 4 for "agree," 3 for "no opinion," 2 for "disagree," and 1 for "strongly disagree." The maximum score for each question is 5 points and the minimum is 1. The questionnaire was distributed to 33 students and 33 questionnaires were valid.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The following survey results present statistical analyses of 6 single-choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question, and briefly summarizes the advantages, disadvantages, and suggestions for code-switching answered by students in response to open-ended questions. What follows is a discussion of the results of the survey.

### **3.1 Survey Results**

Table 1 shows the questions investigated and the results of the statistical survey.

**Table 1. Survey Results on Code-Switching in ESP Classrooms**

	Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Do you agree that teachers use code-switching in the ESP classroom?	4.39	0.69
2	Do you think code-switching can improve comprehension and facilitate learning in the ESP classroom?	4.03	0.67
3	Do you agree that teachers use code-switching frequently in the ESP classroom?	3.69	0.72
4	Do you agree that code-switching enhances your understanding and intake of ESP expertise?	4.24	0.49
5	Do you agree that code-switching fosters teacher-student relationships?	4.69	0.45
6	Do you agree that code-switching improves the classroom atmosphere?	3.75	0.60
7	Do you think why teachers use code-switching in the ESP classroom?	(1) Topic Switching: 81.8 % (27/33) (2) Translation: 90.9% (30/33) (3) Economy Saving: 78.7% (26/33) (4) Maintaining Classroom Discipline: 63.6% (21/33) (5) Emotional Function: 66.6% (22/33) (6) Checking Comprehension: 84.8%	
8	What are the advantages for teachers to use code-switching in the ESP classroom?	open-ended responses	
9	What are the disadvantages for teachers to use code-switching in the ESP classroom?	open-ended responses	
10	What suggestions would you give teachers about using code-switching in the ESP classroom?	open-ended responses	

The multiple-choice question asked students to identify the specific functions of code-switching. The findings indicated that the functions selected by over 70% of the students included “Topic Switching,” “Translation,” “Economy Saving,” and “Checking Comprehension.” Among these, “Translation” was the most frequently chosen function.

In response to the open-ended questions, students shared their views on the advantages, disadvantages, and suggestions regarding code-switching in the classroom. A few common answers to Question 8 are listed below.

“When teachers use my native language, it can reduce anxiety and foster a more comfortable learning environment.”

“Using both the target language and the native language helps reinforce key concepts, which may lead to better retention of information.”

“I am more likely to engage in discussions or ask questions when I can switch to my native language for clarity.”

“The skill to improve our intercultural communication is important, and code-switching provides practice in this skill.”

There are three common answers to Question 9.

“Teachers who keep using Chinese bothers me a lot.”

“It is not good if teachers use Chinese all the way to teach complex ideas in classrooms.”

“When teachers keep switching to my mother tongue, I might miss out on the chance to work through language challenges, which is a key part of language development.”

For Question 10, there are four common answers.

“I like it when teachers employ code-switching if necessary.”

“It is beneficial to the learning of business English if teachers employ code-switching whenever he needs to translate important concepts in Chinese.”

“Proper use of code-switching can lead to sound learning outcome.”

“Contents in specific knowledge can be offered with more Chinese.”

### **3.2 Discussion**

This study explored Business English majors’ perceptions of code-switching in ESP classrooms at Zhaoqing University, focusing on the functions of code-switching and its perceived impact on student comprehension, teacher-student relationships, and the classroom atmosphere. The findings are consistent with previous research that recognizes code-switching as an effective pedagogical tool in second language teaching, particularly in ESP contexts. Notably, the study reveals both benefits and challenges of code-switching, offering a nuanced view of its role in ESP classrooms.

The data reveals that students generally view code-switching as an aid to comprehension and learning, particularly in the context of understanding specialized ESP content. With a mean score of 4.03 (SD = 0.67), most students agreed that teachers’ use of code-switching helped facilitate their understanding of complex ESP concepts. This aligns with findings from previous studies, such as those by Cook (2001) and Sittattrakul and Laovoravit (2018), who emphasized that switching to the native language (L1) can make intricate concepts more accessible, particularly when learners are confronted with unfamiliar terminology. Cook (2001) posited that the common practice of banning students’ native languages in language instruction settings has significantly narrowed the scope of effective language education, and further argued that the incorporation of L1 is particularly justified when the demands of using the target language become excessively challenging or cumbersome for students to manage. Code-switching also serves as a valuable strategy to bridge the gap between students’ existing knowledge and new academic content, helping them retain important information (Wu, 2013).

A striking finding is the high agreement (mean = 4.69, SD = 0.45) among students regarding the positive impact of code-switching on teacher-student relationships. This finding reflects the idea that code-switching helps foster a more relaxed and supportive classroom environment, which encourages greater student participation and engagement. This is consistent with research by Canagarajah (1995) and Khoumssi (2024), who argued that teachers' use of L1 can make students feel more comfortable and reduce anxiety, particularly in content-heavy courses like ESP. In this study, many students reported feeling more willing to ask questions and engage in discussions when teachers alternated between English and Chinese.

Similarly, the positive effect of code-switching on classroom atmosphere (mean = 3.75, SD = 0.60) highlights its role in reducing communication barriers, thus contributing to a more interactive and collaborative learning environment. While this score is slightly lower than for teacher-student relationships, it still indicates general approval of code-switching's role in enhancing the classroom climate.

The results show that the most frequently cited functions of code-switching were "Translation" (90.9%), "Topic Switching" (81.8%), and "Checking Comprehension" (84.8%). These findings reflect the pragmatic functions of code-switching identified by researchers like Canagarajah (1995) and Wu (2013), who highlighted that teachers often switch languages to ensure clearer understanding, especially when introducing new vocabulary or technical terms. Translation is particularly important in ESP contexts, where students need to grasp specific jargon or concepts that are often not easily conveyed in a second language.

In contrast to high-level students in studies by Sittattrakul and Laovoravit (2018), who felt code-switching was less beneficial, the students in this study—many of whom may still be grappling with the specialized vocabulary of business English—viewed translation as a crucial function. However, the students also indicated some concerns about excessive use of Chinese, echoing the caution expressed by Khoumssi (2024) and others who warned against over-reliance on L1, which can hinder the development of fluency in the target language.

The open-ended responses in this study suggest that students appreciate the psychological benefits of code-switching, such as reduced anxiety and enhanced comprehension. Many students stated that switching to Chinese for clarification helped them feel more at ease, which in turn fostered a more positive and effective learning experience. This aligns with the findings of Merritt (1992), who observed that code-switching could be a vital strategy for improving classroom interaction and supporting students' emotional comfort.

Nevertheless, some students raised concerns about the negative impact of too much code-switching. They argued that constant switching to the native language could prevent them from developing language skills through immersion in English. This reflects the views of higher-level students in Sittattrakul and Laovoravit (2018)'s study, who believed that excessive code-switching might impede language acquisition. Such concerns underline the need for teachers to balance the use of L1 and English, ensuring that code-switching is employed as a pedagogical tool rather than a crutch.

#### **4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Based on the complex views of students on code-switching discussed, here are some teaching recommendations:

Educators are advised to employ code-switching with discretion, particularly when elucidating intricate or novel ideas. In the context of advanced learners, the reliance on code-switching should be minimized to foster deeper engagement with the target language. It is essential for instructors to maintain a balance between the utilization of their students' native language and the target language, ensuring that code-switching acts as an educational instrument rather than a dependency. Moreover, instructors might resort to L1 when required to sustain a nurturing educational environment, yet they must guarantee that it does not undermine opportunities for practice in the target language. The incorporation of student feedback into instructional strategies is highly recommended to achieve an appropriate equilibrium. Students have highlighted that they appreciate code-switching for purposes of clarification and also believe that their English proficiency would be enhanced if educators engaged more extensively in English during classroom dialogues and elucidations. Ultimately, educators should endeavor to cultivate an environment abundant with English, while also acknowledging the significance of code-switching during challenging moments.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study reinforces the idea that code-switching plays a multifaceted role in ESP classrooms, offering both pedagogical benefits and potential drawbacks. It has been shown to improve comprehension, enhance teacher-student interactions, and create a positive classroom atmosphere. However, its use must be carefully managed to avoid hindering the development of students' proficiency in English. By striking an appropriate balance, teachers can leverage code-switching effectively, enhancing learning outcomes and fostering greater student engagement in ESP courses.

While the study provides valuable insights into the functions of code-switching and students' perceptions in ESP classrooms, it has several limitations. The sample size of 33 students from a single university in Guangdong limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples from different regions and institutions to offer broader insights. In addition, while the survey method was effective, it did not fully explore the contexts in which code-switching is most beneficial or differentiate between different types of code-switching. A mixed-methods approach, combining surveys with classroom observations and interviews, could yield a more nuanced understanding of students' views.

Another limitation is the focus on students' perceptions, without analyzing teachers' actual code-switching practices, which may vary depending on teaching goals and classroom dynamics. Understanding teachers' reasons for code-switching and their strategies in different contexts would provide a more balanced and comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Including teacher interviews or classroom observations would strengthen the study's findings. Future studies should examine both student and teacher perspectives to provide a more holistic view. Furthermore, the cultural and educational context was not fully addressed. Code-switching practices in China may differ significantly from those in bilingual or multilingual settings. Thus, future research should investigate how local cultural factors influence code-switching in ESP classrooms.

Finally, the study lacked a longitudinal perspective. Future research could explore the long-term effects of code-switching on students' language proficiency and overall learning outcomes. Addressing these gaps would provide a more comprehensive understanding of code-switching in ESP teaching and learning, offering deeper insights into its complex dynamics.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study is conducted in strict accordance with high ethical principles, ensuring that every participant provides informed consent, thereby guaranteeing their complete understanding of the research goals and their rights. Participant data is kept confidential through anonymization and safeguarded storage.

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