

# Code-Switching in University English Classrooms: Evidence from Yunnan, China

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## Abstract

This study examines the use of code-switching in university English classrooms in Yunnan Province, China, where teachers face challenges such as students' low proficiency, limited exposure to English outside class, and inconsistent teaching practices. Code-switching, the alternation between English and Chinese, is a widely adopted strategy to address these barriers. Using qualitative methods, including classroom observations and interviews with six English instructors, the study explores the functions and impacts of code-switching in teaching. Findings show that intra-sentential switching is the most common, serving pedagogical functions such as clarifying complex concepts, emphasizing key content, providing instructions, and facilitating classroom interaction. Teachers reported that code-switching supports comprehension and engagement, while also expressing concern that excessive use of Chinese may reduce students' opportunities to practice English. The study highlights the need for a balanced approach, where code-switching is employed strategically rather than habitually. Implications suggest that teachers can enhance student participation and confidence through purposeful switching, while administrators and curriculum developers should provide training on effective bilingual practices. Policymakers may also draw on these findings to inform language education reforms. Future research should examine the long-term effects of code-switching on English proficiency and explore complementary methods for promoting communicative competence.

**Keywords:** bilingual learners, code-switching, English language classroom, university

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Code-Switching in University English Classrooms: Context and Rationale*

In today's globalized world, multilingual communication has become increasingly common, and the phenomenon of code-switching—the alternation between two or more languages in interaction—has drawn scholarly attention across sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and pragmatics since the 1960s. Within foreign language education, debates continue over its pedagogical role. While immersion approaches often discourage the use of the first language (L1) in classrooms (Cummins, 1998; Kelleher, 2013), growing research suggests that judicious code-switching can aid comprehension, reduce anxiety, and support student participation. Code-switching can be defined as "the occurrence of speech segments belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems in a language exchange." (Gumperz, 1982: 59).

In China, English is a compulsory subject in universities, yet many students enter higher education with limited proficiency and little exposure to English outside the classroom. The 2017 *College English Curriculum Standards* emphasize the need for teachers to consider learners' actual language levels and, when appropriate, incorporate Chinese to support instruction (Ministry of Education, 2017). Despite this, teachers face the challenge of balancing exposure to English with the strategic use of students' L1. Previous research on code-switching in China has primarily focused on secondary schools (Zhang 2023; Zainil & Arsyad 2021), leaving university contexts, where learners' needs and instructional conditions differ underexplored.

The significance of investigating code-switching in university classrooms lies in its potential to enhance both theory and practice. Understanding how teachers employ code-switching can provide insights into effective instructional strategies, enrich theoretical discussions on bilingual pedagogy, and inform teacher training programs. Moreover, such research benefits students by fostering comprehension and communication skills, and it contributes to policy by aligning classroom practices with broader educational goals.

### *1.2 Code-Switching in English Classrooms: Pedagogical Functions and Ongoing Concerns*

The phenomenon of code-switching, defined as the alternation between two or more languages within communication (Haugen, 1953; Gumperz, 1982), has attracted scholarly attention for decades across sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and pragmatics. In language education, it has been a point of contention. Traditional immersion approaches argue for maximizing the use of the target language (Cummins, 1998; Kelleher, 2013), while a growing body of research demonstrates that judicious use of the first language (L1) can enhance learning outcomes. Within bilingual classrooms, code-switching typically refers to the alternation between the target language (English) and the mother tongue (Chinese), employed by teachers or learners for communicative and pedagogical purposes.

Scholars have proposed several typologies to describe the phenomenon. Poplack's (1980) influential framework distinguishes inter-sentential switching (between sentences), intra-sentential switching (within a sentence), and tag-switching (the insertion of discourse

markers or tags). Later work by Muysken (2020) categorized code-switching as alternation, insertion, or congruent lexicalization. In classroom contexts, Ferguson (2003) highlighted pedagogical, managerial, and interpersonal functions, suggesting that code-switching is rarely arbitrary but rather a strategic resource shaped by context.

A substantial body of empirical work underscores these functions. Teachers employ code-switching to explain complex concepts, translate unfamiliar vocabulary, manage classroom discipline, and build rapport with students (Ferguson, 2003). These functions reveal its value not merely as a compensatory strategy but as an integral part of classroom discourse. From a psycholinguistic perspective, code-switching may also reduce cognitive load and support scaffolded learning (Hofweber et al., 2023). Pragmatic accounts highlight its role in signaling stance, solidarity, or shifts in interactional focus (Verschueren, 1999).

Despite this, scholarly opinion remains divided. Proponents argue that code-switching fosters comprehension, reduces language anxiety, and encourages participation (Hall & Cook, 2012). From this perspective, code-switching supports the development of communicative competence by bridging gaps in learners' linguistic resources. However, critics warn against its overuse, contending that excessive reliance on L1 reduces exposure to authentic target language input and may hinder students' ability to think and interact in English (Macaro, 2009; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). This debate underscores a central pedagogical challenge: how to strike a balance between maximizing target language input and strategically using the mother tongue.

Research in the Chinese context further illustrates this tension. Studies at the secondary school level show that teachers frequently use code-switching to explain grammar, translate vocabulary, and provide classroom management cues, with students generally perceiving this positively. Cheng (2015) found that code-switching in Chinese EFL classrooms is often motivated by pedagogical necessity rather than linguistic deficiency. More recent work at the tertiary level (Hu, 2023) identifies intra-sentential switching as the most frequent type in university classrooms, reflecting teachers' attempts to integrate L1 and L2 resources seamlessly. While students acknowledge its role in aiding comprehension, teachers remain cautious about its potential to limit English exposure.

Despite these insights, research remains fragmented. Most studies in China have concentrated on secondary education, leaving university contexts underexplored, even though students at this level face unique challenges such as low proficiency, diverse linguistic backgrounds, and limited opportunities for authentic English use. Furthermore, relatively few studies systematically examine teachers' motivations, the circumstances under which different types of code-switching are employed, or the broader sociocultural and psychological factors that shape its implementation.

To address these gaps, the present study draws on three complementary frameworks: Poplack's (1980) typology of switching, Ferguson's (2003) model of pedagogical, managerial, and interpersonal functions, and Yu's (2004) adaptation model, which emphasizes code-switching as a communicative adaptation to learners' needs. These perspectives provide a robust foundation for investigating how university English teachers in Yunnan Province

understand, implement, and reflect on their code-switching practices, as well as the challenges they encounter in balancing English and Chinese in classroom discourse.

### *1.3 Research Objectives*

This study therefore examines the implementation of code-switching in university English classrooms in Yunnan Province, China. Specifically, it aims: (1) to explore teachers' understanding of code-switching in English instruction, (2) to investigate how they implement it in practice, and (3) to identify challenges they encounter in balancing English and Chinese use.

## **2. Method**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the types, functions, and motivations behind teachers' use of code-switching in university English classrooms. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables in-depth exploration of classroom discourse and teachers' pedagogical reasoning, rather than relying on numerical generalizations. Case study methodology (Yin, 2014) is particularly suited to examining complex social and linguistic practices in their natural context, providing a holistic understanding of classroom interaction.

### *2.1 Research Site and Participants*

The study was conducted at YunLing University (pseudonym), a higher education institution in Yunnan Province, China. Yunnan is characterized by significant linguistic diversity, with many students speaking minority languages in addition to Mandarin and English, making it a rich site for examining code-switching in English instruction.

Six English teachers from the School of Foreign Languages participated in the study. They were selected using purposive sampling to capture a range of teaching experiences. Three participants had fewer than 10 years of teaching experience, while three had over 10 years. All held master's degrees, were non-native English speakers, and had studied abroad. This sample size was deemed appropriate for qualitative research, as it provided sufficient depth for analysis while maintaining manageability.

### *2.2 Instruments and Data Collection*

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

- **Classroom observations:** Each participant's classes were observed and audio-recorded over a two-month period (September–October 2024). An observation protocol, based on Poplack's (1980) typology, was used to document inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching. Observations also noted the pedagogical, managerial, and communicative functions of code-switching. Recordings were later transcribed verbatim to supplement observational notes.
- **Interviews:** Following classroom observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all six teachers (October–December 2024). Interviews explored teachers' attitudes toward code-switching, contexts of use, challenges, and

suggestions for effective practice. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Questions were adapted from Polio and Duff (1994) and refined for this study.

A brief pilot study was conducted beforehand to test and refine the observation checklist and interview protocol.

### *2.3 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations*

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Observation transcripts and interview data were coded according to Poplack's (1980) typology and Ferguson's (2003) framework of pedagogical, managerial, and interpersonal functions. Codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting the functions and motivations of teachers' code-switching practices. To ensure validity, data from observations and interviews were triangulated, and findings were contextualized with existing literature.

Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any stage. All data were anonymized, and YunLing University is used as a pseudonym to protect institutional identity.

## **3. Findings**

The analysis of classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed three overarching themes: (1) the types of code-switching employed, (2) the pedagogical and managerial functions of code-switching, and (3) teachers' perceptions of its benefits and challenges..

### *3.1 Types of Code-switching*

Across the six teachers observed, intra-sentential code-switching emerged as the most frequent type. Teachers often inserted Chinese terms or phrases within English explanations, particularly when teaching grammar or vocabulary. For instance, during a lesson on conditional sentences, one teacher explained: "*If-clause* 要注意时态 (*pay attention to the tense in the if-clause*)". This blending of English and Chinese enabled students to grasp complex structures more quickly.

Inter-sentential code-switching was also common, especially when teachers shifted languages between sentences to summarize content or provide reassurance. In one observation, a teacher concluded a grammar explanation with: "*So you can use the past tense here.* 明白了吗? (*Do you understand?*)"—seamlessly moving between English instruction and Chinese comprehension checks. Tag-switching occurred less frequently but was observed in casual interactions, such as using short fillers like "*好吧* (*okay*)" or "*对不对?* (*right?*)" to maintain engagement.

### *3.2 Pedagogical and Managerial Functions*

The data revealed several distinct functions of code-switching. First, teachers used Chinese to clarify complex linguistic concepts and provide accurate translations of difficult vocabulary. For example, one teacher explained: "*The word 'resilient' means* 坚韧的, 能承受压力的

(*tough, able to withstand pressure*).” Such explanations helped bridge gaps between students’ prior knowledge and new English input.

Second, code-switching facilitated classroom management. Teachers frequently used Chinese to give instructions, maintain discipline, or organize group activities. For example, before a listening task, a teacher stated in Chinese: “*现在请大家先听一遍，不要写* (*Now please just listen once, don’t write anything*).” Using Chinese minimized confusion and ensured smoother transitions between activities.

Third, code-switching played a key interpersonal role by reducing anxiety and encouraging participation. Several students were observed responding more readily when addressed in both English and Chinese. One teacher noted in the interview: “*When I use a little Chinese, students feel less nervous and more willing to answer.*”

### 3.3 Teachers’ Perceptions and Challenges

Interviews with the six teachers highlighted ambivalent attitudes toward code-switching. On one hand, they acknowledged its effectiveness in enhancing comprehension, building rapport, and sustaining student engagement. As one teacher stated: “*If I speak only English, some students completely shut down. Switching helps bring them back.*”

On the other hand, teachers expressed concern about over-reliance on Chinese. They worried that frequent switching might reduce students’ exposure to English, thereby limiting long-term proficiency. One participant commented: “*We must find a balance. Too much Chinese means they don’t practice English enough, but no Chinese means they get lost.*”

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers view code-switching as a pragmatic strategy rather than an ideal practice—useful in addressing immediate classroom needs, but potentially problematic if overused.

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the pervasive role of code-switching in university English classrooms in Yunnan, particularly in contexts where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Intra-sentential switching was the most frequent type, consistent with Poplack’s (1980) typology and with recent research in Chinese EFL settings. The observed blending of English and Chinese within sentences reflects teachers’ attempts to scaffold complex linguistic input in ways that are immediately accessible to learners.

The pedagogical functions identified in this study align with Ferguson’s (2003) framework and have been echoed in more recent scholarship. For instance, Chen (2020) and Tian and Macaro (2022) argue that code-switching facilitates the comprehension of abstract or technical content, particularly in contexts where English is a foreign language. By using Chinese to clarify difficult concepts and vocabulary, the teachers in this study enhanced learners’ understanding without abandoning the communicative goals of English instruction.

In addition to pedagogical functions, the study highlights the role of code-switching in classroom management and affective support. This finding resonates with earlier claims that



code-switching can help reduce students' anxiety and foster a supportive classroom climate (Cook, 2001). More recent studies (e.g. Munawaroh, 2022) similarly emphasize that strategic switching lowers the affective filter and encourages participation among less confident learners. The teachers in this study consistently reported that a judicious use of Chinese increased students' willingness to engage, which is particularly important in multilingual regions like Yunnan, where many students juggle multiple linguistic repertoires.

At the same time, teachers' concerns about over-reliance on Chinese reflect ongoing debates in applied linguistics. While code-switching offers immediate benefits, excessive use may reduce learners' opportunities for authentic English input (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; Tian & Macaro, 2022). Several teachers in this study recognized this tension, underscoring the need to strike a balance between accessibility and exposure. Their emphasis on moderation aligns with recent calls for "principled code-switching," in which switching is used strategically rather than instinctively (Macaro, 2018).

Another important implication concerns teacher training and institutional policy. In the absence of clear guidelines, teachers in this study relied on personal judgment to determine when and how to code-switch. Recent research by Zhang (2023) stresses the importance of professional development programs that equip teachers with strategies for effective bilingual pedagogy. Such training could help maximize the benefits of code-switching—such as improved comprehension and reduced anxiety—while minimizing risks associated with excessive reliance on the L1.

Finally, this study contributes to broader discussions about multilingualism in education. In linguistically diverse regions like Yunnan, code-switching is not simply a compensatory practice but part of students' natural communicative repertoire. Recognizing and leveraging this resource can help reframe code-switching from being perceived as a deficiency to being valued as a pedagogical asset (Li, 2018; García & Wei, 2019).

In conclusion, the findings affirm that code-switching, when used strategically, can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms. However, its effectiveness depends on deliberate, balanced use supported by teacher awareness, professional training, and institutional policy.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study examined the implementation of code-switching in university English classrooms in Yunnan Province, China, focusing on teachers' understanding, practices, and challenges. The findings show that code-switching is a common and practical strategy, serving multiple functions such as facilitating comprehension, managing classrooms, and supporting student engagement. Intra-sentential code-switching was most frequently observed, while inter-sentential and tag-switching also played important roles in communication and interaction.

Teachers perceived code-switching as an adaptive tool that helps balance students' proficiency levels with instructional demands. At the same time, they acknowledged the risk of over-reliance on Chinese, which may limit students' exposure to English. These insights

affirm that while code-switching can enhance teaching and learning, it must be applied strategically and in moderation.

The study contributes both theoretically and practically by reaffirming established frameworks on code-switching functions while offering context-specific evidence from Chinese higher education. It also underscores the need for teacher training and supportive institutional policies that promote effective bilingual pedagogy. Ultimately, code-switching should be viewed not as a deficiency, but as a dynamic resource that, when used judiciously, can bridge linguistic gaps and foster meaningful language learning.

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