

Foreign language acquisition through English–Arabic code-switching in EFL classroom: a systematic literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the language shift model between English and Arabic in foreign language acquisition, specifically focusing on how English–Arabic code-switching (EACS) is structured and utilized as a teaching approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. The study also aims to investigate the functions of EACS in EFL settings, explore its benefits and pedagogical advantages and identify the challenges and drawbacks associated with its use in EFL classrooms.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology to analyze and synthesize existing research on EACS within the context of EFL classrooms. The study analyzes 25 articles assessing the impact of language shift on teaching and learning practices, including research published between 2013 and 2024 across multiple databases. Data analysis is carried out in two stages. First, a descriptive synthesis involves a comprehensive analysis of each study, summarizing its context, methodologies and key findings. Second, a thematic synthesis groups the studies according to the main themes derived from the research questions, providing a more structured interpretation of the findings.

Findings – The results reveal that EACS plays a significant role in EFL classrooms by facilitating comprehension, reducing students' anxiety and fostering an interactive learning environment. The results also indicate that teachers strategically employ EACS to clarify complex concepts, explain new vocabulary, manage classroom interactions and serve multiple pedagogical functions. Additionally, the study identifies key challenges in EACS implementation, including teachers' and students' preferences toward implementing code-switching (CS), teacher proficiency concerns and potential over-reliance on the first language, all of which might hinder full immersion in English learning.

Originality/value – The significance of the study, serving as a valuable resource in the field, is also evident in its recommendations, which are based on the study's findings. The study recommends structured guidelines for the effective use of EACS, ensuring balanced integration that maximizes benefits while minimizing drawbacks and challenges. Professional development programs should equip teachers with the skills to implement EACS strategically. Institutions should establish policies that support flexible language use, enabling teachers to utilize CS when necessary while ensuring consistent, systematic exposure to English. Further research is recommended to explore students' perceptions of EACS and its long-term impact on proficiency.

Keywords Code-switching strategy, Code-switching functions, Foreign language acquisition, Pedagogical approaches, Systemic literature review

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Foreign language acquisition, particularly English proficiency is essential in multicultural societies and is high in demand due to global lingual needs (Crystal, 2003; Byram, 2020). However, acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL) presents challenges, including vocabulary comprehension, grammatical structure and fluency (Mochacha and Lwangale, 2020; Jogulu and Radzi, 2018). To address these, educators implement diverse teaching methods to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Richards and Rodgers, 2014; Dörnyei, 2001).



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Code-switching (CS) is an effective strategy in bilingual EFL classrooms, where teachers alternate between languages to aid comprehension (Gumperz, 2014). In bilingual settings like the Arab world, teachers switch between Arabic (L1) and English (L2) to clarify concepts and create a supportive environment (Alsalam, 2022; Fauziati *et al.*, 2020; Al-Ta'ani, 2019). Studies show that CS bridges linguistic gaps, making content more accessible and improving engagement and learning outcomes (Rabab'ah and Al-Yasin, 2017; Al-Jamal and Al-Gharaibeh, 2016; Al-Mahrooqi and Denman, 2016; Sadeghi and Sadeghi, 2020).

CS serves multiple functions in EFL classrooms, including clarifying meaning, reducing vocabulary and grammar struggles and providing emotional support to enhance confidence and engagement (Basirat and Shafiee, 2016; Boustani, 2019; Taniş *et al.*, 2020; Lin, 2013). Studies show that CS improves language retention, comprehension and overall learning outcomes (Monchacha and Lwngale, 2020; Al-Jamal and Al-Gharaibeh, 2016) while fostering student participation and social dynamics (Liu, 2016; Horasan, 2014). However, over-reliance on L1 can hinder L2 immersion, slowing language acquisition and limiting proficiency (Marsella, 2020a; Almoayidi, 2018) and excessive use of CS may negatively impact fluency (Mahmoud and Mustafa, 2016). Therefore, educators must balance CS to support, not hinder, language learning (Cook, 2001a, b).

The theoretical framework of CS is rooted in sociolinguistics, with scholars like Fishman (1972), Weinreich (1953) and Myers-Scotton (1993) emphasizing its role in bilingual communication. CS serves as a social practice, signaling group identity and solidarity (Blackledge and Pavlenko, 2001; Blom and Gumperz, 1972). In educational settings, it helps students navigate languages, fostering a sense of belonging (Sert, 2015a, b). In Arab EFL classrooms, English–Arabic CS is common, aiding comprehension in bilingual contexts (Rabab'ah and Al-Yasin, 2017). While some view excessive CS as detrimental to English proficiency, others see it as a tool for overcoming barriers and supporting student-centered learning (Alsalam, 2022; Rabab'ah and Al-Yasin, 2017). Given the widespread bilingualism in the Arab world, understanding CS's impact on language development is essential (Al-Mahrooqi and Denman, 2016).

Although CS has been widely examined, research on its application in Arab EFL classrooms, particularly in higher education, remains limited (Alsalam, 2022). This study aims to address this gap by investigating the structure and application of EACS in EFL classrooms. The main research question guiding this study is: How is EACS structured and utilized as a teaching approach in EFL classrooms? To explore this issue in depth, the study attempts to address the following sub-questions:

- (1) What are the functions of EACS in EFL classrooms?
- (2) What are the benefits and pedagogical advantages of EACS in EFL classrooms?
- (3) What are the challenges and drawbacks of EACS in EFL classrooms?

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to analyze and synthesize existing research on EACS within the context of foreign language learning in EFL classrooms. A systematic review is a research approach that involves identifying, critically evaluating and summarizing relevant studies on a given topic (Snyder, 2019; Pati and Lorusso, 2017). The primary aim of a systematic review is to compile a comprehensive list of all published and unpublished studies related to the subject matter (Cronin *et al.*, 2008). In this study, the focus is on critically evaluating studies published between 2013 and 2024, with the goal of exploring how CS functions as a pedagogical tool, its advantages, the roles it plays in EFL classrooms

and the barriers it may introduce in language learning environments. The systematic nature of this review ensures that the selected studies are rigorously assessed based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, promoting transparency and replicability. Table 1 below presents the selection criteria for published studies and search strategy.

Data synthesis

The synthesis of the selected studies will be conducted in two stages to systematically analyze the findings related to EACS in EFL classrooms. This structured approach aligns with the study's aim of examining how EACS is structured and applied as a teaching approach, while also addressing the research sub-questions concerning its advantages, functions and barriers in language learning.

Descriptive synthesis: This stage involves a comprehensive analysis of each study, summarizing its context, methodologies and key findings. It aims to explore how each study contributes to answering the research questions by providing insights into the role of CS in foreign language acquisition (FLA). As part of a SLR, this synthesis follows a structured and replicable approach to critically assess and integrate findings from multiple studies, ensuring a transparent and rigorous analysis of existing research (Gough *et al.*, 2017; Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). This process ensures a clear understanding of the scope and relevance of each study within the broader discussion of EACS in EFL classrooms.

Thematic synthesis: To provide a more structured interpretation, studies will be grouped according to the main themes derived from the research questions:

- (1) *Teacher–student interaction:* Examining how EACS influences classroom communication and enhances teacher-student engagement, facilitating a more interactive learning environment (Macaro, 2014; Sert, 2015a, b).
- (2) *Educational and cognitive functions:* Investigating how teachers and students use EACS to aid comprehension, scaffold learning and support cognitive processes in acquiring a foreign language (Swain and Lapkin, 2000; Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

Table 1. Selection criteria for published studies and search strategy

Criteria	Description
Inclusion Criteria	• Focus on English–Arabic code-switching in EFL classrooms • Investigates functions, benefits and pedagogical advantages • Addresses drawbacks and challenges of code-switching • Empirical, peer-reviewed research from reputable journals • Published between 2013 and 2024 • Centered on Arabic-speaking EFL environments
Exclusion Criteria	• Full-text availability for analysis • Studies not directly addressing English–Arabic code-switching in EFL learning • Research on bilingualism or code-switching outside educational contexts • Lacks focus on pedagogical functions, benefits or challenges • Non-peer-reviewed articles • Published before 2013 • No full-text availability or missing empirical data
Search Strategy	• Conducted in academic databases: ERIC, JSTOR, ScienceDirect and Scopus • Methodical approach following inclusion/exclusion criteria • Identified primary research on English–Arabic code-switching in EFL classrooms • Ensured diverse selection of relevant studies

Source(s): Created by the author

- (3) *Language skills development*: Analyzing the impact of EACS on developing key language skills, such as speaking, listening, reading and writing and determining its role in improving fluency and accuracy (Hall and Cook, 2012; Lin, 2013).
- (4) *Challenges or barriers to code-switching*: Identifying the challenges that hinder the effective implementation of EACS, including institutional policies, pedagogical concerns and students' linguistic preferences (Williams, 2017; Littlewood and Yu, 2009).

This structured synthesis ensures that the findings from the literature are systematically organized to provide a comprehensive understanding of how EACS functions as a pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms. The approach follows established guidelines for conducting SLRs and thematic synthesis, ensuring rigor, transparency and reliability in the analysis (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003; Thomas and Harden, 2008).

Literature review

Theoretical and analytical frameworks of code-switching

This section outlines the theoretical and analytical frameworks that underpin the present study, focusing on two complementary perspectives: socio-pragmatic models – primarily Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993) and Matrix Language Frame Model (2002) – and conversation analysis (CA). These frameworks offer both structural and interactional lenses for interpreting EACS in EFL classrooms.

A foundational contribution to the study of CS comes from Carol Myers-Scotton, whose theoretical models offer valuable insights into bilingual language behavior. Her Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton, 1993) explains CS as a rational linguistic choice made by speakers to index social relationships. According to this model, speakers use marked or unmarked language choices to negotiate identity, power and group membership within a given communicative setting. In the context of English–Arabic EFL classrooms, this model helps explain why teachers or students might strategically switch codes to signal alignment, clarify meaning or establish rapport. In addition, her Matrix Language Frame Model (Myers-Scotton, 2002) distinguishes between the dominant language of a sentence (Matrix Language) and the embedded elements from another language (Embedded Language). This distinction is useful in analyzing the structure and directionality of classroom CS, particularly in instructional discourse.

Integrating these models into the present review not only enriches the theoretical grounding of the study but also aligns with pedagogical analyses that explore how CS functions as an instructional resource rather than a communicative hindrance (Cook, 2001a, b; Lin, 2013; Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

These models offer distinct benefits for this study. The Markedness Model provides a sociolinguistic lens for understanding why teachers and students make specific CS choices in classroom discourse – choices that often reflect pedagogical goals, group identity or learner needs (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Lin, 2013). Meanwhile, the Matrix Language Frame Model offers a structural framework for interpreting how Arabic and English interact grammatically during instructional talk (Myers-Scotton, 2002). By grounding this review in Myers-Scotton's theories, the study gains a stronger theoretical foundation for analyzing examples of CS in classroom settings and for interpreting the pedagogical implications discussed later in the paper.

CA provides a powerful framework for understanding the fine-grained structure of spoken interaction, especially in educational contexts where language use is highly dynamic (Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2011). Originating from the work of Sacks *et al.* (1974), CA investigates how talk is organized through systematic principles such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, repair sequences and preference organization (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008). These micro-level features are essential in understanding how participants manage meaning, negotiate understanding and perform social roles in real-time interaction.

In the context of EACS in EFL classrooms, CA offers an interpretive lens to examine how teachers and students shift between languages as part of managing the organization of talk (Seedhouse, 2004; Li Wei and Martin-Jones, 2000). For instance, switching from English to Arabic can function as a repair mechanism to resolve comprehension problems, as a contextualization cue to initiate instructional transitions or as a strategy to align with learners' affective needs (Sert, 2015a, b; Üstünel and Seedhouse, 2005). CS may also occur within adjacency pairs (e.g. question–answer sequences), providing insight into how bilingual participants navigate communicative tasks (Cromdal, 2005).

Several studies have successfully employed CA to analyze CS in educational settings, highlighting the importance of interactional cues, speaker intent and pedagogical functions (e.g. Sert, 2015a, b; Seedhouse, 2004; Li, 2011). However, many of these studies are situated in European or Asian multilingual contexts, with limited application to Arabic-speaking learners (Almoaily, 2014; Alshammari, 2011). By integrating CA concepts into the current literature review, this study reinforces its interpretive depth and enhances the credibility of its analysis of classroom interaction fragments. The incorporation of CA is particularly valuable in a systematic review of EACS, as it provides a theoretical grounding for interpreting the interactional patterns across the reviewed studies and informs the conclusions by illustrating how CS contributes to both pedagogical scaffolding and conversational organization (Walsh, 2011).

Thus, CA not only strengthens the analytical base of this study but also bridges the gap between structural analysis and pedagogical implications in bilingual classroom discourse. Combined with the insights provided by the Markedness Model and the Matrix Language Frame Model, these analytical perspectives collectively establish a robust conceptual and methodological foundation for interpreting the patterns and pedagogical roles of CS in English–Arabic EFL classrooms.

Review of English–Arabic code-switching in EFL classroom

The purpose of this section is to examine the potential role of EACS in EFL classrooms in promoting efficient learning for FLA as both a teaching and learning strategy. The studies discussed here focus on CS in the context of teaching EFL. Given that this study is centered on EACS, the literature review is an integral part of the research process, providing a foundational framework for planning and offering valuable insights into the function of EACS in language learning. This review highlights how EACS can serve as an essential educational tool in facilitating language acquisition, while also exploring its potential benefits, drawbacks and challenges. Through a systematic analysis, this literature review aims to deepen our understanding of how EACS operates as a dynamic and flexible educational strategy in FLA process and its influence on teaching and learning approaches in EFL classrooms. This SLR also seeks to synthesize existing research on CS in EFL classrooms, serving as a valuable resource in the field. It aims to support future studies and contribute to bridging any identified gaps in this area.

Larbah (2013) explored the use of CS between Arabic (L1) and English (L2) by Arabic-speaking students in English classes in Western Australia. The study sampled 40 Arab students from the ELICOS course at Curtin University, including participants from both observed and unobserved classes. Using a mixed-method approach – questionnaires, language transfer data recording and interviews – the study found that CS served pedagogical, communicative and social functions. Additionally, students' language proficiency did not hinder their use of CS; rather, it contributed to language development.

Magid and Mugaddam (2013) examined the role of Arabic CS in ESL classrooms and its effect on classroom interaction. The study collected data from primary, secondary and higher education institutions in Sudan and Saudi Arabia using audio recordings, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Findings indicated that while English remained the dominant classroom language, switching to Arabic positively influenced student engagement and interaction, supporting English language learning.

[Gulzar and Al-Asmari \(2014\)](#) investigated awareness and perceptions of CS among 100 faculty members and 100 students at Taif University's English Language Center. Using a 22-item Likert-scale questionnaire, the study found that both groups held positive attitudes toward CS but varied in their perceptions of when and why to switch languages. Participants demonstrated a strong desire to learn English while recognizing the value of the mother tongue in language acquisition.

[Alshugithri \(2015\)](#) studied the use of CS by Saudi female teachers in EFL classrooms at a university and a high school. The sample included 10 bilingual Arabic-speaking teachers, with five from each institution. Audio recordings of 10 classroom sessions were analyzed to assess CS usage and its impact on learning. The results showed a positive tendency toward CS, as it enhanced students' comprehension and classroom interaction, reinforcing its role as an effective communication tool.

[Al-Adnani and Elyas \(2016\)](#) investigated the impact of teacher CS on students' English-speaking skills and examined the functions of CS in EFL classrooms. The sample included 20 teachers from the English Institute in Jeddah, observed using a checklist and 200 students, whose speaking scores were analyzed. The findings revealed three key points: (1) students taught by teachers who did not switch languages performed better in speaking assessments, (2) the most frequent CS functions were "comprehension assessment" and "translation" and (3) despite lower speaking scores, students had a positive attitude toward teacher CS as it facilitated learning.

[Almansour \(2016\)](#) examined the use of CS as a strategy for learning grammar in Saudi EFL classrooms. The study aimed to explore whether CS could enhance grammar learning. The sample included two university classrooms – one where the teacher used CS over 60% of the time and another where CS was used only about 1%. The study employed pre- and post-tests and attitude questionnaires. The results showed that CS was not an effective strategy for grammar learning, although students preferred CS and felt they learned more when it was used.

[Alshahrani \(2017\)](#) investigated the use of CS by Arabic-speaking EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. The purpose was to examine how teachers used CS and understand its functions. Two teachers were observed using a mixed-method approach that included observations, questionnaires and interviews. Findings showed that both teachers engaged in CS for various functions, such as topic changes and emotional expression, despite it being considered inappropriate. Students' low proficiency and negative attitudes contributed to the frequency of CS. The study recommended raising awareness of CS as an instructional tool.

[Rabab'ah and Al-Yasin \(2017\)](#) conducted a case study on CS among Arabic-speaking teachers in two Jordanian schools. The aim was to explore the types and reasons for CS in English classes. The sample included four teachers and 106 teachers' responses to a questionnaire. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Results revealed that teachers frequently switched to Arabic (L1) and the type of switching varied depending on students' proficiency. Teachers used CS to effectively communicate and clarify meaning.

[Al Aqad \(2018\)](#) explored the reasons for language switching and blending in Gaza's secondary schools, focusing on how these practices facilitated communication and learning. The sample included 57 students and six teachers from two schools. Data were collected through questionnaires with both open and closed questions. Findings indicated that both teachers and students valued switching and blending for improving understanding and communication in the classroom.

[Hussein et al. \(2020\)](#) explored the roles and functions of language switching among English teachers and students in Jordanian secondary schools. The study observed teachers' language-switching behavior over four weeks and distributed questionnaires to 330 students from two schools. Findings indicated that teachers used language switching for emotional functions, giving instructions and addressing language incompetence, while students used it for non-linguistic purposes, such as maintaining personal relationships and avoiding misunderstandings.

[Binmahboob \(2020\)](#) investigated the functions of language switching and teachers' attitudes toward it in Saudi secondary schools. The study examined teachers' beliefs regarding language switching in relation to the communicative approach and its pedagogical role. A descriptive-analytical approach was used, with a 31-item questionnaire distributed to 30 English teachers in Riyadh. Results showed that teachers encouraged reduced reliance on the mother tongue, viewing language switching as having a limited role in the communicative approach and a potentially negative impact on language teaching, though it served some pedagogical purposes.

[Razak and Shah \(2020\)](#) examined pre-university students' beliefs about language switching in Malaysian ESL classrooms. The study involved 91 students from a secondary school in Pasir Puteh, Kelantan, using a cross-sectional exploratory design and a 19-item questionnaire analyzed through IBM SPSS. Findings revealed that students had a positive perception of language switching, considering it a useful tool for learning English. The study provided insights for policymakers, teachers and researchers regarding language-switching practices.

[Adder and Bagi \(2020\)](#) studied the relationship between English and Algerian Arabic in EFL classrooms at the University of Tlemcen. The research aimed to understand the functions of language switching among teachers and students. Data were collected through interviews with 16 teachers and classroom observations. Results indicated that while teachers held negative attitudes toward language switching, they acknowledged its role in clarifying difficult words. Teachers preferred limiting the use of the mother tongue to enhance students' language skills and achievement.

[Almagableh and Yunus \(2022\)](#) analyzed the impact of language switching on students' speaking ability in Jordanian private secondary schools. The study used a qualitative approach, with classroom observations of 270 male and female students from grades 9 to 11 in three private schools in Irbid. Observations, conducted over several weeks, recorded teachers' language interactions. Findings showed that while teachers used language switching to facilitate comprehension and engagement, it did not always enhance student participation. Students were more engaged when responding in their mother tongue, while their English responses were often brief. Additionally, students used language switching to avoid discussing topics they found irrelevant.

[Aldalbahy \(2022\)](#) examined the relationship between CS and language proficiency among Saudi female bilingual students and their perceptions of CS. Data were collected using a questionnaire and a prompted production task from 24 students at King Saud University, with an additional six performing the task. Analysis using percentages and content analysis revealed that while the type of CS correlated with language proficiency, its frequency did not. Participants exhibited positive attitudes toward CS, viewing it as a communication tool rather than a sign of weak proficiency.

[Al Taleh and AlQahtani \(2022\)](#) investigated the impact of CS strategies versus exclusive target language instruction on students' English reading skills, comprehension and emotional sustainability. The study surveyed 52 Saudi female university students through questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Results indicated that students favored CS over English-only instruction, perceiving it as beneficial for learning and emotional well-being. Significant differences emerged in their preferences, with a strong inclination toward CS in reading classes.

[Nelson \(2023\)](#) explored the role of CS in ESL classrooms in Saudi Arabia, focusing on its effects on student learning. The study included 35 students and five teachers, utilizing qualitative methods such as observations and interviews. Findings showed that CS aids comprehension and facilitates learning complex concepts, though excessive use could hinder long-term language acquisition. While both students and teachers acknowledged its benefits, concerns were raised about overreliance, highlighting the need for a balanced approach.

[Zaghlool and Altamimi \(2023\)](#) examined EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of language switching in Saudi secondary schools and the motivations behind its use. The study

surveyed 100 teachers and 122 students using a validated five-point Likert scale questionnaire. Results revealed that both groups viewed language switching as an effective strategy for enhancing comprehension, learning grammatical structures, fostering interaction and maintaining classroom engagement. They agreed it helped avoid misunderstandings, elicit better responses and bridge communication gaps.

[Almutairi and Alqarni \(2024\)](#) examined the effectiveness of CS in enhancing comprehension and communication in English classrooms. The study involved 52 English teachers from the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation and employed a mixed-method approach, combining content analysis of social media use and a teacher questionnaire. Findings indicated that teachers viewed CS as an effective instructional tool, though its application varied based on experience, teaching methods and student proficiency. Social media reliance ranged between 13.5% and 25.7%, reflecting different levels of its use as a communication aid.

[Alnefaie and Gupta \(2024\)](#) conducted a narrative study on the role of CS in second-language classrooms through the experiences of a Saudi English instructor. The study explored how the instructor's past learning shaped her teaching practices. Findings suggested that CS enhances engagement and cognitive development but should be reduced as proficiency improves. The study emphasized the need for further research on integrating CS into bilingual teaching strategies and its influence on student participation and language acquisition.

[Alrasheed \(2024\)](#) investigated the social motivations behind CS in Saudi children's speech using a mixed-method approach. Data were gathered through parent questionnaires and storytelling sessions, analyzed using [Poplack's \(1980\)](#) classification. Results showed that children primarily engaged in intersentential switching rather than intrasentential. Three key functions of CS were identified: reducing social distance, requesting a word equivalent and expressing emotions and thoughts.

[Al-Essa \(2024\)](#) explored the use of CS in EFL classes at Jordanian universities, focusing on how teachers implement it to facilitate instruction. The study involved four teachers and 12 students from two universities, utilizing classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Content analysis revealed that teachers used CS intermittently for repetition, clarification, summarization and social interaction, demonstrating its role in supporting comprehension and engagement.

[Altalhi \(2024\)](#) examined the perceptions of ESL and EFL teachers and learners in Saudi universities regarding the use of English as a second language in the classroom. The study aimed to explore the relationship between learners' perceptions and their levels of English proficiency. Data were collected using two modified Likert-type questionnaires, administered to 40 Saudi EFL teachers and 50 students. The results, analyzed using SPSS, revealed positive attitudes from both teachers and learners toward using English in the classroom. The study also found a correlation between learners' proficiency levels and their perception of English as the primary language in lessons.

[Dooly and Bakri \(2024\)](#) analyzed the role of CS as a facilitative tool in an online English-language course for Arabic-speaking learners. The sample consisted of three adult learners in the specialized field. Data were collected through recordings of 10 Zoom sessions, each approximately 1.5 h long. The results indicated that CS was crucial for understanding complex concepts, helping learners search for words in their native language (Arabic) and promoting collaborative learning, which enhanced L2 acquisition.

[Khafaga et al. \(2024\)](#) conducted a survey study on CS in the English Department at Cairo University. The study examined how five Arabic-speaking university teachers used CS in their lessons. Classroom observations revealed that teachers used CS for various purposes, such as clarifying terms or grammar in Arabic, encouraging student participation and enhancing comprehension. The findings showed that CS helped students feel more comfortable using their mother tongue and facilitated better understanding of the material.

Findings and discussion

This section presents key findings from a SLR on EACS in EFL classrooms, focusing on its functions, benefits for language acquisition, pedagogical advantages and potential challenges. By analyzing relevant studies published between 2013 and 2024, this section provides insights into how CS supports comprehension, communication and learning outcomes. The discussion also explores its impact on language proficiency development, taking into account both pedagogical perspectives and students' experiences. These aspects will be examined in detail in the following sections.

Functions of English–Arabic code-switching in EFL classrooms

CS in EFL classrooms serves various functions, including pedagogical, communicative, social and affective purposes. It helps improve comprehension, learning and engagement. [Larbah \(2013\)](#) noted that it aids skill development without hindering English proficiency, while [Rabab'ah and Al-Yasin \(2017\)](#) found that its use depends on students' proficiency, mainly for clarifying concepts. Similarly, [Almutairi and Alqarni \(2024\)](#) observed that teachers in Saudi technical colleges use CS effectively to enhance comprehension, although its frequency varies with student proficiency.

Several studies have explored CS in classroom communication. [Alshugithri \(2015\)](#) and [Al-Adnani and Elyas \(2016\)](#) found that it enhances teacher-student interaction and understanding, making it a useful teaching tool. However, [Almansour \(2016\)](#) and [Almagableh and Yunus \(2022\)](#) argued that while CS aids comprehension, it does not always improve engagement or academic performance, especially in grammar. [Nelson \(2023\)](#) warned that over-reliance on CS could impede long-term language acquisition, despite its short-term benefits in clarifying complex concepts.

The social and affective functions of CS are evident in classrooms. [Hussein et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasized its role in emotional expression and interpersonal communication, with teachers using it for instructions and relationship management. [Alrasheed \(2024\)](#) noted that Saudi children often switch languages to reduce social distance and express emotions, while [Al Tale' and AlQahtani \(2022\)](#) found that students use it for emotional engagement and better reading comprehension. [Al-Essa \(2024\)](#) observed that Jordanian instructors use CS for repetition, clarification and social interaction, highlighting its role in creating a supportive learning environment.

Student and teacher attitudes toward CS have been studied in various contexts. [Gulzar and Al-Asmari \(2014\)](#) found that Saudi university students and teachers generally view it positively, though with differing awareness. [Binmahboob \(2020\)](#) reported that secondary school teachers recognize its pedagogical benefits but caution against overuse of the mother tongue. [Razak and Shah \(2020\)](#) noted that Malaysian pre-university students find CS helpful in English instruction, a view shared by [Al Aqad \(2018\)](#) in Gaza, where both students and teachers value its role in communication.

Studies on CS's impact on language proficiency show mixed results. [Al-Adnani and Elyas \(2016\)](#) found that while it aids comprehension, students taught by language-switching teachers tend to have lower speaking scores. [Aldalbahy \(2022\)](#) found no direct link between CS frequency and proficiency but noted it is preferred for interacting with bilingual speakers. [Zaghloul and Altamimi \(2023\)](#) found that both teachers and students in Saudi secondary schools view CS as effective for improving comprehension and interaction.

CS's role in specialized learning contexts has been studied. [Dooly and Bakri \(2024\)](#) showed its effectiveness in an online English course, helping students understand complex concepts and promoting collaborative learning. [Magid and Mugaddam \(2013\)](#) found that mother tongue switching in Sudanese and Saudi ESL classrooms enhanced communication and supported English learning. [Alnefaie and Gupta \(2024\)](#) explored a Saudi female teacher's views on CS, highlighting how her teaching was influenced by her own language-learning experiences.

Several reviewed studies reported cases of classroom discourse in which teachers strategically used Arabic to clarify unfamiliar terms, manage transitions or maintain engagement. Although these studies did not explicitly employ CA, their findings align with key CA principles such as turn-taking management, repair sequences and interactional alignment (Seedhouse, 2004; Sert, 2015a, b). These classroom practices demonstrate how CS contributes to the organization of pedagogical interactions – what CA would define as interactional sequences – and thus can be interpreted through the lens of CA to highlight their functional role in real-time instructional scaffolding.

Furthermore, these instances reflect what Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model describes as rational language choices aimed at negotiating social roles and pedagogical alignment. Teachers' use of Arabic can be seen as an unmarked choice within specific classroom contexts – particularly when it serves to promote clarity, manage affective rapport or enhance comprehension. Additionally, the alternation between English and Arabic often reflects the structural dynamics described in the Matrix Language Frame Model (Myers-Scotton, 2002), with English typically functioning as the Matrix Language and Arabic elements embedded strategically to support meaning-making in instructional discourse.

Overall, English–Arabic CS plays a crucial role in EFL classrooms, serving as a pedagogical, communicative and social tool. While it enhances comprehension, engagement and emotional interaction, concerns about its long-term impact on language acquisition remain.

Benefits and pedagogical advantages of English–Arabic code-switching in EFL classroom

CS between English and Arabic in EFL classrooms has been widely acknowledged as a beneficial pedagogical strategy that enhances the learning experience. Various studies have highlighted the benefits of this practice, demonstrating its effectiveness in facilitating communication, comprehension, engagement and overall language acquisition.

CS enhances classroom effectiveness by serving pedagogical, communicative and social functions, making it a valuable learning tool (Larbah, 2013). It helps instructors clarify concepts, provide explanations and ensure student understanding (Al-Essa, 2024; Khafaga et al., 2024). It also supports teaching strategies and meets diverse student needs (Alshahrani, 2017; Almutairi and Alqarni, 2024). CS enhances skill development without hindering language proficiency. Research shows it improves comprehension, engagement and the overall learning process, without negatively impacting English proficiency (Larbah, 2013; Alnefaie and Gupta, 2024). It also supports both the native language (Arabic) and the target language (English), reinforcing bilingual competence (Gulzar and Al-Asmari, 2014).

Students show positive attitudes toward CS, as it boosts motivation, participation and engagement (Gulzar and Al-Asmari, 2014; Almansour, 2016; Razak and Shah, 2020). It reduces the affective filter, helping students feel more comfortable and improving second language acquisition (Hussein et al., 2020). This emotional support enhances willingness to communicate and confidence in using English (Al Tale' and AlQahtani, 2022; Alrasheed, 2024). CS helps facilitate comprehension and communication. Teachers often use Arabic to clarify terms, explain grammar, summarize key points and provide instructions (Al-Adnani and Elyas, 2016; Adder and Bagi, 2020; Almagableh and Yunus, 2022), ensuring students understand the material and reducing misunderstandings (Alshugithri, 2015; Magid and Mugaddam, 2013). It also aids word retrieval, helping learners express themselves more accurately and fluently (Alrasheed, 2024; Dooly and Bakri, 2024).

CS fosters interaction and engagement in the classroom, allowing students to participate more actively (Al-Aqad, 2018; Zaghloul and Altamimi, 2023). It bridges social gaps, creating a relaxed and interactive learning environment (Alrasheed, 2024). Additionally, it helps convey emotions and thoughts, improving student–teacher rapport and making the classroom more dynamic (Hussein et al., 2020; Zaghloul and Altamimi, 2023).

CS adapts to different teaching methods and student proficiency levels. Teachers adjust its use based on students' linguistic abilities to meet learning needs (Rabab'ah and Al-Yasin, 2017; Almutairi and Alqarni, 2024). It also aids in repetition and reinforcement, improving retention of key concepts (Al-Essa, 2024), highlighting its effectiveness as a strategic teaching approach for students with varying English proficiency.

In specialized contexts within English courses, CS facilitates the accessibility of complex concepts (Dooly and Bakri, 2024). Similarly, in grammar instruction, alternating between English and Arabic helps elucidate grammatical structures and enhance comprehension (Zaghlool and Altamimi, 2023). Studies show that CS is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but a natural, effective communicative process. It supports second language acquisition, fosters collaborative learning and improves the learning experience (Nelson, 2023; Almutairi and Alqarni, 2024). Both teachers and students recognize its benefits, making it a valuable tool for enhancing comprehension, communication and engagement in EFL classrooms (Altalhi, 2024).

The reviewed literature describes several instances of classroom discourse where teachers used Arabic to explain grammatical structures, provide feedback, or reassure learners during instructional breakdowns. These pedagogical decisions reflect systematic interactional choices that, when viewed through the lens of CoCA, demonstrate the role of CS in shaping learning-oriented interactional sequences. As CA emphasizes the moment-to-moment management of understanding (Sert, 2015a, b), these reported instances illustrate how language alternation supports interactional clarity and maintains instructional flow.

Moreover, these practices can be interpreted through Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993), which suggests that such CS represents deliberate, socially meaningful language choices – where the shift to Arabic serves to align with learners' needs or to foster a more supportive classroom identity. From the perspective of the Matrix Language Frame Model (2002), English often functions as the matrix language, while Arabic is embedded strategically to clarify or support instruction. This structural dynamic reflects a pedagogical blending of languages that supports comprehension and engagement without undermining the goal of English proficiency.

In conclusion, the benefits of EACS in EFL classrooms are numerous. It enhances comprehension, facilitates communication, increases student engagement, supports emotional expression and serves multiple pedagogical functions. Given its effectiveness, educators should consider incorporating CS strategically to optimize language learning outcomes.

Challenges and drawbacks of English–Arabic code-switching in EFL classrooms

Despite the potential advantages of EACS in EFL classrooms, some studies highlight its drawbacks and challenges. These include varying perceptions among faculty and students regarding its proper use, which can lead to misunderstandings and ineffective application (Gulzar and Al-Asmari, 2014). Additionally, frequent CS by teachers may negatively impact students' speaking proficiency, with those exposed to it often scoring lower in speaking tests compared to students in classrooms with less CS (Al-Adnani and Elyas, 2016).

Another significant issue is the ineffectiveness of CS. Research indicates that CS is ineffective for grammar learning, as Saudi female learners do not show improvement in grammar acquisition through this method (Almansour, 2016). Furthermore, teachers hold divided opinions on its usefulness, with some considering it unacceptable, reflecting a lack of consensus regarding its role in EFL instruction (Almansour, 2016). Frequent use of Arabic (L1) is linked to poor English proficiency and negative attitudes toward the language, raising concerns that CS may hinder language development (Alshahrani, 2017). Despite its functional benefits, some educators view it as inappropriate, limiting its use in classrooms and reducing students' exposure to English (L2) (Alshahrani, 2017).

Teachers may use CS as a coping mechanism due to language incompetence, which can hinder effective English instruction (Hussein *et al.*, 2020). Excessive CS reduces students' opportunities to engage with English, limiting their linguistic development (Hussein *et al.*, 2020).

This is consistent with findings that CS has a limited role in the communicative approach, which promotes exclusive use of the target language for immersive learning (Binmahboob, 2020). Teachers are concerned that language switching limits students' immersion in English and fosters dependence on their mother tongue (Binmahboob, 2020). As a result, some educators aim to reduce CS to improve English proficiency, supported by research showing that frequent CS reduces students' engagement in the second language and restricts their use of English to short sentences (Almagableh and Yunus, 2022).

Another challenge associated with CS is its use to avoid irrelevant topics, which limits classroom interaction and reduces student engagement with English (Almagableh and Yunus, 2022). Additionally, while the type of CS correlates with proficiency levels, its frequency does not necessarily enhance language skills, raising questions about its long-term benefits (Aldalbahi, 2022). Excessive CS can negatively affect long-term language acquisition by reducing students' ability to develop strong English proficiency (Nelson, 2023). Scholars stress the need to balance CS with exclusive English use for optimal language learning outcomes (Nelson, 2023). However, variation in teachers' and students' experiences leads to inconsistent application of CS across classrooms (Almutairi and Alqarni, 2024).

Over-reliance on CS can hinder language acquisition, with excessive switching worsening these challenges (Alnefaie and Gupta, 2024). Dependence on Arabic may prevent learners from achieving full English proficiency, supporting the view that excessive CS impedes language development (Alnefaie and Gupta, 2024). Findings show that heavy reliance on Arabic for clarification limits students' exposure to English, further hindering language development (Altalhi, 2024).

Excessive CS has been associated with detrimental effects on student proficiency. Although it may prove advantageous in certain contexts, its overutilization requires meticulous management to prevent adverse consequences for language acquisition. In light of these findings, it is evident that CS can serve as a valuable pedagogical instrument. However, its associated challenges and limitations highlight the necessity for deliberate and regulated application to optimize its advantages, address potential obstacles and mitigate any negative repercussions.

Several cited studies raise concerns about excessive reliance on L1, where teachers defaulted to Arabic for full instructions or explanations. These episodes of classroom discourse reveal potential breakdowns in L2 immersion, reducing students' exposure to English-mediated interactional sequences. From a CA perspective, such practices may disrupt the pedagogical structure of the turn-taking system and limit opportunities for learners to engage in target-language interaction. Although not framed as CA studies, these findings resonate with CA's emphasis on maximizing learner participation in authentic communicative environments (Seedhouse, 2004).

Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993) helps explain how overuse of Arabic may signal unintended social meanings – such as lowering expectations for L2 performance or reinforcing reliance on the L1 as the default communicative norm. From the lens of her Matrix Language Frame Model (2002), the frequent embedding of Arabic may inadvertently destabilize the matrix language (English), making the instructional discourse less consistent with English-language acquisition goals. Together, these models provide a critical theoretical basis for interpreting the pedagogical limitations of excessive CS and emphasize the need for strategic, rather than habitual, use of the L1 in EFL classrooms.

Summary and conclusion

This study focused on EACS as a teaching strategy in FLA. By reviewing 25 studies published between 2013 and 2024, the research explored how EACS is structured and applied in EFL classrooms. The findings reveal that CS plays a vital role in enhancing the learning environment by facilitating comprehension, reducing students' anxiety and fostering greater engagement.

EACS was beneficial for clarifying complex concepts, explaining new vocabulary and fostering an interactive classroom. The bilingual approach bridged language proficiency gaps, creating a supportive learning environment. By switching between English and Arabic, teachers provided linguistic scaffolding, boosting students' confidence and encouraging greater participation, which improved their engagement and language acquisition. The study found that CS promoted a collaborative learning environment, enhancing communication, reducing misunderstandings and clarifying difficult topics, which supported language acquisition. However, concerns included excessive reliance on Arabic hindering English immersion and teacher proficiency issues limiting the full implementation of EACS, which could affect its success in some educational settings.

In conclusion, while EACS enhances comprehension and engagement in EFL classrooms, it must be balanced to avoid over-reliance on the native language. Teachers should receive professional development and institutions should adopt flexible policies for strategic CS, ensuring consistent English exposure. Future research should focus on optimal strategies for balancing CS with language immersion, as well as students' perceptions and the long-term effects on language proficiency.

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Further reading

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