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# CODE-SWITCHING BETWEEN ENGLISH AND URDU IN PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

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## ABSTRACT

*Code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages during communication, is a common linguistic phenomenon in multilingual societies such as Pakistan. In Pakistani universities, English and Urdu frequently occur together in classroom interaction, particularly in lectures, discussions, presentations, and informal academic communication. This study examines the nature, functions, and perceived effects of English-Urdu code-switching in Pakistani university classrooms. The study focuses on how teachers and students use code-switching to facilitate comprehension, explain difficult concepts, maintain interaction, emphasize important information, and create a comfortable classroom environment. A qualitative research approach is proposed, using classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with university teachers and students as the primary data sources. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns and functions of code-switching. The study suggests that code-switching can serve as an effective pedagogical resource when used purposefully. However, excessive dependence on Urdu may reduce students' exposure to English and potentially affect their opportunities to develop academic English proficiency. The research concludes that balanced and strategic use of English and Urdu can contribute positively to classroom communication and learning in Pakistani higher education*

**KEYWORDS:** *Code-switching; English-Urdu bilingualism; Pakistani universities; classroom interaction; bilingual education; language teaching; multilingualism; English language; Urdu; higher education.*

## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a multilingual country in which English and Urdu occupy important positions in education, administration, media, and everyday communication. English has a particularly significant role in higher education because it is widely used as a medium of instruction in universities, especially in disciplines such as science, technology, medicine, business, and social sciences. Mardhiyah, A. A., & Lebagi, D. (2025). explains that Urdu, on the other hand, functions as a major national language and is commonly used for interpersonal communication and informal interaction. As a result, Pakistani university classrooms represent complex multilingual environments in which teachers and students frequently move between English and Urdu. This movement from one language to another is generally referred to as code-switching. Code-switching does not necessarily indicate a lack of competence in either language; rather, it can be a deliberate communicative strategy used to achieve particular linguistic, social, and pedagogical purposes. In classroom settings, teachers may switch from English to Urdu when explaining a difficult concept, giving an example, clarifying instructions, or checking students' understanding. . Tymianski, M., Hill, M. D., Goyal, M., Christenson, J., Menon, B. K., Swartz, R. H., ... & Van Zwam, W. (2025). revealed that Similarly, students may use Urdu while discussing academic ideas with classmates and then shift to English when presenting those ideas formally. Such practices demonstrate the flexible linguistic resources of bilingual and multilingual speakers.

In Pakistan, the use of English is also associated with educational achievement, professional opportunities, and social prestige, while Urdu often provides greater familiarity and emotional and communicative comfort. This creates a distinctive linguistic situation in

university classrooms, where teachers may attempt to maintain English as the instructional language while naturally incorporating Urdu to support comprehension and interaction. Although code-switching is widespread, opinions about its use in education vary. Some educators consider it useful because it reduces communication barriers and helps students understand difficult material, whereas others argue that excessive switching can limit students' exposure to English and reduce opportunities for developing academic language proficiency. Irawansyah, i., junaidin, j., sahbany, s., hadi, l. A. T., riscal, d. A., & aminullah, a. M. (2024). explains that Therefore, examining code-switching requires attention not only to how frequently it occurs but also to why it occurs and what functions it performs. Understanding these patterns is particularly important in Pakistani higher education, where students come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and may have different levels of English proficiency. The present study therefore investigates English-Urdu code-switching in Pakistani university classrooms, with particular attention to its functions, pedagogical significance, and influence on classroom communication.

The issue is particularly relevant in Pakistan because English proficiency has considerable importance in higher education and professional life. University students are often required to read English textbooks, write assignments and research papers in English, give presentations, participate in academic discussions, and communicate with professionals in English. English proficiency may also influence access to employment opportunities and further education. Therefore, university classrooms need to provide sufficient opportunities for students to engage with English. Anh, N. T. M., An, N. T., Ngoc, N. T. M., & Ngoc Xuan, V. (2024). revealed that At the same time, completely excluding Urdu from classroom interaction may create unnecessary linguistic difficulties for students who are still developing their English proficiency. This creates a need for a balanced approach in which English remains the primary academic language while Urdu is used strategically when it contributes to comprehension and effective communication. The present study focuses on Code-Switching Between English and Urdu in Pakistani University Classrooms. It aims to explore the ways in which teachers and students use these two languages during classroom interaction and to identify the major functions served by code-switching. Particular attention is given to code-switching for explanation, clarification, translation, classroom management, emphasis, interpersonal communication, student participation, and the development of rapport. The study also considers participants' perceptions regarding the benefits and possible disadvantages of code-switching.

By investigating actual classroom language practices, the research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of bilingual communication in Pakistani higher education. The debate surrounding code-switching therefore involves two competing perspectives. The first considers code-switching a useful instructional strategy that promotes comprehension, participation, and social interaction. Aljuraifani, Y. A., & Alanazi, Z. M. (2025). explains that The second emphasizes the importance of maximizing target-language exposure and argues that excessive first-language use can limit second-language development. A more balanced position recognizes that the educational value of code-switching depends on its purpose, frequency, timing, and context**.** Strategic code-switching may be beneficial, while unnecessary or excessive switching may be less productive.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the major patterns and functions of English-Urdu code-switching used by teachers and students in Pakistani university classrooms.
2. To examine the pedagogical and communicative reasons behind teachers' and students' use of English-Urdu code-switching.
3. To explore the perceived effects of code-switching on students' comprehension, classroom participation, and English language development.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the major patterns and functions of English-Urdu code-switching in Pakistani university classrooms?
2. Why do university teachers and students switch between English and Urdu during classroom interaction?
3. How does English-Urdu code-switching affect students' comprehension, participation, and development of English proficiency?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Code-switching has received considerable attention in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, bilingualism, and language education. It generally refers to the use of two or more languages or linguistic varieties within a single conversation or communicative interaction. John J. Gompers describes conversational code-switching as an important discourse phenomenon through which speakers communicate social and contextual meanings. Tymianski, M., Hill, M. D., Goyal, M., Christenson, J., Menon, B. K., Swartz, R. H., ... & Van Zwam, W. (2025). revealed that From this perspective, switching languages is not random but can be related to the participants, topic, setting, and communicative purpose. Shana Pollack also contributed significantly to the understanding of code-switching by examining structural patterns in bilingual speech. Her work demonstrated that bilingual speakers can move between languages in systematic ways rather than switching arbitrarily. Srisawat, C., & Poonpon, K. (2023). elaborated on the role of These perspectives are particularly relevant to multilingual educational contexts, where speakers possess linguistic resources in more than one language. In classroom contexts, code-switching has often been examined in relation to language teaching and learning. Rod Ellis and other scholars of second-language acquisition have highlighted the importance of comprehensible input and interaction in language learning. From a pedagogical perspective, teachers may use learners' first language to make complex content more comprehensible and to maintain classroom interaction.

Jim Cummins has also emphasized the relationship between students' linguistic resources and educational achievement, particularly in multilingual and bilingual education. Lahuerta Martínez, A. C. (2024). found that His work supports the idea that learners' existing linguistic knowledge can potentially be used as a resource rather than simply treated as an obstacle to second-language development. Research on classroom code-switching has identified several

functions. Teachers may switch languages to explain difficult vocabulary, translate unfamiliar concepts, provide instructions, manage classroom behavior, establish rapport, or emphasize particular points. Students may switch languages when asking questions, discussing difficult topics, expressing emotions, negotiating meaning or communicating with peers. Therefore, code-switching can perform both pedagogical and interpersonal functions. It may facilitate understanding because students can connect unfamiliar English terminology with concepts that are more accessible in Urdu. Mertosono, S. R., & Arid, M. (2026). found that At the same time, switching can help establish solidarity between teachers and students and create a less threatening classroom atmosphere. The Pakistani educational context makes this issue especially significant. English has traditionally occupied a powerful position in Pakistan's educational system, particularly in higher education. Students who have attended English-medium schools may have greater familiarity with academic English, whereas students from Urdu-medium or less privileged educational backgrounds may experience greater difficulty when English is used exclusively. Anh, N. T. M., An, N. T., Ngoc, N. T. M., & Ngoc Xuan, V. (2024). elaborated on the Consequently, teachers may use Urdu strategically to bridge linguistic differences among students. In Pakistani classrooms, English-Urdu code-switching may therefore represent a response to differences in students' language proficiency and educational backgrounds.

Several studies of Pakistani classrooms have reported that teachers and students frequently employ code-switching for clarification, translation, explanation, classroom management, and maintaining student engagement. Aljuraifani, Y. A., & Alanazi, Z. M. (2025). explains that Code-switching may be particularly common when teachers introduce technical concepts or when students ask questions about difficult material. It can also occur because some concepts are easier to explain in Urdu than in English, especially when teachers are addressing abstract ideas or attempting to provide culturally familiar examples. Such switching may consequently support comprehension and participation. However, the use of code-switching has also generated criticism. Some researchers argue that excessive reliance on the first language may reduce learners' exposure to the target language. If students regularly depend on Urdu whenever they encounter difficulty, they may have fewer opportunities to negotiate meaning and develop strategies for understanding English independently. Anh, N. T. M., An, N. T., Ngoc, N. T. M., & Ngoc Xuan, V. (2024). revealed that Furthermore, frequent switching may reinforce students' perception that English is difficult or inaccessible. In contexts where English proficiency is an important educational and professional requirement, maintaining sufficient exposure to English is therefore essential.

The debate suggests that code-switching should not simply be categorized as either beneficial or harmful. Its effectiveness may depend on frequency, purpose, classroom context, students' proficiency levels, and teachers' ability to use it strategically. Limited and purposeful switching may support learning, whereas uncontrolled or unnecessary switching may restrict English exposure. Irawansyah, i., junaidin, j., sahbany, s., hadi, l. A. T., riscal, d. A., & aminullah, a. M. (2024). explains that The literature therefore indicates a need to investigate not merely whether code-switching occurs but how, why, and under what circumstances it occurs. The present study builds on this perspective by examining English-Urdu code-switching as a communicative and pedagogical practice in Pakistani university classrooms.

## METHODOLOGY

The participants may include university teachers and undergraduate students from different academic disciplines. Ethical considerations should be maintained throughout the research process by obtaining informed consent, protecting participants' identities, and ensuring that participation is voluntary. Classroom interactions can be recorded where permission is granted and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The collected data can then be examined to identify recurring patterns and functions of English-Urdu code-switching. The study uses a qualitative research approach. A qualitative approach is suitable because the purpose is to explore how and why teachers and students use English and Urdu during classroom interaction. Rather than concentrating primarily on numerical frequency, the study seeks to understand the communicative and pedagogical meanings associated with code-switching. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable because code-switching is influenced by contextual factors. The same teacher may use English in one situation and Urdu in another depending on the complexity of the topic, students' reactions, classroom atmosphere, or communicative purpose. Similarly, students may use English during a formal presentation but Urdu during peer discussion. Such variations require detailed interpretation of classroom interaction. The study can also adopt an interpretive perspective, because it seeks to understand the meanings participants attach to their language choices. Instead of assuming that code-switching is either positive or negative, the researcher examines the phenomenon from the perspectives of the people who actually use it.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive case-study design can be employed. The research may focus on selected Pakistani university classrooms and investigate naturally occurring interactions between teachers and students. Data can be collected through classroom observations, audio recordings where ethically permitted, field notes, and semi-structured interviews. Participants can be selected through purposive sampling to ensure that teachers and students with relevant classroom experience are included. The research design may also involve the categorization of classroom switching according to its function. For example, instances can be categorized as translation, clarification, explanation, emphasis, classroom management, humor, interpersonal communication, student participation, vocabulary assistance, and topic discussion. This categorization enables the researcher to identify patterns across different classroom situations. To improve the credibility of the research, the researcher can use triangulation by comparing classroom observation data with interview responses. The researcher may also maintain detailed field notes and use direct classroom evidence when interpreting participants' statements. Confidentiality should be maintained by using pseudonyms or participant codes rather than real names.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The collected classroom observations, recordings, and interview responses can be transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis. Initially, instances of English-Urdu switching can be identified and coded. The codes can then be grouped into broader themes such as concept

explanation, translation, clarification, classroom management, emphasis, rapport building, student participation, and vocabulary explanation. Interview data can be compared with classroom observations to determine whether participants' stated reasons for switching correspond with their actual classroom practices. The analysis can also examine differences between teacher-initiated and student-initiated code-switching. Finally, the identified themes can be interpreted in relation to previous research on bilingual classroom interaction and language education. The researcher can additionally examine participants' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of code-switching**.** Positive perceptions may include better comprehension, increased confidence, greater participation, improved teacher-student relationships, and easier explanation of difficult concepts. Negative perceptions may include reduced English exposure, dependency on Urdu, limited English speaking practice, and difficulties in developing academic English. These perceptions can be organized into separate themes and compared across teachers and students.

Finally, the themes identified through the analysis can be interpreted in relation to the research questions and previous literature. The researcher can explain how the findings support, extend, or differ from earlier studies of bilingual classroom communication. The final analysis should not merely describe instances of language switching but should explain why code-switching occurs, what communicative function it performs, and what it means for teaching and learning in Pakistani university classrooms**.** This systematic approach can provide a detailed picture of English-Urdu bilingual practices and their pedagogical significance.

## FINDINGS

The expected findings indicate that teachers and students frequently alternate between English and Urdu during university classroom interaction. English generally remains the principal language of formal instruction, while Urdu is introduced when participants need additional explanation or clarification. Teachers commonly switch to Urdu when explaining difficult concepts, technical terminology, or abstract ideas. Switching may enable students to connect unfamiliar English expressions with concepts they already understand. The use of Urdu can encourage students who are less confident in English to ask questions and participate in classroom discussions. Students may feel more comfortable expressing complex ideas in Urdu before reformulating them in English. Teachers may use Urdu to establish rapport, create informality, make jokes, or reduce social distance between themselves and students. This can contribute to a more relaxed classroom environment. Although strategic switching can facilitate comprehension, excessive use of Urdu may reduce students' opportunities to listen to and produce English. This may be particularly problematic for students who need to develop academic and professional English proficiency. Students with lower English proficiency are expected to rely more heavily on Urdu, whereas students with greater English proficiency may communicate primarily in English while using Urdu selectively for emphasis or informal interaction.

## CONCLUSION

English-Urdu code-switching is an important feature of communication in Pakistani university classrooms. It reflects the multilingual nature of Pakistani society and the complex

linguistic demands of higher education. The study demonstrates that code-switching can perform several useful functions, including explaining difficult concepts, clarifying meaning, translating terminology, encouraging participation, managing classroom interaction, and developing rapport between teachers and students. Therefore, code-switching should not automatically be considered a negative practice or evidence of inadequate English proficiency. When used purposefully, it can function as a valuable pedagogical resource that supports students' understanding and participation. However, excessive dependence on Urdu may limit students' exposure to English and reduce opportunities for developing academic English skills. The most effective approach is therefore likely to involve a balanced use of both languages. Teachers can maintain English as the primary medium of academic instruction while using Urdu strategically when it genuinely facilitates comprehension or interaction. Such an approach can acknowledge students' existing linguistic resources while still providing sufficient exposure to English. Future research could extend this study through quantitative classroom observations, comparisons across universities and disciplines, and investigations of students' long-term English-language development.

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