

# Code-Switching Phenomenon among EFL Learners

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## **Abstract**

*This study investigates the issue of code switching (CS), which occurred in daily conversation among bilinguals. The participants were from three different countries, the Republic of China, the Republic of Indonesia and Kingdom of Thailand. The data include the recordings of conversation in different settings. Recent studies examine this phenomenon both in the classroom context (Rose & van Dulm, 2006; Iqbal, 2011) and in everyday life conversation (AL-Hourani & Afizah, 2013). Empirical research has shown that the practice of alternating or mixing languages is not only common, but serves important communication strategies (Heller, 1992; Myers-Scotton, 1992). In addition, code switching is considered a skill used in early attempts of playing with the languages involved in the conversation (Arnfast & Jorgensen, 2003). The results of this paper reveal that apart from being a communication tool and skill, code switching represents an in-group identity and it is highly related to emotional expression.*

**Keywords:** *bilingualism, code switching, teasing and joking*

## **1. Introduction**

Learners' speaking strategies, commonly referred to as communication strategies (CSs), captured the interest of scholars in the 1970s; and the use of CSs was recognised as "a key interlanguage process" (Selinker, 1983, p.49). In addition, sociolinguists, for decades, have examined the issue of bilingualism and code switching, and the often asked question in bilingual studies is why bilingual interlocutors often switch from one language to another in conversational interaction.

Studies on code-switching have been extensively scrutinised for decades. Japanese-English (Azuma, 1997), Cantonese-English (Li, 2000), Russian-English (Angermeyer, 2010). Although the code switching topic has been widely explored, it has been depicted with

divergent views. Some put an emphasis on the linguistic aspect of language shift while others focus more on a cultural aspect.

According to Fishman (1965), when analysing language, during code-switching, there are three components to be concerned with: what is said, how it is said and when it is said. This paper explores bilingual conversations, especially the phenomena of code switching that happens outside the classroom. Interestingly, some argue that code switching would only occur within groups sharing similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, the hypothesis was raised whether code switching would still occur when the participants did not partake in the same home languages. In other words, not only does code-switching happen between Thai interlocutors, but it also happens between Thai and Indonesian interlocutors or Thai and Taiwanese interlocutors.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Bilingualism*

Defining the word, *bilingual*, has been a debatable issue for years. In the past, most definitions put a heavy emphasis on where and when a person learnt languages while recently the definitions have relied on how easy or difficult it is to engage in cognitive tasks across as compared to within languages (Altarriba & Heredia, 2008). A number of scholars have proposed different types of definitions. Bloomfield (1933) states a bilingual is one who has acquired native-like control of two or more languages. However, Weinerich (1953) believes that language use is more important than language competence. Additionally, Haugen (1956) claims that bilingualism is present when a speaker of one language can deliver complete and meaningful utterances in other languages. It is not simple to designate which definition is the most suitable for research. Therefore, it possible to say that the researcher might need to use the context that he/she is working in to assist him/her in assessing degree of bilingualism (Altarriba & Heredia, 2008).

### *2.2 Code switching*

For years, code-switching (CS) has been a significant issue that has been examined applying a number of linguistic processes within the frameworks of psycholinguistics, grammatical studies and sociolinguistics with an emphasis either on the descriptive or on the theoretical aspects of this phenomenon. Accordingly, as it is proposed in Franceschini's (1998) study, there tends to be more convincing evidence that CS is universal among bilingual or multilingual communities. CS is a phenomenon which occurs mainly in bilingual or multilingual conversations in which "interlocutors have at least one common language" (Franceschini, 1998, p.51). A number of studies on code-switching in various languages mentioned earlier prove this has been happening throughout the world.

The term ‘code switching’ is widely used in linguistic and sociolinguistic fields of study. It is a way bilingual and multilingual people use language varieties in a conversation which is based on conversation-internal mechanisms observable in different social contexts. Their proficiency might vary according to individual language skills. When bilinguals share the same language, it is usual to switch from L1 to L2 or vice versa (Wei, 2000).

Hymes (1972) stated that code switching is divided into two types: situational switching and metaphorical switching. Situation switching occurs when a topic of the conversation is changed, while metaphorical switching is not concerned with a topic change but it puts more an emphasis on the change of code at a specific time during the conversation and also on the social relationship.

According to Pavlenko’s (2005) theory, the explanation of CS phenomena in bilingual and multilingual communities could be divided into three sub-groups which are individual, contextual, and linguistic factors. To elaborate, the individual elements involve language predominance, speakers’ competence in languages, age and context of their acquisition and, lastly, bilingual and multilingual speakers’ perceived emotions. Due to the contextual element, it refers to personal and communication purposes. The last element involves the cross-linguistic variation which refers to an influence of one language on another in an individual mind (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

### *2.3 Teasing and Joking*

In general, the distinction between teasing and joking is ambiguous; however, to be able to distinguish the features is important as they deliver diverse outcomes in the communication process. Eisenberg (1986) mentioned teasing functions as a medium of social control because of the peculiarity which leads to either negative or positive feedbacks. On the other hand, joking is regarded as all categories of both verbal and non-verbal activities establishing play frames - a situational humour which is created by participants in a group (Boxer, 2002). Nevertheless, the focus of the play does not have to be the interlocutors participating in the group. Hence, joking tends to be safer than teasing.

### *2.4 Conversation Analysis*

Human beings build and sustain their relationships with each other through conversations. When people talk, they engage in the use of linguistic codes to some extent. Since conversation is part of people’s everyday life, it has attracted a great attention from sociolinguistic and linguistic researchers for some time (Liddicoat, 2007). Many researchers use different approaches to explicate conversations and one of the well-known approaches is *conversational analysis* (CA).

Conversation analysis is a method to analyze a talk in interaction. It became known during the 1960s by the sociologist, Harvey Sacks. The idea was developed from two theoretical initiatives in sociology, Goffman (1959) and Garfinkel (1967). Sacks placed

an emphasis on conversation to study how interlocutors understand and are understood by others. From his point of view, an ordinary talk is considered a deeply ordered, structurally organized phenomenon and is the embodiment of social action (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009).

According to Psathas (1995, p.2):

*conversation analysis explores the order, organization, orderliness of social action, particularly those social actions that are located in everyday interaction, in discursive practices, in the sayings, tellings, doings of members of society.*

The researchers who use CA in second language acquisition (SLA) research have argued that this approach allows analysts to investigate not only how learners use language in their interactions but also how they learn language when interacting (Markee, 2000). Therefore, the transcript in CA could reveal more details in the conversation which would enable the researchers to investigate the utterances in depth.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Participants*

The subject of this study was a subset from a larger group of bilingual and multilingual communities. There were six participants; three Taiwanese, two Thais and one Indonesian. They were graduate students who studied in Sydney, Australia. To be able to study at this university, the students were required to have an IELTS minimum overall result of 7.0. They were classmates and friends.

#### *3.2 Settings*

The data were collected in two different settings – in an Indian restaurant and at a participant's dormitory in Sydney, Australia.

#### *3.3 Data*

Daily conversations were used as the data of this study and were collected by audio-recording. The first recording took approximately one and a half hours and the second one was over a period of two hours. The recording equipment was placed in the centre of the group; however, over the recording period, the participants seemed to ignore it.

#### *3.4 Steps of Analysis*

These were the steps which the researcher followed. Firstly, two sets of data were recorded. Then, the transcription convention was determined before the data were transcribed. After the transcription finished, the researcher analysed the adjacency pairs in the conversational exchanges.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

The following instances are adapted from the two conversations.

	Conversation A	Conversation B
<b>Settings</b>	An Indian restaurant	A dormitory
<b>Participants</b>	6 participants; 3 Taiwanese, 2 Thais, and 1 Indonesian	4 participants; 3 Thais and 1 Indonesian

##### Conversation A

**Context:** *The Taiwanese participants were talking about the Indonesians' way of cleaning themselves after using the restroom which is totally different from their habits. (See Appendix for transcription conventions.)*

##### Extract 1

All the subjects are from Taiwan (TW).

- 1 TW1: No no no. They use their right hands to hold the water, and use their left hands to...
- 2 TW2: 對啊, 要不然你們剛剛聽什麼?  
Of course, what else do you think?
- 3 TW3: 我以為是, 就是這樣...(gesture)  
I thought+ I thought it is like....(gesture)
- 4 TW1, 2 & 3: (laughs)
- 5 TW1: How come you use only one hand to do that, how come you do everything with just one hand?
- 6 TW2: 一隻手... 一隻手要摸啊! 另外一隻手要摸啊! 你們兩個到底懂不懂 啊?  
Just one hand+ Just one hand to use. Use the other hand to clean yourself.  
Do you guys understand what she was talking about or not?

##### Analysis

From the first extract, the participants were talking about different ways of cleaning themselves after using the bathroom. While discussing this topic, the interlocutors usually utilised emotional expression. According to Pavlenko's (2005) theory, the individual factors affect the participants' usage of code-switching in the way they wanted to express their own personal feelings. Often, bilingual and multilingual people find their first languages the most precious resource in order to express themselves. Hence, in the extract above, there is a clear evidence of this argument which is in line 2, when TW2 showed her questioning and surprised attitude toward the others' understanding of the explanation. Furthermore, in line 6, another code-switching is observed but it is combined with a conversational joking phenomenon. The sentence

“Do you guys understand what she was talking about or not?” confirms Eisenberg’s statement of a ‘teasing’ situation. When observing this sentence literally, there seems to be an implied accusation and interrogation. However, due to the contextualization cues, such as “exaggerated intonation or laughs” (Eisenberg, 1986, p.184), the interlocutors could simply comprehend the play frame. In this case, the speaker delivered the teasing play frame through a raising intonation and a laugh which enabled the recipients to obtain the message unconsciously.

### Conversation A

**Context:** *At the dining table, TW1 wanted to take a picture with the others.*

#### Extract 2

- 1 TW1: Can you take a picture of all of us?
- 2 TW2: No a: (rising tone)
- 3 ID: No a: hahahah
- 4 TW1: Come on.

#### Analysis

In the example above, TW2 adopted the usual suffix in Mandarin /a/ into her talk, which implies the identity of Mandarin speakers. Even though TW2 replied ‘No’ but it was not actually a denial. With the rising tone of her speech, ID realized that she was only teasing her.

### Conversation A

**Context:** *Two Thai speakers (TH) were gossiping about an Indonesian friend (ID) about her speaking speed.*

#### Extract 3

- 1 ID: So yeah: It sounds really a lot like us.
- 2 TH1: เค้าพูดเร็วมาก (pointing at ID)  
She speaks so fast.
- 3 TH2: [laugh]
- 4 ID: [Kena]pa lagi nunjuk-nunjuk gue?  
Why are you pointing at me?
- 5 TH1: [laugh]
- 6 TH2: [laugh]
- 7 TH1: เค้าพูดเร็วมากจริงๆ ฉันเคยเห็น “เอเจ” คุยโทรศัพท์ ฉันแบบว่า ฉันก็แบบ  
She speaks so fast, really. I used to see ‘AJ’ talking on the phone, I was like  
[นั่งฟังเค้าคุยภาษาอินโด]  
[sitting and listening to him talking in Indo]

- 8 TH2: [เค้าคุยกับใคร] เค้าอาจจะแบบว่า-  
[To whom he was talking to?] He might have talked to-
- 9 TH1: คุย[กับเพื่อน] คุยกับเพื่อน จริงๆ  
[To his friend] really, he was talking to his friend
- 10 TH2: [โหยรู้: รู้ดี] [laugh] (clapping)  
[Oh you know him so: well] [laugh] (Clapping)
- 11 TH1: [laugh] ก็เค้าบอกไว้แล้วแบบหนึ่ง เพื่อนเค้าโทรมา แล้วเค้าก็ “การึบกับกับ” ไปตาม[โทรศัพท์]  
[laugh] That’s because he told me so. And then he just said like ‘garub gub gub’ on [the phone.]
- 12 TH2: [laugh]
- 13 ID: Apaan sih ni arang ngomongin (gue?) Ga jelas deh  
What are you talking about (me?) It’s not clear
- 14 TH1: [laugh]
- 15 ID: [What?]

### ***Analysis***

Earlier in Extract 3, participants were discussing about the English pronunciation of their Philippine and Indonesian friends. ID was the main talking person and since her English was fluent, she spoke very fast. CS occurred twice in extract 3. The first one is the switch from English to Thai and the second one is from English to Bahasa Indonesia.

The CS between Thai speakers happened and it is TH2’s interjection ‘[โหยรู้: รู้ดี:] [haha] (clapping) [Oh you know him so: well] [haha] (Clapping),’ with its marked features, accompanying with laughter, clapping and implied meaning, inviting a teasing frame. TH2 lengthened the vowel of ‘ดี:’ [so: well] and stressed in the word “รู้:” [know] to tease TH1 about the person she was talking about. A mother language might be a better option when it comes to a tease. TH2 did not tease TH1 in English as she found that it could not express her emotion the same way as her first language did.

TH1 spoke in English before she switched to Thai once she wanted to tease ID about the speed of her speaking. However, it seems obvious that TH1 would have like ID to have known that she was the target by pointing at her while she was talking to TH2. TH1’s code switching was done on purpose. Being aware of being gossiped about, ID, consciously, replied to TH1’s action in Bahasa Indonesia. Interestingly, it leads to the question of why ID did the CS. The lack of proficiency to continue the conversation in English might not be the case for ID’s code switching as she was considered fluent in English.

For ID’s code switching to Indonesian, it can be assumed that this phenomenon was neither due the limitation of English proficiency nor was it an expression of solidarity. It was simply that she wanted to reciprocate what TH1 had done to her. Also, it is possible that she had wanted to send the message to TH1 and TH2 that it was inappropriate to talk about others in another language.

## Conversation B

**Context:** TH1 and TH2 were teasing TH3 about her taking a bathing habits while ID was still in the group

### Extract 4

- 1 ID: ...I don't think so, not as I recall but I should write that clause.
- 2 TH2: โห้ย เร็วมากค่ะคุณ  
Oh...look how fast she is!
- 3 TH1: อืม: เดินผ่านน้ำเอารึไง แก  
Hmmm real fast. Just walked through the water?
- 4 TH3: เวอร์ค่ะ! เวอร์ค่ะ!  
Come on! Don't be too exaggerated!

### Analysis

This situation is quite different from what was previously illustrated. While ID, TH1 and TH2 were discussing the assignment, the CS immediately occurred once TH3 came into the group. The CS usually happens when emotional expression occurs, in particular, in a teasing context. In bilingual or multilingual settings, speakers may feel more comfortable turning to their first language when they want to express their feelings or to tease (Pavlenko, 2005). In the example displayed above, TH2 reverted to her first language (Thai) in order to tease TH3 about her showering habit because she might feel that she could express herself more precisely. Likewise, TH1 did the switching to show not only her in-group identity, but also the teasing intention.

According to Pavlenko (2005), when being able to choose, bilingual or multilingual speakers seem to defer to the language in which they are more proficient, or at least more skilled in, to convey their emotions. Thus, it is presumed that when being compelled to perform playful jokes in a less dominant language, they might feel less expressive since they lack the confidence to employ the less familiar language appropriately. Also, she would like to address the in-group solidarity among Thai-English addressees.

In addition, the teasing relationship was likely to appear at the time TH1 and TH3 joined in the conversation. TH3 is a person who suffered the consequence of teasing; however, the way in which certain patterns were revealed in the teasing discourse within the group enabled TH3 to perceive that it was merely a joke, and it showed the intimacy within a group.



## Conversation B

**Context:** *Three bilinguals (2 Thais and 1 Indonesian) were talking in English with their home languages accents*

### Extract 5

- 1 TH1: Monday? ทิม: ช่วย ช่วยด้วยนะ You need to help me translate นะ You need to help Hmm help me okay me translate because I don't know how to translate. I'm not sure whether I can translate or not.
- 2 TH2: [laugh] Do you understand her?
- 3 ID: [( )] Is that Thailand? [Is that] Thai-[English accent]?
- 4 TH1: [Yeah] [Thai-English] accent
- 5 ID: Oh: yes. Yes, I do understand her.
- 6 TH2: Umm
- 7 ID: [I do.]
- 8 TH2: [Okay] [So:]
- 9 TH1: [Do you understand it all?] [laugh]
- 10 ID: [laugh] I do actually, I do understand.
- 11 TH1: Aha
- 12 ID: [unders]tand what you said to me la?
- 13 TH1: [Okay]

### Analysis

In this part of the exchange, three participants were talking about ID's horoscope, but it was originally written in Thai. Therefore, the two Thai speakers were asked to translate the content for ID. TH1 began to do the CS from English to Thai when she asked TH2 to help her to do the translation, as it was the easiest and quickest way to understand each other. It can be seen that emotional formulation was excluded from this stage. Interestingly, once TH1 realtered from Thai to English, her accent also shifted to speak English with the Thai accent. ID responded to TH1 by speaking English with the Indonesian accent. Although this phenomenon is regarded by the researcher as a CS, it is considered an incomplete form because the speakers did not switch languages but accents.

It is noticeable that the three participants created the joking atmosphere by making fun of their English in their native languages. Initially, CS prodigy in non-serious situations would happen for several reasons such as addressing solidarity, self-expression and enhancing affiliation. Nevertheless, none of the previously cited rationales appeared at this point. Instead, they used this specific type of CS as a communicative tool for producing jokes without an explicit goal to achieve.

## 5. Discussion

From the data above, we have observed that there are several factors that can be attributed to code-switching in a conversational joking situation. First, code-switching is used as a medium for representing in-group identity. For example in extract 1, TW2 sudden code-switching displayed the shared identity of being Mandarin speakers, which was a way to reflect the interlocutor's ethnic and linguistic background. In extract 4, while three participants were discussing the assignment, TH2 swiftly switched the language to Thai in order to tease TH3 about her showering habits. Apart from teasing, TH2's language alternation from English to Thai addressed her ethnic identity. TH1 and TH3's responses confirmed their shared ethnic and first language backgrounds.

In addition, emotional expression is another crucial factor of CS phenomena. Pavlenko (2005) indicates that in bilingual and multilingual communities, when expressing emotions, if bi/multilinguals are forced to speak in their less proficient languages, they sometimes feel that it is not 'authentic.' This could illustrate the point that emotional expression in each language is different. Thus, it is possible that there are no equivalent terms between two languages. For instance Thai speakers usually, could not find the English vocabulary which has the same meaning as 'อ่อน /aon/'. If one were to search for its meaning in an online Thai-English dictionary ([www.thai2english.com](http://www.thai2english.com)), the word 'to implore; please; beg' would be displayed. However, these concept is not actually the same as 'อ่อน /aon/'.

Lastly, the findings propose that sometimes there are no explicit reasons for code-switching. For example in extract 5, ID spoke English with an Indonesian accent merely to respond to her Thai interlocutors, and she did it purposefully. As a result, it is presupposed that ID's performance was for personal pleasure and for being part of a group. This suggests that language is used not only as an informative tool but also as a purely enjoyable medium. Doing code-switching deliberately can be part of an amusing segment.

## 6. Conclusion

The studies of code switching have been categorised mainly into two directions: linguistic and sociolinguistic fields. This present study appears to be under the sociolinguistic approach since its focus is to explain why the participants talked the way they did.

Bilingual individuals usually do the code-switching or mix two or more languages within a single utterance in their daily lives. Accordingly, our research raised the hypothesis on bilingualism and code switching. To narrow down the scope of our framework, we specifically focused on the phenomena of code switching in conversation outside the classroom. We expected to find some underpinning reasons that make code switching happen in these situations, as it may relate to emotional expression which is one of the factors that may evoke code switching.

After implementing the study, it can be seen that the code switching phenomenon is not an incidental occurrence. Conversely, it is a salient feature of bilinguals and multilinguals in a group exchange. Moreover, there are a number of factors which reinforce bilingual and multilingual interlocutors to engage in code switching. Previous studies have mostly suggested that code switching happens because of an interlocutors' lack of proficiency in the second language. Yet, other factors such as individual, contextual and linguistic contexts also have to be taken into account. Interestingly, it can also be seen that none of the reasons above are the factors which fertilize code switching. It could possibly happen simply on account of exclusive pleasure.

### Appendix: Transcription Conventions

—	emphatic stress
:	lengthened vowel
.	sentence final, falling intonation
( )	impossible transcription
[ ]	overlapping speech
+	a short pause
[laugh]	extended laughter
-	interrupted

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