

Saudi Lecturers' Code Switching in English Undergraduate Lectures: L1 Functions

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Abstract: This study examines the extent of L1 (Arabic) use by Saudi EFL lecturers in undergraduate lectures and delves into the underpinnings of L1 functions in these lectures. Four Saudi university lecturers (two males and two females), who teach undergraduate courses, at the College of Language Sciences at King Saud University participated in this study. Thirteen lectures in the courses: English Teaching Methods, Semantics, CALL and Research Methods were audio-recorded and each one lasted between 50–100 minutes. Ferguson's (2009) theoretical framework for the functions of classroom code switching was adopted to analyse the data. The results revealed that although all lecturers switched codes, it was quite limited as the mean of the number of L1 words was only 4.83%, and the mean of the code switching frequency was 25.76%. Additionally, two main functions of L1 use were found in the lectures: the construction and transmission of knowledge and the establishment of interpersonal relations.

Keywords: code switching, EFL lecturers, L1 functions.

التناوب اللغوي للأساتذة السعوديين في محاضرات اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الجامعية: استخدامات اللغة الأولى

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المستخلص: تبحث هذه الدراسة في مدى استخدام الأساتذة السعوديين للغة الأولى (العربية) في محاضرات اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الجامعية، وتتناول كذلك استخدامات اللغة الأولى في هذه المحاضرات، شارك في هذه الدراسة أربعة أساتذة سعوديين (اثنان من الذكور، واثنان من الإناث) من كلية اللغات وعلومها بجامعة الملك سعود/ حيث يقومون بتدريس مقررات في مرحلة البكالوريوس. سُجلت ثلاث عشرة محاضرة في مقررات: طرق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، وعلم الدلالة، وتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية بمساعدة الحاسب الآلي، وطُرق البحث، وترواحت مدة كل محاضرة من (50-100) دقيقة. استخدمت الدراسة الإطار النظري ليفيرسون (2009) لتحليل بيانات الدراسة فيما يتعلق بتحديد استخدامات اللغة الأولى. وأظهرت النتائج أنه بالرغم من أن جميع الأساتذة قاموا بالتناوب اللغوي خلال المحاضرة فإن ذلك كان محدوداً للغاية، حيث بلغ متوسط كلمات اللغة الأولى المستخدمة في المحاضرات (4.83%) فقط، ومتوسط عدد التناوب اللغوي (25.76%). بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أظهرت النتائج وظيفتين رئيسيتين لاستخدام اللغة الأولى في المحاضرات هما: بناء المعرفة ونقلها، وتوطيد العلاقة بالطلاب.

الكلمات مفتاحية: التناوب اللغوي، أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية، استخدامات اللغة الأولى.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of shifting between two languages within the confines of a single speech, phrase or discourse is commonly known as code switching (CS) (Bhatti et al., 2018). The impact of CS has been widely observed and documented in various educational settings worldwide (Alharbi & Alqefari, 2023; Bhatti et al., 2018; Cahyani et al., 2018; Levine, 2011). Tutors in institutions primarily dedicated to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to non-native speakers typically integrate their native language (L1) with the language they are presently instructing (L2).

In the context of students' linguistic and sociocultural development, Levine (2011) placed great emphasis on the pivotal role of CS due to the fundamental nature of CS as a core function. Moreover, CS is viewed as a strategic tool that instructors can use for classroom management, explaining complex concepts and promoting communicative engagement within the L2 learning context (Zainil & Arsyad, 2021). Conversely, some argue that excessive use of L1 in the classroom might hinder students from exposure to and utilisation of the target language (L2), which is intended to be the primary language (Ellis, 1984). Furthermore, frequent CS may lead to an increased reliance on L1, running counter to the overarching goal of linguistic immersion and proficiency development in L2 (Tamene & Desalegn, 2022).

CS can be employed as a beneficial learning strategy, reducing the cognitive load associated with understanding complex concepts (Paap et al., 2021). Adendorff (1993) revealed that skilful and purposeful language transitions can assist students in comprehending, retaining and recalling challenging academic subjects. The linguistic and cultural ties of Arabic students not only influence how information is perceived but also how it is socioculturally contextualised (Al Tale & AlQahtani, 2022). In contrast, for learners of English, their linguistic and cultural backgrounds primarily influence how information is interpreted. According to Levine (2011), CS is essential for developing sociocultural and linguistic understanding, as it offers students a framework for comprehending and internalising academic content that is both linguistically and culturally meaningful. This underscores the significance of CS in fostering sociocultural and linguistic comprehension.

2. The problem of the study

The previous studies as will be discussed in section 5, significantly enhanced the understanding of the fundamental functions of L1 use in undergraduate EFL courses, including the context of Saudi Arabia. Beyond merely observing its prevalence, this study aims to deepen awareness of L1's role in constructing and transmitting knowledge and interpersonal relations. While previous research offered a foundational understanding of CS in EFL classes, a more comprehensive investigation into the various aspects of CS in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia requires in-depth research. Despite the perceptible literature gap, few in-depth studies have been conducted on the CS behaviours of Saudi EFL lecturers teaching at the undergraduate level (Temesgen & Hailu, 2022).

3. The significance of the study

Examining CS is a valuable area of investigation, particularly within the classrooms of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Alharbi & Alqefari, 2023). A key reason behind growing interest in research about CS in EFL classrooms worldwide is the convergence of social, psychological and educational factors (Al-Adnani & Elyas, 2016). Macaro (2001) and Levine (2011) noted that EFL instructors must navigate complex linguistic terrains while simultaneously shifting between L1 and

L2 languages. They need to employ tools from both languages to foster student engagement, maintain classroom order and enhance overall student comprehension. This underscores the need to challenge the prevailing view of restricting classroom instruction to L2 (Nurhamidah et al., 2018).

4. Research questions

The current study examined the following research questions:

1. How frequently do Saudi lecturers switch to L1 (Arabic) in undergraduate EFL classes?
2. What are the functions of L1 (Arabic) in these lectures?

5. Literature review

5.1 Code switching in EFL classrooms

CS has sparked extensive pedagogical discussions in EFL classrooms, rooted in various language and cognitive development theories (Levine, 2011). According to Macaro (2001), CS can enhance learning by providing scaffolding, aiding comprehension and fostering an environment conducive to learning. This perspective on CS highlights the positive aspects of language acquisition, such as boosting engagement and motivation among EFL students.

In an international educational context, Hanafiah et al. (2021) investigated the types and functions of CS between English and Bahasa Indonesia during thesis examinations at Universitas Sumatera Utara. Intra-sentential switching was the most common type, with various functions, such as entertainment, translation, emphasis and feedback, being fulfilled. Furthermore, Kasim et al. (2019) examined CS during a thesis defence examination at Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh. Their study involved one student and four lecturers from the English Education Department, with a focus on the types and functions of CS. The examination assessed students' research competence after four years of study.

Cahyani et al. (2018) conducted an ethnographic case study of teachers' CS in Indonesian tertiary bilingual classrooms where English was the primary instruction language. The results showed that CS often served as a translanguaging tool that strategically integrated both languages to enhance communication and learning. Overall, these studies provide insights into the types and functions of CS in different educational contexts, ranging from thesis examinations to bilingual classrooms. The studies utilised qualitative research methods, such as content analysis, ethnographic case studies and interviews, to understand the complexities of CS in these settings. Narasuman et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative research study in Afghan universities that aimed to explore CS triggers in EFL classes, understand Afghan EFL lecturers' perceptions of CS and examine how lecturers utilise CS as a teaching strategy in their English classes.

In another global context, Gallagher (2020) conducted a qualitative study in Dublin, Ireland, focusing on EFL teachers' perspectives on CS and L1 use in classrooms. The research involved analysing interviews with 24 EFL teachers who were teaching in multilingual contexts in Ireland and non-English-speaking countries. The study highlighted the various views of EFL teachers on L1 use and emphasised the need for its inclusion in teacher training. Research has shown that CS has a positive impact on the growth of students' English language abilities in EFL courses (Bhatti et al., 2018). In the Arabic context, the use of Arabic in the Saudi context can either serve as a tool facilitating comprehension and participation or accidentally inhibit complete immersion in the

English language (Almulhim, 2014), thus slowing the development of fluency and comprehensive competency. It is possible that the strategic deployment and regulated use of Arabic in classrooms to preserve cultural backgrounds, control students' conduct or teach complicated topics requires a delicate balance to ensure that it promotes rather than inhibits L2 learning. Arabic is used not only as a medium of communication but also as a vehicle for transmitting Arabian Gulf cultural values and social standards, making it an important linguistic resource (Mustafawi et al., 2022).

The ability to move between different linguistic (or coding) systems helps people build sociocultural bridges that relate foreign (English) concepts to local understandings and settings. It enables instructors to culturally adapt the material, making it more relatable to students and easier for them to comprehend. Moreover, this cultural adaptation through linguistic mediation may produce a more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational environment.

The widespread use of CS in EFL classrooms calls for an examination of the instructional methods currently being implemented in Saudi Arabia (Alzahrani, 2023). A full knowledge of the functions and effects of L1 use can influence the pedagogical models that wisely utilise L1 to facilitate learning while maintaining an English-dominant environment. Furthermore, the common use of CS in classrooms emphasises the necessity of developing organised teacher training programmes to empower them to efficiently traverse between L1 and L2, making it likelier that CS will be used as a purposeful educational tool rather than as a compensatory mechanism (Macaro, 2005).

Cognitively speaking, CS may allow for a more seamless absorption of difficult scholastic subjects (Lising et al., 2020). Particularly when struggling with complex or abstract concepts, a momentary retreat to L1 might give cognitive respite, helping students anchor new knowledge onto their prior language and cognitive frameworks. This is especially true when grappling with complex or abstract notions. Understanding the functional role of Arabic in the classroom may help teachers devise tactics that will maximise student engagement, involvement and behavioural control without heavily relying on L1 (Tajeddin et al., 2020). This is especially helpful for classroom management and dynamics and highlights the need for a sophisticated grasp of how and when to bring Arabic into the classroom to control classroom circumstances, retain student engagement and ensure efficient communication while largely focusing on English communication.

5.2 The functions of L1 in EFL classrooms

CS in the Middle East EFL context has shown remarkable trends and results, especially in countries that are well-known for their significant language variety (Gardner-Chloros, 2009). It is common practice for teachers in Saudi Arabia (Alharbi & Alqefari, 2023), the United Arab Emirates (Jdetawy, 2011) and Oman (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012) to incorporate Arabic into their English classes (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015). Therefore, they must strike a careful balance between national educational objectives and the prevalent linguistic reality (Alharbi & Alqefari, 2023). This leads to the need for CS to identify certain terms and instructions in a way that does not harm the use of English in the classroom as a means of communication.

The deployment of Arabic in English-centric academic discourses and its many functions in regulating linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural dynamics within classrooms remain largely understudied (Saeed, 2021). Additionally, a significant portion of Arabic's role in the classroom as a moderator of linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural processes is still being determined (Kim et al., 2019). Although the theoretical underpinnings of CS are well understood, relatively little is known about the precise

techniques by which Arabic is taught in English-language classrooms or the effects that this has on the linguistic and cognitive development of children in such classrooms (Dhaouadi, 2006). In contrast, the core aspects of CS is well researched and analysed. The understanding of the practical dynamics of CS within the unique sociocultural and pedagogical setting of Saudi Arabia (Alzahrani, 2023; Hasan, 2020), where the interaction of linguistic and cultural variables casts a specific light on language learning and usage, is necessary for a comprehensive awareness of how CS is perceived, discussed and exploited by instructors and students in this setting.

When EFL students have difficulties grasping the subject or when L2 does not successfully transmit the intended meaning, teachers may employ L1 to enhance students' comprehension and learning (Al-Nofaie, 2010). From a pedagogical perspective, the usefulness and applicability of CS in EFL classes have long been a topic of debate among EFL teachers and researchers. The use of L1 in such situations offers many advantages, including regulation of classroom dynamics, maintenance of dialogue flow and clarification of content or tasks (Alharbi & Alqefari, 2023). However, critics argue that excessive use of L1 might prevent students from immersing themselves in the process of learning L2, which would hinder their capacity to acquire and demonstrate proficiency in the target language (Cook, 2001). Conversely, proponents emphasise the function of L1 as a useful scaffolding tool in L2 acquisition and argue that it assists students in understanding complex subjects and maintains good classroom communication (Macaro, 2001).

Many studies have focused on CS in Arabic contexts and have provided insights into the use of CS in Arabic educational contexts. They highlight the different functions and purposes of CS, as well as the perspectives of teachers and students regarding its use in the classroom. Adriosh and Razi's (2019) ethnographic study explored CS in Libyan universities with six EFL teachers and their students. The results revealed that Arabic was occasionally used in classrooms for pedagogical and social purposes, such as clarification, repetition, recapitulation and socialisation. Both teachers and students viewed this CS positively for addressing educational and social needs.

Sadiq (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study in Iraq with EFL lecturers and students from different EFL classroom groups. The data collection methods included teacher interviews and classroom observations using a checklist. The results showed that CS was used by lecturers for various purposes, such as explaining topics, asking questions, checking students' understanding and managing the classroom. While some lecturers claimed not to employ CS during the interviews, it was observed that they did so during instruction.

In the Saudi context, Mahdi and Almalki (2019) examined CS by Saudi EFL learners in the classroom and found that CS was commonly used by teachers to assist low-level learners and facilitate language tasks. Alanazi and Widin (2018) examined the impact of different F-moves in Teacher Talk (TT) on enhancing students' dialogic skills. The results revealed that well-oriented F-moves can improve student-teacher interactions, error correction and dialogue maintenance, while some examples of TT may limit student participation and spoken output. Bhatti et al. (2018) investigated CS among EFL teachers of Saudi students, highlighting the sociocultural factors influencing TT and student learning. Al-Ahdal (2020) evaluated the use of CS in an EFL environment and found positive attitudes towards CS in English and Arabic, suggesting its potential inclusion as a teaching practice in the Saudi EFL context.

In the Saudi university context, Almulhim (2014) explored CS in EFL university classrooms by video recording classes and conducting interviews with teachers and students. The results showed the existence of CS in the class; however, the functions of the teachers' CS differed from those of the students. This finding agrees with Alsuhaibani (2015), who showed the facilitative uses of L1 by both teachers and students in Saudi EFL university classes.

In a different context, Alqurashi (2022) examined the motivation behind CS and its functions in spoken interactions within multilingual medical workplaces. Qualitative methods, such as observations and individual semi-structured interviews, were used to collect and analyse data from 25 participants comprising doctors and nurses from various Arabic and Asian countries. The findings indicated that CS in these hospitals was driven by personal, institutional, linguistic, socio-biographical and emotional factors. The study highlighted that CS serves many functions, such as facilitating communication, providing emphasis, clarifying information through repetition, filling lexical gaps and delivering messages quickly.

A recent study by Alzahrani (2023) focused on CS in the EFL classroom and its effects on students' learning outcomes. The study distinguished between methodological CS (linguistic explanation) and mixed CS (linguistic, classroom management and social purposes) and involved teaching different groups using these CS categories and a control group. The results showed that both CS groups performed better than the control group, with mixed CS having a greater impact. The largest improvements were seen at the intermediate level, particularly in vocabulary and reading enhancement. Overall, a rich CS environment, especially mixed CS, was found to facilitate learning in the EFL classroom.

6. Methodology

6.1 Participants

Four Saudi lecturers (two males and two females) who teach undergraduate courses at the College of Language Sciences at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia participated in this study. Thirteen lectures in the courses English Teaching Methods, Semantics, CALL and Research Methods were audio-recorded.

6.2 Data collection and analysis

Consent was first obtained from the lecturers and students via email. The participants were then provided with an overview of the study. All lectures were audio-recorded, and each one lasted between 50–100 minutes. Also, they were all transcribed. The data analysis was based on Ferguson's (2009) theoretical framework for the functions of classroom CS. Ferguson (2009) classified the teacher's classroom CS into three categories: (a) for constructing and transmitting knowledge, (b) for classroom management and (c) for interpersonal relations. The lecturers' CS practices in the transcripts were highlighted, and all CS instances were listed and coded on the basis of their potential functions. Ferguson's (2009) theoretical framework was used to answer the second research question.

7. Findings and Discussion

RQ1: How frequently do Saudi lecturers switch to L1 (Arabic) in undergraduate EFL classes?

The data obtained from 13 lectures given by four lecturers at King Saud University clearly showed that CS occurred in the classes, as shown in Table 1. However, their switch codes were quite limited: the mean of the number of L1 words was 4.83%, and the mean of the CS frequency was 25.76%. This might have been due to the students' advanced level of English (because they were majoring in English) and the nature of the courses in this study (i.e. not language skills courses). The highest use of Arabic was 20.47%, and the CS frequency was 85, while the lowest use of L1 was 0.76%, and the CS frequency was 9.

Table 1

The frequency of L1 use and its functions

Lecturer	Number of words	L1 (Arabic) words	Constructing and transmitting knowledge (frequency of CS)	Interpersonal relations (frequency of CS)	Total frequency of CS
A 1 (male)	8,814	1805 (20.47%)	80	3	83
A 2 (male)	4,250	465 (10.94%)	31	3	33
A 3 (male)	8,802	1515 (17.21%)	63	2	65
M 4 (male)	4,653	67 (1.43%)	14	2	16
M 5 (male)	8,624	233 (2.70%)	22	2	24
M 6 (male)	5,775	106 (1.83%)	11	3	14
M 7 (male)	4,027	33 (0.81%)	7	2	9
R 8 (female)	3,915	30 (0.76%)	9	2	11
R 9 (female)	2,865	26 (0.90%)	8	2	10
R 10 (female)	5,292	87 (1.64%)	14	2	16
W 11 (female)	1,762	25 (1.41%)	13	2	15
W 12 (female)	2,469	25 (1.01%)	12	2	10
W 13 (female)	4,904	88 (1.79%)	27	2	29
Mean	5,088	346 (4.83%)	23.92	2.23	25.76

These results seem to be a natural outcome because all participants in this study were bilingual. Interestingly, CS occurred in this study, even though the speech event was (more or less) constant and continued to have the same participants and the same topic, as in the course of a single lecture. This is a dimension of conversational strategy because CS aids in communicating certain elements, which will be discussed in the next section. This study's findings agree with Adriosh and Razı (2019) who found that Libyan EFL teachers and students expressed favourable attitudes towards the use of CS by the teacher to address pedagogical and social issues. These findings align with Levine (2011) and Macaro (2001), who held that CS occurs when a single conversational exchange involves the simultaneous use of multiple languages or dialects. This has sparked extensive pedagogical discussions in EFL classrooms rooted in various language and cognitive development theories (Levine, 2011). Macaro (2001) suggested that CS can enhance learning by providing scaffolding, aiding comprehension and fostering an environment conducive to learning. This perspective on CS emphasises the positive aspects of language acquisition, such as increasing engagement and motivation among EFL students.

This finding also agrees with previous studies (Almulhim, 2014; Alsuhaibani, 2015) that were conducted in a similar context to the current study (i.e. CS occurred in the observed classes). However, the frequency of L1 use in the current study was lower than that found in those studies (Almulhim, 2014; Alsuhaibani, 2015). This may be

attributed to the fact that the participants in the current study were majoring in English, while the participants in Almulhim's (2014) study were not. Additionally, the courses in the current study were specialised for advanced levels, whereas the students in Alsuhaibani's (2015) study were taking beginning courses that focus on language skills.

RQ2: What are the functions of L1 (Arabic) in these lectures?

Two main functions of CS were found in this study's data: (a) establishing interpersonal relations and (b) the construction and transmission of knowledge, as shown in Table 1. In terms of establishing interpersonal relations, in all 13 lectures, the teachers opened the lectures in Arabic. In all cases, this negotiated an immediate relation with the students, followed by a brief pause and then a switch to the content in English. Following the same pattern, the relationship was once again negotiated when bringing the lecture to a close by switching to Arabic to say goodbye. When formulaic or set expressions, such as

السلام عليكم (As-salamu alaykum)

أهلا يا شباب (Hi guys)

مع السلامة .. نلتقي الأسبوع القادم (Goodbye....see you next week)

were used, CS was clearly a communication tool. One of the lecturers used CS when checking with the students about how their exams went:

كيف كان اختباركم الأسبوع الماضي؟

(How was your exam last week? I hope it was fine.) (Lecturer 1)

This function of CS is used to establish interpersonal relations between the communicating agents. This aligns with the socialisation reported by Adriosh and Razi (2019), who found that teachers CS to Arabic to encourage interaction between themselves and students in informal interactions, such as exchanging greetings. This function complements the pedagogical aspects of the classroom experience. In terms of the construction and transmission of knowledge, Arabic was adopted by the lecturers in this study to explain new ideas and concepts that the students might find difficult. This can be seen in the following extracts:

synonym تعني الكلمة التي لها نفس المعنى لكن antonym تعني الكلمة وعكسها

(A synonym is a word that has the same meaning, and an antonym is a word that has the opposite meaning.) (Lecturer 2)

literature في البحث لاتعني الروايات والقصائد تعني الدراسات السابقة

(Literature in research does not mean novels and poetry; it means previous research.) (Lecturer 1)

semantics هي دراسة المعاني

(Semantics means the study of meanings.) (Lecturer 4)

أحد يعطينا مثال على platforms أو منصات تعليمية؟

(Can anyone provide us with examples of learning platforms?) (Lecturer 3)

One of the lecturers used Arabic to check the students' understanding:

هل فهمتم هذه النقطة؟

(Did you understand this point?) (Lecturer 3)

This function of L1 was confirmed by Adriosh and Razi (2019), who affirmed that Libyan EFL teachers frequently switch to L1 when it is necessary to help students understand ambiguous concepts, even though they primarily use L2. This practice is justified by the need to ensure that students fully comprehend the material. It serves the dual function of aiding in understanding while establishing a shared space between teachers and students and easing learning stress.

This finding resonates with an earlier study by Mahdi and Almalki (2019), who examined CS by Saudi EFL learners in classrooms. Their research found that CS is commonly used by teachers to assist low-level learners and facilitate language tasks. CS is also motivated by a change in speech events, such as a change in the participants or topic. In the data gathered in the current study, the lecturers regarded switching to Arabic for knowledge transmission as appropriate for changes in speech events. The findings of the current study on the functions of CS align with many studies conducted in the EFL context of the Middle East and Saudi Arabia (e.g. Al Tale & AlQahtani, 2022; Alsuhaibani, 2015; Almulhim, 2014; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012; Jdetawy, 2011), which elucidates that EFL teachers commonly integrate Arabic into their English classes to identify terms and instructions without undermining the use of English as the primary mode of communication in the classroom. Some studies (e.g. Al Tale & AlQahtani, 2022; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012) have also reported that teachers often use Arabic alongside English as the medium of instruction.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that lecturers use L1 as a facilitative tool in the classroom, highlighting its key role in EFL classrooms. This suggests that comprehensive research into the functions, motivations and impacts of L1 use within this context is essential to ensuring that its deployment is strategic to optimise its benefits while mitigating potential drawbacks. This will harmonise the interaction between L1 and L2 to achieve balanced bilingualism and effective EFL learning. It would be helpful to conduct more nuanced research in EFL classrooms to obtain a complete understanding of the complex drivers and consequences of CS. It might also be crucial to consider the cultural context of CS in EFL programmes.

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