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Code-Switching in EFL Classrooms: A Qualitative Study of Learners' Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract

This study investigates Saudi undergraduate EFL learners' perceptions and experiences of code-switching in English language classrooms. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with fifteen students enrolled in EFL courses at a public university. Thematic analysis revealed three key functions of code-switching: as a comprehension aid, an emotional support mechanism, and a facilitator of classroom engagement. Learners viewed strategic Arabic use as beneficial for understanding complex concepts, reducing performance anxiety, and fostering interpersonal connection with teachers and peers. Framed within Communication Accommodation Theory, the findings suggest that code-switching functions as a relational and pedagogical tool that enhances learner confidence and inclusion. While students supported selective L1 use, they also emphasized the importance of maintaining English immersion for language development. The study advocates for context-sensitive bilingual teaching practices that validate learner identity and support academic achievement.

Keywords: code-switching, EFL learners, saudi arabia, bilingual pedagogy, communication accommodation theory

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Introduction

Code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages within a single conversation, is a common feature of bilingual and multilingual communication. In sociolinguistic terms, it is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a communicative strategy

that speakers employ for various social, functional, and affective purposes. As Gumperz (1982) describes, code-switching involves the juxtaposition of speech passages belonging to different grammatical systems, serving expressive and pragmatic functions rather than indicating a lack of language competence. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, especially in multilingual settings such as Saudi Arabia, code-switching is frequently observed as both teachers and learners shift between English (L2) and Arabic (L1) to facilitate understanding and interaction. Traditionally, language teaching methodologies have emphasized target-language exclusivity, arguing that maximum exposure to English supports language acquisition (Krashen, 1985; Hall & Cook, 2012). However, more recent perspectives recognize the cognitive and communicative value of integrating the learners' first language into the learning process. For example, Cook (2001) and Kroll et al. (2012) argue that L1 can be a powerful scaffolding tool, helping students grasp complex concepts and feel psychologically supported in the classroom.

Within the Saudi EFL context, the use of Arabic in English language classrooms is both prevalent and pedagogically significant. Prior studies have documented widespread use of code-switching among Saudi teachers and students, with many recognizing its role in facilitating instruction, clarifying meaning, and managing classroom interactions (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Alshammari, 2011). These studies point to a growing awareness of the functional value of switching to Arabic, particularly when teaching complex grammar, vocabulary, or abstract concepts. Learners, too, have expressed positive attitudes toward this practice. For instance, Altalhi (2024) reports that Saudi university students perceive code-switching as helpful for comprehension and retention. Similarly, Al Tale' and AlQahtani (2022) found that students value code-switching not only for its cognitive support but also for the affective comfort it provides. These findings suggest that code-switching fulfills multiple classroom roles: it aids understanding, reduces anxiety, and fosters a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the implications of code-switching go beyond pedagogy. The choice of language in any communicative act reflects deeper social dynamics, power relations, and identity negotiations. In the classroom, when a teacher switches to the students' L1, it may signal empathy, solidarity, or an attempt to reduce social distance. Conversely, rigid adherence to English-only instruction may be perceived as a display of authority or linguistic ideology. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1973) offers a useful lens through which to examine these dynamics. The theory posits that speakers adjust their language patterns—through convergence or divergence—to regulate social relationships and align with the expectations or identities of their interlocutors. Applied to the classroom, code-switching can be interpreted as a form of linguistic convergence: a teacher shifting to Arabic to accommodate students' linguistic needs and social comfort. This accommodation not only facilitates learning but also shapes classroom rapport and mutual respect. Despite these insights, most existing research in the Saudi context has focused on teachers' practices or general attitudes, with limited exploration of how learners themselves interpret and experience these language shifts.

This lack of focus on learner perceptions represents a significant gap in the literature. While we know that code-switching is common and often appreciated by students, we know far less about how learners understand its role in their own educational experience. Specifically, there is a need for qualitative research that captures learners' nuanced reflections on how code-switching affects their comprehension, emotional engagement, and classroom participation. Most studies in the region have relied on survey-based methods, which are useful for measuring general trends but insufficient for exploring deeper personal experiences. Learners' voices—how they feel, think, and respond to code-switching moments—are often absent or underrepresented in the discourse. This study seeks to address this gap by providing a qualitative account of Saudi undergraduate EFL learners' perceptions of code-switching in their classrooms.

The goal is to explore how students interpret the use of their first language within English instruction—not merely whether they approve or disapprove of it, but what meanings they attach to it, how it influences their learning process, and what social or psychological functions it serves from their perspective. For example, does code-switching reduce anxiety and encourage participation, or does it cause dependence on L1 and hinder English fluency? Do students feel more connected to their instructors and peers when Arabic is used, or do they perceive it as a break from the formality and immersion of English learning? These questions go beyond simple attitudinal surveys and delve into learners' lived experiences, which are critical for informing pedagogical practices in EFL settings.

This study is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it contributes to the broader sociolinguistic understanding of code-switching by applying Communication Accommodation Theory in an educational setting, highlighting how language choices function as tools of interpersonal negotiation in the classroom. By focusing on students rather than teachers, it expands the application of CAT to reflect learner-driven perspectives on accommodation and linguistic alignment. Empirically, the study adds to the limited body of qualitative research on Saudi EFL learners, offering in-depth data drawn from actual classroom experiences and interviews. This not only enriches academic knowledge but also provides educators with insights into how students perceive the educational and emotional value of code-switching. Practically, the findings of this study can guide teacher training and curriculum development by illustrating when and how code-switching is most beneficial to learners. If learners perceive it as supportive and empowering, teachers can use it strategically to build rapport, lower the affective filter, and improve engagement. Conversely, if overuse leads to dependence or confusion, guidelines can be established to balance its usage.

In light of the above, this study is guided by three central research questions. First, what are the perceptions of Saudi undergraduate EFL learners regarding the use of code-switching in their English language classrooms? This question seeks to understand their attitudes, beliefs, and emotional responses to code-switching as a teaching strategy. Second, how do learners describe

the functional role of code-switching in their English learning experience? This includes their views on how code-switching facilitates comprehension, task performance, and overall learning effectiveness. Third, what social and psychological dimensions do learners associate with code-switching in the classroom? This question explores how code-switching affects classroom relationships, peer interactions, learner identity, confidence, and motivation. By addressing these questions, the study aims to generate a holistic understanding of code-switching from the learners' point of view and offer valuable contributions to both theory and practice in EFL education.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of code-switching has been extensively examined within sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and language education research. Defined as the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single discourse, code-switching is a routine and often unconscious practice among bilingual speakers (Poplack, 1980). In classroom contexts, particularly within EFL environments, code-switching has traditionally been viewed with skepticism, especially under monolingual-oriented teaching ideologies that favor maximum exposure to the target language. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly acknowledges that strategic use of the learners' first language (L1) can play a significant role in second language (L2) acquisition, both as a cognitive scaffold and a communicative strategy (Cook, 2001; García & Wei, 2014).

Early research on code-switching in educational contexts often emphasized its interference in the learning of the target language. Influenced by the Direct Method and later the Audio-Lingual Method, pedagogical norms in language teaching tended to marginalize the use of L1, arguing that it hampers fluency and immersion (Krashen, 1985). These views were based on the assumption that the best way to acquire a language was to simulate naturalistic conditions, where exposure to L2 is maximized and L1 is excluded. However, this rigid stance has been increasingly challenged by more recent studies which suggest that, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure to English is limited outside the classroom, L1 can serve as a valuable resource rather than a hindrance (Auerbach, 1993; Macaro, 2005).

Instructors and learners alike have reported the effectiveness of code-switching for various instructional purposes. According to Macaro (2009), teachers may switch to the students' native language to clarify instructions, explain difficult grammar, manage classroom behavior, or build rapport. Similarly, Alshammari (2011) observed that Saudi instructors often used Arabic strategically during English lessons to enhance learner comprehension and maintain classroom discipline. In student-centered research, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) found that learners

often felt more confident and engaged when teachers used their L1 to explain complex concepts. These findings are echoed in Altalhi's (2024) Saudi-based study, where learners expressed strong support for code-switching, especially when facing linguistic difficulties.

While much of the literature on code-switching has focused on teacher use, several studies have begun to explore learners' perceptions and experiences. Al-Nofaie (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study in Saudi Arabia and found that students appreciated teachers' occasional use of Arabic, particularly in moments of linguistic confusion or when dealing with abstract concepts. Al Tale' and AlQahtani (2022) similarly reported that Saudi undergraduate EFL learners believed code-switching enhanced their affective engagement, eased anxiety, and supported better understanding of instructional content. These studies suggest that learners do not perceive L1 use as detrimental; instead, they view it as an essential part of the learning environment, particularly in contexts where English exposure is otherwise limited.

Beyond instructional functions, the sociolinguistic literature highlights the interpersonal and identity-related dimensions of code-switching. Gumperz (1982) noted that language choice in bilingual settings is often socially motivated, signaling group membership, solidarity, authority, or distance. Holmes (2013) reinforced this view, suggesting that code-switching can serve affective functions, such as expressing empathy or reducing power imbalances. In classroom settings, this means that when teachers switch to L1, they may be engaging in acts of social accommodation—an interpretation supported by Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1973).

Despite growing attention to code-switching as a communicative and pedagogical strategy, gaps remain in the literature—particularly in the area of qualitative research focused on learners' lived experiences. While surveys and structured interviews have provided insights into learners' attitudes, they often fail to capture the nuanced ways in which students interpret and experience code-switching during classroom interaction. Moreover, the emotional and psychological aspects—such as how learners feel more or less confident, motivated, or included due to language switching—are still underexplored, especially in the Saudi higher education context. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating how learners perceive the role of code-switching in their English language learning, not only in terms of functionality but also its social and affective dimensions.

To analyze these perceptions and experiences, this study is grounded in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). First developed by Howard Giles and colleagues in the early 1970s, CAT provides a theoretical framework to understand how individuals adjust their speech and communicative behavior to either reduce or emphasize social distance (Giles, Taylor & Bourhis, 1973). The theory posits that speakers employ strategies of convergence—adapting their speech to be more like that of their interlocutor—or divergence—emphasizing the

difference—to negotiate relationships and social identities. These strategies are not merely linguistic but are often motivated by social goals such as approval, identity assertion, or group solidarity.

In the classroom context, CAT has important implications for understanding language choice. When teachers shift from English to Arabic, they may be engaging in convergence to align with students' linguistic comfort zones, thereby fostering inclusion and rapport. Conversely, maintaining English-only instruction could be seen as divergence, signaling authority, formal distance, or adherence to institutional norms. From the learners' perspective, such shifts in language may be interpreted as supportive and accommodating, or alternatively, as distancing and exclusive—depending on context and frequency. Applying CAT allows researchers to frame code-switching not simply as a teaching strategy, but as a **relational act** shaped by social intentions and interpersonal dynamics.

Several studies have employed CAT to analyze classroom discourse, although few have explicitly focused on learners' interpretations. For instance, Gallois et al. (2005) applied CAT to intercultural communication in educational settings, emphasizing that language accommodation affects not only comprehension but also relational outcomes such as trust and respect. In EFL contexts, this means that learners may feel more connected and valued when teachers use their L1, thereby enhancing their emotional engagement and willingness to participate. However, the same accommodation can also backfire if perceived as patronizing or excessive, highlighting the importance of understanding learner perspectives on both the benefits and potential drawbacks of code-switching.

This theoretical framing aligns well with the sociolinguistic and psychological objectives of the present study. By integrating CAT with qualitative insights from Saudi undergraduate learners, the research aims to offer a nuanced account of how code-switching is perceived, interpreted, and experienced in classroom interaction. The study will examine not only the functional outcomes (e.g., clarity and comprehension) but also the social meanings (e.g., teacher-student alignment) and affective responses (e.g., confidence, motivation, anxiety) that learners associate with code-switching practices. In doing so, it contributes to a more holistic understanding of bilingual classroom discourse and its role in shaping language learning experiences.

Methodology

▪ Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** to explore Saudi undergraduate EFL learners' perceptions and experiences of code-switching in the classroom. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complexity of participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and emotional responses toward the use of L1 (Arabic) alongside L2 (English) during instruction. Qualitative

inquiry is especially suitable for research that seeks to uncover **contextual, nuanced, and subjective insights**, which are not easily measurable through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research is guided by **interpretivism**, a paradigm that prioritizes meaning-making through participants' perspectives. Unlike positivist approaches that seek generalizability, this study aims to **understand how learners interpret the pedagogical, social, and psychological significance of code-switching** in their unique educational contexts. The study also draws theoretical support from **Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1973)**, which is used to interpret how learners perceive their teachers' language choices and how such choices influence classroom dynamics, comfort levels, and learning engagement.

- **Participants and Sampling**

The participants for this study consisted of **undergraduate students enrolled in EFL courses** at a public university in Saudi Arabia. The target population was selected based on two criteria: (1) current enrolment in English language courses, and (2) fluency in both Arabic and English sufficient for discussing classroom experiences in either language. These criteria ensured that participants had adequate exposure to bilingual classroom practices and were capable of articulating their views.

A **purposive sampling strategy** was used to select participants who could provide rich and diverse perspectives on the subject matter. This non-probability sampling technique is commonly used in qualitative studies where the goal is not to generalize findings but to gather deep insights from information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). A total of **15 participants** were selected for the study, representing both male and female students across different academic years and majors. This sample size was deemed sufficient for qualitative saturation, where new interviews no longer yielded substantially new information.

The researcher also ensured **diversity within the sample** in terms of participants' English proficiency levels and classroom exposure to different teaching styles. This variation allowed the study to capture a wide spectrum of learner experiences, from those in beginner-level courses to more advanced English learners. The selected participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study and were informed about their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

- **Data Collection**

The primary data collection method used in this study was **semi-structured interviews**, conducted in either English or Arabic depending on the participant's preference. This format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency in key questions across participants while also

offering flexibility to pursue relevant follow-up questions based on each individual's responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rahman 2020). Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in duration and were conducted in a private room on campus to ensure confidentiality and reduce distractions.

An **interview guide** was developed based on themes emerging from the literature review and the study's research questions. Topics covered included: participants' general views on code-switching, specific instances when code-switching helped or hindered their understanding, emotional responses to code-switching, and perceptions of teacher-student relationships influenced by language choices. Example questions included:

- *"How do you feel when your teacher switches from English to Arabic during class?"*
- *"Can you describe a time when code-switching helped you understand a difficult concept?"*
- *"Do you think using Arabic affects your motivation to speak in English? Why or why not?"*

All interviews were **audio-recorded** with participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim. Arabic-language responses were translated into English by the researcher, who is fluent in both languages, and then validated by an independent bilingual reviewer to ensure **translation accuracy** and cultural sensitivity.

- **Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations**

The data collected from interviews were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher followed a six-step process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo 12 software was used to manage, code, and categorize the data efficiently. Emerging themes were not predefined but were inductively derived from participants' narratives. Initial coding revealed categories such as *"code-switching for comprehension," "emotional relief," "peer interaction,"* and *"reduced anxiety."* These were later grouped into broader themes reflecting **functional, social, and psychological dimensions** of code-switching, aligned with the research questions.

All participants provided **informed written consent**. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that pseudonyms would be used in any published materials. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device, accessible only to the researcher. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to review and clarify their transcripts to ensure the accuracy of their responses—a process known as **member checking**, which contributes to the study's credibility.

By adopting a robust qualitative methodology that integrates interviews, observations, and thematic analysis within a strong ethical framework, this study seeks to generate deep, contextualized insights into how Saudi undergraduate learners perceive and experience code-switching in their EFL classrooms. These findings will not only contribute to the academic discourse on bilingual education and learner identity but also offer practical guidance to educators navigating language use in multilingual classroom environments.

Results and Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview data yielded three central themes: **(1) Code-Switching as a Comprehension Aid, (2) Emotional and Psychological Comfort through L1 Use,** and **(3) Social Connection and Classroom Engagement**. These themes collectively illustrate how Saudi undergraduate EFL learners perceive and experience code-switching in their classroom environments.

- **Theme 1: Code-Switching as a Comprehension Aid**

A recurring theme in students' responses was the functional role of code-switching in enhancing comprehension. Most participants stated that the selective use of Arabic by instructors helped them understand difficult grammar points, technical vocabulary, or assignment instructions. This function of code-switching corresponds with the "message-oriented" function of language alternation in the classroom (Sert, 2005).

As Participant 1 explained,

"When the teacher explains something hard, like grammar, and I don't understand it in English, a quick sentence in Arabic helps. It's like suddenly a light turns on in my brain."

Participant 3 echoed this sentiment:

"Sometimes we pretend to understand when the teacher uses only English. But if they just say one line in Arabic, it becomes clear. We don't want the whole class in Arabic, but small help is very useful."

These statements demonstrate that code-switching is not merely a fallback for weak students but a strategic pedagogical tool used by instructors to scaffold complex material, as supported by Cook (2001) and Macaro (2005). Participant 5 elaborated,

"During writing tasks, we often get confused about what is required. If the teacher translates or explains in Arabic just once, it saves 10 minutes of confusion."

These reflections confirm that learners are capable of distinguishing between purposeful and excessive code-switching. Many participants emphasized the importance of balance: too much Arabic may disrupt immersion, but complete exclusion hinders accessibility. Participant 7 noted,

"If everything is explained in English, we may stay silent. But when Arabic is used properly, it pushes us to engage. We feel more sure about what we are learning."

This aligns with Alshammari's (2011) findings that strategic Arabic use facilitates instructional clarity without diluting language learning goals. Students acknowledged that code-switching, when used judiciously, saved time, reduced miscommunication, and encouraged them to engage with English more confidently.

- **Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Comfort through L1 Use**

Beyond functional benefits, code-switching emerged as a powerful tool for reducing language anxiety and increasing learners' psychological comfort. Students consistently reported feeling less stressed when teachers used Arabic to offer reassurance, clarify instructions, or provide feedback. This reflects the **affective function** of code-switching, a well-documented area in second language acquisition research (Krashen, 1985; Mehmood, 2018; Rahman 2020).

Participant 2 shared,

"Sometimes we freeze when the teacher asks something in English and we are not sure of the answer. But if we're allowed to speak in Arabic first, we feel safe to express, then try to say it again in English."

Participant 4 described her experience during oral presentations:

"I was very nervous. But when the teacher smiled and said, 'say it in Arabic if you need,' I relaxed. I gave my idea in Arabic, and then slowly said it in English. That chance made a big difference."

Students appreciated when instructors signaled accommodation not just linguistically, but emotionally. Participant 6 observed:

"When teachers act strict about English only, we feel distant and afraid to speak. But if they switch to Arabic at the right time, it feels like they understand us. It builds trust."

Such insights align with CAT, which posits that language accommodation reduces social distance and fosters psychological alignment (Giles et al., 1973). Many participants explained

that brief Arabic use by the teacher served as a **relational gesture**, communicating empathy, understanding, and patience. Participant 9 said,

"When the teacher uses Arabic for one minute to comfort or guide us, we feel respected. It shows that she knows what it's like to struggle."

These findings resonate with Al Tale' and AlQahtani (2022), who reported that Saudi learners see code-switching as a supportive mechanism that sustains their motivation and emotional connection to the learning process. It is not simply a cognitive aid, but a socio-emotional one.

- **Theme 3: Social Connection and Classroom Engagement**

The final theme explores how code-switching enhances interpersonal relationships and boosts learner engagement. Many students noted that Arabic use during classroom interaction made the environment feel more inclusive, familiar, and interactive — especially in peer collaboration and informal exchanges.

Participant 8 reflected,

"When we work in groups, we often start in Arabic. It helps us coordinate faster and understand each other. Then we move to English when presenting or writing."

This flexible use of L1 and L2 supports findings by Al-Nofaie (2010), who noted that learners rely on Arabic to sustain task-based discussions before transitioning into formal English output. Participant 10 explained,

"Sometimes a friend explains the meaning of a word in Arabic when the teacher uses hard English. It builds team spirit and helps all of us move forward."

Several learners also mentioned that teachers who code-switched occasionally to tell jokes, share stories, or express approval seemed more approachable and human. Participant 11 commented,

"If the teacher jokes in Arabic or shares an example from our culture, it connects us. We listen more, we laugh, we feel part of the class."

This social alignment reinforces the **interpersonal dimension** of CAT: language choices signal not just information but relational intent (Gallois et al., 2005). Code-switching was viewed as a marker of **cultural resonance**, making the classroom feel like a shared space rather than a distant academic platform.

Interestingly, a few participants acknowledged that overuse of Arabic during peer interaction might limit English practice. As Participant 12 put it,

"If we only use Arabic in groups, we don't get enough chance to practice speaking English. Sometimes the teacher has to remind us."

This highlights that students are aware of the fine balance required between fostering connection and maintaining language goals. Many saw code-switching not as a replacement for English, but as a **stepping stone** that allowed deeper engagement before switching back into L2 use.

Participant 13 captured this well:

"Arabic is the bridge, but English is the destination. We just need both to walk confidently."

Across the three themes, the learners' voices collectively emphasize that code-switching is not a sign of pedagogical weakness but a **responsive strategy** that acknowledges their linguistic, emotional, and social realities. Learners saw it as an important aid for comprehension, an emotional anchor during stress, and a relational bridge in social interaction.

They were also discerning in their preferences: they valued purposeful, timely use of Arabic that supported rather than substituted English instruction. These findings align with a growing body of research advocating for **context-sensitive bilingual practices** (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012) and support the relevance of Communication Accommodation Theory in EFL learning environments. Ultimately, learners viewed code-switching as a practice that allowed them to **navigate language learning with greater clarity, confidence, and connection**.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that Saudi undergraduate EFL learners perceive code-switching as a valuable, context-sensitive classroom practice with multidimensional impact. Learners consistently reported that code-switching—when employed judiciously—enhanced comprehension, reduced anxiety, and improved classroom participation. These insights not only validate existing literature but also extend it by centering learners' nuanced perspectives and highlighting the affective and relational layers of bilingual classroom interaction.

In line with Cook (2001) and Macaro (2005), students viewed Arabic as a scaffold rather than a crutch. They appreciated when instructors used Arabic strategically to clarify difficult content, provide task instructions, or elaborate on unfamiliar vocabulary. Learners were careful to distinguish between helpful code-switching and excessive use that might disrupt immersion. Their preference for a balanced approach aligns with Hall and Cook's (2012) notion of

"judicious L1 use," which calls for a pedagogically informed application of code-switching tailored to learner needs.

A significant contribution of this study is its emphasis on the affective dimensions of code-switching (Horasan, 2014). Learners' descriptions of relief, reduced pressure, and increased confidence echo Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, underscoring the role of L1 use in creating a psychologically safe environment. These emotional responses are often overlooked in strictly pedagogical discussions of language instruction. The fact that students felt more "respected" and "understood" when their teacher used Arabic demonstrates how code-switching contributes to emotional alignment and interpersonal empathy.

This finding resonates strongly with Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1973), which explains how speakers adapt their language to reduce social distance and enhance relational harmony. Teachers' occasional use of Arabic was perceived by learners not simply as a teaching tool but as a social signal—a gesture of convergence that indicated care, solidarity, and attunement to learners' realities. Through this lens, code-switching is not just a linguistic phenomenon but a relational strategy that builds trust and rapport in multicultural, multilingual classrooms.

Moreover, learners described how code-switching facilitated peer collaboration and classroom engagement (Maruf, et al.2023). It was used among students to negotiate meaning, discuss tasks, and encourage each other during group activities. While some participants warned against overusing Arabic during peer work, most viewed it as a bridge to more effective English communication. This mirrors findings from Al-Nofaie (2010), Narayan (2019) and Rahman (2021) who observed that peer code-switching in EFL settings contributes to task completion, group cohesion, and collective learning.

Importantly, learners' reflections reveal a metacognitive awareness of their own language learning journey. They were not merely passive recipients of instructional choices; they actively evaluated the role of Arabic in their development as English users. Their collective stance—that Arabic should support but not dominate English instruction—demonstrates a mature understanding of pedagogical balance, one that educators would do well to consider in curriculum planning and delivery.

Implications

The study's findings carry several pedagogical implications for EFL instructors, curriculum designers, and language education policymakers, particularly in Saudi Arabia and similar multilingual contexts.

First, teachers should feel empowered to use Arabic strategically without guilt or hesitation. While English-only policies have long dominated mainstream language teaching ideologies, this study affirms that context-sensitive code-switching enhances both learning outcomes and emotional engagement. Professional development programs should equip teachers with training on when and how to code-switch effectively—emphasizing that the goal is not to dilute English input but to make it more accessible and emotionally resonant.

Second, code-switching should be viewed as a learner-centered practice. Students in this study clearly articulated when, why, and how they found Arabic helpful. Teachers should actively solicit such feedback and reflect on learners' preferences, creating open dialogues around language use. Incorporating learner voices into instructional planning ensures that classroom language policies reflect the actual needs and emotional landscapes of students.

Third, EFL curriculum developers should resist rigid language use mandates. While exposure to the target language is critical, this study suggests that occasional L1 integration—particularly for clarification, motivation, and emotional reassurance—has important educational benefits. A flexible language policy that allows for minimal but meaningful Arabic use could lead to more inclusive, supportive classrooms that foster sustained learner engagement.

Fourth, these findings have relevance beyond the immediate context of Saudi higher education. They suggest that in any multilingual EFL environment, allowing space for students' linguistic identities can enhance trust, reduce learning anxiety, and create stronger social bonds. Teachers working in diverse linguistic landscapes should be encouraged to adopt a relational lens on language, understanding that communication in the classroom is not just about transmitting knowledge, but also about building connection and belonging.

Finally, this study highlights the value of using Communication Accommodation Theory as a framework for analyzing classroom discourse. Teachers and researchers alike can use CAT to examine not just what language is being used, but why it is being used, and what it signals in terms of power, identity, and inclusion. Future research could further apply CAT in cross-cultural comparisons or examine how different types of teacher accommodation (linguistic, paralinguistic, pragmatic) shape student outcomes. Further, the findings suggest that strategic code-switching in EFL classrooms is not only pedagogically effective but socially and psychologically transformative. It acts as a bridge—between languages, between teacher and learner, and between instruction and inclusion. Recognizing and legitimizing this bridge can help create more humanized and equitable language learning spaces.

Conclusion

This study explored Saudi undergraduate EFL learners' perceptions of code-switching within their English language classrooms. The findings reveal that students perceive code-switching not

as a hindrance but as a strategic and supportive practice that enhances comprehension, reduces anxiety, and fosters social connection. Learners recognized the functional benefits of brief Arabic use for clarifying complex concepts, as well as its affective value in creating a safe and inclusive classroom atmosphere. Through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory, code-switching emerged as a form of linguistic convergence that helped bridge gaps between teachers and students, and among peers.

Crucially, learners demonstrated an awareness of the balance needed between L1 support and L2 exposure. They valued code-switching when used purposefully but remained committed to developing their English proficiency. These insights challenge monolingual teaching ideologies and support more flexible, learner-centered approaches to language instruction.

Overall, this research underscores the pedagogical, emotional, and social dimensions of classroom code-switching and calls for educators and policymakers to embrace it as a legitimate, context-sensitive tool that promotes effective and humanized learning in multilingual EFL environments.

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