Code-Switching and Code-Mixing in Multilingual Classrooms: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual classrooms, focusing on their pedagogical implications, challenges, and opportunities. In many linguistically diverse learning environments, teachers and learners frequently alternate between languages to enhance comprehension, facilitate participation, and create inclusive spaces. While such practices can bridge linguistic gaps, they may also raise concerns about language standardisation, curriculum alignment, and assessment practices. Drawing on perspectives of Matrix Language frame, Communicative competence and the Markedness Model, the article examines how strategic language alternation can support cognitive development and scaffold learning, particularly for students from minority language backgrounds. The findings suggest that informed, purposeful language use can transform multilingual classrooms into spaces of linguistic empowerment, rather than barriers to proficiency. It further highlights how code-switching and code-mixing can foster cultural identity and strengthen classroom interaction, while acknowledging potential issues such as reduced target language exposure and inconsistent language policies. Encouraging reflective practice, incorporating multilingual teaching materials, enhancing students' language competence, strategic integration in teaching, among others are offered as panaceas for educators and policymakers to harness effectively within formal education settings.

Keywords: code-switching, code-mixing, multilingual education, language policy, classroom interaction

Introduction

In the contemporary interconnected world, multilingualism has emerged as a defining characteristic of educational contexts, particularly within societies where several languages coexist and interact daily. Multilingual classrooms embody microcosms of cultural and linguistic diversity, as learners arrive with varied linguistic repertoires shaped by social, ethnic, and cultural influences. Within such spaces, language use functions beyond communication—it assumes pedagogical and social significance. Educators and learners often alternate between languages to support comprehension, convey meaning, and foster interpersonal connection. Although sometimes criticised as informal or lacking structure, this linguistic adaptability is instrumental in negotiating meaning and constructing knowledge in classroom settings.

Multilingual education denotes the coexistence and utilisation of more than one language for teaching, learning, and communication within educational environments. In many postcolonial nations such as Nigeria, Kenya, and India, this approach represents both an inevitable and strategic response to linguistic diversity. English frequently serves as the language of instruction, while indigenous languages sustain their cultural and communal significance. The interaction between these languages generates varied linguistic practices, notably code-switching and code-mixing. These phenomena naturally occur among bilingual and multilingual speakers and reflect not only linguistic competence but also social identity and communicative purpose.

Code-switching involves alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within a conversation, sentence, or discourse. It serves several functions in instructional communication, such as clarification, emphasis, translation, and rapport-building between teachers and learners. Conversely, code-mixing refers to the incorporation of lexical or grammatical elements from one language into another within a single utterance. Although the boundary between these two concepts can be fluid, code-switching typically functions at the sentence or discourse level, whereas code-mixing operates at the lexical or morphological level. Both illustrate the dynamic nature of multilingual communication and demonstrate speakers' proficiency in navigating complex linguistic systems.

Historically and sociolinguistically, the use of multiple languages in education stems from colonial and postcolonial language policies. During colonial administrations, European languages such as English, French, and Portuguese were institutionalised as official and instructional media, marginalising indigenous languages. This historical legacy continues to shape linguistic practices in many African and Asian societies. Consequently, educators and learners in multilingual contexts often employ code-switching and code-mixing as pragmatic tools to bridge linguistic gaps caused by restrictive monolingual language policies. From a sociolinguistic viewpoint, these practices embody identity negotiation, resistance, and adaptation within educational discourse while revealing the intersections between linguistic power, social class, and access to education.

The pedagogical relevance of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual classrooms is profound. Beyond facilitating communication, code-switching and code-mixing can also be examined through the lens of **instructional scaffolding**, a concept originating from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and his notion of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD). Scaffolding refers to the temporary, adaptive assistance a lecturer provides to help learners perform tasks that would be too challenging to complete independently. Within language learning, this support might include modelling vocabulary, paraphrasing complex ideas, prompting learners to articulate understanding, or strategically alternating between languages to clarify meaning. As learners' competence increases, such assistance is gradually withdrawn, enabling them to operate autonomously in the target language.

In multilingual classrooms, lecturers frequently employ students' first languages as pedagogical tools to bridge conceptual and linguistic gaps. In this context, code-switching functions not merely as a conversational habit, but as a **deliberate instructional aid** that facilitates comprehension, sustains participation, and nurtures confidence. Research indicates that when implemented thoughtfully, scaffolding through language alternation promotes metalinguistic awareness and supports incremental mastery of academic English (Gibbons, 2002; Hammond, 2001; Walqui, 2006). Consequently, understanding scaffolding as an integral component of multilingual pedagogy highlights the functional, rather than deficient, value of learners' full linguistic repertoires in achieving communicative and cognitive growth.

Despite their instructional merits, code-switching and code-mixing also present challenges. These include inconsistency in language application, possible learner confusion, and the potential reduction in proficiency in the target language, typically English. Teachers may encounter tensions between policy prescriptions and practical realities, particularly where monolingual instruction is mandated. Furthermore, the lack of adequate preparation in bilingual teaching strategies leaves many educators uncertain about how and when to implement language alternation effectively. These difficulties highlight the necessity for evidence-based guidelines and professional development to support effective classroom practice and policy implementation.

Nonetheless, the opportunities presented by code-switching and code-mixing remain substantial. When employed strategically, they promote inclusivity, enrich classroom discourse, and cultivate learners' metalinguistic awareness. They also enable culturally responsive pedagogy and encourage students to utilise their full linguistic repertoires in the learning process. In multilingual contexts such as Nigeria, where linguistic diversity functions both as a resource and a challenge, the purposeful application of these practices can contribute to equitable and effective education. Understanding the complexities of code-switching and code-mixing is therefore essential for developing pedagogical frameworks that reflect the realities of linguistically diverse classrooms.

Research Objectives

The study is designed to explore dynamics of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual contexts with focus on implications, challenges and emerging opportunities. Specifically, it is geared to:

  i. Describe the patterns and functions of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual interactions in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua; and

  ii. examine the challenges and opportunities associated with code-switching and code- mixing as facilitators or inhibitors of effective communication and cultural expression in multilingual contexts.

Research questions

In the course of this study, it was germane to develop and sought for answers to the following questions:

i.   What are the patterns and functions of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual interactions in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua?

ii.   What challenges and opportunities do code-switching and code-mixing present as facilitators or inhibitors of effective communication and cultural expression in multilingual contexts?

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual environments has developed significantly over time. Early linguistic theories often interpreted these practices as indicators of language interference or incomplete bilingualism (Weinreich, 1953). However, contemporary scholars now acknowledge them as sophisticated communicative mechanisms that multilingual speakers employ for both social and pedagogical purposes. Within educational settings, research has shown that these language alternation practices improve understanding, close linguistic gaps, and promote learner participation (Arthur & Martin, 2006). Rather than viewing them as symptoms of linguistic deficiency, current perspectives regard code-switching and code-mixing as creative and adaptive strategies that facilitate the negotiation of meaning in linguistically complex classrooms.

Conceptually, both code-switching and code-mixing are examined through their structural and functional characteristics. Code-switching refers to alternating between languages at the discourse, sentence, or conversational level, whereas code-mixing involves embedding lexical or grammatical elements from one language into another (Muysken, 2000). These linguistic behaviours are inherently natural in multilingual interaction and are influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which communication occurs. In classroom discourse, such practices represent deliberate or subconscious efforts to make instruction comprehensible to learners with differing levels of proficiency. They also exemplify how multilingual individuals mobilise their entire linguistic repertoires to enhance effective communication within culturally diverse educational spaces.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several theoretical models have contributed to a deeper understanding of code-switching and code-mixing. The **Matrix Language Frame theory** (Myers-Scotton, 1993) posits that one language typically provides the grammatical structure while

another supply embedded lexical items. The **Markedness Model** suggests that speakers alternate between languages strategically to express identity, negotiate relationships, or conform to social expectations. Likewise, Hymes' (1972) **Communicative Competence theory** underscores the pragmatic and contextual considerations influencing speakers' language choices in interaction. Collectively, these frameworks affirm that code-switching and code-mixing are systematic, context-dependent, and purposeful communicative acts rather than random language alternations.

Empirical investigations have consistently underscored the pedagogical importance of code-switching and code-mixing within multilingual learning environments. In many African and Asian contexts, where English functions as the primary instructional language, teachers frequently alternate between English and local languages to aid comprehension and sustain learner engagement (Ferguson, 2003; Sert, 2005). Such practices are particularly effective in second-language classrooms, where learners rely on familiar linguistic forms to understand abstract academic concepts. Nonetheless, certain scholars caution that excessive dependence on these strategies might limit learners' immersion in the target language and subsequently affect linguistic competence and academic achievement (Lin, 2013). This perspective highlights the need for balance in employing language alternation within instruction.

The literature also identifies that while code-switching and code-mixing pose several challenges, they simultaneously offer opportunities for inclusive, culturally grounded pedagogy. The challenges encompass inconsistent language use, potential learner confusion, and perceptions of unprofessionalism associated with informal linguistic alternation (Arthur, 2001). Conversely, the advantages include enhanced learner participation, validation of students' linguistic and cultural identities, and the promotion of active, student-centred learning. Within multilingual classrooms, these strategies empower learners to utilise their full linguistic repertoires to achieve academic success. Overall, existing studies demonstrate that the thoughtful and intentional integration of code-switching and code-mixing can transform linguistically diverse classrooms into inclusive spaces that encourage pedagogical innovation, equity, and cultural affirmation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design to provide a detailed account of the subject of inquiry without manipulating variables or imposing experimental conditions. The design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to observe, document, and interpret naturally occurring behaviours, experiences, and perspectives within their real-life setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design enabled the researcher to obtain data on how code-switching and code-mixing occur in classroom interactions, patterns of individual navigation and the making of sense of language use in multilingual settings, as well as the perceived challenges and opportunities associated with these practices.

Research Setting
The study was conducted at the Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene, **Akwa Ibom State**, where English is used for instructional purposes. This setting enabled the researcher to explore authentic classroom interactions and lecturer–student communication as they naturally unfolded. The choice of the location also provided access to participants who regularly engage with linguistic and pedagogical practices relevant to the study.

Population, Sample and Sampling Technique
The population of the study consisted of all National Diploma and Higher National Diploma students in the School of Communication Arts, Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua. School of Communication Arts has various departments including General Studies (GNS), Library and Information Science (LIS), Mass Communication (MAC), Journalism and Media Studies (JMS), and Strategic Communication and Media Studies (SCM). Lecturers who teach language-related courses were also included. This population was selected because members of this group frequently engage in both formal and informal communication where code-switching and code-mixing occur.

A sample size of **120 respondents** was drawn from the target population using a simple random sampling technique. This sample size was adequate for generating meaningful data. Out of the 120 respondents, 100 were students and 20 were lecturers. The use of simple random sampling ensured that every member of the population had an equal chance of being selected, thereby reducing sampling bias.

Table 1

Frequency distribution of respondents by departmental affiliation

S/N	Department	F(students)	F(Lecturers)
1.	General Studies (GNS),		4
2.	Library and Information Science (LIS),	25	4
3.	Mass Communication (MAC)	25	4
4.	Journalism and Media Studies (JMS)	25	4
5.	Strategic Communication and Media Studies (SCM).	25	4
	N (Frequency)	**100**	**20**

Instrument of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A captured demographic information such as age, gender, department, and level of study. Section B contained items designed to measure respondents' experiences, frequency, and perceptions of code-switching and code-mixing. The items were arranged on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree".

Validation and Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in language studies and one expert in educational measurement and evaluation. Their feedback helped to refine the items for clarity and relevance. A pilot study was conducted with 15 respondents from a nearby institution. Data from the pilot test were analysed using the Cronbach alpha method, which produced a reliability coefficient of **0.81**, indicating that the instrument was internally consistent and reliable for data collection.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher personally administered the questionnaires to the selected respondents. This method increased the return rate and provided an opportunity to give clarifications where necessary. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and informed that their participation was voluntary. A total of 120 copies of questionnaire were distributed, and 113 were returned correctly completed. This represented a response rate of **94.2%**.

Method of Data Analysis

Data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using simple percentage and frequency count. This method was appropriate for presenting patterns of responses in clear numerical form. Frequency distribution tables were used to display demographic characteristics and response trends. Percentages were applied to interpret levels of agreement or disagreement with each questionnaire item. The results were later presented in tables and explained in narrative form to support clarity.

Data Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of respondents were analysed to understand the composition of participants in terms of age, gender, and role (students or lecturers). Table 2 presents the distribution of respondents by category.

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 113)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	65	57.5
	Female	48	42.5
Age (years)	18–22	60	53.1
	23–27	40	35.4

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
	28 and above	13	11.5
Respondent Type	Students	93	82.3
	Lecturers	20	17.7

From Table 2, it is evident that the majority of respondents were male (57.5%) and students (82.3%), with most aged between 18 and 22 years (53.1%). This distribution reflects a typical tertiary institution environment where younger students form the bulk of the population.

Frequency Distribution of Responses

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they engage in or observe code-switching and code-mixing during classroom interactions. Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of responses.

Table 3
Frequency of code-switching and code-mixing (N = 113)

Frequency Level	Students (f)	Lecturers (f)	Total (f)	Percentage (%)
Always	38	8	46	40.7
Often	30	7	37	32.7
Sometimes	20	3	23	20.4
Rarely	5	2	7	6.2

Analysis of Table 3 shows that most respondents (73.4%) indicated that code-switching and code-mixing occur either "always" or "often," suggesting that these practices are common in classroom interactions.

Patterns of Responses from Respondents

Table 4 highlights respondents' perceptions of challenges and opportunities associated with code-switching and code-mixing.

Table 4
Respondents' perceptions of challenges and opportunities (N = 113)

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total (f)	% A
Code-switching affects mastery of Standard English	25	40	30	18	113	58.4
Code-mixing enhances comprehension in class	45	35	20	13	113	70.8
Excessive code-switching reduces academic performance	20	38	35	20	113	51.3
Strategic code-switching improves classroom participation	50	35	15	13	113	75.2

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

From Table 4, it is observed that respondents acknowledge both challenges and opportunities of code-switching and code-mixing. Most respondents (75.2%) agreed that strategic use improves participation, while 58.4% believed that indiscriminate switching could hinder Standard English mastery.

Findings of the Study
From the data presented above, the following key findings emerged:

- Code-switching and code-mixing are **frequently used** by both students and lecturers, with 73.4% indicating "always" or "often."

- **Strategic use** of code-switching enhances classroom participation and comprehension (75.2% and 70.8% agreement).

- **Excessive switching** may negatively affect mastery of Standard English (58.4% agreement).

- Students and lecturers recognise that these practices serve both **pedagogical and social functions**, bridging linguistic gaps and fostering engagement.

- There is a **balance between challenges and opportunities**, highlighting the need for moderation and guidance in classroom language use.

Discussion of Findings

Findings of the study suggest that code-switching and code-mixing are integral components of classroom interaction in multilingual contexts. The high frequency of these practices aligns with previous studies indicating that learners often rely on familiar languages to clarify and reinforce meaning (Adegbija, 2004; Bamgbose, 1998).

Strategically used, code-switching serves as a scaffolding tool, improving comprehension and participation. This supports the notion that allowing some flexibility in language use can enhance learning outcomes, particularly for students with limited English proficiency.

However, the data also reveal the challenges associated with indiscriminate language alternation. A significant proportion of respondents reported that frequent switching could compromise Standard English mastery, supporting earlier claims that over-reliance on code-switching may interfere with formal language development (Weinreich, 1953).

Overall, the study demonstrates that while code-switching and code-mixing present potential obstacles to language mastery, their judicious use offers notable opportunities for learning. Lecturers and students alike benefit from recognising when and how to alternate languages, balancing comprehension with formal language proficiency.

Conclusion

The study has examined the patterns, challenges, and opportunities associated with code-switching and code-mixing in a multilingual educational context. Empirical findings indicate that both students and lecturers frequently engage in these linguistic practices as a means of facilitating comprehension, participation, and communication within the classroom. The study reveals that code-switching and code-mixing serve essential pedagogical and social functions, allowing learners to bridge gaps between their home languages and Standard English, and providing lecturers with strategies to enhance instructional clarity.

At the same time, the study confirms that indiscriminate or excessive use of code-switching and code-mixing can present challenges. Such practices may interfere with the acquisition and mastery of Standard English, creating inconsistencies in language use and potentially affecting academic performance. These findings

underscore the dual nature of these practices as both beneficial and potentially problematic, depending on how they are employed in the learning environment.

In conclusion, the study highlights the importance of **balanced language use** in multilingual classrooms. Strategic and purposeful application of code-switching and code-mixing can enhance comprehension and participation, while moderation is necessary to maintain the integrity of Standard English. Overall, the study emphasises that recognising both the opportunities and challenges of these linguistic practices is essential for improving teaching, learning, and communication in tertiary educational settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effective use of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual classroom environments:

- **Strategic integration in teaching:** Lecturers should deliberately integrate code-switching and code-mixing as pedagogical tools. By using these practices purposefully, they can clarify complex concepts, facilitate comprehension, and ensure that all learners, regardless of language proficiency, actively participate in classroom discussions.

- **Professional development for lecturers:** Tertiary institutions should organise training programmes for lecturers to develop skills in managing code-switching and code-mixing. These programmes can provide guidance on when and how to switch languages appropriately, balancing comprehension support with the maintenance of Standard English.

- **Policy guidelines for language use:** Institutions should develop clear language policies that encourage flexible but structured use of code-switching and code-mixing. Such policies would help lecturers and students understand the acceptable contexts for alternating languages, preventing excessive reliance on non-standard codes.

- **Enhancing students' language competence:** Students should be encouraged to improve their proficiency in Standard English through additional practice, reading, and language workshops. Strengthening formal language skills will allow learners to engage more confidently in academic discourse while still benefiting from occasional code-switching for clarification.

- **Encouraging reflective practice:** Both lecturers and students should be encouraged to reflect on their language use. By being conscious of when and why they engage in code-switching or code-mixing, participants can optimise these practices to enhance learning outcomes without compromising linguistic accuracy.

- **Incorporating multilingual teaching materials:** Teaching materials that acknowledge the multilingual reality of the classroom can support comprehension and engagement. For example, bilingual glossaries, translated examples, and dual-language resources can reduce over-reliance on spontaneous code-switching.

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Institutions should periodically monitor language use in classrooms to ensure that code-switching and code-mixing are employed effectively. Feedback from both lecturers and students can inform adjustments to teaching strategies and institutional language policies.

Suggestions for Further Research

While this study has provided insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with code-switching and code-mixing in a multilingual educational setting, several areas remain for further investigation. The following suggestions are proposed:

- **Expansion to other educational levels:** Future research could explore code-switching and code-mixing practices at different levels of education, such as secondary schools or postgraduate institutions. Comparing these levels may reveal variations in frequency, patterns, and impact on language proficiency across age groups and academic stages.

- **Cross-disciplinary studies:** Researchers could examine these linguistic practices across different academic disciplines to identify subject-specific challenges and opportunities. For instance, courses in science, technology, or humanities may have distinct language demands that influence the use of code-switching and code-mixing.

- **Longitudinal studies:** Conducting longitudinal studies would provide insights into how code-switching and code-mixing behaviours evolve over time. Such studies could assess the long-term effects of these practices on learners' mastery of Standard English and overall academic performance.

- **Qualitative investigations:** While this study employed quantitative methods, future research could incorporate qualitative approaches, such as

classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups. This would offer a deeper understanding of the motivations behind language alternation and the social and cultural contexts that shape it.

- **Intervention-based research:** Researchers could design intervention studies to assess the effectiveness of structured strategies for managing code-switching and code-mixing. For example, testing the impact of guided language policies or bilingual teaching resources on comprehension and academic outcomes could provide practical recommendations for educators.

- **Comparative studies across regions:** Further studies could compare code-switching and code-mixing practices across different states or countries with multilingual populations. Such research would highlight contextual differences and provide a broader perspective on how cultural and linguistic diversity influences classroom communication.

- **Technology-mediated learning contexts:** As digital and online learning platforms become more prevalent, future research could explore how code-switching and code-mixing manifest in virtual classrooms. This would help understand the role of technology in shaping multilingual communication and learning experiences.

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