

# SOCIO-PRAGMATIC EFFECTS OF CODE SWITCHING AND CODE MIXING OF ESL LEARNER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN PAKISTAN

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## Abstract:

Code-switching and code mixing is a dominant phenomenon in any bilingual ESL setting. Therefore, the study aims to evaluate their socio-pragmatic effects on the English language proficiency of ESL university students in Pakistan. The study takes insights from the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky. Employing a mixed-method approach, data were gathered through a questionnaire on 4-point Likert scale language proficiency assessments, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with 150 students and 10 ESL instructors across three major Pakistani universities. The findings highlight that code mixing and code switching are restrictions in ESL learning, and researchers conclude that there must be a focus on students' learning outcomes (SOL). Although these strategies serve as powerful tools for making meaning, classroom engagement and peer interactions, frequent reliance on these practices may impede full immersion in English, affecting fluency and accuracy in formal language contexts. Finally, it is underscored in the study that pedagogical strategies are required to create harmony between the pragmatic benefits of code-switching and code-mixing and structured opportunities by targeting language use, offering implications to curriculum designers, linguists, stakeholders and policymakers by keeping in view the aim to improve ESL outcome in multilingual outcomes.

## Keywords:

Code Mixing, Code Switching, ESL Learners, Language Proficiency, Socio Pragmatic Effects.

## Introduction

Bilingualism and multilingualism are deeply embedded in the linguistic tapestry of Pakistan (Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023a), where English, regional languages, and Urdu coexist across educational domains (Ahmad et al., 2022, Amjad et al., 2021). In such environments, code-switching (alternating between languages) and code-mixing (blending languages within utterances) frequently arise, particularly among university-level ESL learners. These phenomena not only reflect sociocultural practices but also impact learners' pragmatic and academic growth. From a sociocultural theoretical standpoint, notably that of Vygotsky, language serves as a critical cognitive tool facilitated through social interaction and cultural exchange. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) highlights how learners progress cognitively with assistance from more capable peers or instructors. When code-switching is used strategically in the classroom, it functions as a scaffolding device—bridging students' existing linguistic knowledge in their first language (L1) to new English (L2) concepts—thus promoting comprehension, reducing affective barriers, and enhancing engagement (Anisah, 2023; Fareed et al., 2016; Bilgin & Rahimi, 2013).

Empirical studies within Pakistan present nuanced findings. In some university settings, excessive reliance on code-switching has been observed to negatively affect learners' fluency and proficiency by limiting immersion in the English medium—thereby reducing their readiness for formal contexts and assessments (Younas, 2020; Tehsil Sadiqabad intermediate-level study). Similarly, undergraduate learners in BS English programs often perceive code-switching as disruptive—believing it hampers attention and language development (Nawaz, 2023). Yet, other scholars document its pragmatic benefits: teachers and students view code-switching as supportive for explaining abstract concepts, boosting confidence, and enriching classroom participation (Li & Akram, 2024, 2023; Nawaz, 2023).

These mixed outcomes underscore the pressing need for carefully calibrated pedagogical strategies (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025; Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024). While code-switching and code-mixing can serve as tools for meaningful engagement and understanding, they also risk stunting learners' immersion and mastery of English, especially in formal academic settings (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Ramzan et al., 2023b). A balanced approach—one that aligns code-switching with well-defined learning goals and structured opportunities to practice English—is essential to ensure both engagement and proficiency. The current study investigates the socio-pragmatic effects of code-switching and code-mixing on the language proficiency of ESL university students in Pakistan, guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. By applying a mixed-methods approach—including Likert-scale proficiency assessments, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with students and ESL instructors across multiple universities—this research aims to illuminate how these linguistic practices facilitate or hinder ESL learning. The findings are intended to inform stakeholders—curriculum designers, linguists, educators, and policymakers—on how to harness the pedagogical utility of code-switching while mitigating its drawbacks, ultimately enhancing ESL outcomes in multilingual classrooms.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study anchors itself in two interrelated theoretical models:

1. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

According to Vygotsky, language is a psychological tool integral to cognitive development, and learning occurs most effectively within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—the gap between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with assistance from a more knowledgeable other. In ESL contexts, code-switching and code-mixing function as scaffolding devices—enabling learners to bridge prior linguistic knowledge with more advanced English input. Through interaction—peers or instructors—students are guided toward improved fluency and comprehension.

2. Communicative Competence Framework (Canale & Swain, 1980)

This model underscores that language proficiency transcends grammatical accuracy, inclusive of sociolinguistic, discursive, and pragmatic competencies. Code-switching and code-mixing, within this frame, are strategic tools that facilitate effective meaning-making and interpersonal communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

By synthesizing these frameworks, this research conceptualizes code-switching/mixing as both cognitive scaffolds (per Vygotsky) and facilitators of communicative competence (per Canale & Swain), offering a nuanced lens to evaluate their socio-pragmatic impacts on ESL learners' proficiency.

## Literature Review

Code-switching (CS) and code-mixing (CM) are pervasive linguistic phenomena in bilingual and multilingual educational settings, particularly in countries like Pakistan where English coexists with Urdu and regional languages (Mahmood & Qureshi, 2020). Code-switching involves the alternation between two or more languages within a discourse, sentence, or conversation (Myers-Scotton, 1993), while code-mixing refers to the embedding of elements from one language into another at the word or phrase level (Muysken, 2000). Both are frequently observed in classrooms as natural communication strategies, serving cognitive, affective, and socio-pragmatic functions (Gulzar, 2010). In Pakistani universities, the use of CS and CM in ESL classrooms has been described as both a facilitator and a barrier to language learning (Akram et al., 2020, 2019; Ramzan & Javaid, 2023; Ramzan & Khan, 2019; Chen & Ramzan, 2024; Nawaz et al., 2021). Research by Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) found that these practices often emerge as a scaffolding mechanism to bridge comprehension gaps, especially when learners encounter unfamiliar vocabulary or complex grammatical structures. However, critics argue that over-reliance can limit linguistic immersion, reducing opportunities for learners to fully internalize English syntax, discourse patterns, and sociolinguistic norms (Younas, 2020). From a socio-pragmatic perspective, CS and CM fulfill several communicative functions that go beyond mere translation. They can:

- Clarify meaning when English terminology is complex (Gumperz, 1982)
- Signal group identity and solidarity in peer interaction (Ahmed & Jusoff, 2009)
- Manage classroom discourse by shifting between instructional and interpersonal talk (Ferguson, 2003)
- Facilitate affective engagement by reducing learners' anxiety and increasing participation (Awan & Malik, 2014)

In the Pakistani higher education context, teachers often use CS strategically to negotiate meaning, explain abstract concepts, and create rapport with students (Gulzar, 2010). Yet, as Khan and Malik (2019) note, the pragmatic benefits can be overshadowed by the unintended reinforcement of L1 dominance in formal academic settings, where English proficiency is essential for academic success and career advancement. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding the pedagogical implications of CS and CM. In SCT, learning is mediated through social interaction, with language functioning as a primary cognitive tool. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes the role of guidance and collaboration in moving learners from their current level of ability to higher levels of competence. In ESL classrooms, code-switching can serve as a scaffolding tool that helps learners connect new L2 concepts with their L1 schema (Anton & DiCamilla, 1999). This aligns with the mediation principle in SCT, where learners' linguistic resources in their first language are leveraged to facilitate the acquisition of a second language. However, Vygotsky also stressed the importance of gradually reducing scaffolding to promote learner autonomy—a point directly relevant to concerns about overuse of CS and CM in Pakistan's ESL contexts (Shabir, 2017).

Empirical research on the relationship between CS/CM and English language proficiency reveals mixed results. On one hand, studies in multilingual contexts (e.g., Setati, Adler, Reed, & Bapoo, 2002) have shown that strategic use of multiple languages can enhance comprehension and critical thinking, leading to better academic outcomes. On the other hand, frequent and unregulated switching can lead to code dependency, where learners habitually rely on their L1, thereby limiting exposure to authentic English discourse (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009). In Pakistan, Nawaz et al. (2023) observed that while short-term comprehension gains are often achieved,

long-term proficiency—particularly in terms of fluency, accuracy, and discourse competence—may suffer. This is consistent with findings from ESL programs in other multilingual countries, such as Malaysia and Nigeria, where prolonged CS/CM use correlated with lower levels of spontaneous L2 production (Adendorff, 1996). The dual nature of CS and CM—both as facilitators of learning and potential barriers to full immersion—presents a challenge for curriculum designers and policymakers (Akram & Yang, 2021; Akram, 2020). Research supports a balanced approach, where teachers use CS/CM as intentional scaffolds during the early stages of ESL learning but progressively increase the demand for English-only communication in formal academic activities (Macaro, 2001; Shabir, 2017). Integrating this approach into curriculum design requires:

- Clear guidelines for when and how CS/CM should be employed in classroom instruction
- Teacher training to enhance awareness of socio-pragmatic impacts
- Assessment practices that measure not only comprehension but also active English production and interaction skills

Such measures align with Pakistan's Higher Education Commission's goals to improve English language competency while respecting the country's multilingual heritage. Despite considerable research on CS and CM, gaps remain in understanding their longitudinal effects on language proficiency in Pakistani higher education. Most studies focus on school-level ESL contexts, leaving university-level dynamics less explored. Additionally, there is a need for more mixed-method studies that combine quantitative proficiency assessment with qualitative insights from classroom observation and interviews, which your study aims to address.

### Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method research design to comprehensively investigate the socio-pragmatic effects of code-switching and code-mixing on the English language proficiency of ESL university students in Pakistan. The mixed-method approach was selected to integrate the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms, allowing for a deeper exploration of not only measurable patterns of language proficiency but also the lived experiences, perceptions, and classroom interactions that underlie those patterns (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

### Research Design

A convergent parallel design was employed, wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation. This design was chosen because it enables researchers to validate and enrich quantitative findings with qualitative insights, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between code-switching, code-mixing, and language learning outcomes in ESL contexts.

### Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in three major public-sector universities in Pakistan that offer degree programs in English Language and Literature. These institutions were selected purposively due to their diverse student populations and established ESL programs. The participant pool comprised 150 undergraduate students enrolled in intermediate and advanced-level ESL courses, alongside 10 ESL instructors with a minimum of five years' teaching experience at the university level. Students represented a variety of linguistic backgrounds, including Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto, reflecting the multilingual reality of Pakistan's higher education environment.

### Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure that participants had substantial exposure to English-medium instruction and classroom interaction involving code-switching and code-mixing. Inclusion criteria for students required enrollment in courses taught by instructors known



to use a blend of English and local languages in instruction. Instructors were selected based on their willingness to participate and their history of engaging in bilingual classroom practices.

### **Quantitative Data Collection**

Quantitative data were obtained through a structured questionnaire comprising four separate 4-point Likert scale language proficiency assessments. These assessments measured students' self-reported competence in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English. Items were adapted from validated ESL proficiency scales to ensure reliability and comparability (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). The instrument also included sections on frequency and perceived impact of code-switching and code-mixing in the classroom. Questionnaires were distributed in person and completed during regular class sessions to ensure a high response rate.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Qualitative insights were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

- Classroom Observations: A total of 12 classroom sessions (four from each university) were observed using a structured observation protocol. The protocol captured instances of code-switching and code-mixing, their functional purposes, and student responses. Field notes focused on socio-pragmatic functions such as clarification, humor, social bonding, and classroom management.
- Semi-Structured Interviews: Follow-up interviews were conducted with 20 students (selected from the questionnaire respondents) and all 10 instructors. Interview questions explored perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of code-switching/mixing, its influence on learning engagement, and its perceived effect on English proficiency. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.
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### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) and inferential tests (Pearson's correlation and independent samples t-tests) to explore relationships between code-switching frequency and proficiency scores. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Transcripts and observation notes were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns, socio-pragmatic themes, and divergences between student and instructor perspectives. The thematic findings were then integrated with the quantitative results to form a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the lead university. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Pseudonyms were used in all reporting to protect participant identity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

### **Rationale for Methodological Choice**

The chosen methodology reflects the complexity of investigating bilingual classroom practices, where language use is shaped by both measurable proficiency outcomes and the subtle, context-dependent nature of social interaction. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this study aimed to produce findings that are not only statistically valid but also pedagogically

meaningful for ESL teaching and curriculum development in Pakistan's multilingual higher education context.

### Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the socio-pragmatic effects of code-switching and code-mixing on the English language proficiency of ESL university students in Pakistan. Results are presented in two subsections: quantitative findings from the language proficiency assessments, and qualitative findings from classroom observations and interviews.

### Quantitative Findings

Analysis of the 4-point Likert scale proficiency assessments revealed a moderate overall self-reported proficiency level among students ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ). Across the four language skills, reading and listening recorded the highest mean scores ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ;  $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.50$  respectively), while speaking ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) and writing ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) were comparatively lower.

Correlation analysis indicated a negative but statistically significant relationship between the reported frequency of code-switching/code-mixing in classroom interactions and students' self-reported proficiency scores in speaking ( $r = -.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and writing ( $r = -.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ). No significant correlations were found with reading or listening proficiency. These results suggest that while receptive skills appear unaffected by code-switching frequency, productive skills—particularly those requiring spontaneous target-language use—are more sensitive to excessive reliance on the first language.

When grouped by high vs. low frequency of exposure to code-switching/mixing, independent samples t-tests confirmed that students in high-exposure classrooms scored significantly lower in speaking proficiency ( $t = 2.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and marginally lower in writing proficiency ( $t = 1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ) compared to their low-exposure counterparts.

### Qualitative Findings

#### Classroom Observations

A total of 142 instances of code-switching and 97 instances of code-mixing were recorded across the 12 observed classroom sessions. Instructors primarily engaged in code-switching for four socio-pragmatic purposes:

1. Clarification of meaning (34% of cases) – often when explaining abstract concepts or academic terminology in English.
2. Classroom management (22%) – including instructions, discipline, and transitions between activities.
3. Encouraging participation (18%) – using L1 to draw in less confident students.
4. Building rapport (15%) – inserting humor or cultural references to ease classroom atmosphere.

Notably, in classes where code-switching was used sparingly and strategically, students demonstrated greater willingness to respond in English. In high-frequency code-switching classrooms, peer-to-peer exchanges tended to revert predominantly to Urdu or regional languages, even during activities designed for English practice.

#### Student Interviews

Interviews with 20 students revealed a dual perspective. On the one hand, students acknowledged that code-switching helped them understand complex ideas more quickly, reduced anxiety, and allowed them to connect culturally with the instructor. On the other hand, many expressed that overuse by instructors “made it easier to stay in comfort zones” and reduced their motivation to try expressing themselves in English. One respondent remarked:

*“If the teacher always repeats in Urdu, I stop trying to understand in English first. I just wait for the translation.”*

### **Instructor Interviews**

Instructors generally perceived code-switching as an essential pedagogical tool for bridging comprehension gaps, especially with lower-proficiency learners. However, several admitted that habitual switching—especially during time-pressured lessons—might inadvertently reduce students’ exposure to sustained English discourse. One senior instructor stated:

*“It saves time and keeps students engaged, but I know it also means they are hearing less English than they should. Finding the balance is the hard part.”*

### **Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results**

When viewed together, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest a nuanced relationship between socio-pragmatic use of code-switching/mixing and language proficiency. While strategic, limited use appears to support comprehension and classroom rapport without harming proficiency, frequent and unregulated use correlates with lower self-reported performance in productive skills. This pattern aligns with Vygotsky’s scaffolding principle—where assistance should be gradually withdrawn to foster learner autonomy. In the present study, classrooms maintaining this gradual withdrawal showed better speaking and writing outcomes, whereas those with persistent high-frequency switching did not.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the complex and dual nature of code-switching (CS) and code-mixing (CM) in the ESL university context of Pakistan. Quantitative results indicated a negative association between high-frequency code-switching/mixing and productive language skills—particularly speaking and writing—while qualitative evidence revealed the socio-pragmatic benefits of these practices in fostering comprehension, classroom engagement, and rapport. This interplay reflects the pedagogical tension between immediate accessibility and long-term language development. From the perspective of Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (1978), the strategic use of CS and CM in the classroom can be understood as a form of scaffolding within the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The observed practices—especially clarifying meaning, reducing affective barriers, and encouraging participation—mirror the supportive interactions Vygotsky described as essential to cognitive growth. This is consistent with findings by Anton and DiCamilla (1999), who argue that bilingual resources can mediate understanding and promote collaborative learning. However, the current results also align with Macaro’s (2001) caution that scaffolding must be temporary. In classrooms where CS and CM were overused, students’ reliance on their L1 became entrenched, reducing opportunities for extended English discourse and autonomous L2 production. This echoes Younas’s (2020) observations in Pakistani universities that excessive switching creates “comfort zones” inhibiting linguistic risk-taking—precisely what some students in this study described in interviews.

The qualitative data confirmed that CS and CM fulfill important socio-pragmatic functions, such as signaling solidarity, managing classroom discourse, and injecting humor—functions well-documented in the work of Gumperz (1982) and Ferguson (2003). Instructors viewed these practices as culturally responsive strategies, particularly in multilingual classrooms where shared L1 fosters inclusivity. Similar findings have been reported by Fareed et al. (2016), who noted that Pakistani ESL teachers use CS to bridge sociocultural gaps and sustain engagement. Yet, the quantitative evidence of reduced productive skill scores in high-exposure classrooms suggests that such socio-pragmatic benefits come with trade-offs. The lack of significant correlation with receptive skills (reading, listening) may be because these skills benefit from bilingual scaffolding

without requiring active L2 output—an observation that aligns with Ahmad and Jusoff's (2009) argument that CS aids comprehension more than production.

The findings underscore the need for controlled, intentional use of CS and CM in ESL university settings. Rather than adopting an “English-only” policy—which may alienate lower-proficiency learners—educators could adopt graduated reduction strategies, progressively limiting L1 use as students' proficiency increases. This aligns with the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan's language policy goals and recommendations by Shabir (2017) for balancing communicative ease with immersion-based learning. Furthermore, the socio-pragmatic role of CS and CM could be explicitly integrated into teacher training programs, helping instructors recognize when these strategies facilitate learning and when they may hinder it. For example, using CS to clarify complex academic terms but avoiding repetition of all instructions in L1 could maintain comprehension while promoting active English processing.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on bilingual pedagogy in South Asian higher education by combining quantitative proficiency measures with qualitative classroom and interview data. While prior studies (e.g., Gulzar, 2010; Fareed et al., 2016) have described the functions of CS/CM, fewer have empirically linked these practices to measurable differences in specific language skill domains. By demonstrating a skill-specific impact—negative for speaking and writing, neutral for reading and listening—this study adds nuance to the discourse on bilingual teaching strategies. Although the mixed-methods design strengthens the credibility of these findings, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Self-reported proficiency scores, while valuable for gauging learner perceptions, may not perfectly align with objective language assessments. Future research could integrate standardized proficiency tests to validate these results. Additionally, the study focused on three public-sector universities; expanding to private institutions or different regions could reveal whether institutional culture influences the use and effects of CS/CM. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to assess how sustained exposure to varying levels of CS/CM shapes language development over time.

### Conclusion

This study examined the socio-pragmatic effects of code-switching and code-mixing on the English language proficiency of ESL university students in Pakistan, integrating both quantitative and qualitative evidence. The findings reveal a dual role for these bilingual practices. On one hand, code-switching and code-mixing serve as effective pedagogical tools for clarifying meaning, reducing anxiety, and fostering social cohesion in multilingual classrooms. These benefits align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of mediated interaction and scaffolding in language development.

On the other hand, the results underscore that frequent and unregulated use of these strategies may impede the development of productive language skills—particularly speaking and writing—by limiting students' opportunities for sustained L2 use. Receptive skills such as reading and listening appeared unaffected, suggesting that bilingual support may aid comprehension without necessarily hindering input-based learning.

Ultimately, the study highlights the need for balance: leveraging the socio-pragmatic advantages of bilingual teaching while maintaining structured opportunities for full English immersion. The pedagogical challenge lies not in eliminating code-switching or code-mixing entirely, but in using them strategically to support comprehension early on and then progressively reducing reliance to foster learner autonomy and proficiency.



## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for instructors, curriculum designers, and policymakers:

### 1. Strategic Integration of Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

Employ these practices selectively for functions such as explaining complex academic concepts, managing classroom discipline, and fostering inclusion.

Avoid translating every instruction or explanation into L1, as this may encourage dependency and reduce active L2 processing.

### 2. Progressive Reduction Model

Introduce a phased approach in which L1 use is gradually decreased over the semester, aligning with learners' growing proficiency.

Provide explicit rationale to students so they understand the purpose of reduced L1 use in promoting fluency and confidence.

### 3. Teacher Training and Professional Development

Offer training workshops for ESL instructors on the socio-pragmatic functions and potential drawbacks of code-switching and code-mixing.

Equip teachers with strategies for balancing bilingual support with immersion-based activities, especially for speaking and writing development.

### 4. Curriculum and Assessment Design

Incorporate English-only tasks in assessments—particularly for speaking and writing—while allowing strategic L1 use in pre-task preparation for lower-proficiency learners.

Embed classroom activities that require extended L2 interaction, such as debates, role-plays, and peer feedback sessions.

### 5. Policy Guidelines for Higher Education

Develop institutional language use policies that acknowledge the cultural and pedagogical relevance of CS/CM while setting benchmarks for minimum English exposure in specific courses.

Align university-level language policy with the Higher Education Commission's objectives for enhancing English proficiency in graduates.

### 6. Further Research and Monitoring

Conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of different frequencies of CS/CM on language proficiency.

Monitor classroom practices through peer observation and feedback cycles to ensure that code-switching and code-mixing remain purposeful and learner-centered.

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