



THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC PHENOMENON OF ARABIC-ENGLISH CODE-SWITCHING AMONG YEMENI UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

Fahmi Abdo Mohamed Al Mafalees

Associate Professor, Tor Al- Baha University College University of Lahj, Yemen

Abstract

This study investigates the sociolinguistic phenomenon of Arabic-English code-switching (CS) among Yemeni university professors across academic and everyday communicative contexts. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a validated two-part questionnaire administered to 40 bilingual faculty members (18 males, 22 females) specializing in various disciplines at a university where English is the primary medium of instruction. The findings reveal that code-switching is a pervasive, deliberate, and functional communicative strategy rather than an indicator of linguistic deficiency. In instructional settings, the overwhelming majority of professors utilize code-switching as a pedagogical resource to facilitate content comprehension, relieve classroom tension, maintain student engagement, and bridge linguistic gaps. In everyday discourse, code-switching serves key socio-pragmatic functions, such as serving as a sociolinguistic shield when addressing taboo or sensitive topics, expressing social group solidarity, and navigating lexical retrieval challenges. Syntactically, code-switching predominantly manifests intra-sententially at the single-word level—primarily through nouns and verbs—and mostly occurs in the middle of utterances. The study concludes that code-switching constitutes an integral element of bilingual academic competence and recommends its formal recognition as a legitimate instructional tool in higher education.

Keywords

Code-Switching, Arabic-English Bilingualism, Sociolinguistics, Pedagogical Strategy, Yemeni Higher Education, Intra-Sentential Switching, Classroom Interaction, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Language is a fundamental means of communication through which people interact with one another. In monolingual contexts, individuals generally rely on their native language (L1) to communicate. However, the increasing interconnectedness of the modern world has resulted in a growing number of bilingual and multilingual speakers. As a consequence, speakers may alternate between two or more languages during the same conversation. This linguistic practice is commonly referred to as code-switching (CS).

Code-switching has attracted considerable attention in sociolinguistic research because it is not simply a random alternation between languages. Rather, it can serve a variety of communicative, social, and pragmatic purposes. Bilingual speakers may switch codes depending on the topic, interlocutor, communicative situation, or social relationship between participants. In educational contexts, particularly in foreign-language classrooms, code-switching can also play an important role in facilitating comprehension and maintaining effective communication.

Objectives of the Study:

The study aims to:



- Investigate the reasons and classroom circumstances that lead Yemeni university professors to switch between Arabic and English during instruction.
- Examine the social, pragmatic, and contextual factors that motivate Yemeni university professors to engage in code-switching in their everyday discourse.
- Identify the predominant structural positions (beginning, middle, or end of an utterance) in which code-switching occurs in Yemeni university professors' speech.
- Analyze the linguistic units and word classes most frequently involved in code-switching, including nouns, verbs, phrases, and clauses, in the speech of Yemeni university professors.

Research Questions:

- Why and under what classroom circumstances do Yemeni university professors switch between Arabic and English during instruction?
- What social, pragmatic, and contextual factors motivate Yemeni university professors to code-switch in their everyday discourse?
- What are the predominant structural positions (beginning, middle, or end of an utterance) in which code-switching occurs within their speech?
- Which linguistic units and word classes (e.g., nouns, verbs, phrases, or clauses) are most frequently subject to code-switching?

Limitations of the Study:

This study investigates Arabic-English code-switching among forty (40) bilingual faculty members across seven specialized academic disciplines at a Yemeni university utilizing English as the primary medium of instruction. The scope is delimited to examining instructional motivations in classrooms, socio-pragmatic factors in daily discourse, structural positions within utterances, and grammatical categories of switches. Methodologically, the study is limited by its sample size and reliance on self-reported questionnaire data rather than direct observational audio or video recordings. Furthermore, the findings are constrained to English-medium higher education contexts and assess faculty perceptions of learning without directly measuring student academic performance or language acquisition outcomes.

Literature Review:

Code-switching has been defined as the “phenomenon of switching from one language to another in the same discourse” (Carter & Nunan, 275). It generally occurs when bilingual speakers alternate between different linguistic codes within the same interaction (Berthold et al., 1997; Crystal, 1987). Abahassan and Alshalawi (2000), Bader (2003), and Nilep (2006) further explain that code-switching involves changes in the linguistic resources used by speakers and may signal a shift in context, topic, or communicative purpose.

Several scholars have investigated the reasons, characteristics, and effects of code-switching. Crystal (1987) identifies three major reasons for code-switching. First, speakers may switch languages to maintain the continuity of communication when they cannot adequately express a particular idea in one language. Second, code-switching may provide a sociolinguistic benefit, such as expressing solidarity with a particular social group or creating a sense of belonging while excluding others from the conversation. Third, speakers may switch languages to express attitudes, feelings, or emotions. Baker (2006, as cited in Alenezi, 2010, p. 4) identifies several additional communicative functions of code-switching. These include emphasizing a particular point, substituting for an unknown word, expressing culturally specific concepts, reinforcing a request, clarifying meaning, expressing identity, establishing friendship, reducing tension, and introducing humor. Code-switching may therefore be understood as a flexible



communicative strategy rather than merely an indication of insufficient proficiency in one language. Cheng and Butler (1989, as cited in Ayeomoni, 92) also point out that code-switching may reflect the relative dominance of one language over another. When one language becomes more dominant in a bilingual community, speakers may increasingly rely on that language in particular communicative situation. This observation highlights the relationship between code-switching and broader sociolinguistic factors, including language dominance, identity, social relationships, and cultural values.

Code-Switching in Educational Contexts:

The classroom represents an important context in which code-switching occurs, particularly when the language of instruction is different from students' first language. In foreign-language classrooms, teachers may experience a tension between the need to maximize the use of the target language (L2) and the need to ensure that students understand the instructional content. In such situations, code-switching may provide a practical means of addressing this tension. Zabrodska (2007, 127) argues that teachers may use the target language and switch to the students' first language when particular aspects of the lesson remain unclear. From this perspective, code-switching can function as a pedagogical resource that supports comprehension without necessarily replacing the target language as the principal medium of instruction. Mattsson and Burenhult (1999) identify three major reasons for teachers' code-switching. The first is topic switching, in which teachers use L1 to facilitate students' understanding of L2 related content. The second is the affective function, whereby teachers use L1 to establish solidarity, familiarity, and rapport with students. The third is the repetitive function, in which information presented in L2 is repeated or clarified in L1 to ensure comprehension. These functions indicate that teachers' code-switching may serve both pedagogical and interpersonal purposes. Consequently, the use of L1 in an L2 classroom should not automatically be regarded as a weakness or a failure to use the target language. Instead, its effectiveness depends on the frequency, purpose, context, and manner in which it is employed.

Previous Studies:

Previous studies on code-switching has demonstrated that the phenomenon is widespread among bilingual and multilingual speakers, including Arab speakers. Studies have examined code-switching from different perspectives, including its linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and pedagogical functions. The existing literature suggests that speakers switch between languages for reasons related not only to linguistic competence but also to identity, social relationships, topic, emphasis, emotional expression, and communicative efficiency.

Research conducted in educational settings has particularly emphasized the role of code-switching in facilitating comprehension and classroom interaction. Teachers may use students' L1 to explain difficult concepts, clarify unfamiliar terminology, manage classroom interaction, establish rapport, or emphasize important information. At the same time, excessive dependence on L1 may reduce students' exposure to the target language and consequently limit opportunities for authentic L2 interaction. Despite the considerable body of research on classroom code-switching, relatively limited attention has been given to Arabic-English code-switching among university professors, particularly in the Yemeni higher-education context. University professors occupy a distinctive position because they may switch between Arabic and English not only for pedagogical purposes but also to express professional identity, emphasize disciplinary terminology, manage interaction, establish solidarity, or address culturally specific meanings.

Therefore, examining Arabic-English code-switching among Yemeni university professors can contribute to a better understanding of how language choice is shaped by social, professional,



pedagogical, and communicative factors. Such an investigation may also help clarify whether professors' code-switching is primarily motivated by students' comprehension needs or whether it reflects broader sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions.

Bader (2003) conducted a research on 10 native speakers of French, Russian and Italian residing in Jordan who use mainly English or French to communicate with Jordanians. The aim was to study how and why speakers code switch to Arabic in their speech. Research findings showed that subjects resort to Arabic when greeting, asking about someone's health conditions or talking about local festivals or religious occasions." Another research was done by Ayeomoni (2006) on a specific speech community in Nigeria in order to investigate the extent of effect of code mixing on the educational attainment of individuals. It concluded that 'both phenomena have their merits as well as demerits in the speech repertoire of the users [recommending] that English language users would devise the means of preventing the demerits from adversely affecting the language acquisition process of the child' (Ayeomoni, 90)."

Al-Enizi (2010) studied the attitudes of 17 students towards code-switching between Arabic and English in science classes at the Kuwait University as well as the extent of the effect of such attitudes on academic performance. Findings indicated that students have positive attitudes towards CS preferring it as a medium of instruction compared to one language only. Findings also showed that code switching, from the students' point of view, presented no negative academic influence on L1 or L2."

Cook in a study in 2001, as quoted in Zabrodskaja (2007), showed that bilingual teachers resort to L1 when teaching in three main methods: simultaneously, or as direct translation or intentionally. Their decision is made on the spot as required by the situation and as a way by which to ensure understanding and meaningful involvement of students. The research thus concludes that there are no reasons for not using L1 in classrooms." Al-Khatib and Alshalawi (2000) conducted a research on 12 Saudi graduate students studying their usage of CS between Arabic (L1) and English (L2) in a 2-hour informal meeting. Researchers concluded that code switching seems to be quite natural when speakers are bilingual and that the level of code switching correlates in complexity with the speakers' level of L2 proficiency."

Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (2009) tested if women use more standard and fewer nonstandard forms of bilingual CS than men. They reached the conclusion that although 'code switching is generally considered a nonstandard form of speech, there is no consistent pattern of sex differentiation emerging from the bilingual data (5)."

In Egypt, Fayed and Alsha'er (2012) studied how residents of Na'ama Bay, Sharm, an Egyptian touristic neighborhood surrounding the hotel/resort area and whose residents live mainly on tourism and speak more than one language other than Arabic, code switch between Arabic and English. The research sample consisted of 140 persons divided according to their level of education and kind of work in tourism to answer the question to what extent education and work act as variables. Results showed that two thirds of CS appeared mainly in contexts representing work in tourism, concluding that this kind of work is a determinant factor in shifting to language other than L1."

Paraskeva conducted a research on ten employees working in an enterprise within the London Greek-Cypriot community (2010). They were between 30 and 35 years of age. About thirteen hours of conversations were recorded. Findings showed that CS exemplifies itself in" requests, offers, as well as attention seeking Code switching can also add to conversational coherence.... When certain words or phrases are used repeatedly and finally can signal dispreferred responses, accompanied by several delay devices such as pauses or hesitations makers (118-119) .



Eight classes from two Pakistani universities, four taught by male teachers and four by female teachers, formed the subjects of a study conducted by Awan and Sheerez (2011). The aim was to study the difference in functions and frequency of CS between males and females. Results revealed that 'although women code switch more for the expression of emotions yet overall frequency of code switching in male speakers is far greater than among the females' (p. 414)."

Reyes (2004) experimented on 20 children, 7 and 10 year olds, who were in the second and fifth grades. The purpose was to examine how they code switched between English (L2) and Spanish (L1) and what social/linguistic function did code switching play. The study found that code switching occurred both within and across turns. The older children's switches were more frequent than the younger children's. Results challenge the negative view that code switching by children who are learning two languages is due to lack of proficiency, and instead support the view that it is used as a strategy to extend their communicative competence during peer interaction (77)."

Research Design and Methodology:

Participants:

The participants included forty (40) Yemeni university professors, eighteen (18) males and twenty two (22) females. They specialized in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, business, computer science, mass communication, and engineering. They were all bilinguals, speaking Arabic and English, and working at an Yemeni university where English is the medium of instruction. Their years of experience teaching university students varied. 31.6% had five years of experience, 31.6% between 6 and 10 years and 36.6% above ten."

Instrument:

The researcher collected data from the forty (40) participants by distributing a questionnaire that was divided into two parts and comprised both close ended and open ended items. Part one included questions that addressed subjects' attitudes towards CS as instructional means as well as with friends. This part consisted of 7 items on a Likert scale. Participants were asked to specify their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements (SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, DA=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree). Two statements queried about the languages they use when teaching, two displayed using one language or switching between the two in teaching to students' understanding of content and finally, the last three addressed participants' use of either languages with friends in their daily conversations."

In part two they were asked to specify word groups and parts of speech they mostly code switch as well as the position of switch whether it be the beginning, middle or end of an utterance. Finally, this part included two open ended questions in which participants gave their perception of why they code switch from English to Arabic in the classroom and from Arabic to English in everyday communication. For the second and third parts participants were asked to provide examples of code switching they practice. To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, a pilot study involving 5 professors was conducted. The results demonstrated high internal consistency across all scales, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.78. Furthermore, item validity was confirmed through Pearson correlation analysis, with all correlation values surpassing the 0.70 threshold, indicating strong construct alignment.

Data Analysis:

It is worth mentioning that data collection was conducted during the 2024 academic year. The questionnaire was constructed then employed to elicit the required data. The questionnaire was filled in by the professors who taught different classes. The questionnaire included four-scale (strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree) responses. The items were related to the aims of the study. To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, a pilot study involving five



(5) participants was conducted. The results demonstrated high internal consistency across all scales, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.80. Furthermore, item validity was confirmed through Pearson correlation analysis, with all correlation values surpassing the 0.65 threshold, indicating strong construct alignment.

Results:

The analysis of the questions of the questionnaire revealed that almost all participants used code switching to some degree when teaching.

No.	Item	SA	AG	DA	SD
1	I teach courses in one language	5%	12.5%	20%	62.5%
2	I mix Arabic and English when teaching courses	70%	17.5%	7.5%	5%
3	Mixing English and Arabic make it easy for students to understand	65%	22.5%	7.5%	5%
4	Using only one language makes it easy for my students to understand	5%	7.5%	65.5	22%

Table (1) Percentages of Agreeing or Disagreeing with Items on Teaching

These results show that 5% of the participants used Arabic or English only in the classroom. Responses were the highest for agreeing (62.5% SD and 20% DA) with using one language in teaching. On the other hand, 70% of the participants chose SA and 17.5% chose AG to mixing of English and Arabic while teaching. Possible explanation is that CS is considered by almost all teachers an acceptable medium of instruction at the university level.

As for the easiness of understanding on the part of the students using one language only while teaching or when mixing English and Arabic, participants perceived that CS plays a positive role in making it easy for students to grasp and better understand course content, while one language only in the classroom is not effective enough in conveying information to students. These results are substantiated by the respondents in their answers to the open ended question of why they code switch in classes, demonstrating favoring CS. Some of the answers were " I code switch when students do not understand, when I repeatedly try to explain but the students do not grasp what I say; when stuck to avoid wasting time; to better clarify the meaning of certain points, to give students the opportunity to completely understand".

Besides being a means for a better understanding on the part of the students, participants gave a number of other interesting reasons for favoring CS in the classroom. 30% wrote that CS acts as an alarm when students start to lose interest in class. 28% thought that moving from English to Arabic in class plays the role of an ice breaker. It makes the atmosphere more lively and funny as it gives professors the chance to allow jokes and humorous comments. Another 20% said that CS to Arabic is important because it relates students more with real life practices later."

Code Switching in Everyday Communication:

As for communicating with friends, results are shown in Table 2 below:

No.	Item	SA	AG	DA	SD
5	I use Arabic only with my friends	40%	10%	37.5	12.5%
6	I use English only with my friends.	2.5%	7.5%	60%	27.5%
7	I mix Arabic and English with my friends	37.5%	40%	10%	12.5%

Table (2) Percentages of Agreeing or Disagreeing with Items on Everyday Communication



Results above reveal that CS from Arabic to English in professors' everyday communication is a common practice among them (40%). In addition, most of the respondents agree (37.5% SA and 40% AG) with mixing the two languages while total percentages of those who agree with using English or Arabic only is much lower (10% and 12.5% respectively). A possible hypothesis that may explain this practice is that knowing two or more languages is in itself a skill that acts as an urge to code switch. A bilingual/multilingual may switch into another language without intending or realizing doing it. At certain point code switching becomes a spontaneous, positive and a relaxing practice that gives the speaker a wide range of alternatives to express himself/herself.

No.	Reasons for CS	% of respondents
1	When discussing certain topics	31%
2	When using terms related to technology	28%
3	To show solidarity with a group	17%
4	When lost for words	10%
5	I respond spontaneously	8%
6	It is a trend these days	6%

Table (3) Respondents' Perception of Reasons for CS in Their Conversations

Table (3) shows that the predominant reason cited for code-switching was the discussion of specific topics (31%). This frequently occurs when addressing subjects considered taboo within Yemeni society. To avoid sensitive or culturally inappropriate Arabic expressions, speakers adopt English as a "safe" alternative, affording a sense of emotional detachment from the topic. In this context, code-switching acts as a "sociolinguistic shield" or "camouflage".

Regarding group solidarity (17%), respondents reported that aligning with the linguistic habits of their social circle "removes social barriers and intensifies the feeling of belonging," resulting in enhanced social identification.

Additionally, 6.2% associated CS with modern trends, viewing foreign language proficiency as a source of prestige. However, some literature frames this dynamic as a form of cultural colonialism that undermines the native language (Arabic) in favor of the dominant language (English) (Ayeomoni, 2006). Although spontaneous response (8%) and lexical retrieval difficulties (10%) yielded lower percentages, they still reflect an unconscious impulse to switch languages without prior planning.

Analysis of Word Groups and Utterance Positions Switched:

The second part of the questionnaire investigated the specific word types and syntactical positions associated with code-switching. Analysis of the answers revealed the following. As for word group, answers showed that 75% of the participants in the study believe that they code switch words only. Of these words 65% are nouns, 52.6% verbs, 45.5% adjectives, 19% adverbs, 12% prepositions, 10% articles, 7.3% pronouns, and 5.6% are determiners. On the other hand, 32% said that they mainly code switch phrases and 11% shift clauses. In addition, the positional analysis showed that code-switching occurred intra-sententially across 45% of the examined examples took place in the middle utterance, 35% at the end and 20% at the beginning. Examples are given bellow:

Examples of Code-Switching in the Middle of a sentence:

The sentences *أعطينا هي التي* are all clear. (in class example)

All the sentences you gave me are clear.

اسكت (Everyday conversation example)



Can I speak out or is it better not to?

Examples of Code-Switching in the End of a sentence

I am happy لنجاحكم جميعاً (In class example)

I am happy for all of your success.

I have running nose. (Everyday conversation example)

I have running nose today

Examples of Code-Switching at the Beginning of a sentence

If you are not interested سيب الفصل (In class example)

(If you are not interested you can leave the class)

I know انك تعبان اليوم (Everyday conversation example)

(I know you are tired today)

Conclusion:

The present study examined Arabic-English code-switching among Yemeni university professors, focusing on its pedagogical motivations, sociolinguistic and pragmatic functions, and structural characteristics in both instructional and everyday communicative contexts. The findings demonstrate that code-switching is a widespread and purposeful practice among bilingual university faculty rather than merely a consequence of inadequate proficiency in either language.

In classroom settings, the results indicate that professors predominantly employ code-switching to facilitate students' comprehension, clarify difficult concepts, overcome communication difficulties, and maintain students' attention and engagement. The findings further suggest that switching from English to Arabic can contribute to creating a more relaxed and interactive classroom atmosphere. Thus, code-switching may function as a complementary pedagogical resource while English remains the principal medium of instruction.

In everyday communication, the study shows that professors switch between Arabic and English according to the topic, interlocutor, communicative context, and immediate linguistic needs. Code-switching is particularly associated with discussions of sensitive or culturally restricted topics, technological terminology, social solidarity, and occasional lexical retrieval difficulties. These findings indicate that language choice among bilingual speakers is dynamic and closely related to social, pragmatic, and contextual considerations.

With regard to structural patterns, the findings reveal that code-switching occurs predominantly at the single-word level, with nouns and verbs representing the most frequently switched word classes. In terms of syntactic position, intra-sentential switching occurs most frequently in the middle of utterances, followed by switching at the end and then at the beginning. These patterns demonstrate that code-switching is systematically integrated into bilingual discourse rather than occurring randomly.

Overall, the study concludes that Arabic-English code-switching constitutes an integral component of bilingual communicative competence among Yemeni university professors. Its functions extend beyond linguistic substitution to include pedagogical clarification, interpersonal communication, social identification, emotional management, and pragmatic adaptation. Accordingly, code-switching should not be automatically interpreted as a deficiency or failure to maintain the target language. Instead, when used purposefully and appropriately, it can serve as an effective linguistic and pedagogical resource in Yemeni higher-education contexts.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed. Firstly, university professors should use Arabic-English code-switching strategically to facilitate students'



comprehension and clarify difficult concepts. After that, universities should provide training to help instructors use code-switching effectively as a pedagogical resource.. Then, professors should maintain English as the main medium of instruction while using Arabic when necessary to support understanding and classroom interaction. Finally, future studies should investigate code-switching in a wider range of Yemeni universities and academic contexts.

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Article Received: 13/09/2026

Article Accepted:19/09/2026

Published Online:30/09/2026

To Cite the Article: *Mafalees, Fahmi. "The Sociolinguistic Phenomenon of Arabic-English Code-Switching among Yemeni University Professors." Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism, Vol.-VII, Issue-2, September, 2026, 179-188. www.literarycognizance.com*



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