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CODE-SWITCHING AS A MULTIFUNCTIONAL RESOURCE IN ENGLISH-MEDIUM INSTRUCTION: EVIDENCE FROM ENGLISH–UZBEK BILINGUAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This study investigates the role of code-switching among English–Uzbek bilingual university students within the context of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Uzbekistan. While traditional perspectives often regarded code-switching as evidence of linguistic deficiency, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes it as a strategic, systematic, and multifunctional communicative resource. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design, the study analyzes classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and digital discourse produced by bilingual students in Uzbek higher education institutions. The research examines the linguistic patterns, sociocultural functions, cognitive benefits, and digital manifestations of code-switching among English–Uzbek bilinguals. Particular attention is given to the newly proposed Integrated English-Uzbek Code-Switching (IU-CS) Framework, which synthesizes structural, sociolinguistic, cognitive, interactional, and translanguaging perspectives into a unified analytical model. Findings reveal that code-switching serves multiple functions, including pedagogical scaffolding, identity construction, solidarity building, cognitive facilitation, and digital self-expression. Intra-sentential switching emerges as the dominant structural pattern, particularly in EMI classrooms where students negotiate complex academic content while maintaining cultural and emotional connections through Uzbek.

Keywords: code-switching, bilingualism, English-Medium Instruction, EMI, English–Uzbek bilingualism, translanguaging, sociolinguistics, higher education, Uzbekistan

Introduction

Globalization, internationalization of higher education, and the growing dominance of English as a lingua franca have transformed linguistic practices across multilingual societies. One of the most prominent manifestations of these transformations is code-switching, the alternation between two or more languages within a single interaction. In recent decades, code-switching has evolved from being viewed as a linguistic deficiency to being recognized as a sophisticated expression of bilingual competence and communicative adaptability.

The phenomenon is particularly visible in educational settings where bilingual and multilingual speakers regularly navigate multiple linguistic systems. English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments represent one of the most fertile contexts for examining code-switching because they bring together local languages, global academic discourse, and institutional language policies. Within such environments, bilingual students frequently draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire to facilitate understanding, negotiate meaning, and construct social identities.

Uzbekistan presents a particularly significant case for investigating code-switching. Following educational reforms initiated after independence and accelerated through recent higher education modernization strategies, English has acquired increasing importance in academic, professional, and technological domains. Simultaneously, Uzbek remains the primary language of national identity, interpersonal communication, and cultural expression. This coexistence of global and local linguistic resources has created a unique sociolinguistic ecology in which English–Uzbek bilingual speakers routinely engage in code-switching practices.

The expansion of EMI programs across Uzbek universities has intensified bilingual interactions. Students are often required to process complex academic content in English while maintaining social relationships and emotional expression through Uzbek. Consequently, code-switching has become an integral component of classroom communication, collaborative learning, and digital interaction. Despite its prevalence, the phenomenon remains underexplored in the context of English–Uzbek bilingualism, particularly from an integrated perspective that combines linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and pedagogical dimensions.

Previous studies have demonstrated that code-switching performs numerous communicative functions. It enables speakers to clarify meaning, compensate for lexical gaps, express emotions, signal group membership, and manage interpersonal relationships. Research has also highlighted cognitive advantages associated with bilingual language management, including enhanced executive control and greater communicative flexibility. However, much of the existing scholarship has focused on widely studied language pairs such as Spanish–English, Arabic–English, or Chinese–English. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to Central Asian bilingual contexts, where linguistic histories and educational policies differ substantially.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining code-switching among English–Uzbek bilingual university students. The research investigates how bilingual speakers utilize code-switching in EMI classrooms and digital communication environments, what functions these practices serve, and how they contribute to learning and identity construction.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Code-Switching

Code-switching has traditionally been defined as the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation, utterance, or discourse event. Early studies often viewed code-switching through a deficit perspective, associating language alternation with incomplete linguistic competence. However, contemporary sociolinguistic research has overwhelmingly rejected this view.

Modern scholarship recognizes code-switching as a systematic and rule-governed practice that reflects bilingual speakers' ability to manage multiple linguistic systems simultaneously. Rather than indicating confusion, code-switching demonstrates linguistic flexibility, pragmatic awareness, and communicative sophistication.

Researchers generally distinguish between three primary forms of code-switching: inter-sentential switching, intra-sentential switching, and tag-switching. Inter-sentential switching occurs between complete clauses or sentences. Intra-sentential switching takes place within a single sentence and is generally considered the most complex form because it requires adherence to grammatical constraints from multiple linguistic systems. Tag-switching involves the insertion of discourse markers, interjections, or formulaic expressions from one language into another.

Structural Approaches to Code-Switching

Structural theories seek to explain how bilingual speakers maintain grammatical coherence while alternating between languages. One of the most influential contributions comes from Poplack's Equivalence Constraint, which proposes that switches occur at points where the grammatical structures of both languages align. Similarly, the Free Morpheme Constraint suggests that switching generally does not occur between bound morphemes and lexical stems.

Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) Model further developed structural explanations by proposing that one language typically serves as the matrix language, providing grammatical structure, while the other contributes lexical content. Numerous empirical studies have supported the MLF model across various language pairs.

Within English–Uzbek bilingual discourse, these structural constraints are particularly significant because English and Uzbek differ typologically. English follows a relatively analytic grammatical structure, whereas Uzbek is an agglutinative language characterized by extensive suffixation. Despite these differences, bilingual speakers consistently produce grammatically coherent code-switched utterances, indicating sophisticated linguistic control.

Sociolinguistic Perspectives

Beyond structural considerations, sociolinguistic theories emphasize the social meanings associated with language choice. Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model argues that speakers select languages according to perceived social expectations and rights-and-obligations relationships. Unmarked choices correspond to expected linguistic behavior, while marked choices signal specific social intentions.

Gumperz's interactional sociolinguistics highlights the role of code-switching as a contextualization cue. Language alternation can signal topic shifts, indicate emotional stance, establish group boundaries, or facilitate conversational management.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that code-switching plays a crucial role in identity construction. Bilingual speakers often use language alternation to negotiate multiple social identities simultaneously. English may index modernity, professionalism, and global connectivity, whereas local languages often express cultural authenticity, emotional intimacy, and community membership.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Such a design enabled a comprehensive examination of linguistic patterns, social functions, and educational implications of code-switching.

Participants

Participants consisted of English–Uzbek bilingual university students and instructors enrolled in EMI programs at higher education institutions in Tashkent.

Data Collection

The study utilized:

- 45 hours of classroom observations
- 94 semi-structured interviews
- 312 student questionnaires
- A corpus of 1,850 transcribed classroom utterances
- 4,200 digital posts and comments collected from educational online environments

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequency analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed through discourse analysis, thematic analysis, and contextual interpretation.

Results

The analysis revealed three dominant structural patterns:

- Intra-sentential switching: 62%
- Inter-sentential switching: 28%
- Tag-switching: 10%

In 71% of intra-sentential instances, Uzbek functioned as the Matrix Language while English supplied technical terminology. Structural predictions of the Matrix Language Frame model were confirmed in 94% of observed cases.

Four major functional categories emerged:

Pedagogical Function

Students used code-switching to clarify concepts, explain technical terminology, and facilitate comprehension.

Identity Function

Code-switching enabled participants to negotiate global and local identities simultaneously.

Social-Affective Function

Language alternation fostered solidarity, reduced anxiety, and strengthened peer relationships.

Compensatory Function

Participants employed code-switching to overcome lexical limitations and maintain conversational fluency.

Questionnaire results indicated:

- 81% viewed code-switching positively.
- 76% believed it improved understanding.

- 72% reported increased classroom participation.
- 68% associated code-switching with reduced communication anxiety.

Digital discourse analysis revealed even higher switching density than classroom communication. Intra-sentential switching reached 68% in online interactions.

Discussion

The findings strongly support contemporary competence-based views of bilingualism. Rather than reflecting linguistic deficiency, English–Uzbek code-switching represents a sophisticated communicative resource that integrates linguistic, social, and cognitive functions.

The dominance of intra-sentential switching demonstrates advanced bilingual competence. Participants consistently adhered to structural constraints despite typological differences between English and Uzbek. This finding supports structural theories while simultaneously validating translanguaging perspectives emphasizing flexible repertoire use.

The results further demonstrate that code-switching serves essential sociocultural functions. Participants strategically employed language alternation to negotiate identity, establish solidarity, and manage interpersonal relationships. English frequently indexed academic authority and global competence, whereas Uzbek facilitated emotional expression and cultural authenticity. From a cognitive perspective, findings support psycholinguistic models emphasizing executive control. Strategic language alternation reduced cognitive burden during complex learning tasks and facilitated conceptual understanding.

The digital environment amplified existing code-switching practices. Online communication encouraged experimentation with hybrid linguistic forms, multimodal expression, and innovative identity performances. These findings suggest that digital communication constitutes an important domain for future code-switching research.

Most importantly, the findings provide substantial support for the IU-CS Framework. Each layer of the framework contributed to explaining observed patterns, demonstrating the value of integrated approaches in bilingualism research.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of code-switching among English–Uzbek bilingual university students within Uzbekistan's expanding EMI environment. The findings demonstrate that code-switching is a systematic, multifunctional, and pedagogically valuable practice that contributes to learning, identity construction, social interaction, and cognitive effectiveness.

The research identified intra-sentential switching as the dominant structural pattern and revealed that code-switching serves pedagogical, social, affective, compensatory, and identity-related functions. The findings challenge monolingual educational ideologies and support the recognition of bilingual linguistic resources as assets rather than obstacles. The proposed IU-CS Framework represents the principal theoretical contribution of the study. By integrating structural, sociolinguistic, cognitive, interactional, and translanguaging perspectives, the framework offers a comprehensive explanation of code-switching in English–Uzbek bilingual contexts. The study suggests that educational institutions should reconsider restrictive language policies and adopt more inclusive approaches that recognize the pedagogical value of bilingual communication. Such approaches may contribute to greater student engagement, improved comprehension, and more effective EMI implementation.

Future research should examine longitudinal changes in code-switching behavior, investigate regional variation across Uzbekistan, and explore the applicability of the IU-CS Framework to other multilingual contexts.

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