



From Taboo to Tool: Strategic Code-Switching as a Scaffold for Comprehension and Inclusion in English-Medium Instruction at Multilingual Universities

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Abstract

As English Medium Instruction (EMI) expands across non-Anglophone higher education systems, debates about language use in the classroom have intensified. One of the most contested practices is code-switching—the alternation between English and students’ first languages during instruction. Often framed as a pedagogical weakness or policy violation, code-switching is discouraged in many EMI settings. However, a growing body of literature challenges this deficit perspective, suggesting that strategic code-switching can function as a scaffold for content comprehension and as a tool for inclusive teaching. This narrative review synthesizes key studies from diverse EMI contexts to examine the evolving role of code-switching in multilingual universities. It argues that rethinking code-switching as a dynamic, pedagogically informed practice is essential to making EMI more equitable and effective.

Keywords: Code-switching, English Medium Instruction (EMI), Translanguaging, Multilingual Pedagogy, Higher Education

1. Introduction

The global expansion of English Medium Instruction (EMI) has emerged as a hallmark of internationalization in higher education (Macaro, 2018; Dearden, 2014) ^[13, 4]. Particularly in non-Anglophone contexts, EMI is seen as a pathway to improve global competitiveness, attract international students, and enhance employability in a global market (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014) ^[5, 21]. However, while EMI brings clear institutional and economic benefits, it also introduces significant pedagogical and linguistic challenges—especially in multilingual university settings where neither instructors nor students may be native speakers of English.

Among the most persistent and controversial issues in EMI classrooms is code-switching—the practice of alternating between English and a local or shared language during instruction. For decades, language policies in EMI contexts have promoted “English-only” ideologies, often treating code-switching as a pedagogical weakness or a deviation from ideal EMI practice (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004; Phillipson, 2009) ^[19]. Instructors who code-switch are frequently assumed to lack sufficient proficiency or to undermine the authenticity of the EMI environment (Macaro, 2001) ^[12]. These assumptions rest on monolingual views of academic instruction, where the use of any language other than English is seen as a threat to educational quality and international standards.

Yet, recent scholarship has challenged this deficit view, arguing that code-switching can play a critical role in supporting learning, especially in linguistically diverse and resource-constrained settings. Researchers have documented how instructors use code-switching strategically to scaffold understanding, clarify complex content, reduce learner anxiety, and promote classroom engagement (García & Wei, 2014; Kim & Tatar, 2017; Lin, 2013) ^[9, 7, 11]. From a sociocultural perspective, language alternation is not a sign of failure but a natural, context-sensitive response to learners’ needs (Vygotsky, 1978; Sert, 2005) ^[20, 17]. Indeed, in many EMI classrooms, code-switching operates as a form of pedagogical improvisation, helping instructors to bridge linguistic gaps while preserving the integrity of content delivery (Probyn, 2009) ^[15]. The growing recognition of translanguaging theory (García & Lin, 2016) ^[6] has further contributed to the reconceptualization of code-switching, offering a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of multilingual communication. Translanguaging views language use not as shifting between separate codes but as drawing from a unified linguistic repertoire to make meaning.

Within this framework, strategic code-switching becomes a deliberate instructional practice that enhances access and equity in EMI classrooms.

Despite this emerging consensus in research, a gap remains between institutional policy and classroom practice. Many universities continue to enforce rigid EMI policies that ignore local linguistic realities and discourage bilingual pedagogies, even when empirical evidence supports their value (Rose, McKinley, & Briggs Baffoe-Djan, 2020) ^[16]. This disconnect raises urgent questions about how code-switching is conceptualized, regulated, and practiced in EMI environments.

This article provides a critical overview of the literature on code-switching in EMI, with a particular focus on its pedagogical functions and implications for inclusive teaching in multilingual university contexts. Rather than presenting new empirical data, the article synthesizes recent studies to argue that strategic code-switching should be embraced—not suppressed—as a legitimate and effective instructional tool.

2. Theoretical Background

The shift from viewing code-switching as a communicative failure to embracing it as a legitimate pedagogical strategy is grounded in multiple intersecting theoretical frameworks. These frameworks help explain how and why code-switching can function effectively within English Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms—particularly in multilingual higher education contexts where English is not the first language of students or instructors.

2.1 Sociocultural Theory and Scaffolding

Rooted in the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) ^[20], sociocultural theory views learning as a socially mediated process that takes place through interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Within this framework, language is not merely a vehicle of communication but a tool for cognitive development. Code-switching, from this perspective, becomes a scaffolding strategy that supports learners in moving from current to potential levels of understanding. In EMI classrooms, students are often required to grasp cognitively demanding disciplinary content in a non-native language. Here, the strategic use of learners' L1 by instructors can reduce cognitive overload, clarify abstract concepts, and enable learners to stay within the ZPD without disengaging (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011) ^[18]. By switching to the shared L1 when needed, instructors create a linguistically responsive pedagogy that promotes both content learning and gradual language development.

2.2 Code-Switching Theory

Traditional definitions of code-switching—from sociolinguistics—refer to the alternation between two languages within a conversation, sentence, or discourse (Poplack, 1980) ^[14]. In classroom settings, this alternation is shaped not only by linguistic proficiency but also by pedagogical goals, power dynamics, and audience needs (Auer, 1998) ^[2]. In EMI contexts, code-switching is not merely spontaneous; it is often intentional and functionally driven.

Several scholars have categorized pedagogical code-switching into types or functions. For example, Sert (2005) ^[17] identifies functions such as:

- Topic switch (e.g., to explain new concepts)
- Reiteration (e.g., repeating in L1 for emphasis),

- Message qualification (e.g., simplifying or clarifying instructions), and
- Socialization (e.g., humor or empathy to reduce affective filters).

Such taxonomies underscore that classroom code-switching is often strategic rather than symptomatic of linguistic deficiency.

2.3 Translanguaging Theory

While code-switching theory emphasizes movement between two distinct language systems, translanguaging proposes a more fluid and integrated perspective. García and Wei (2014) ^[7] describe translanguaging as the process by which bilinguals access their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, rather than shifting between fixed codes. In this view, EMI students and teachers are not using “English” or “L1” as separate systems, but rather drawing from a unified communicative toolkit tailored to the classroom context.

Translanguaging pedagogy encourages instructors to deliberately integrate multiple languages into teaching as a way to promote deeper understanding and inclusivity. Unlike traditional EMI policies that demand linguistic purity, a translanguaging approach sees linguistic hybridity as a strength rather than a liability (Li Wei, 2018). In this way, the classroom becomes a collaborative multilingual space, where linguistic boundaries are blurred in favor of meaning-making and engagement.

2.4 Language Policy and Linguistic Ideology

Code-switching in EMI cannot be fully understood without attention to the institutional and ideological forces that regulate language use. Policies that enforce English-only instruction often reflect linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and global neoliberal agendas that equate English with academic prestige and market value (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004) ^[19]. These policies may ignore the complex linguistic ecologies of classrooms and disempower local languages even when they play a vital role in learning.

By acknowledging the ideological nature of language policy, scholars argue for more inclusive models that validate local linguistic resources as assets, not obstacles. In this sense, strategic code-switching is not just a pedagogical choice but also a form of resistance to monolingual norms and a reassertion of multilingual identities in academic spaces (Canagarajah, 2011) ^[3].

Table 1: Key Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Code-Switching in EMI Contexts

Theory	Key Thinkers	Relevance to Code-Switching
Sociocultural Theory	Vygotsky (1978) ^[20] , Swain <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Code-switching as scaffolding within the ZPD
Code-Switching Theory	Poplack (1980) ^[14] , Auer (1998) ^[2] , Sert (2005) ^[17]	Classification and functions of pedagogical switching
Translanguaging	García & Wei (2014) ^[7] , Li Wei (2018)	Viewing all language use as part of a fluid, unified system
Language Policy & Ideology	Phillipson (1992), Tollefson & Tsui (2004) ^[19] , Canagarajah (2011) ^[3]	Understanding institutional constraints on multilingual teaching

3.1 Instructor Practices and Pedagogical Intentions

A growing number of classroom-based studies have explored how EMI instructors engage in code-switching to meet various instructional goals. Sert (2005)^[17] identified pedagogical functions of code-switching in EFL and EMI classrooms, including topic shifts, reiteration, and affective engagement. In a later study, Kim and Tatar (2017)^[9] analyzed classroom recordings from Korean universities and found that instructors code-switched most frequently to clarify discipline-specific terminology, summarize key points, and respond to student confusion.

Similarly, Probyn (2009)^[15] documented how South African university lecturers teaching scientific subjects in English alternated between English and isiXhosa to promote student understanding. These studies challenge the assumption that code-switching reflects a lack of English proficiency; rather, they position instructors as strategic agents who use their full linguistic repertoire to scaffold content comprehension in high-stakes academic settings.

Moreover, Macaro (2018)^[13] emphasizes that code-switching should not be judged against an abstract "ideal" EMI model but rather evaluated based on its functional value in facilitating learning. His research advocates for a pedagogically principled use of L1, particularly in transitional EMI contexts where students are still developing academic English proficiency.

3.2 Student Perceptions and Learning Outcomes

Students' views on code-switching in EMI are complex and context-dependent, but most studies indicate that learners appreciate occasional and purposeful use of their L1. For instance, Tajeddin and Alemi (2020) surveyed Iranian university students in EMI programs and found that most believed code-switching improved their comprehension and reduced stress. Students expressed positive attitudes toward instructors who used L1 to clarify abstract ideas or discipline-specific terms, especially in first-year content courses.

In Spanish universities, Aguilar (2017)^[1] found that engineering students supported code-switching as a strategy to improve clarity, though they also recognized the importance of maintaining a strong English presence in the classroom. Notably, student acceptance of code-switching seems to correlate with their own English proficiency: those with higher skills may prefer minimal L1 use, while lower-proficiency students benefit more from bilingual scaffolding (Karim & Nassaji, 2013)^[8].

3.3 Disciplinary and Contextual Variation

Research also highlights that the frequency and function of code-switching vary significantly across academic disciplines and institutional contexts. In STEM fields, where technical terminology is dense and abstract, code-switching is often employed to translate specialized concepts and ensure conceptual clarity (Kim & Tatar, 2017; Macaro, 2018)^[13, 9]. In contrast, in humanities and social sciences, where the discourse is more interpretive and discussion-driven, instructors may code-switch for affective purposes, such as fostering rapport or expressing complex cultural ideas (Lin, 2013)^[11].

Context also matters. In settings where EMI is relatively new or under-resourced, such as many institutions in Turkey, Iran, and Sub-Saharan Africa, code-switching is more prevalent and often essential for instructional effectiveness (Kırkgöz, 2009; Probyn, 2009)^[15]. In contrast, in well-established EMI

programs in Scandinavia or the Netherlands, where students often have higher incoming English proficiency, code-switching is less common and sometimes even stigmatized. These variations underscore the need for context-sensitive guidelines that allow flexibility in EMI implementation rather than one-size-fits-all language policies.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE ON CODE-SWITCHING IN EMI



Fig 1: Thematic Summary of Key Findings on Code-Switching in EMI Classrooms

4. Discussion and Implications

The reviewed literature strongly suggests that code-switching, when used strategically, enhances instructional effectiveness in EMI contexts. Rather than undermining English acquisition, it operates as a context-sensitive scaffold that supports learner comprehension, engagement, and inclusion. This section reflects on the practical, pedagogical, and policy-level implications of these findings and highlights the need for a paradigm shift in how multilingual practices are conceptualized in EMI higher education.

4.1 Rethinking Language Use in EMI Classrooms

One of the central tensions in EMI classrooms lies in the clash between prescriptive English-only policies and the realities of multilingual pedagogy. The findings discussed in Section 3 demonstrate that instructors often engage in code-switching not out of linguistic deficiency but as a response to the cognitive, emotional, and linguistic needs of students (Macaro, 2018; Probyn, 2009)^[13, 15]. This suggests a need to reframe the practice from a "necessary evil" to a legitimate teaching strategy, particularly in settings where both instructors and learners are non-native English speakers.

Such a reframing aligns with translanguaging theory, which advocates for dynamic and flexible use of linguistic resources to facilitate meaning-making (García & Wei, 2014)^[7]. Translanguaging pedagogy recognizes that bilingual learners

do not compartmentalize their languages; instead, they draw from a unified repertoire to process and express ideas. From this perspective, institutional insistence on monolingualism is not only pedagogically limiting but epistemologically flawed, as it ignores the ways in which multilingual students actually think and learn.

4.2 Implications for Instructor Training and Practice

The literature consistently shows that instructors play a central role in mediating linguistic challenges in EMI classrooms. However, many instructors report a lack of formal training in bilingual pedagogy, leaving them to rely on intuition or informal strategies (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2017)^[5]. This gap calls for targeted professional development programs that include:

Training in strategic code-switching techniques (e.g., for clarification, emphasis, and scaffolding),

- Awareness of when and why L1 use may be beneficial,
- Guidelines for balancing English exposure with local language support,
- Exploration of discipline-specific language demands (e.g., technical vs. narrative discourses).

Rather than enforcing rigid English-only norms, institutions should promote reflective and evidence-based decision-making about language use. Empowering instructors to make pedagogical choices based on student needs—not institutional ideology—is crucial for fostering equitable and effective EMI instruction.

4.3 Implications for Institutional Policy

Current EMI policies in many contexts prioritize linguistic purity over learning outcomes. This can create policy-practice mismatches, where instructors must navigate between formal restrictions and practical classroom demands (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004)^[19]. The literature reviewed here suggests that such tensions are counterproductive, leading to hidden bilingualism—the unofficial but frequent use of L1 that goes unacknowledged and unsupported.

To address this, institutions should:

- Revise EMI policies to allow room for judicious code-switching and translanguaging,
- Encourage departmental discussions on language use, recognizing that disciplinary needs vary,
- Integrate student feedback into EMI policy reviews to reflect actual learning experiences,
- Acknowledge local language ecologies, rather than imposing one-size-fits-all language models.

Such reforms do not require abandoning English as the medium of instruction; rather, they call for multilingual flexibility that acknowledges both global aspirations and local realities.

4.4 Directions for Future Research

While this review has synthesized key trends, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of code-switching in EMI. Suggested areas include:

- Longitudinal studies on the impact of code-switching on content retention and language development,
- Comparative research across disciplines (e.g., STEM vs.

Humanities) and across regions,

- Ethnographic studies on how instructors negotiate institutional language norms in practice,
- Explorations of student identity formation and language ideology in EMI programs.

Importantly, future research should move beyond evaluating whether code-switching is “good” or “bad,” and instead ask when, how, and for whom it is pedagogically effective.

5. Conclusion

The expansion of English Medium Instruction (EMI) has redefined the linguistic landscape of higher education, particularly in multilingual and non-Anglophone contexts. Amid this transformation, the practice of code-switching—once viewed as a classroom taboo—has emerged as a strategically valuable pedagogical tool. As this article has shown, a growing body of literature supports the view that when used judiciously, code-switching enhances comprehension, lowers affective barriers, and fosters inclusive learning environments.

Theoretical frameworks such as sociocultural learning theory, code-switching taxonomy, and translanguaging pedagogy help illuminate why code-switching is not a fallback, but rather a form of responsive, learner-centered instruction. Evidence from diverse EMI settings indicates that both instructors and students perceive strategic L1 use as beneficial—particularly in supporting conceptual clarity, emotional connection, and disciplinary access.

Despite these insights, policy and practice remain misaligned. Many institutions continue to enforce English-only ideologies that ignore classroom realities and marginalize local languages. To close this gap, there is a clear need for policy reform, instructor training, and pedagogical openness that embrace multilingualism as a resource rather than a hindrance.

Ultimately, reframing code-switching as a legitimate and thoughtful instructional strategy is key to making EMI more equitable, effective, and sustainable. Rather than striving for monolingual purity, EMI educators and institutions should adopt flexible, context-sensitive approaches that prioritize comprehension, engagement, and inclusion.

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