

Code-Switching in Malay Language Teaching among Primary School Teachers in Rural Kapit

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ABSTRACT

Code-switching is a prevalent linguistic practice in multilingual classrooms, particularly in rural contexts where students' mother tongue dominates daily communication and the instructional language functions as a second language. This study examines the practice of code-switching in Malay language teaching among primary school teachers in rural Kapit, Sarawak. This study aims to identify the level of code-switching practices, examine the factors influencing its use and explore teachers' perceptions of its implications for students' mastery of the Malay language. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 69 Malay language teachers while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with six selected teachers. Descriptive statistical analysis and thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. The findings indicate that code-switching is widely and strategically used to support students' comprehension, manage classroom interaction and address linguistic diversity in rural classrooms. However, teachers also expressed concerns regarding excessive reliance on code-switching, which may limit students' exposure to Malay as target language. The study highlights the importance of controlled and purposeful use of code-switching as pedagogical scaffold rather than a substitute for the target language. These findings contribute to sociolinguistic and educational research by providing empirical evidence from rural primary schools and offering pedagogical implications for Malay language teaching in multilingual contexts.

Keywords : code-switching, Malay language teaching, rural primary schools, multilingual classrooms, Sarawak

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is characterized by rich linguistic diversity particularly in rural and interior regions such as Kapit, Sarawak. In these areas, students often use their mother tongue as the primary language of communication within the family and community while Malay is predominantly used in educational settings. As a result, Malay frequently functions as a second language for students, creating challenges for teachers in ensuring comprehension and effective classroom interaction.

In multilingual classrooms, teachers commonly employ code-switching as a pedagogical strategy to bridge linguistic gaps and facilitate learning. Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages within a single communicative event. Although Malay is the official medium of instruction, classroom realities in rural settings necessitate flexible language practices to accommodate students' linguistic backgrounds. However, the use of code switching in Malay language teaching has generated debate, particularly regarding its potential impact on students' mastery of the target language.

Previous studies on code-switching in Malaysia have largely focused on urban schools, vernacular schools or English language instruction. Empirical research examining code-switching in Malay language teaching at the primary level in rural contexts remains limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating code-switching practices among Malay language teachers in rural primary schools in Kapit, Sarawak, with a focus on pedagogical, contextual and professional factors influencing its use.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Code-Switching in Educational Contexts

Code-switching has been widely discussed in sociolinguistic and educational research as a natural outcome of multilingual interaction. In classroom contexts, code-switching is often employed to clarify meaning, explain complex concepts and maintain instructional flow. Studies have shown that teachers use code-switching to scaffold learning, especially when students face difficulties understanding the target language.

Low and Abdul Aziz [3] found that teachers in multilingual classrooms use code-switching strategically to ensure comprehension and sustain lesson momentum. Similarly, Razak and Shah [4] reported that code-switching functions as a communicative bridge between teachers and students with varying levels of language proficiency. These findings suggest that code-switching is not merely a linguistic habit but a pedagogically motivated practice.

In Malay language teaching, Hassan [5] observed that teachers frequently resort to code-switching when students struggle with abstract ideas, unfamiliar vocabulary or grammatical explanations. This tendency is more pronounced in rural schools, where students' exposure to Malay outside the classroom is limited. Atika Hassan et al. [6] further highlighted that teachers in rural Sarawak consciously adapt their language use to align with students' linguistic realities, demonstrating sensitivity to contextual and sociocultural factors.

Sociolinguistic Perspective: Fishman's Theory

Fishman's Sociolinguistic Theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding code-switching in educational settings. Fishman argued that language choice is shaped by social domains, communicative functions and contextual demands rather than linguistic competence alone. In the educational domain, the use of an official language is expected; however, multilingual realities often necessitate flexible language practices.

Within this framework, teachers act as social agents who negotiate language choices based on students' needs, instructional goals and classroom dynamics. Code-switching, therefore, reflects teachers' efforts to balance institutional language policies with the communicative effectiveness. In rural classrooms where students' mother tongue dominates daily interaction, code-switching becomes a pragmatic response to contextual demands.

Environmental and Teacher-Related Factors

Environmental factors, particularly the linguistic ecology of rural communities play a significant role in shaping classroom language practices. Abdullah Hassan et al. [7] argued that teachers' awareness of community language norms influences their pedagogical decisions including the use of code-switching to foster rapport and comprehension. Ismail and Rashid [8] similarly noted that teachers' language choice are deeply embedded in the sociocultural context of the school community.

Teacher-related factors such as attitudes, experience and professional judgement, further influence code-switching practices. Sopian and Wan Mohammad [9] found that experienced teachers are more likely to employ code-switching selectively and purposely guided by pedagogical considerations rather than habitual language use. Teachers with positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity tend to view code-switching as a legitimate instructional resource rather than a deviation from standard language norms.

Implications for Language Mastery

Despite its pedagogical benefits, several studies caution against excessive reliance on code-switching. Kamisah Ariffin and Misyana Susanti [10] reported that prolonged dependence on the first language may reduce students' opportunities to practice the target language, potentially affecting vocabulary development and grammatical accuracy. Consequently, scholars emphasise the need for balance where code-switching functions as a temporary scaffold that is gradually reduced as students' proficiency improves.

Overall, existing literature indicates that code-switching should be understood as a context-sensitive pedagogical strategy shaped by linguistic environment, teacher professionalism and instructional objectives. However, empirical studies focusing specifically on Malay language teaching in rural primary schools remain scarce. This study contributes to the literature by providing mixed-methods evidence from a rural Malaysian context, grounded in Fishman's sociolinguistic framework.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of code-switching practices among Malay language teachers. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enabled triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Participants

Quantitative data were collected from 69 Malay language teachers teaching in rural primary schools in Kapit, Sarawak. For the qualitative components, six teachers were purposively selected based on their teaching experience and involvement in multilingual classrooms.

Instruments and Data Analysis

Data were gathered using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to pedagogical, environmental and professional factors.

RESULTS

The findings indicate a high level of code-switching practices among Malay language teachers. Teachers reported using code-switching to explain concepts, manage classroom interaction and ensure students' understanding. Three main factors influencing code-switching were identified : pedagogical needs, the linguistic environment of rural schools and teachers' professional judgement. While teachers acknowledged the benefits of code-switching, they also highlighted the importance of controlling its use to prevent over dependence on non-target languages.

DISCUSSION

The findings support Fishman's Sociolinguistic Theory, demonstrating that teachers' language choices are shaped by contextual and communicative demand. In rural multilingual classrooms, code-switching functions as a pedagogical scaffold that supports learning while maintaining instructional effectiveness. However, the study also underscores the importance of professional judgement in regulating code-switching to ensure sustained exposure to the Malay language.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that code-switching is prevalent and strategic practice in Malay Language teaching in rural primary schools in Kapit. When used purposefully and in moderation, code-switching supports students' comprehension and classroom interaction without undermining the role of Malay as the target language. The findings offer valuable insights for teachers, school administrators and policymakers in designing context-sensitive language teaching strategies in multilingual rural settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities. Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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