Code-Switching as a Cognitive Strategy in Vocabulary Acquisition: A Classroom Action Research on Senior High School EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition remains a persistent challenge for many EFL learners, particularly in contexts where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited. In Indonesian classrooms, learners often rely on their first language as a bridge when encountering lexical difficulties, yet teachers frequently discourage this practice of code-switching. This study employs Classroom Action Research (CAR) to investigate how code-switching can be used as a cognitive strategy to enhance vocabulary learning among Indonesian-English bilingual senior high school students. Conducted in three cycles using the plan–act–observe–reflect model, the research introduces code-switching strategies into vocabulary lessons, such as bilingual flashcards, guided translation, and lexical comparison tasks. Data will be collected through vocabulary tests, classroom observations, student reflection journals, teacher diaries, and semi-structured interviews. The findings will be analyzed thematically to identify patterns of code-switching use and its effects on vocabulary retention, task performance, and learner engagement. It is expected that the integration of code-switching will lead to measurable improvements in vocabulary acquisition and foster positive learner attitudes toward bilingual strategies. The study not only addresses a practical classroom challenge but also contributes to a broader pedagogical shift by reframing code-switching from a sign of weakness into a purposeful and effective learning tool. In doing so, it seeks to provide teachers with actionable strategies for improving vocabulary instruction in bilingual EFL contexts.

Keywords: Code-switching, Cognitive Strategy, Vocabulary Acquisition, Bilingual Learners

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Indonesia continually faces the challenge of fostering effective language acquisition, especially in the domain of vocabulary. Vocabulary is the foundation of language proficiency; without a sufficient lexicon, learners cannot comprehend or express themselves meaningfully in the target language (Schmitt, 2010). Consequently, many Indonesian senior high school EFL learners possess limited vocabulary, which impedes their overall communicative competence. This persistent issue calls for innovative and contextually relevant instructional strategies.

The traditional EFL teaching paradigm has long advocated for a monolingual approach, minimizing or prohibiting the use of the learners' first language (L1) based on the belief that it interferes with target language development (Cook, 2001). However, this perspective is being challenged by a growing body of research suggesting that the judicious integration of L1 can be a valuable cognitive tool (Macaro, 2005). Indonesian senior high school students are inherently bilingual, navigating both Bahasa Indonesia and English. Ignoring this linguistic reality can be counterproductive.

Code-switching—the alternate use of two or more languages in a single discourse—has historically been viewed with skepticism, often seen as a sign of linguistic deficiency rather than a strategic resource (Gumperz, 1982). However, contemporary perspectives argue that when used strategically, code-switching can facilitate understanding, manage classroom interactions, and scaffold complex concepts (Ferguson, 2003). For vocabulary acquisition, it can bridge the gap between known L1 concepts and unknown L2 equivalents, reducing cognitive load and enhancing comprehension.

This research is important because it challenges the long-standing pedagogical assumption about L1 use in EFL classrooms. By investigating code-switching as a facilitative strategy, this study aims to provide empirical evidence of its benefits for Indonesian-English bilingual learners. The research addresses a significant gap, as prior studies have often observed spontaneous code-switching rather than its purposeful implementation as a planned cognitive strategy for vocabulary instruction.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do planned code-switching strategies influence the vocabulary acquisition of Indonesian-English bilingual senior high school EFL learners?
2. What are the perceptions of Indonesian-English bilingual senior high school EFL learners regarding the use of code-switching as a strategy for vocabulary acquisition?
3. What challenges and facilitators emerge when implementing code-switching strategies for vocabulary acquisition in an EFL senior high school classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary is widely considered the foundation of language proficiency (Schmitt, 2010), and a lack thereof can lead to learner frustration and demotivation (Thornbury, 2002). Traditional EFL instruction has often promoted a strict monolingual approach, forbidding L1 use to prevent "interference" (Cook, 2001). However, this view neglects the cognitive assets of bilingual learners. More recent scholarship posits that a learner's L1 can serve as a powerful cognitive tool (Macaro, 2005). As Cook (2001) argues, the bilingual competence of learners should be treated as a resource, not a deficiency.

Code-switching, once stigmatized as a linguistic crutch (Gumperz, 1982), is now increasingly recognized as a sophisticated communicative strategy. In educational settings, it can function as a scaffold to clarify meaning and manage complex tasks (Lin, 2008). Furthermore, the strategic tuse of L1 can create a low-anxiety environment, which is crucial for language acquisition as it lowers the "affective filter" (Krashen, 1985). While previous research has examined code-switching for classroom management (Sert, 2005), its systematic use as a planned pedagogical tool for vocabulary acquisition remains underexplored, particularly in the Indonesian senior high school context. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating its purposeful implementation and impact.

Research Method

Research Design: This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) methodology, which is ideal for investigating and improving educational practices within a natural classroom setting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The research was conducted in two iterative cycles, each following the plan-act-observe-reflect model. This cyclical approach allowed the researcher, who was also the teacher, to systematically implement strategies, monitor their effects, and refine the intervention based on observed outcomes.

Participants: The participants were one class of approximately 30-35 Indonesian-English bilingual senior high school EFL learners in Indonesia. These students use Bahasa Indonesia as their primary language and were learning English as a foreign language. They had not previously received explicit instruction on using code-switching as a vocabulary acquisition strategy.

Data Collection and Analysis: A mixed-methods approach was used to gather comprehensive data.

- Quantitative Data: Vocabulary tests were administered in each cycle to measure improvements in vocabulary acquisition. The scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired sample t-tests to determine statistical significance.

- Qualitative Data: Data were collected through classroom observations, student reflection logs, teacher diaries, and semi-structured interviews. This data provided rich insights into student perceptions, engagement, and the practical challenges of implementation. All qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes.

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative data sources were triangulated to enhance the credibility and validity of the results.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The research was conducted across two cycles, and the data revealed significant positive outcomes.

Vocabulary Test Results: Quantitative data showed consistent improvement in students' vocabulary mastery.

- Cycle 1: The use of direct L1 translations and bilingual glossaries resulted in an 18% improvement in test scores. However, observations noted that some students became dependent on literal translation.
- Cycle 2: After strategies were refined to include more contextual L1 explanations and encourage student-initiated code-switching, the improvement rose to 26%. Students demonstrated deeper understanding by using the new words more flexibly in context.

Classroom Dynamics and Engagement: Observations revealed a marked shift in classroom dynamics between the two cycles.

- In Cycle 1, code-switching was primarily teacher-led, and students were passive recipients of information.
- In Cycle 2, student-initiated code-switching emerged as learners used Bahasa Indonesia among peers to clarify meaning and check comprehension. This led to increased engagement, participation, and more dynamic collaborative work.

Student Perceptions: Student reflection logs and interviews indicated overwhelmingly positive attitudes.

- Most students reported that code-switching reduced the stress and anxiety associated with learning difficult vocabulary.
- They found L1 explanations helpful for connecting new English words to familiar concepts.
- While a few students worried about "relying too much" on L1 in Cycle 1, they noted that the refined strategies in Cycle 2 pushed them toward greater responsibility and autonomy.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that planned, strategic code-switching is a powerful pedagogical tool that significantly contributes to vocabulary acquisition. This study challenges the traditional monolingual approach and validates the view that a learner's L1 is a resource, not an impediment (Cook, 2001).

Code-switching served as an effective scaffold, reducing learners' cognitive load and allowing them to process and retain new vocabulary more effectively. This supports the principle that creating meaningful associations between L1 and L2 strengthens vocabulary retention (Nation, 2013). The affective benefits were also clear; using L1 lowered anxiety and increased motivation, creating a more relaxed learning environment conducive to risk-taking, which aligns with Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis.

Crucially, the study demonstrated a shift toward greater learner autonomy. In Cycle 2, students moved from being passive recipients to active agents who used L1 strategically to support their own learning and that of their peers. This reflects the idea that code-switching can support interactional competence (Lin, 2008) and that students can learn to regulate their L1 use as a learning tool (Macaro, 2005).

Finally, the results highlight the necessity of purposeful implementation. Unstructured or excessive code-

switching risks creating dependency, as seen in Cycle 1. However, when planned and refined, it empowers learners. This reinforces the notion that teachers must consciously plan when and how to switch codes to serve specific instructional goals (Sert, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This classroom action research demonstrates that planned and strategic code-switching is a highly effective approach for supporting vocabulary acquisition among Indonesian senior high school EFL learners. The integration of bilingual strategies not only improved vocabulary test scores but also enhanced classroom engagement, lowered anxiety, and fostered learner confidence. The key conclusions are:

1. Carefully designed code-switching strategies improve vocabulary comprehension and retention.
2. Learners perceive code-switching as a helpful bridge that reduces anxiety and promotes motivation.
3. The effectiveness of code-switching is contingent on its purposeful and balanced use, which fosters learner autonomy rather than dependence.

Pedagogically, this study suggests that EFL teachers in similar contexts should reconsider rigid monolingual practices and instead explore structured bilingual strategies to support their students. Future research could build on these findings by examining long-term vocabulary retention or applying these strategies to larger and more diverse participant groups.

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