

Functions of Code-Switching in Rwandan EFL Classrooms: Insights from Teachers and Learners

Jean d'Amour Ndayisenga¹, Ouda Teda Ena¹

¹Sanata Dharma University, Indonesia

*Correspondence: damourjado44@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In multilingual settings, speakers frequently move between codes and languages during frequent social interactions. Any circumstance in which speakers flip between accepted codes is considered code-switching. Several studies have assessed and compared aspects of code-switching in EFL classrooms, focusing on teachers' perceptions of multilingual contexts. However, limited studies have examined code-switching in EFL classrooms like Rwanda, where three languages are officially used, and one native language is still the most dominant language for all people. The current study uses qualitative methods to examine how teachers perceive different aspects of code-switching in multilingual classrooms to address the following questions: What types of code-switching do teachers and students use in the classrooms, and how do they perceive that phenomenon? The participants in the study were nine senior teachers from Groupe Scolaire Nyamirama. Data were collected through interviews and analysed using coding. The findings from the interview demonstrate that both intra-sentential and inter-sentential functions of code-switching are sometimes used to manage the language minority in the classroom, remaining united with the students, and the language learners' lack of proficiency. This study provides future researchers with suggestions and educational implications for EFL/ESL teachers.

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1. Introduction

English has become a medium of instruction because many formerly monolingual nations have effectively become bilingual or multilingual. For instance, Rwanda is a multilingual state (Habyarimana, 2017). Kinyarwanda is the national language of most Rwandan people; while English is utilized for functions and purposes across the country, it is rarely used for naturalistic communication (Of & Science, 2018). Consequently, difficulty is compounded while teaching and learning English in a monolingual country such as Rwanda, where everybody speaks Kinyarwanda and thus has only one L1. There is no reason that Rwandans may want to learn another language, even English, which is widely used worldwide since Kinyarwanda is enough to meet their needs in their regular interactions.

Another reason for the above challenges facing the education system in Rwanda today is that the use of English as a medium of instruction was almost unheard of in Rwandan schools before 2009 (Spowage, 2019). The need to use English as the medium of instruction has added complexity to the already complex learning process, making teaching and learning in general even more difficult. Both teachers and students were immediately confronted with a situation they were ill-equipped for, given that Kinyarwanda and French had been the medium of instruction in Rwandan primary and secondary schools until 2009.

Code-switching has been defined in several diverse approaches by many writers. Code-switching is also known as switching between two or more languages, dialects, or speech varieties alternatively and turn (Novianti & Said, 2021). However, code-switching is hard to define precisely because it encompasses a wide range of contact phenomena, according to (Driouch, 2023; Weda et al., 2022; Sahib & Hasyim, 2024.; Yaumi et al., 2024). According to (Beatty-Martínez et al., 2020)- The ability of bilinguals to occasionally switch between their two languages is known as code-switching. Code-switching is the use of two languages in parallel or in a single conversation, which presupposes, even if not simultaneous, the ability to speak both languages despite the children not being fully trilingual yet (Caballero & Celaya, 2022; Yaumi et al., 2023; Youngsun et al., 2024).

Code-switching in education is the alternating use of two or more languages in the same classroom by bilinguals (Rukmi & Khasanah, 2020; Al-Obaydi et al., 2022; Said et al., 2021; Sukmawaty et al., 2022). Empirical research has shown that it is relatively challenging to obtain classroom conversation in a single language in many nations (Brevik & Rindal, 2020), which explains why code-switching occurs in many classrooms worldwide.

The study's theoretical framework is related to the theory of code-switching functions in educational settings (Ferguson, 2009). Based on several studies, Ferguson's meta-analyses of the Code-Switching studies were used to provide the adopted taxonomy. Ferguson distinguishes three types of functions for code-switching in the educational context. It can be interpreted as follows: a) to support students in comprehending the definition of curricular access/knowledge construction. b) Classroom management implications of this social psychology mean increasing, sanctioning, and signaling in the classroom. c) From an interpersonal relationship point of view, it involves the creation of culture and the reconnaissance of the classroom as a humane space. For the students who struggle with the English language, teachers have been practicing code-switching in class (Yolanda, 2020).

In many ESL classrooms, code-switching occurs when there are switches between the two languages (Ulfah et al., 2021). Many African nations have reported this situation when many students and teachers speak a language other than English (Robertson & Graven, 2020). In general, code-switching can be considered a conversational technique in which a speaker modifies a language code to create, preserve, or dissolve group borders; as such, it is utilized in part to build or alter interpersonal relationships. In addition, groups of educators and learners may practice it without realizing it, or there can be no formal rule prohibiting or allowing it.

People who interchange languages within a single period, such as within a sentence, within a paragraph, or a speech, are called language combiners. Since English is required in universities and schools, code-switching is used to switch between students' first language, their country's language, and their target language EFL teachers. Code-switching can be used to increase active classroom engagement, especially in producing comprehensible information for the slow, limited English students (Celenia et al., 2021). Students who use code-switching can also encounter some difficulties in adhering closely to the instructions and pronunciation, and, thus, the teachers' improperly articulated words and phrases, as well as complicated vocabulary. (Kiem & Parcon, 2024).

Code-switching is categorized into three types which are inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and extra-sentential, which is known as tag (Habyarimana, 2017). The type of code-switching concerning the structure of sentences, which occurs between separate clauses, or different text segments, is called inter-sentential. It requires proficiency in both languages. For example, I do not know the reality. Ndabitekerezaho nyuma (I will think about it after). Intra-sentential code-switching, on the other hand, takes place in a subclause or a whole sentential level. For example, Come very soon, Uhagere mu kanya saa sita (Come very soon at noon. Despite being the most dangerous to syntax during language transitions, this type is commonly found in speech. Thirdly, extra-sentential or tag is translated into another language, which is called interjections, fillers, quotes, and tags. These are a few examples of this kind of tag phrase. For example, Ngiye kukubwira, you know? (I am going to tell you, you know? It consists of independent phrases, verb phrases, determiners, and so forth. Because they have little syntactic restriction, they can be readily incorporated into monolingual statements.

Many studies have examined the benefits of code-switching in EFL classrooms from the perspective of teachers; however, the current study examines the benefits from the perspectives of both teachers and students. This study investigates the perspectives of EFL teachers and students regarding the function of code-switching in Rwandan classrooms that use English as the primary language of instruction for all educational levels in the country.

It is challenging to locate ESL/EFL teachers who can instruct without code-switching if they are also native speakers of the first language spoken in the community (Jeanjaroonsri, 2022). Finding schools in many countries where one first language predominates in each community is impossible. In this regard, Rwanda is no exception. Every Rwandan speaks the same language. Everybody speaks Kinyarwanda as their mother tongue in day-to-day interactions. Since few individuals in Rwanda are proficient in English, it is not yet a language used for everyday communication (Sibomana, 2022). Instead, people use the linguistic information they have learned in the three languages they encounter in school to code-switch.

This study investigates the various forms of code-switching used in EFL classroom interactions in Rwanda's multilingual Secondary schools. Specifically, it explores how English, French, Swahili, and Kinyarwanda are taught as first, second, and third languages employed by both teachers and learners. This research aims to identify the effectiveness of code-switching as a method for promoting understanding and transmission of messages in a multilingual environment.

This research is valuable, particularly in multilingual countries like Rwanda, for enhancing teaching approaches that can be used in multilingual classrooms by understanding how swapping languages can support learning in the secondary school setting. The study answers the questions: What types of code-switching are employed by teachers and students in EFL classroom discourse? How do educators perceive its effects on student learning and classroom interaction?

The current research will be carried out in four parts: the first part is an introduction, the second section is the methodology, the third is results and discussions, and the last is a conclusion and recommendation.

2. Methodology

The current research explores code-switching in Rwandan EFL teachers' classroom discourses in Groupe Scolaire Nyamirama, a school in the Gatsibo District. The selection of the qualitative design aimed at a broad understanding of teachers' views, attitudes, and uses of code-switching in the classroom. The section identifies the research design, participants, measurement, and analysis procedures.

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative research design was used to understand how EFL teachers use this practice in a multilingual classroom context. The rationale for the study was to collect the attitudes, and appraisals of the teachers to know how the process of code-switching works in the context of practice. This approach aligns with this study that seeks to offer contextualized insight into code-switching as practiced within the Rwandan EFL classroom learning context whereby English, Kinyarwanda, French, and Swahili languages are used in classrooms.

2.2 Participants

Nine EFL teachers from Groupe Scolaire Nyamirama, a 12-Year Basic Education (12YBE) school in Gatsibo district, Rwanda, were purposefully selected as participants for this study. All teachers have at least five years of teaching experience in teaching different foreign languages, English, French, Kinyarwanda, and Swahili. It successfully selected teachers with professional teaching experience and multilingual skills so that participants could have considerable knowledge of both linguistic dynamics and educational practices and offer essential insights into the roles of using code-switching in school.

2.3 Data Collection

The data for this study was gathered through interviews, which afforded flexibility and thorough exploration of code-switching in EFL classrooms. All the interviews were recorded using WhatsApp audio with the participants' permission, lasting between 10 and 20 minutes. Some of the interviews were done in languages understandable to the participants, with translated recordings in case clarification was needed. Code-switching was described by their functions in the class and the reasons why the teachers used them, while their effects on students were described from the teachers' perception.

2.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were taped and transcribed word by word to capture the participant's responses as close to reality as possible. The triangulation approach was used to improve the dependability and credibility of the data analysis of the findings. This triangulation included verification data from the interview and analysis of the recurring themes and patterns concerning teachers' perceived use of and attitudes towards code-switching.

The method of data analysis was inductive thematic analysis, where codes were generated from the data and category development involved grouping related codes into themes. Based on previous studies, four key research areas were as follows: functions of code-switching, motivations for code-switching, and the opportunities and difficulties of code-switching in EFL classrooms. The above aspects were then used to understand how and why code-switching happened, focusing on its implications for students' understanding and interest.

3. Result and Discussion

Interviews with nine EFL teachers at Groupe Scolaire Nyamirama and analysis of their code-switching practices showed that the Rwandan classroom is characterized by multilingualism. The teachers used code-switching at the intra-sentential levels as well as the inter-sentential levels. This section categorizes the teachers according to their code-switching and reveals how this process facilitates and hinders teachers' practice.

Teachers One, Two, and Three mainly engaged in intra-sentential code-switching. For example, Teacher One said: "When I am teaching grammar concepts that are a little complicated, I find that I can use Kinyarwanda to explain it." For

instance, I would tell them, 'The past tense in English is 'igihe cyashize' in Kinyarwanda.' It even assists in understanding and assists students in comparing what they learn in English to what they know in their natural languages. Teacher Two also shared the same idea when they said, "In speaking Kinyarwanda, it feels like I am talking to my students". 'They are at ease when I say, 'Igihe cyashize' rather than when I just give the English version of what I am trying to tell them.' Teacher Three further said, "By code-switching within a sentence, I can go on teaching uninterrupted while at the same time making sure the students understand what is being taught."

The advantages include improved comprehension and thus higher levels of student participation. However, whenever students over-depend on Kinyarwanda, this may lead to some drawbacks, especially the learners' limited English language proficiency (Aizawa et al., 2023). Teacher One said, "Sometimes I feel they might not practice enough English if I switch on this technique too frequently."

It was therefore found that Teacher Four and Teacher Five preferred inter-sentential code-switching. For instance, Teacher Four said, "I will use the second language to give a summary or to reinforce the point I have been making, then switch to the second language midway through a second sentence". For example, if I wanted to make part preachers understand how to make the present perfect tense, I could say: As they say in Kinyarwanda, he said "niba utazi ndakubwira mu Kinyarwanda". Since it is more conversational in style, liaisons between ideas are more apparent, and important points are emphasized. Teacher Five also noted, "Switching from one sentence to another helps the students process what is being relayed." They can think of what I said in English and then hear it in Kinyarwanda."

The main advantage of the use of inter-sentential switching is that it affords the students a chance to reflect on what has been covered before proceeding (Kulsum, 2022). Teacher Five supports this by explaining that switching from one sentence to another assists the students in understanding whatever is being passed on to them. "They can translate what I said into English and then interpret it in Kinyarwanda." Likewise, Teacher Four noted that inter-sentential switching made comprehension and review possible, similar to how they elicit the first language to explain the present perfect tense. Nevertheless, problems occur when such switching disrupts the continuity of lessons: Teacher Four said, "If sometimes, I stop translating between the two languages in mid-course, I sometimes find that I lose the pace of the class". This observation highlights a key drawback: Although inter-sentential switching promotes comprehension, it disrupts lesson continuity and students' engagement with the target language. Hence its enforcement can be helpful but needs to be done under moderate intensity so that students do not rely too much on the first language.

Teachers Six, Seven, and Eight used intra-sentential and inter-sentential code-switching depending on the student's ability to comprehend English then. Teacher Six said, "If I learn that my students are not grasping certain ideas, then I change." If students look lost, I will explain I'm teaching simple past tense. According to Kinyarwanda, it is 'igihe cyashize'. About flexibility, Teacher Seven insisted that "I switch depending on the contention." For instance, if a student asks a question in Kinyarwanda, I also answer in Kinyarwanda so that they feel good to do so. Teacher Eight continued, "The two code switching' enable me to address different learning modes." As observed, some students understand better when being taught in Kinyarwanda and others when taught in English.

Thus, the advantages of the given approach are the following: Inclusion of All Learners and Learning Needs (Molina Roldán et al., 2021). However, the challenge mentioned by Teacher Six was that some students could be confused. Sometimes it is clear that students may not understand when they are expected to respond in which language, and as such, they give a response in two languages, he noted.

Teacher Nine mainly utilized code-switching in the context of behaviours used in classroom management. He said, "I usually use Kinyarwanda whenever I want to teach or correct the children's behaviour." For instance, I might utter 'Nimuceceke' (Please keep quiet) whenever the learners make lots of noise in the class. The students also feel safe and orderly, which is suitable for learning since order is achieved by all the students being cautioned. The advantage of the approach is that it allows for better learning organization. However, Teacher Nine showed concern with its implication that using Kinyarwanda might reduce the frequency of their practice of English in class (Hennessy et al., 2020).

The results show that teachers use intrasentential and intersentential switching strategies to explain meaning, cope with the students' varying learning levels, and manage the class (Brien, 2020). Code-switching in the immediate context helps understand what has been said, and between sentences, it helps repeat and reflect on what has been said. However, using this kind of language dulls the learning of English and interferes with the continuity of lessons. Teachers, therefore, use code-switching events appropriately depending on the student's needs and wants; as such, it becomes the basis of integrating language and talk.

4. Conclusion

An analysis of the patterns of code-switching used by EFL teachers at Groupe Scolaire Nyamirama shows how using different languages in Rwandan classrooms is not a simple process. The present study, which conducted nine teacher interviews, indicates that code-switching is not only a language practice but an effective mode of teaching known to improve students' learning comprehension.

Teachers' flexibility in using context-related code-switching from intra-sentential to inter-sentential functions in the classroom shows the possibility of meeting students' needs. The advantages of code-switching include better understanding, students' comfort, and ways of controlling the group work. But again, issues like possible overemphasis on the Kinyarwanda language and some interferences with the smooth teaching-learning sequence were also highlighted, suggestive of the fact that there is a need for moderation in the use of the local language in teaching.

This study also pinpoints the review of code-switching as an appropriate resource for use in multilingual education. The research highlights the importance of linguistically responsive practice to enhance language learning and to make sure that all the students feel comfortable in the classroom. Future studies could extend the results obtained concerning the long-term impact of code-switching on language proficiency and students' engagement and outcomes to provide more on the importance of code-switching practice in second language acquisition.

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