

Strategic Code-Switching in EFL Classrooms: Pedagogical Value and Perceived Psychological Effects on Saudi Postgraduate Learners

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Received: July 7, 2026

Accepted: October 15, 2026

Online Published: October 17, 2026

doi:10.11114/jets.v15i1.9120

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v15i1.9120>

Abstract

This study examined the pedagogical value and perceived psychological effects of code-switching among Saudi postgraduate EFL learners. For data collection, the researcher administered a questionnaire to 65 students from three Saudi universities and conducted interviews with 18 students and three teachers. Quantitative data revealed that CS was perceived as most frequently used in response to student confusion ($M = 4.11$) and complex academic content ($M = 4.06$), and as most pedagogically valuable for enhancing comprehension of complex content ($M = 4.34$) and technical terminology ($M = 4.08$). The results also revealed positive perceived psychological effects of CS, such as alleviating anxiety ($M = 4.06$) and enhancing confidence ($M = 4.05$). Furthermore, the results of the thematic analysis showed that CS was perceived as an effective pedagogical tool for conceptual scaffolding, task clarification, and balanced bilingual support. Additionally, it identified three psychological mechanisms: affective reassurance, confidence building, and sense of classroom comfort. Triangulation revealed that both students and faculty conceptualise strategic code-switching as a temporary cognitive bridge that enhances comprehension and reduces affective pressure without replacing English-medium instruction. The study concludes that code-switching, when purposeful and bounded, constitutes a conditionally effective pedagogical strategy in Saudi postgraduate EFL contexts.

Keywords: code-switching, EFL classrooms, pedagogical scaffolding, language anxiety, postgraduate education, Saudi Arabia, mixed-methods research

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

The use of learners' first language (L1) in foreign language classrooms has long been a topic of debate in language education. Traditional approaches often discourage the use of the L1, arguing that maximum exposure to the target language is necessary for effective learning (Ellis, 1984; Gass and Madden, 1985; Chaudron, 1988; Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Lightbown, 2001; Martin, 2005; Willis, 2021). However, recent research suggests that strategic code-switching can serve important pedagogical functions (Stern et al., 1992; Cook, 2001; Miles, 2004; Levine, 2011; Cook, 2002). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, teachers frequently alternate between English and students' L1 to clarify meaning, manage classroom interaction, and create a supportive learning environment (Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; Bairmani et al., 2022; Hazaymeh, 2022; Temesgen and Hailu, 2022; Alzahrani, 2023; Al-Marzouki and Albeyali, 2025). Beyond its instructional role, such linguistic flexibility may also have some psychological effects on the part of learners, such as enhancing their confidence, engagement, and sense of comfort during language learning (Bhatti et al., 2018).

It is important to consider the difference between strategic code-switching and the general or un-planned L1 use. In the present study, the term 'code-switching' is employed to describe the teachers' or students' conscious, purposeful alternation between English and Arabic to achieve specific pedagogical goals, such as meaning clarification, scaffolding comprehension, or mitigating learner anxiety, rather than incidental or habitual language mixing. This distinction is central to the present study, which focuses specifically on deliberate, goal-directed instances of L1 use.

The use of code switching (henceforth CS) in the classroom has been supported by many researchers. For example, Levine (2011) viewed it as an important teaching strategy in teaching an L2. Similarly, Stern et al. (1992) contended that CS is useful in conveying the exact meaning of a particular aspect, arguing that using learners' first language in teaching a foreign language is a preferred strategy by learners.

In contrast, many researchers believed that foreign language teachers should create a pure foreign language learning environment and that CS deprives students of valuable L2 input, affecting their learning of the L2 (Ellis, 1984; Gass and Madden, 1985; Chaudron, 1988; Lightbown, 2001). Similarly, Martin (2005) believed that CS reduces the exposure and results in a lack of fluency in the L2.

1.2 Explore Importance of the Problem

The use of Arabic alongside English in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia has become a common practice although the policy of the Saudi Ministry of Education highlights the use of an English-only approach in teaching EFL. The previous research in the Saudi context investigated the perceptions of teachers and students towards CS use at both schools and universities, identifying the different functions of CS in these contexts. Postgraduate students, however, are different from school or undergraduate students in diverse ways. These differences are evident in their advanced English proficiency, greater exposure to academic discourse, and engagement with English in more specialized, discipline-specific contexts such as thesis writing, academic presentations, and research seminars. These differences may shape both the pedagogical functions of CS and its psychological effects differently than at earlier educational stages. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study has investigated these perceptions at a postgraduate level, combining the pedagogical value and the perceived psychological effects of using CS on Saudi students. Understanding CS practices at this level can therefore offer insights into how L1 use functions once learners have reached an advanced stage of language development, which has implications for postgraduate curriculum design and academic language support. This study aims to bridge this gap by contributing to a growing body of research on the relationship between the pedagogical and psychological functions of code-switching, extending this understanding to the postgraduate EFL context in Saudi Arabia.

The aim of the present study is to further explore the use of CS in the Saudi educational context. By focusing on the perceptions of teachers and students at postgraduate level, this study contributes new insights into the pedagogical value of using CS and its perceived psychological effects on postgraduate students. The results of the study will be useful among a number of parties as it will offer feedback for teachers, supervisors, curriculum designers, and students in an attempt to enhance teaching and learning English in Saudi Arabia.

1.3 Describe Relevant Scholarship

How to define code switching and what constitutes the most appropriate definition is not agreed upon by scholars because of their different concerns (Nilep, 2006). For example, Myers-Scotton (1972) characterised CS broadly as alternation between linguistic varieties within the same conversation, while Gumperz (1982) offered a more refined view, describing it as the juxtaposition, within a single speech exchange, of passages belonging to two distinct grammatical systems. Subsequent definitions narrowed this focus to educational settings: Lin (2008, p. 273) defined CS in the classroom context as the "alternating use of more than one linguistic code in the classroom by any of the classroom participants (e.g., teacher, students, teacher aide)," while Myers (2008) similarly described it as second-language learners' incorporation of elements from their mother tongue into their speech. Lin's (2008) definition is adopted as the primary working definition, as it explicitly accounts for the participation of both teachers and students in classroom code-switching, which aligns directly with the study's focus on the perceptions of both groups. This definition therefore guides the analysis of code-switching instances involving teachers and students in the present study.

1.3.1 Code-switching Functions in EFL Classrooms

The use of learners' L1 for learning an L2 has been debated over the years (Orfan, 2023; El Boubekri, 2024). The presence of the CS phenomenon in EFL classrooms has attracted the attention of researchers worldwide. Researchers investigated the reasons behind using CS in EFL classrooms in order to explore its various functions in the educational setting. Previous studies showed that CS serves diverse functions, such as providing clarification in terms of grammar and vocabulary (Pondan et al., 2018; Zainil and Arsyad, 2021; Bairmani et al., 2022), giving effective instructions to reinforce or clarify what had been previously said (Wijaya et al., 2020), building rapport with students to facilitate communication with instructors (Temesgen and Hailu, 2022; Al-Marzouki and Albeyali, 2025; Mohamed Ali El Deen et al., 2025) indicating topic shifts (Sert, 2005; Bairmani et al., 2022; Al-Marzouki and Albeyali, 2025), offering correction, increasing comprehension and academic achievement (Alshugithri, 2019; Zaghlool and Altamimi, 2023; Al-Marzouki and Albeyali, 2025), and saving time and effort for students with low L2 proficiency by switching to their L1, helping them gain a deeper understanding of the L2 (Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; Mohamed Ali El Deen et al., 2025).

Research has also identified a number of affective functions of CS in the foreign language classroom (Sert, 2005; Glušac et al., 2023). Studies by Bhatti et al. (2018), and Istifci (2019), who showed that CS had an important role in lightening the classroom atmosphere, for example, by incorporating humor in the learners' L1. It also provided psychological support for learners such as reducing anxiety and enhancing confidence (Malik, 2014; Selamat, 2014; Cahyani et al., 2018; Narasuman et al., 2019; Wijaya et al., 2020).

These pedagogical and psychological functions are closely interrelated. For instance, using CS for clarification or to support comprehension may simultaneously reduce learners' anxiety, since struggling to understand content solely in the L2 can itself be a source of stress. Similarly, when code-switching is used to manage the classroom or build rapport, it may provide a more relaxed atmosphere, where comfort of the students and their desire to communicate in English are enhanced. This interconnection suggests that strategic CS use may support both learning and learners' psychological wellbeing at the same time (Alsalam, 2025; Rengur et al., 2025).

1.3.2 Code-switching in the Saudi EFL Context

Although an English-only policy was mandated in the EFL classroom by the Saudi Ministry of Education in order to enhance the communication competence of EFL learners (Zaghlool and Altamimi, 2023), switching to Arabic is quite common (Alshughithri, 2019). This gap in practice is noteworthy: while an English-only approach is officially required, the persistence of alternation between Arabic and English suggests a disconnect between prescribed policy and classroom practice. This is one of the motivations for conducting the current study, as exploring why teachers and students continue to switch languages despite institutional discouragement can inform more context-sensitive EFL pedagogy in Saudi Arabia. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers across different educational levels and institutions. At the school level, Hamouda and Aljumah (2020) examined CS use among 64 Saudi male tertiary-level students and found that lower- and mid-proficiency learners viewed CS as beneficial for language acquisition, whereas high-proficiency learners considered it a hindrance—an early indication that proficiency level may moderate perceptions of CS. Extending this line of inquiry to the secondary level with a considerably larger sample, Zaghlool and Altamimi (2023) surveyed 100 EFL teachers and 122 students in Riyadh and reported convergent views between the two groups: both perceived CS as useful for clarifying unfamiliar topics and grammatical structures, increasing classroom interaction, and creating a relaxing atmosphere. Unlike Hamouda and Aljumah (2020), this study did not report proficiency-related reservations, suggesting that such concerns may be more salient among advanced learners specifically.

At the university level, findings have been broadly consistent with, and in some respects extend, these earlier results. Al Tale and AlQahtani (2022), working with 52 Saudi EFL university students, found that a CS approach outperformed an L2-only approach in teaching reading comprehension, while Mohamed Ali El Deen et al. (2025), surveying a larger sample of 173 male and female learners, similarly reported positive perceptions of CS as a communicative tool that enhances comprehension and academic achievement, with no moderating effect of gender or GPA. Combining teacher and student perspectives at two Saudi higher-education institutions, Al-Marzouki and Albeyali (2025) further corroborated these findings, showing that both groups recognised CS as useful for topic transition and for its affective, rapport-building functions. Taken together, these studies agree on the pedagogical benefit of CS across the Saudi EFL context, particularly for comprehension, communication, and classroom atmosphere; their main point of divergence concerns the role of proficiency level, which only Hamouda and Aljumah (2020) identified as a moderating factor, an inconsistency that has not been systematically examined in the literature. Moreover, sample sizes and institutional contexts vary considerably across these studies, and none has specifically targeted postgraduate learners, leaving this population—together with the joint pedagogical and psychological functions of CS examined in the present study—largely unexamined. Recent evidence continues to extend this line of inquiry: Alsulami et al. (2026) examined code-switching attitudes among postgraduate EFL students in Saudi Arabia, while Almansour (2024) linked code-switching attitudes to language anxiety among Saudi EFL learners.

1.3.3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT) as a theoretical framework. The sociocultural theory stresses the role of social interaction and language-mediated learning in cognitive development. According to this theory, learners construct knowledge through interaction with more knowledgeable others, and language functions as a mediational tool that facilitates learning. As far as EFL classroom context is concerned, CS can function as a form of scaffolding that helps learners understand complex concepts, negotiate meaning, connect new knowledge with learners' existing linguistic resources. Accordingly, the use of learners' L1 as a teaching and learning strategy may facilitate learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

The study is also informed by Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that emotional factors such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation impact L2 acquisition. When learners experience high anxiety, language acquisition may be hindered. Employing CS as a strategy in EFL classrooms may reduce learners' affective filter by minimizing stress, increasing comprehension, and creating a supportive classroom environment. Consequently, CS may increase learners' comprehension, confidence and willingness to communicate in English. Together, these two theories provide complementary lenses for interpreting the present study's findings. Sociocultural Theory guides the interpretation of CS instances that function as pedagogical scaffolding, helping to explain how and why teachers and

students use CS to support comprehension and learning. The Affective Filter Hypothesis guides the interpretation of participants' reported psychological effects, helping to explain how CS use relates to learners' anxiety, confidence, and willingness to communicate. Together, these frameworks provide a coherent basis for interpreting the pedagogical and psychological dimensions of CS identified in this study.

1.4 State Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design

This study aims at finding out the situations in which EFL teachers switch between English and Arabic at the postgraduate level. Moreover, it aims to investigate the perceptions of teachers towards the pedagogical value of CS as well as its perceived psychological effects on learners in the classroom. To achieve these objectives, the study tries to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: In what situations do English teachers use code-switching between English and Arabic in EFL classrooms?

RQ2: How do teachers and students perceive the pedagogical value of code-switching?

RQ3: How do teachers and students perceive the psychological effects of code-switching on students particularly in terms of anxiety, confidence, classroom comfort, motivation, and willingness to communicate in English?

2. Method

2.1 Participant Characteristics

This study was conducted at three Saudi universities: King Abdulaziz University, the University of Jeddah, and Umm Al-Qura University, where the medium of instruction is mainly English while Arabic remains the lingua franca of the wider university environment and the primary means of everyday communication. All participants were bilingual in Arabic (L1) and English (L2) and specialized in English language studies: student participants were enrolled in postgraduate English-language programs, and teacher participants were English-language faculty members teaching postgraduate students. The quantitative strand involved sixty-five postgraduate students, and the qualitative strand involved three teachers and an interview subsample of eighteen students selected by convenience from those who had already completed the questionnaire. Each participant was assigned a code to conceal his or her identity: 'T' represents a teacher participant and 'S' stands for a student participant.

2.2 Sampling Procedures

For the quantitative strand, a convenience sampling procedure was employed, whereby the questionnaire was distributed among the postgraduate students available and willing to participate at the three participating universities. For the qualitative strand, a convenience sampling procedure was likewise used to select both the eighteen student interviewees, drawn from those who had already completed the questionnaire, and the three teacher participants, based primarily on their specialization in English language studies and their willingness to participate, so that the interview data could elaborate directly on the quantitative results. Before data collection began, the researcher introduced himself to the participants, explained the objectives of the study, and assured them that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without providing a reason. The achieved sample consisted of 65 postgraduate students who completed the questionnaire, together with a conveniently selected subsample of 18 students and 3 teachers who took part in the semi-structured interviews.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 24 items, which demonstrated strong overall reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.924$). The 24 items were developed by the researcher through a deductive process grounded in the literature reviewed above, from which three eight-item subscales—situations of teacher code-switching, pedagogical value, and psychological effects—were derived, each aligned with one of the study's three research questions. Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject-matter experts to establish content validity and piloted with a small group of postgraduate students to check item clarity and comprehensibility. Item-total and item-subscale correlations for each of the three subscales were all statistically significant ($p < .001$), supporting the internal validity of the instrument. Reliability was also assessed for each subscale individually, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .819 for the teacher code-switching situations subscale, .912 for the pedagogical value subscale, and .921 for the psychological effects subscale, in addition to the overall coefficient of .924. In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers and eighteen students to obtain richer, in-depth accounts of participants' perceptions and experiences.

The questionnaire was organized into three eight-item subscales, each corresponding to one research question: situations of teacher code-switching (see Figure 1), perceived pedagogical value of code-switching (see Figure 2), and perceived psychological effects of code-switching (see Figure 3). All items were rated on a five-point agreement scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data

collection and analysis. Quantitative data were collected first via the questionnaire completed by students, followed by qualitative data collection via semi-structured interviews with both students and teachers, used to elaborate on the quantitative findings and incorporate the perspectives of teachers. The semi-structured interview protocol was structured around the same three thematic areas as the questionnaire—situations of teacher code-switching, its pedagogical value, and its psychological effects—consistent with the theoretical framework guiding the study and established a priori, allowing the two strands to converge in addressing each research question; since only students completed the questionnaire, their perspectives drew on both instruments, whereas teachers' perspectives came solely from the interviews. Integration of the two strands was achieved at the interpretive stage, whereby the qualitative findings pertaining to each research question were synthesized with their corresponding quantitative results to yield a unified interpretation. For data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative interview data.

3. Results

This section presents the results of the analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data for each of the three research questions. For each question, questionnaire results are reported and interpreted followed by the results of the thematic analysis of the interviews.

3.1 RQ1: In What Situations Do English Teachers Use Code-switching between English and Arabic in EFL Classrooms?

3.1.1 Quantitative Findings

The first research question examined the frequency of teacher code-switching across eight instructional situations. As presented in Table 1, the subscale mean was $M = 29.57$ ($SD = 5.82$) out of a possible total of 40, corresponding to an item-level mean of $M = 3.70$ on the five-point scale. This score falls within the 'Agree' range and indicates that postgraduate students generally perceived code-switching as a recurrent, though not constant, feature of their instructional experience.

The two highest-rated situations were responding to student confusion (Item 5: $M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.90$) and explaining complex academic concepts (Item 1: $M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.88$). These results suggest that students perceive Arabic as functioning most predominantly as a reactive comprehension support mechanism—deployed in response to observable learning difficulties rather than as a proactive or routine instructional strategy. Clarifying specialised terminology ($M = 3.83$) and providing assignment and assessment instructions ($M = 3.77$) also received relatively elevated scores, reflecting the importance of code-switching in situations where precision and accuracy of understanding carry direct academic consequences.

In contrast, the lowest-rated items were answering routine questions about course content ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.24$), guiding academic writing and research tasks ($M = 3.45$), and summarizing key lecture points ($M = 3.48$). The substantially wider standard deviations associated with these items indicate greater interindividual variability in perceived teacher practice for these functional contexts, suggesting that students perceive instructors as adopting divergent approaches to the use of Arabic in routine academic interaction and content consolidation.

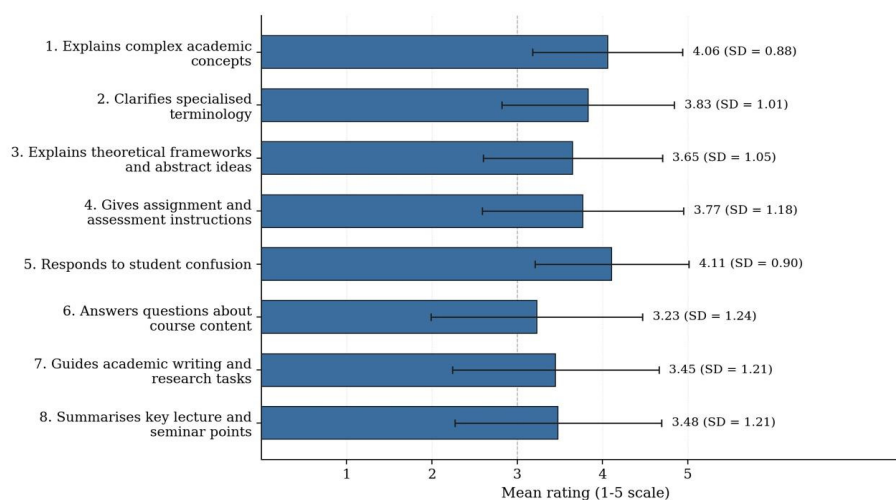


Figure 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Situations in Which Teachers Use Code-Switching ($N = 65$)

Note. Items were rated on a five-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). M = mean; SD = standard

3.1.2 Qualitative Findings

Two themes emerged from the student interviews: Arabic as a targeted clarification tool, and preference for selective and purposive code switching. As for the first theme, students reported that teachers switch to Arabic intentionally in order to explain difficult concepts or unfamiliar lexical items or communicate complex task requirements. This supports the questionnaire findings surfacing students' confusion and difficult concepts as the highest requirements for switching to Arabic. The qualitative data also showed that students appreciated switching to Arabic for removing ambiguity that may arise in assignment instructions, such as grading criteria, presentation standards, or research task expectation. Therefore, code-switching appears, from students' perspective, to serve as a form of meta-communicative scaffolding, with potential implications for academic performance.

The second theme shows that despite students' approval and support for the use of Arabic besides English in their classroom, several students highlighted that switching to Arabic should be kept for cognitive necessity. Some of them, especially those with high L2 proficiency, emphasized frequent switching to Arabic may delay their L2 acquisition and reduce their intrinsic motivation to engage independently with academic English. These views explain the lower and more dispersed quantitative results related to routine content questions, academic writing guidance and summaries of lectures, suggesting that pedagogically switching to Arabic is less preferred.

As for the teacher-participants, all of them indicated that they employ an English-dominant approach rather than Arabic-dominant approach. However, they rejected both strict English-only strategies and free bilingual practices. Teachers' opinions related to when to employ code switching are in line with the results of the questionnaire items, including complex theoretical constructs, disciplinary terminology, assignment specifications, research methodology requirements, assessment criteria, and instance of observable student confusion. Furthermore, the teachers' interview data generated an important theme related to their decision to use code switching: responsive, context-sensitive decision making. They reported what encouraged them to use Arabic were the behaviors of the students, such as lack of vocabulary participation, incorrect responses, and some paralinguistic cues such as facial expressions and conversational silence. One teacher described the situation as "reading the room", while another stressed the immediate switch back to English after providing clarification in Arabic. These accounts distinguished between two types of code switching: intentional and non-intentional. The former is a planned one encouraged by difficult terminology or complex content, whereas the latter is spontaneous employed as a solution for communication failures during instructions.

Combining quantitative and qualitative data sources provides a comprehensive account. Based on the questionnaire findings, code switching was a response to confusion and difficult content. Student interviews indicated that switching to Arabic was an instrument for clarification when students find it difficult to rely only on English to understand the meaning of certain terms. Similarly, teacher interview emphasized this explanation by attributing switching to Arabic to students' comprehension challenges. Therefore, EFL teachers' use of code-switching functions mainly as a strategic, temporary, and context-responsive scaffold.

3.2 RQ2: How Do Teachers and Students Perceive the Pedagogical Value of Code-switching?

3.2.1 Quantitative Findings

The second research question examined students' evaluations of code-switching as a pedagogical instrument. As shown in Table 2, the subscale mean was $M = 32.32$ ($SD = 5.54$), corresponding to an item-level average of $M = 4.04$ ---a score that falls solidly within the 'Agree' range and reflects broad and consistent student endorsement of code-switching as pedagogically valuable. Crucially, all eight items produced means at or above 3.94, indicating that positive perceptions were not confined to a subset of pedagogical functions but were distributed across the full range of instructional domains assessed.

The highest-rated item was the perception that code-switching helps students understand complex academic content ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.67$), which also displayed the narrowest standard deviation in the subscale---an indicator of particularly strong consensus across the sample. The items concerning following theoretical and abstract discussions ($M = 4.12$) and understanding specialized terminology ($M = 4.08$) ranked second and third, respectively, reflecting the specific demands of postgraduate academic engagement. Three items shared the lowest mean ($M = 3.94$): clarifying assessment expectations, supporting discipline-specific comprehension, and supporting learning while maintaining English use. The uniform endorsement of the final item is theoretically notable, suggesting that students conceptualize code-switching as compatible with---rather than antithetical to---continued English-medium learning.

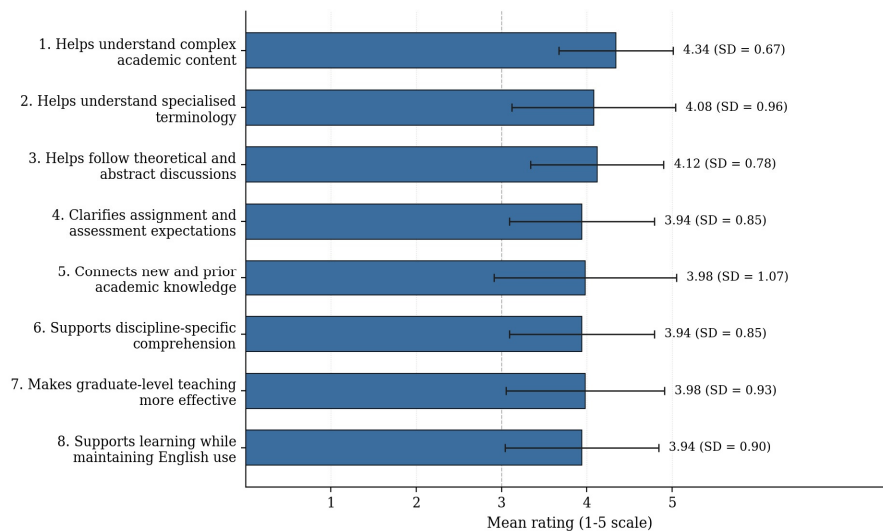


Figure 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Pedagogical Value of Code-Switching (N = 65)

Note. Items were rated on a five-point agreement scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

3.2.2 Qualitative Findings

As a result of the thematic analysis of the interviews, the pedagogical value of CS can be presented under three mechanisms: conceptual scaffolding, task-specific clarification, and balanced bilingual support.

Various students reported that switching to Arabic enabled them to build a stable understanding of concepts before engaging with ideas in English. They described this process as verifying comprehension, disambiguating meaning, or linking English academic terms to existing conceptual frameworks encoded in Arabic, similar to Vygotskian notion of L1 as a cognitive scaffold that mediates access to advanced content. Thus, from students' perspective, switching to Arabic appears to reduce the gap between language processing and disciplinary understanding.

As for task clarification, students highlighted the value of Arabic in context of postgraduate assessment. They reported that it reduces ambiguity in assignment requirements, presentation expectations, grading criteria, academic writing instructions, and research task specifications. This enabled them to employ cognitive resources appropriately for the quality and substance of their work. This finding offers an explanation for the high questionnaire mean for assignment instruction, suggesting that CS serves a pedagogical function that is not limited to content delivery but also includes the communication of academic expectations and procedural requirements.

Regarding balanced bilingual support, students did not encourage switching to Arabic unrestrictedly. This was because they preferred primarily English-dominant instruction whereby English is used with sporadic switching to Arabic when a serious need arises. They based their preference for an English-dominant medium and restricted use of Arabic in order not to reduce exposure to English, decrease listening and speaking practice, slow fluency development, and increase overreliance on Arabic translation as a comprehension strategy. This supports the questionnaire finding that the use of CS is a conditional strategy.

Teachers' accounts met those of the students in terms of the necessity of CS in restricted and controlled environments for the optimal pedagogical value. They viewed switching to Arabic as a bridge that is temporary but necessary for the students to understand the content and develop academic English. They identified specific pedagogical functions of CS include clarifying complex theoretical concepts and research frameworks, analysing grading criteria, and understanding meaning of unfamiliar or technical terms. Furthermore, teachers articulated certain stipulations to govern the use of code switching, such as employing Arabic only when the need arises and switching back to English when clarification is made. They indicated their awareness of negative consequences of the excessive use of Arabic in the EFL classroom as this may result in dependency, affect L2 exposure, and decrease students' effort to engage with academic English. Therefore, the overall perspective of the teachers supports a conditional model of pedagogical value that CS can be optimally employed as an effective instructional tool when it is strategic, limited, and incorporated within primarily English-dominant teaching approach.

Merging the questionnaire and interview findings helps answer RQ2. The quantitative findings show agreement among participants that CS has pedagogical value through diverse functions. At the same time, the interview findings extend

the quantitative ones by explaining how Arabic can be switched to for maximum benefits without negatively affecting exposure to English. Therefore, to answer RQ2, both teachers and students perceive CS as pedagogically valuable, particularly when used strategically and selectively.

3.3 RQ3: How Do Teachers and Students Perceive the Psychological Effects of Code-switching on Students, Particularly in Terms of Anxiety, Confidence, Classroom Comfort, Motivation, and Willingness to Communicate in English

3.3.1 Quantitative Findings

The third research question examined the perceived psychological effects of strategic code-switching for postgraduate EFL students, specifically their anxiety, confidence, classroom comfort, motivation, and willingness to communicate in English. As shown in Table 3, the subscale mean was $M = 32.02$ ($SD = 6.28$), with an item-level average of $M = 4.00$. This score falls within the 'Agree' range and indicates that students generally perceived strategic code-switching as having positive psychological effects. The slightly wider standard deviations observed in this subscale, relative to the pedagogical value subscale, suggest greater interindividual variability in psychological responses to bilingual instruction.

The highest-rated item was the reduction of anxiety during cognitively demanding content ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.97$), followed by increased confidence to ask questions ($M = 4.05$), encouragement to express ideas in English ($M = 4.03$), and the creation of a supportive and inclusive classroom environment ($M = 4.02$). These four items---which form a coherent cluster around anxiety reduction, confidence enhancement, communicative engagement, and psychological safety---produced the most consistent responses in the subscale. The item addressing engagement and motivation ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.11$) received the lowest mean and the widest standard deviation in the subscale, indicating that code-switching's perceived influence on motivation is both less pronounced and considerably more variable across students than its perceived influence on anxiety and confidence.

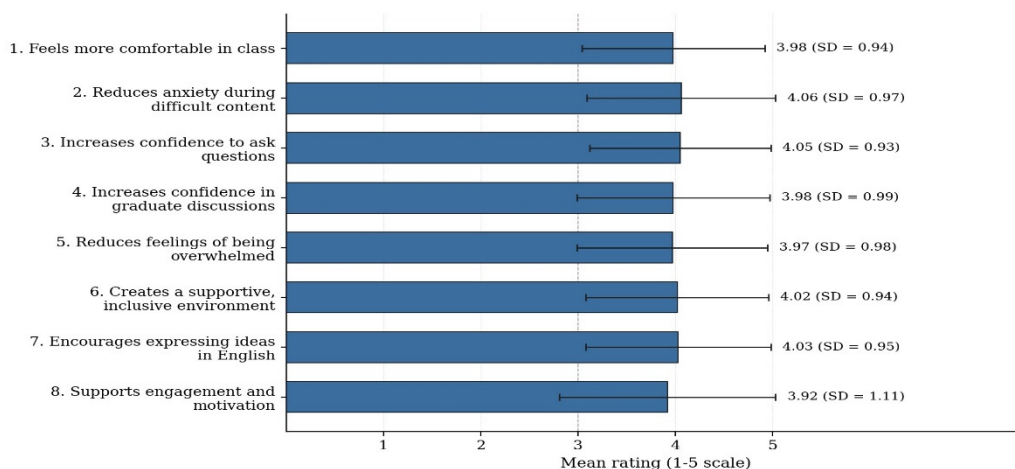


Figure 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Psychological Effects of Code-Switching ($N = 65$)

Note. Items were rated on a five-point agreement scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

3.3.2 Qualitative Findings

The analysis of the interview data resulted in the emergence of the following themes: anxiety reduction and affective reassurance, confidence building and increased participation, and psychological safety and classroom belonging.

Participants indicated learning in an English-only approach caused them psychological pressure, especially when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, research specific terminology, or complex assessment-related discourse. However, when these issues are resolved by using Arabic clarification, they feel that the cognitive and emotional burden is removed and that they can focus their attention to conceptual content instead of being anxious about understanding the medium of instruction. The interview finding contextualises the questionnaire result for anxiety reduction, indicating how CS is perceived to contribute to removing uncertainty and reducing their anxiety.

As for confidence building and increased participation, many participants reported the efficiency of switching to Arabic in reducing their fear of committing errors, and confirming their comprehension. This, in turn, lessens the perceived social and academic consequences of participating in classroom discussions in English. The analysis also indicated that

students follow a sequential process associated with learning through CS; they reported that they begin with achieving conceptual clarity through Arabic and after feeling sufficiently confident, they formulate and express their ideas in English. This sequence explains the results of the questionnaire related to confidence and encouragement to ask questions and express ideas in English. This suggests that the CS approach does not replace the L2-only approach for English production, but rather provides the affective circumstances that facilitate English production.

Regarding the psychological wellbeing and classroom belonging, multiple students perceived CS as a tool that converts the communicative atmosphere of the classroom from high-pressure, English-only environment requiring constant performance to a more relaxing, stress-free environment characterized by collaboration and psychological safety where questions and participation are perceived as genuinely welcome. It is noteworthy that many participants perceived the teachers' use of CS as an act of pedagogical care, implying an extra attention to authentic comprehension rather than superficial content delivery, thus enhancing both the teacher-student relationship and the broader learning community. However, students with a high-level English proficiency reported different views on the use of Arabic inside the English classrooms. They believed that it may decrease the productive challenge required for advanced language development. Some students mentioned that excessive use of Arabic may reduce their motivation and make the maintenance of the English-only approach of learning more difficult. These views justify the low mean and high inconsistency noticed on the motivation item in the questionnaire.

Teachers expressed views that are similar and supportive for those of the students. They reported observing increased student willingness to ask questions, participate in classroom discussions, and respond to instruction after the teacher makes clarification in Arabic. They also explained that students often experience a dual cognitive burden: first they must understand the instructional content and then provide their responses in English. The presence of Arabic, in this case, was described as temporarily reducing the linguistic processing burden, allowing them to devote more cognitive resources to comprehending and engaging with subject matter instead of struggling with language production. Additionally, their views were aligned with those of the students in terms of the limitations of the psychological support function of CS. Like the students, the teachers warned against the excessive use of Arabic, highlighting that it may lead to dependency, reduce exposure to L2, and, on the long run, weaken students' preparation for English-medium academic and professional contexts such as international conferences, scholarly publications, and high-level examinations, where effective communication in English is vital.

Combining both quantitative and qualitative findings offers an answer to RQ3. The questionnaire findings affirmed a number of positive psychological effects of CS in terms of enhancing confidence and classroom atmosphere, and alleviating students' learning anxiety. Relatedly, the interview data explained the mechanisms supporting CS psychological effects in that its use confirms comprehension, eliminates the fear of committing errors, and enhances communication psychological safety. Moreover, they determined the conditions for successfully mitigating these challenges. Consequently, the answer to RQ3 is that strategic CS has generally positive perceived psychological effects on students in the classroom. These positive effects were evident in anxiety reduction, confidence development, classroom wellbeing, and participation encouragement. However, CS influence on motivation is generally positive but significantly more variable, depending on students' level of proficiency and their language preference. The dominant role of CS is to provide affective safety without hampering productive challenges. In other words, Arabic should assist in confirming comprehension, reducing barriers to participation, and building a sense of academic belonging, whereas English remains the main teaching and learning medium based on which students develop and demonstrate academic language competence.

3.4 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The findings of the three research questions showed a consistent and theoretically meaningful pattern. Strategic CS was most beneficial when employed as a pedagogical scaffold and a psychological safety mechanism that should be used selectively when a real cognitive necessity arises because of its ability to simplify academic content and assignment requirements, and its vital psychological role in alleviating anxiety, and improving students' confidence and willingness to participate in English classes. The interview findings did not repeat those of the questionnaire, but also explained the processes through which maximum benefits of CS can be obtained, including lessening cognitive burden, eliminating task ambiguity, supporting conceptual mapping between Arabic and English frameworks, and providing the affective conditions that inspire active participation in stress-free English classes. The findings also do not support the free and ungoverned use of Arabic in English classes to avoid any potential negative impacts, such as reducing exposure to L2, increasing L2 dependency, hindering speaking and listening practice, and impeding academic English fluency development. In other words, both students and teachers affirmed that the pedagogical and psychological benefits of CS should be considered cautiously within these boundaries to prevent the possible negative effects, qualifying it to function as a constructive teaching and learning tool.

4. Discussion

The current study explores the pedagogical value and perceived psychological effects of CS in Saudi postgraduate EFL classrooms through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Combining quantitative and qualitative data, the results of the study showed that participants perceived using Arabic in English classrooms not as an alternative to the English-medium approach, but as a strategic pedagogical tool that facilitates learning when used cautiously. The discussion of the findings is made with reference to the three research questions under which the current findings are linked to those of the previous research.

4.1 Situations in Which Teachers Use Code-Switching

As for the first research question exploring the situation in which teachers use CS, the findings showed that teachers were reported to employ CS selectively in situations involving high cognitive demand, such as complex academic concepts, disciplinary terminology, assignment specifications, research methodology requirements, assessment criteria, and instances of observable student confusion. On the other hand, CS appeared less frequent during routine classroom interaction, lecture summaries, and academic writing guidance. These findings confirm the results of the previous studies. For example, Alshughithri (2019) reported that Saudi EFL teachers employ CS for clarification, translation and checking understanding. Similarly, the results of Zaghlool and Altamimi (2023) showed that both Saudi EFL teachers and students acknowledged the benefits of CS in understanding unfamiliar topics and grammatical structures, and in creating a stress-free learning atmosphere. The current findings add to the previous ones by suggesting that CS is perceived as remaining an effective learning tool even at the advanced levels such as of the postgraduate students rather than a linguistic deficiency. The study also supports the theoretical perspective of the Sociocultural Theory as it showed that L1 (Arabic in this case) serves as a mediational tool that scaffolds EFL learners' comprehension within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Switching to Arabic sporadically, teachers bridge the gap between learners' current knowledge and complex disciplinary content. This is consistent with the use of Arabic functioning as a cognitive scaffold rather than a substitute for English.

4.2 Pedagogical Value of Code-Switching

According to the findings, the pedagogical value of CS received positive perceptions and attitude from both teachers and students. They viewed it as a complementary tool for learning English rather than a substitute. Participants reported that switching to Arabic improved their comprehension of difficult materials and helped them link what they already knew with new concepts. In line with these findings, the previous research showed that CS had positive educational functions. Cook (2008) for example, states that the use of learner's L1 helps in understanding difficult concept. Similarly, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009) considered L1 use a facilitator rather than a barrier. Studies by Al Tale and AlQahtani (2022) and Mohamed Ali El Deen et al. (2025) reported that CS enhanced Saudi EFL learners' comprehension and academic achievement. Likewise, the results of Pondan Perlindungan Leoanak and Kurniati Amalo (2018) concluded that CS is an important tool for academic achievement, understanding difficult lexical items, and abstract concepts.

A significant contribution of the current study is that its findings affirm the function of CS as a tool for conceptual scaffolding which facilitates L2 learning. The participants indicated how the Arabic brief clarification facilitated understanding complex concepts before discussing them in English. From a theoretical perspective, the current findings corroborate Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory as learners' L1 functions as cognitive resource, mediating learning and enhancing high-order thinking. However, participants emphasized the use of a balanced approach whereby English should be retained as the dominant language in the classroom and Arabic should be used restrictedly. This supports recent bilingual approaches to language teaching, where neither unrestricted use of L1 nor strict L2-only are encouraged.

4.3 Perceived Psychological Effects of Code-Switching

The third research question focused on the perceived psychological effects of CS on Saudi EFL learners. The findings show that participants perceived CS as alleviating their anxiety, enhancing their confidence, and increasing their participation and engagement. Participants reported that they felt a certain amount of comfort asking questions and engaging in participation after the teacher introduced them in Arabic to the difficult concepts.

These findings corroborate those of the previous studies proving the positive impact of CS affective functions on the perceived psychological effects of L2 learners and foreign language classroom in general. Studies such as Bhatti et al. (2018), Istifei (2019), and Wijaya et al. (2020) reported that using learners' L1 in L2 classes alleviates anxiety and increases their confidence. The findings of the previous studies also revealed that CS offers a relaxing stress-free learning environment in which learners are encouraged to participate (Malik, 2014; Selamat, 2014; Cahyani et al., 2018; Narasuman et al., 2019). The current findings offer deep insight into how affective advantages emerge. Having

experienced Arabic in the classroom, participants reported that their fear of misunderstanding difficult matters faded away and that they began to focus their attention towards learning rather than being worried about language proficiency issues. Again, Arabic is not a substitute for English instruction; it is a psychologically encouraging tool for participation.

Furthermore, the findings provide robust approval for Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that learning takes place more effectively in low-anxiety and high-confidence environments. As for the present study, switching to Arabic minimizes learners' affective filter, which, in turn, enhances their comprehension, confidence, and engagement in English input. However, some participants, mainly teachers and advanced students, highlighted that overreliance on Arabic may impede long-term English development since it lessens opportunities for authentic language practice. This issue was already emphasized in various previous studies, such as Richards and Rodgers (2001), Martin (2005), and Lightbown (2001) who maintained that overreliance on learners' L1 in L2 learning may negatively influence exposure to L2. The present study, therefore, suggests that the affective gains of CS depend on control and moderation. As the results showed, while strategic CS enhances learners' confidence, it preserves a room for sufficient exposure for L2 development.

To conclude, strategic CS serves interrelated pedagogical and psychological roles in Saudi postgraduate EFL classrooms. Pedagogically, it functions as cognitive scaffolding that facilitates understanding of complex academic content and specialized terminology; psychologically, it contributes to anxiety reduction, confidence building, and greater classroom participation. However, participants consistently emphasized that these benefits depend on moderation, with English retained as the dominant instructional medium and Arabic used selectively rather than habitually. These results support a flexible bilingual pedagogy over a strict English-only approach, and suggest that EFL teachers should be trained on when, why, and how to employ CS so as to enhance L2 learning without reducing learners' exposure to English.

Since this study focused on postgraduate EFL students in Saudi Arabia, transferability of its findings to other educational settings, proficiency levels, or cultural settings may be limited. Others may perceive and experience switching to L1 differently. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to explore CS across different educational levels, and sociocultural settings. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling for the quantitative strand, together with the recruitment of participants from a limited number of institutions (three universities), may limit the generalizability of the questionnaire findings to the broader population of Saudi postgraduate EFL learners. Similarly, since interview participants were selected primarily on the basis of specialization and willingness to participate rather than stratification by proficiency level or gender, the transferability of the qualitative findings across more varied learner and instructor profiles should be interpreted with caution.

As the study relied on participants' perceptions of CS use elicited from the questionnaire and interview data, this data may be biased or influenced by social desirability which may not fully indicate the real implementation of CS inside the classroom. Therefore, future research may involve classroom observation and conversation analysis to investigate the natural use of CS during instruction and the actual responses of learners to such practice.

Finally, the study explored the pedagogical value and perceived psychological effects of CS on EFL learners, not leaving room for the influence of CS on academic achievement and performance, or long-term L2 proficiency. With this limitation, future longitudinal and experimental investigations are encouraged to explore the impact of switching to learners' L1 on English proficiency, academic achievement, and learner autonomy.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank all the students and teachers who participated in this study for their time and valuable insights.

Author contributions

Dr. Hassan Saleem Alqurashi was solely responsible for the study design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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