ISSN 1798-4769 (print); ISSN 2053-0684 (online)
Journal of Language Teaching and Research, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 86-97, January 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1701.09

A Comparative Study of Code-Switching in Communication Between First- and Fourth-Year English Majors at a University in Vietnam

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***Abstract*—This study investigates the phenomenon of code-switching among English language learners, focusing on the influence of their first language and second language and identifies differences and similarities between the two groups. It examines code-switching among first- and fourth-year English majors at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research employed a mixed-method approach, collecting data through questionnaires completed by 240 students and semi-structured interviews with 10 lecturers and 10 students involved in experimental classes. The results reveal that first-year English majors use code-switching more frequently and across a wider range of contexts, including classroom and casual conversations, mainly due to limited vocabulary, lower fluency, and a lack of confidence. In contrast, fourth-year students use code-switching less often and in a more selective, strategic manner, typically in important academic discussions or when expressing complex concepts. English should be consistently used as the main language of instruction, though reasonable alternation between the mother tongue and English can still support learning. Based on these findings, the study proposes solutions to improve speaking skills and limit unnecessary code-switching, including creating an English-only environment, enhancing vocabulary, and encouraging participation in English activities such as presentations, role-plays, and debates. Lecturers should provide timely feedback and increase opportunities for real-life English communication to develop more effective language reflexes.**

***Index Terms*—code-switching, comparative study, communication, English-majored students**

I. Introduction

English has become a global language due to historical, political, and economic factors. No longer restricted to native speakers, English has evolved into a "world language" used and modified by people across different cultures and linguistic backgrounds. In this context, multilingualism and code-switching have become common, and the interconnection of languages is essential for effective communication (Kachru, 1992). Communication bridges individuals by enabling message exchange and interpretation. In bilingual contexts, code-switching between L1 and L2 helps manage conversation flow. It enhances clarity and mutual understanding (Ervin-Tripp, 2001). Recent sociolinguistic research has

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increasingly recognized code-switching not as a sign of linguistic deficiency but as a complex, identity-expressive, and purposeful communicative act (García & Wei, 2021).

In the context of Vietnam, a linguistically diverse country with Vietnamese as the national language and numerous ethnic minority languages, globalization and digital integration have influenced patterns of language use. These influences have led to hybridization in communication, with English increasingly present in Vietnamese discourse, particularly in contemporary literature, youth expression, and professional settings (Nguyen, 2022). Code-switching between Vietnamese and English is especially common among employees in foreign-invested enterprises and in both oral and written forms of workplace communication (Nguyen, 2021). In general, English classrooms, teachers often switch to Vietnamese to explain complex concepts, manage interactions, and support low-proficiency students (Van Nguyen, 2022). Both teachers and students at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City have expressed a preference for a balanced use of Vietnamese and English, noting that code-switching helps reduce learner anxiety and build rapport (Tam, 2024). However, concerns surrounding linguistic purity and national language policy have given rise to debates about the appropriateness of code-switching in formal education settings (Wikipedia, 2025).

Further during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), the rise of platforms like Zoom, Facebook, TikTok, and Microsoft Teams created new spaces for real-time, text-based interaction, where code-switching became common. Among Vietnamese youth, especially English majors, digital communication often blends local and global languages to express nuance, identity, and social connection. Understanding code-switching in this context is key to improving English communication and informing discussions on language use, identity, and policy in a globalized, digital society.

The study aims to explore the characteristics of code-switching in communication among English majors, with a particular focus on how their first language (L1) and second language (L2) influence language choice. It further seeks to examine the similarities and differences in code-switching behavior between first- and fourth-year students. The research attempts to answer the following questions:

(1) How frequently do first- and fourth-year English majors use code-switching between their first language (L1) and second language (L2) in communication?

(2) What similarities and differences exist in the code-switching patterns between first- and fourth-year students in relation to their first language (L1) and second language (L2)?

II. Literature Review

A. Conceptualizing Code-Switching

Myers-Scotton (1993) sees code-switching as socially motivated, where speakers switch languages to express social roles, negotiate power, or build group identity, making it a context-driven communicative strategy rather than random mixing. García and Wei (2021) argue from a translanguaging perspective that bilinguals draw from a unified linguistic repertoire rather than separate languages. Duggal and Asogwa (2025) further view code-switching as both a linguistic tool and a socially grounded practice that aids identity construction and meaning negotiation in multilingual settings.

B. Code-Switching in Bilingual Communication

Myers-Scotton (1993) argues that bilinguals consciously choose "marked" or "unmarked" codes to negotiate social roles, assert authority or solidarity, and adapt to contexts. García and Wei's (2021) translanguaging model views languages as a unified, flexible repertoire used creatively for meaning-making and identity expression, with code-switching as one strategy. Wintner et al. (2023) tested the Triggering Hypothesis, finding shared lexical items like cognates predict switching points based on proximity. Cedden et al. (2024) link cognitive and sociolinguistic factors, urging integration of linguistic and cognitive research on code-switching. Özkara et al. (2025) highlight cognitive control and language entropy's role in shaping switching, referencing the Adaptive Control Hypothesis.

C. Challenges and Controversies Surrounding Code-Switching

In the Classroom

Code-switching aids comprehension, scaffolds learning, and reduces anxiety in second language acquisition (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). However, excessive code-switching may limit immersion and target language exposure, potentially hindering proficiency (Macaro, 2001). Teachers often face pressure to maintain language purity, causing tension between pedagogy and policy (García & Lin, 2017). While code-switching enhances emotional expression and understanding, it can be mistaken for incompetence (Dewaele & Wu, 2021). Teachers use it effectively, but students may feel confused by irregular patterns (Younas et al., 2023).

In Society

From a sociolinguistic perspective, code-switching can reflect social identity, group membership, or power dynamics (Myers-Scotton, 1993). However, it may also trigger negative attitudes linked to linguistic purism—the ideology that promotes "pure" language use and stigmatizes mixing (Woolard, 1998). Such attitudes can lead to social marginalization of bilingual speakers or pressure to conform to monolingual norms (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). Language policies in many countries often emphasize monolingualism for national unity or educational standardization, creating controversy when code-switching challenges these goals (Spolsky, 2004). People use code-switching as a survival strategy in predominantly white workplaces, which raises issues of assimilation pressure and racial identity (Adams, 2024).

Psychological and Sociolinguistic Challenges

Psycholinguistic theories emphasize the cognitive demands of managing multiple languages, with code-switching requiring complex executive control (Green & Abutalebi, 2013), which can be challenging in conflicting language environments. Socially, bilinguals balance multiple identities and language ideologies, causing tension between personal expression and societal expectations (Li, 2018). The debate continues over whether code-switching signals linguistic deficiency or a sophisticated strategy (García & Wei, 2021). Frequent code-switchers may gain cognitive flexibility but also experience increased self-monitoring stress (Dewaele et al., 2022). High cognitive control is needed, and frequent or pressured code-switching can cause mental fatigue (Merry et al., 2023).

D. Pedagogical and Sociolinguistic Benefits of Code-Switching

Cognitive Benefits:

Bilinguals who frequently switch languages develop greater cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness, enhancing language acquisition and academic performance. In higher education, these skills support abstract thinking and problem-solving. Thus, code-switching is not just a conversational tool but a cognitive exercise aiding language learning, cross-cultural communication, and intellectual growth (Antoniou & Myers-Scotton, 1993; Wright, 2017). A longitudinal study found that less frequent code-switching within a single-language context linked to better inhibitory control, benefiting executive function development (Oliva et al., 2020). Research shows bilinguals managing multiple languages often have improved attentional control, task-switching, and metalinguistic awareness (Wikipedia contributors, 2025).

Pedagogical Benefits in the FL Classroom:

Code-switching can improve student comprehension of complex materials, as learners leverage their stronger language (often L1) to access and internalize new content in the target language (Wardaniatul & James, 2024). It contributes to a more inclusive and engaging classroom environment, fostering student participation and emotional comfort, especially when students feel language is not a barrier to learning. Teachers report that brief code-switches can bring attention back, re-engage students who have "zoned out," and create an enabling learning atmosphere and educators using code-switching authentically can build rapport, signal solidarity, and help students feel more confident in using both languages (Li et al., 2022).

Sociolinguistic & Communicative Benefits:

Beyond social bonding, code-switching plays a key role in identity performance and negotiation. Sociolinguistically, language constructs self-image and group belonging (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Applied linguistics views code-switching as part of translanguaging pedagogy, which treats language use as a flexible, integrated system (García & Wei, 2021). In higher education, code-switching helps multilingual students understand complex ideas, express themselves authentically, and engage cognitively. It also serves as an indexical tool, signaling cultural meanings and social identities, reflecting affiliations and attitudes (Silverstein, 2003).

E. Review of Previous Study

Several recent international and domestic studies have explored various aspects of code-switching, focusing on its cognitive and social aspects, especially in recent years as follows:

Previous International Studies:

Özkara et al. (2025) highlight cognitive control and language entropy in shaping bilingual switching, based on the Adaptive Control Hypothesis. Duggal and Asogwa (2025) see code-switching as both a linguistic and social practice aiding identity and meaning negotiation. Adams (2024) discusses code-switching as a survival strategy in mainly white workplaces, raising assimilation and racial identity issues. Dewaele et al. (2022) found frequent code-switchers have greater cognitive flexibility but more self-monitoring stress. Merry et al. (2023) note code-switching requires high cognitive control and can cause mental fatigue under pressure. Younas et al. (2023) report that while code-switching benefits bilingual classrooms, students can be confused by inconsistent use.

Previous studies in Vietnam:

Nguyen (2017) studied English–Vietnamese code-switching among engineers in a multinational oil & gas company, finding it used for technical emphasis, group identity, and when Vietnamese lacked equivalents. Despite concerns over language purity, attitudes remained positive. Nguyen (2021) found that professionals in foreign-invested enterprises frequently code-switch in both oral and written workplace communication. Van Nguyen (2022) showed that teachers in tertiary General English classes code-switch mainly for pedagogical, administrative, and interactional reasons, particularly to aid low-proficiency students. Le (2022) found that lecturers and students use code-switching in speech and texting, both strategically and habitually, to enhance classroom communication. Nguyen (2024) reported that students and teachers at a Ho Chi Minh City university preferred balanced use of English and Vietnamese, with code-switching reducing anxiety and strengthening rapport.

F. Research Gaps

While many studies have explored code-switching in educational and workplace settings, few have examined how it evolves across different stages of language learning. In particular, the contrast between first-year and fourth-year English majors remains under-researched. Most existing work has concentrated on teachers' practices and general student attitudes, with limited attention to the communicative, cognitive, and emotional roles of code-switching in university

contexts. This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the patterns and motivations of code-switching among student groups.

III. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study used a mixed-method approach to examine code-switching among first- and fourth-year English majors at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It aimed to compare similarities and differences in their English communication. Data were collected from 240 students using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with both teachers and students.

B. Participants

The survey involved 240 English majors from a Vietnamese university, split evenly between first-year and fourth-year students (ages 18–22), all native Vietnamese speakers. Participation was voluntary. To deepen insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students (5 from each group) and 10 experienced English lecturers, enhancing the validity of the qualitative data.

C. Instruments

The questionnaire gathered data on students' code-switching frequency, contexts, and attitudes through three sections: demographics, behaviors (rated on a 5-point Likert scale), and attitudes (also on a 5-point scale). Ten students (five from each year group) and ten faculty members were interviewed to explore reasons, perceptions, and changes in code-switching over time. Interviews lasted 20–30 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and analyzed thematically. The interview guide was expert-reviewed for content validity.

D. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over six weeks using a mixed-method approach. Questionnaires were given to 120 first-year and 120 fourth-year students, with responses analyzed using descriptive statistics in Excel. For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews with 10 lecturers and 10 students were transcribed and analyzed thematically to explore patterns, motivations, and impacts of code-switching.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Results

Demographic Information of Participants

Table 1
Demographic Information (N=120)

No.	Variable	Options	First-Year Students (n/%)	Fourth-Year Students (n/%)
1	Gender	Male	46/38.3%	39/32.5%
		Female	74/61.7%	81/67.5%
2	Age group	19	71/59.2%	0/0.0%
		20	34/28.3%	0/0.0%
		21	5/4.2%	0/0.0%
		22	7/5.8%	92/76.7%
		>22	3/2.5%	28/23.3%
3	Studied/lived in English-speaking country	Yes	0/0.0%	0/0.0%
		No	120/100%	120/100%
4	Frequency of English use outside class	Never	30/25.0%	5/4.2%
		Rarely	34/28.3%	17/14.2%
		Sometimes	35/29.2%	56/46.7%
		Often	13/10.8%	25/20.8%
		Always	8/6.7%	17/14.2%
5	Communicate with native/fluent speakers	Yes	26/21.7%	87/72.5%
		No	94/78.3%	33/27.5%
6	Preferred language for daily communication	Vietnamese	41/34.2%	23/19.2%
		English	12/10%	45/37.5%
		Both equally	67/55.8%	52/43.3%

Based on the data from Table 1, each survey group included 120 English majors. Females were the majority in both groups: 74 (61.7%) in the first-year group and 81 (67.5%) in the fourth-year group. Regarding age, most first-year students were 19 or 20 years old, accounting for 87.5% (59.2% were 19 and 28.3% were 20). Most fourth-year students were 22 years old (76.7%), with the rest over 22 (23.3%). None had lived or studied in English-speaking countries. Most students live in Ho Chi Minh City and nearby areas, with Vietnamese as their first language.

There was a notable difference in English use outside the classroom: 53.3% of first-year students rarely or never used English, compared to only 18.4% of fourth-year students. Conversely, 81.6% of fourth-year students often used English outside class, reflecting their superior communication skills developed over four years.

Regarding communication with native or fluent English speakers, only 21.7% of first-year students had such opportunities, while 72.5% of fourth-year students did, indicating greater confidence and practical experience among seniors.

Finally, in daily communication, most first-year students used both Vietnamese and English (55.8%), followed by Vietnamese only (34.2%) and English only (10%). Fourth-year students preferred English more, with 37.5% using it primarily, 43.3% using both languages, and 19.2% favoring Vietnamese.

Code-Switching Behaviors of First- and Fourth-Year Students

TABLE 2
CODE-SWITCHING BEHAVIORS OF FIRST- AND FOURTH-YEAR STUDENTS (N=120*)*

No.	Item	Student Group	Never (n/%)	Rarely (n/%)	Sometimes (n/%)	Often (n/%)	Always (n/%)
7	I use Vietnamese when I do not know the appropriate English word.	1st-year	3/2.5	15 /12.5%	36/30%	35/ 29.2%	31/25.8%
		4th-year	19/ 15.8%	38/ 31.7%	33/27.5%	20/ 16.7%	10/8.3%
8	I switch languages when talking with classmates.	1st-year	4 /3.3%	21/17.5%	47/39.2%	33/27.5%	15/12.5%
		4th-year	20/16.7%	44/36.7%	29/24.2%	19/15.8%	8/6.7%
9	I code-switch during group work or presentations.	1st-year	2 /1.7%	14 /11.7%	46/38.3%	32/26.7%	26/21.7%
		4th-year	17/14.2%	56/46.7%	32/26.7%	8/6.7%	7/5.8%
10	I use both English and Vietnamese when speaking to lecturers.	1st-year	5/4.2%	17 /14.2%	42 /35.0%	30/25.0%	26/21.6%
		4th-year	25/20.8%	51/ 42.5%	31/25.9%	7/5.8%	6/5.0%
11	I use more Vietnamese than English in academic situations.	1st-year	3/2.5%	14/11.7%	45/37.5%	37/30.8%	21/17.5%
		4th-year	32/26.7%	47/39.2%	34/28.3%	4/3.3%	3/2.5%
12	I feel natural when mixing Vietnamese in my English speech.	1st-year	6/5.0%	6/5.0%	44/36.7%	36/30.0%	28/23.3%
		4th-year	24 /20.0%	29 /24.2%	37/30.8%	17/14.2%	13/10.8
13	I switch between English and Vietnamese to explain a complex idea.	1st-year	8/6.7%	12/10.0%	49/40.8%	25/20.8%	26/21.7%
		4th-year	21/17.5%	24 /20.0%	35 /29.2%	21/17.5%	19/15.8%

According to Table 2, the majority of first-year students reported a high frequency of code-switching behaviors, with approximately 91% selecting "Sometimes," "Often," or "Always" across the seven survey items. In contrast, fourth-year students also reported engaging in code-switching but to a lesser extent, with an average of around 69.5% choosing those same frequency levels, while about 30.5% selected "Never" or "Rarely." This shows that first-year students often use code-switching in communication situations, possibly due to limited English vocabulary and English skills, lack of confidence, so they rely more on language switching to express ideas more clearly. In contrast, fourth-year students used code-switching less, possibly because their English skills had improved, their vocabulary was rich, and they were more confident in communicating entirely in English in learning environments such as group work, presentations, and even with native speakers.

The Item 7 illustrates that 84.9% of first-year students reported use Vietnamese at varying levels (Sometimes, Often, Always) when they do not know the appropriate English word, indicating a strong reliance on code-switching due to limited vocabulary. In contrast, 47.5% of fourth-year students selected Never or Rarely, showing they were less likely to switch languages in such situations. This suggests that first-year students still struggle with vocabulary, while fourth-year students have gained more confidence and fluency, reducing their need for code-switching.

The Item 8, it was found that 79.2% of first-year students reported switching languages when talking to classmates (Sometimes, Often, Always), compared to only 46.7% of fourth-year students. This suggests that first-year students tend to rely more on switching languages in conversations with classmates, while fourth-year students rely less on this, possibly due to improved language proficiency.

The Item 9 indicates that 86.7% of first-year students used code-switching to varying degrees (Sometimes, Often, Always) when working in groups and giving presentations. In contrast, only 15.8% of fourth-year students did so. This reflects that first-year students are still limited in their language skills and vocabulary, so they tend to use code-switching more in situations that require academic communication such as working in groups or giving presentations.

As reflected in Item 10 that the majority of first-year students (41.6%) use both English and Vietnamese when communicating with lecturers. In contrast, fourth-year students rarely use both languages simultaneously, accounting for only 10.8%. This indicates that fourth-year students have sufficient knowledge and proficiency to communicate entirely in English with lecturers and tend to limit code-switching in their communication, unlike first-year students.

According to item 11, about 85.8% of first-year students use Vietnamese more than English in academic situations, compared to only 5.8% of fourth-year students. This is understandable since first-year students are new to their English major, have not yet completed enough foundational and specialized knowledge, and have had limited opportunities to practice, so they naturally rely more on Vietnamese than English.

Based on the data in item 12, about 90% of first-year students and only 25% of fourth-year students feel natural when mixing Vietnamese in their English speech. This difference suggests that first-year students may rely more on code-switching because they use it daily, both in and out of class, as a natural part of their language use, while fourth-year students tend to feel less need to incorporate Vietnamese when speaking English, possibly due to improved language proficiency and greater confidence.

Finally, item 13 regarding switching between English and Vietnamese to explain complex ideas shows that over 90.3% of first-year students and 33.3% of fourth-year students use code-switching to clarify complicated issues. This indicates that first-year students tend to rely heavily on code-switching to aid their understanding and communication of difficult concepts, whereas fourth-year students are more independent and confident in explaining complex ideas primarily in English.

Attitudes Toward Code-Switching Among First- and Fourth-Year Students

TABLE 3
ATTITUDES TOWARD CODE-SWITCHING OF FIRST- AND FOURTH-YEAR STUDENTS (N=120)

Statement	Group	Strongly Disagree (n/%)	Disagree (n/%)	Neutral (n/%)	Agree (n/%)	Strongly Agree (n/%)
14. Code-switching helps me express my ideas more clearly.	1st-year	0/ 0.0%	0/0.0%	43/35.8%	56/46.7%	21/17.5%
	4th-year	9/7.5%	34/28.3%	41/34.2%	26/21.7%	10/8.3%
15. Code-switching is a normal part of bilingual communication.	1st-year	0/0.0%	0/0.0%	35/29.2%	52/43.3%	33/27.5%
	4th-year	12/10%	17/14.2%	32/26.7%	41/34.2%	18/15.0%
16. I feel more confident when I am allowed to code-switch in class.	1st-year	2/1.7%	6/5.0%	43/35.8%	51/42.5%	18/15.0%
	4th-year	21/17.5%	40/33.3%	34/28.3%	14/11.7%	11/9.2%
17. Teachers should allow some degree of code-switching in language classrooms.	1st-year	1/0.8%	3/2.5%	8/6.7%	64/53.3%	44/36.7%
	4th-year	17/14.2%	19/15.8%	46/38.3%	19/15.8%	19/15.8%
18. Code-switching can cause confusion in academic communication.	1st-year	21/17.5%	43/35.8%	33/27.5%	13/10.8%	10/8.3%
	4th-year	16 /13.3%	15/12.5%	25/20.8%	41/34.2%	23/19.2%
19. I want to improve my English speaking skills without relying on code-switching.	1st-year	24/20%	41/34.2%	19/15.8%	19/15.8%	17/14.2%
	4th-year	2 /1.7%	3/2.5%	29/24.2%	52/43.3%	34/28.3%
20. Completely banning code-switching in class makes me feel pressured or anxious.	1st-year	7/5.8%	9/7.5%	31/25.8%	45/37.5%	28/23.3%
	4th-year	28/23.3%	41/34.2%	27/22.5%	15/12.5%	9/7.5%

The updated data of the 7 items in Table 3 shows that first-year students tend to agree with the positive benefits of code-switching in English communication, with the average percentage of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" being 56.06%. Meanwhile, the percentage of disagreement (including "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree") is only 16.09%, and 25.13% are neutral. In contrast to first-year students, fourth-year students show a lower level of agreement with the positive statements about code-switching, with the average percentage of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" being only 39.53%. However, it is noteworthy that in item 19, up to 71.6% of fourth-year students expressed their desire to improve their English speaking skills without relying on code-switching, while the rate of disagreement with this view was only 4.2%, and 24.2% chose the neutral option. These analyses show a clear difference in attitudes between the two groups. The first-

year students tend to favor and rely more on code-switching, while the fourth-year students disagree and have a more cautious attitude and focus more on using English exclusively in communication.

Item 14 shows that first-year students have a very positive attitude toward code-switching as a way to express their ideas more clearly, with a total of 64.2% selecting "Agree" (46.7%) and "Strongly Agree" (17.5%). 35.8% of the students remained neutral, and none chose "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree." This indicates that the majority of first-year students view code-switching as an effective tool to help them express their ideas. In contrast, fourth-year students showed a significantly lower level of agreement, with only 30% selecting "Agree" (21.7%) and "Strongly Agree" (8.3%). Meanwhile, 34.2% remained neutral, and as many as 35.8% chose "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree." This suggests a shift in perception among fourth-year students, indicating that they tend to no longer strongly support the use of code-switching to express ideas—possibly due to improved language proficiency or the influence of an academic environment that demands higher linguistic standards.

Item 15 presents that a total of 70.8% of first-year students had a positive attitude and thought that code-switching was normal in bilingual communication. 29.2% held a neutral attitude, and no students chose "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree", meaning there was no negative opinion. For fourth-year students, only 49.2% showed a positive attitude (of which 34.2% chose "Agree" and 15.0% chose "Strongly Agree"), 26.7% chose neutral, and a whopping 24.2% disagreed (of which 10.0% "Strongly Disagree" and 14.2% "Disagree"). The clear difference between the two groups of students suggests that there is a change in language perception over time. Fourth-year students may have experienced a more academically oriented environment, which may have led to a more cautious view of code-switching. Meanwhile, first-year students – who are not yet constrained by academic norms – tend to view code-switching as a familiar and natural part of everyday communication in a bilingual environment.

Item 16 reveals that a total of 57.5% of first-year students have a positive attitude, feeling more confident when they are allowed to code-switch in class (42.5% selected "Agree" and 15.0% selected "Strongly Agree"). 35.8% remained neutral, while only 6.7% expressed disagreement (1.7% "Strongly Disagree", 5.0% "Disagree"). Among fourth-year students, only 20.9% showed a positive attitude (11.7% "Agree" and 9.2% "Strongly Agree"), 28.3% were neutral, and a high 50.8% disagreed (17.5% "Strongly Disagree", 33.3% "Disagree"). This difference between the two groups reflects the development of language proficiency and learning psychology over time. First-year students often need to be allowed to code-switch in order to feel more at ease, reduce pressure, and build confidence in the classroom. In contrast, fourth-year students may already feel confident using English and may view code-switching as unnecessary or inappropriate in academic settings, leading them to feel less confident when using it in class.

It can be seen from Item 17 that first-year students have a highly positive attitude in supporting teachers allowing code-switching in the classroom, with a very high approval rate of 90%, and a very low rate of disagreement at only 3.3%. In contrast, only 31.6% of fourth-year students support the idea, while the percentage of disagreement is considerably higher, at 30%. This difference reflects a shift in perception and increasing academic expectations as students progress in their studies. Clearly, first-year students see code-switching as a necessary support tool, while fourth-year students tend to move toward using the target language more independently and seriously. This serves as a basis for teachers to consider designing flexible code-switching policies that are appropriate to the students' proficiency levels and learning needs.

Item 18 highlights that first-year students tend to disagree with the idea that code-switching causes confusion in academic communication, with 53.3% expressing disagreement (17.5% "Strongly Disagree" and 35.8% "Disagree") and only 19.1% expressing agreement. This suggests that most first-year students do not view code-switching as a source of confusion, as it likely helps them better understand the lesson, while they are not yet highly concerned with academic formality. In contrast, 53.4% of fourth-year students agree that code-switching can lead to confusion in academic contexts, whereas only 25.8% disagree. This indicates that fourth-year students are more likely to perceive code-switching as a barrier in academic settings, possibly because they have become more familiar with stricter academic language standards.

According to Item 19, up to 54.2% of first-year students disagreed with the idea of giving up their reliance on code-switching, while only 30% expressed agreement. This suggests that first-year students are not yet willing to abandon code-switching and still prefer to use their first language (L1) to support their second language (L2) learning. In contrast, 71.6% of fourth-year students agreed that they want to improve their English speaking skills without relying on code-switching, and the rate of disagreement was very low, at only 4.2%. This reflects that fourth-year students have a clearer orientation toward developing independent English-speaking ability and no longer wish to depend on their first language (Vietnamese).

Item 20 shows that the majority of first-year students agreed that a complete ban on code-switching in class would make them feel pressured or anxious, with 60.8% expressing agreement and only 13.3% expressing disagreement. This suggests that most first-year students feel uneasy when code-switching is prohibited, as they still rely on their first language to understand and communicate with peers and instructors in the classroom. In contrast, only 20% of fourth-year students agreed with the statement, while a notable 57.5% disagreed. This indicates that fourth-year students tend to be more confident and less dependent on code-switching, and therefore do not feel threatened by strict language policies that prohibit it.

❖ Interview questions for lecturers

Question 1: How often do your students code-switch during English classes? Do you notice differences between first-year and fourth-year students?

Most lecturers state that the university's English majors occasionally use code-switching in their English classes. However, they also find that first-year students tend to use their native language (Vietnamese) more often than fourth-year students, who have a better command of English and are more confident in their communication.

Question 2: Do you personally use Vietnamese when teaching? If yes, in which situations?

Most lecturers admitted that they occasionally use Vietnamese during English lessons. They tend to switch between Vietnamese and English especially when explaining abstract or complex concepts. According to them, this approach helps students understand the lesson more effectively. The use of Vietnamese is particularly helpful for first-year students, who often have limited English proficiency and struggle with difficult content.

Question 3: What are your views on the effects of code-switching on students' English development?

Lecturers believe code-switching positively impacts students' English development by boosting confidence, reducing anxiety, and aiding knowledge acquisition. It also helps convey complex material more effectively. However, they note that overusing Vietnamese can cause dependence, limiting English practice and weakening language reflexes. Frequent code-switching may also interfere with learning and reduce students' motivation to use English independently.

Question 4: What do you think are the main reasons students switch between Vietnamese and English?

According to the lecturers, the main reasons students switch between Vietnamese and English include a lack of confidence in using English, limited vocabulary, and insufficient language or subject-matter knowledge—particularly among first-year students. Many students fear that their peers or lecturers may not fully understand what they are trying to say if they speak only in English, especially when discussing complex or abstract topics. Other reasons include: the habit of using the mother tongue as a habit in the environment outside the classroom, the influence of friends, or the learning environment does not create enough conditions for students to use English continuously and naturally. In some cases, code-switching is also seen as a strategy to save time or ensure information is conveyed accurately in communication.

Question 5: What strategies do you suggest to help students reduce unnecessary code-switching?

His question is indeed interesting, and all participating lecturers suggested various strategies to help students reduce unnecessary code-switching. First, it is important to explain to students that excessive code-switching can hinder fluency and disrupt the flow of communication. The lecturers also proposed establishing an English-speaking environment in the classroom and emphasized the need to equip students with sufficient vocabulary and appropriate expressions related to lesson topics. In addition, role-play and situational practice activities were recommended to enhance students' confidence in using English consistently. Organizing English clubs and English presentation sessions was also seen as a way to provide diverse practice opportunities. Furthermore, providing timely and constructive feedback when students engage in unnecessary code-switching, along with suggesting alternative expressions in English, was considered essential. Finally, lecturers should serve as role models by using English consistently during lessons, thereby giving students an example to follow.

❖ *Interview questions for students*

Question 1: Do you think code-switching helps or makes it harder to improve your English speaking skills?

For this question, first-year students generally believed that code-switching is helpful in improving their English communication skills, as it allows them to express ideas more clearly and reduces anxiety during interactions. In contrast, fourth-year students tended to view code-switching as an obstacle to the development of their speaking skills, as it may lead to overreliance on the first language and limit opportunities to practice English exclusively.

Question 2: In what situations do you often switch between Vietnamese and English?

Both groups reported frequently switching between Vietnamese and English when discussing difficult or academic topics to clarify ideas and save time, especially in group discussions, presentations, and interactions with instructors involving complex concepts or unfamiliar vocabulary. However, first-year students used code-switching more often, even in less demanding situations, whereas fourth-year students employed it only when necessary for clarity or efficiency.

Question 3: Why do you code-switch? Is it because of habit, lack of vocabulary, or something else?

First-year students reported often code-switching out of habit, as they were used to mixing Vietnamese and English in high school. A major reason was limited vocabulary, making full expression in English difficult. In contrast, fourth-year students used code-switching more strategically—to ensure clarity with complex topics, save time, or avoid misunderstandings. Vocabulary was less an issue for them, but they sometimes switched to emphasize points or maintain rapport in informal conversations.

Question 4: Has your code-switching behavior changed since you entered university? If yes, how?

Students in both groups reported changes in their code-switching compared to high school, where limited English environments made frequent use of their mother tongue inevitable. At university, especially as English majors, they experienced a noticeable decrease in code-switching due to increased English exposure in academic and social settings. However, first-year students said they still relied on code-switching more than they wished, especially in difficult situations. In contrast, fourth-year students reported a greater reduction and felt more confident maintaining conversations fully in English.

Question 5: What would help you speak more English and reduce your use of Vietnamese?

Most students in both groups agreed that to improve their English and reduce Vietnamese use, they must first recognize that excessive code-switching can hinder communication skills. They highlighted the need to use English exclusively in

the classroom and minimize code-switching as much as possible. Students also recommended actively joining English-speaking activities like clubs, presentations, and debates, along with regularly practicing conversations with classmates. Additionally, some mentioned that more chances to interact with native or fluent speakers, both inside and outside the university, would motivate them to use English more consistently.

B. Discussion

The results from both the survey and interviews provide valuable insights into the frequency, context, and underlying reasons for language switching between first- and fourth-year English majors. This section discusses the results in relation to the two research questions, highlighting the similarities and differences between the two groups, as well as their implications for English language teaching and learning.

Research question 1: How frequently do first- and fourth-year English majors use code-switching between their first language (L1) and second language (L2) in communication?

The results indicate a clear gap in code-switching between first- and fourth-year English majors. Over 90% of first-year students "Sometimes," "Often," or "Always" switched between Vietnamese and English, especially when explaining complex ideas, doing group work, or communicating with classmates and lecturers. This aligns with Macaro's (2001) view that less proficient learners rely on L1 for comprehension and Beatty-Martínez et al.'s (2020) concept of code-switching as a "bilingual toolkit." In contrast, code-switching was significantly lower among fourth-year students, with about 69.5% reporting frequent switching and 30.5% "Never" or "Rarely" switching. This decrease corresponds with improved vocabulary, better communicative competence, and more English exposure, reflecting the Adaptive Control Hypothesis (Green & Abutalebi, 2013) about managing language choice and L1 inhibition. Their selective L1 use matches Myers-Scotton's (1993) marker model, where switching occurs purposefully rather than by default. Recent studies (Özkara et al., 2025; García & Wei, 2021) emphasize that greater L2 immersion strengthens cognitive control, reducing unplanned switching and encouraging flexible use of a unified bilingual repertoire. In summary, first-year students rely on code-switching due to limited English skills and confidence, while fourth-year students use it less, supported by stronger English proficiency and more practice in various settings.

Research question 2: What similarities and differences exist in the code-switching patterns between first- and fourth-year students in relation to their first language (L1) and second language (L2)?

These results reveal both similarities and differences in code-switching patterns between first- and fourth-year English majors. Both groups tend to code-switch when discussing complex or academic topics to ensure clarity or save time, aligning with García and Wei's (2021) translanguaging perspective that students use their full linguistic repertoire for meaning-making. The key difference is that first-year students code-switch more frequently and in a wider range of contexts, including everyday and informal conversations. Their reliance on L1 is due to limited vocabulary, fluency, and confidence, supporting Macaro's (2001) view that less proficient learners use their mother tongue as a scaffold. This also fits Beatty-Martínez et al.'s (2020) idea of code-switching as a "bilingual toolkit," combining resources to fill L2 gaps. In contrast, fourth-year students use code-switching less frequently and in a more selective and strategic manner, typically in important academic discussions or when conveying complex concepts. Their reduced reliance on L1 indicates stronger inhibitory control over language selection, consistent with the Adaptive Control Hypothesis (Green & Abutalebi, 2013) and recent findings by Özkara et al. (2025) on the role of cognitive control in minimizing unplanned switches. Moreover, their patterns align with Myers-Scotton's (1993) markedness model, in which language choice is a deliberate act shaped by social and contextual considerations rather than a default habit. Overall, while both first- and fourth-year students demonstrated code-switching in communication, the first-year group used it as a habit, while the fourth-year group demonstrated a more intentional and context-dependent approach.

V. Conclusion

Findings

The study found that both first- and fourth-year English majors used code-switching between Vietnamese (L1) and English (L2), especially when discussing difficult or academic topics to ensure clarity and save time. However, the main difference was in frequency and scope: first-year students code-switched more often and in more contexts, including everyday interactions and informal talks, mainly due to limited vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. Fourth-year students used code-switching less frequently and more strategically, mainly in important academic discussions or complex concepts, reflecting their stronger English skills and greater practice. Overall, the extent of code-switching relates closely to proficiency, confidence, and English exposure. While useful, code-switching should be limited and only used when necessary, encouraging students to maximize English use across contexts to improve fluency.

Overall, this study shows that the extent of code-switching is closely related to students' English proficiency, confidence, and exposure to English-speaking environments. While code-switching is a useful communicative strategy for both groups, its use should be limited and applied only when truly necessary. Students should maximize their use of English (L2) in diverse contexts and environments in order to develop greater fluency in spoken English.

Implications

The findings suggest that teachers should help first-year students expand vocabulary, build fluency, and gain confidence through increased L2 use in meaningful contexts. Implementing an English-only policy in class, combined with role-

plays, debates, and presentations, can reduce unnecessary code-switching and promote sustained target language use. Extracurricular activities such as English clubs can further extend L2 practice. Teachers should model consistent English use and provide constructive feedback, guiding students to employ code-switching only when it serves a clear communicative purpose.

Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited to 240 participants, comprising 120 first-year and 120 fourth-year English majors from a single university, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Data were collected primarily through questionnaires and interviews, which may have been influenced by participants' subjective perceptions rather than their actual behavior. Future research could expand the sample size to include a more diverse population from multiple institutions to enhance generalizability. In addition, further studies could examine the impact of targeted pedagogical interventions on reducing unnecessary code-switching and improving L2 speaking fluency.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank every team member of the research group for their valuable contributions to this study.

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