

The Effect of Language Anxiety and Proficiency on Saudi EFL Learners' Attitudes Towards Teacher Code-Switching

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Abstract—This study investigates the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners towards teacher code-switching in the classroom and explores the effect of foreign language anxiety and language proficiency on these attitudes. This mixed-methods study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative part involved the use of a self-reported questionnaire to elicit learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching and foreign-language anxiety. Additionally, qualitative data were collected through an open-ended question to explore learners' perspectives on the role of teacher code-switching in the classroom. The sample comprised 146 Saudi EFL students. The findings indicated that the Saudi EFL learners generally held a positive attitude towards teacher code-switching, perceiving it as a beneficial instructional, communicative tool for language learning. Furthermore, the study revealed that foreign language anxiety had a significant effect on learners' attitudes towards code-switching, with high-anxiety learners exhibiting more positive attitudes than low-anxiety learners in three dimensions: subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations. Language proficiency, however, had no significant influence on learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching. These findings have important pedagogical implications that could help language teachers implement code-switching as an effective instructional tool to reduce learners' anxiety and enhance the language learning experience.

Index Terms—code-switching, anxiety, proficiency, attitudes, EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Research into classroom code-switching has emerged as a prominent area of study in the field of second-language research. This body of research focuses on the phenomenon of teachers and students switching between languages within the classroom setting (Nguyen et al., 2016). Classroom code-switching research has been conducted in various linguistic environments, including English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) classrooms. These studies have explored code-switching from the perspectives of both teachers and students and examined its effect on language development, academic achievement, cultural identity, and classroom communication. Teacher code-switching has gained significant attention as an effective instructional tool in language classrooms. It has been described as an inevitable and natural response behavior in a bilingual context (Cook, 2001; Cook, 2008; Widdowson, 2003). Widdowson (2003) pointed out that learners' use of their first language is inevitable and should be turned into a pedagogic advantage rather than viewed as an impediment to be removed or avoided. However, learners' attitudes towards this practice play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of teacher code-switching. Positive attitudes towards teacher code-switching can facilitate learning a second language, while negative attitudes may hinder students' acceptance and use of this instructional tool. Understanding learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching is therefore essential to implementing this practice effectively in the classroom.

Despite the frequent research into teacher code-switching, few studies have examined Saudi EFL learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching in the classroom and the effect of individual characteristics, such as language anxiety and proficiency, on shaping these attitudes. The current study aims to contribute to the literature on classroom code-switching by exploring learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching, with a focus on the effects of the individual characteristics of foreign language anxiety and language proficiency on their attitudes.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1- What are the attitudes of Saudi EFL learners towards teacher code-switching in the classroom?
- 2- Is there a statistically significant difference in the attitudes towards teacher code-switching among Saudi EFL learners with varying levels of language anxiety?
- 3- Is there a statistically significant difference in the attitudes towards teacher code-switching among Saudi EFL learners with different proficiency levels?

Overall, this research endeavors to provide valuable insights that can inform language educators, teachers, and researchers in designing effective instructional practices and strategies for diverse learners in the EFL context.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Code-Switching

Code-switching has been defined in numerous ways by different researchers, depending on the focus of their studies. It is often described as the “insertion of a word or phrase from a language other than that being spoken into a single sentence, or the switching back and forth between two languages or dialects” (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, p. 522). Cook (2000) further emphasized that code-switching occurs when both speakers are proficient in the same two languages and switch between them during communication. A more recent definition characterized code-switching as the alternating use of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent (Bhatti et al., 2018).

B. Classroom Code-Switching

Classroom code-switching has been extensively examined in the contexts of ESL and EFL classrooms. The investigation of code-switching in classroom discourse is motivated by the fact that language classrooms are viewed as social situations where participants share knowledge of communicative constraints and options, aligning them as members of one speech community (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986). Research into classroom code-switching has identified two teaching approaches: monolingual teaching, which advocates teaching a language without reference to another language, and bilingual teaching, which suggests using a language that students already know (Hall & Cook, 2012). It is widely recognized that achieving a balance between these two approaches is crucial. Incorporating a student’s first language into language instruction can have benefits, such as enhancing understanding, engagement, and learning outcomes (Hall & Cook, 2012).

Classroom code-switching serves various functions, including instructional, communicative, social, and affective functions. Teacher code-switching can be used as an instructional tool to support students’ comprehension and learning by providing explanations, clarifying concepts, and giving examples (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Ferguson, 2003). Additionally, teacher code-switching facilitates communication and interactions in the classroom (Larbah & Oliver, 2015; Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Shin & Milroy, 2000). Furthermore, classroom code-switching serves social and affective functions by enabling teachers and students to express themselves, show solidarity, and establish social relationships and by reducing anxiety, influencing emotional experiences, and enhancing motivation (Larbah & Oliver, 2015; Ferguson, 2003; Mattsson & Burenhult-Mattsson, 1999; Bailey, 2011). Ferguson (2003) reported three common functions of classroom code-switching: facilitating access to the subject, managing classroom discourse, and fostering interpersonal relations. Code-switching for subject access aims to help learners to understand the subject matter of their lessons. Code-switching for classroom management is used to motivate, discipline, and praise students and signal changes in interaction patterns. Code-switching for interpersonal relations humanizes the classroom environment and negotiates different identities.

C. Language Anxiety and Code-Switching

Language anxiety has been recognized as a significant factor that can affect students’ acquisition of a second or foreign language (Richards & Schmidt, 2013). Language anxiety is “the subjective feelings of apprehension and fear associated with language learning and use” (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 313). Clément (1980) conceptualized foreign language anxiety as encompassing learners’ emotions, self-esteem, and self-confidence.

Code-switching has been suggested as a technique to mitigate language anxiety, as it creates a more relaxed and less stressful learning environment for students (Bailey, 2011). This is particularly evident when teachers communicate in the student’s first language (Bailey, 2011). However, research into the role of teacher code-switching in reducing anxiety has yielded conflicting findings. Some studies have indicated that the use of the first language does not reduce student anxiety, while others have suggested the opposite (Levine, 2003; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). Levine (2003) argued that incorporating the target language into instruction can be advantageous for language learning, despite the presence of anxiety.

The relationship between learners’ anxiety and their attitudes towards code-switching has received limited attention in the literature. Rezaee and Fathi (2021) conducted a study into the effect of learners’ anxiety levels on their perception of code-switching. They found a positive relationship between anxiety and learners’ perceptions, suggesting that learners with high anxiety levels hold more positive attitudes towards code-switching than low-anxiety learners do. This indicates that code-switching serves as a coping mechanism for anxious learners.

D. Language Proficiency and Code-Switching

The perception of code-switching as a sign of language proficiency or deficiency has been a subject of debate among scholars. Some studies have suggested that code-switching is used to compensate for a deficiency in language, particularly when speakers cannot express themselves effectively, reflecting the speaker’s limited language proficiency (Cheng & Butler, 1989; Muthusamy et al., 2020). Other scholars, however, have argued that code-switching requires language competence in both languages and is not indicative of a deficiency (Becker, 1997). Viduya (2018) further supported this argument by finding that code-switching is not symptomatic of low proficiency levels in the target language.

Research exploring the relationship between learners’ attitudes towards code-switching and language proficiency is limited. Rezaee and Fathi (2016) investigated the effect of language proficiency on learners’ perception of code-switching. They found that low-proficiency learners had more positive attitudes towards code-switching than high-proficiency learners did. Similarly, Hamouda and Aljumah (2020) examined the perceptions of Saudi EFL university students towards code-switching across various proficiency levels and found a correlation between the level of language proficiency and the use of code-switching in EFL classes. They found that students with medium and low proficiency levels held positive attitudes towards the use of code-switching, whereas students with high proficiency levels exhibited negative attitudes. However, Aldalbahy (2022) found no statistically significant relationship between students’ proficiency levels and their attitudes towards code-switching. These findings suggest that the relationship between language proficiency and attitudes towards teacher code-switching is complex and not easily generalized.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The study included a sample of 146 Saudi learners majoring in the English language. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. Their language proficiency levels were determined based on their scores on the Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP). They were grouped into three proficiency levels: upper intermediate (scores 83–100), intermediate (scores 67–82), and low intermediate (scores 50–66). Additionally, the participants were classified into two levels of anxiety: low anxiety and high anxiety. This classification was based on their scores on the anxiety test, which had a total score range of 8 to 40. The median score of the test was calculated to be 24, and participants with scores of 24 and above were classified as the high-anxiety group, while those with scores below 24 were classified as the low-anxiety group. Table 1 summarizes the grouping of the participants based on proficiency levels and anxiety levels.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS GROUPING

Groups		N	(%)
Proficiency	Upper intermediate	41	(28.1)
	Intermediate	81	(55.5)
	Low intermediate	24	(16.4)
	Total	146	
Anxiety	High anxiety	79	(54.1)
	Low anxiety	67	(47.9)
	Total	146	

B. Instruments

Data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire designed to assess learners’ attitudes towards teacher code-switching in the classroom and learners’ foreign language anxiety. The questionnaire consisted of two sections, each targeting a specific construct. The first section focused on learners’ attitudes towards teacher code-switching and comprised 20 items categorized into four subscales: teacher persona, subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations. The attitude questionnaire was adapted from a previous study conducted by Yao (2011). It employed a 5-point Likert scale to measure participants’ level of agreement. It is important to note that three items (2, 3, 4) were negatively worded. In addition, an open-ended question was included to elicit in-depth responses regarding the perceived advantages of teacher code-switching.

The second section aimed to assess learners’ foreign language anxiety and was based on a scale developed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Only eight items were selected for this study, following previous studies’ recommendations and validation of the short scale (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Participants’ level of agreement was measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Items 1 and 5 were negatively worded. The data from this section were used to measure the level of anxiety experienced by learners when using a foreign language.

C. Data Reliability and Validity

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected, the instruments used for assessing attitudes towards teacher code-switching and foreign language classroom anxiety were adapted from established scales used in previous research. The questionnaire items assessing learners’ attitudes towards teacher code-switching were adapted from Yao (2011), who reported a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.85 for the overall scale. The subscales within this section showed satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from 0.75 to 0.82. The questionnaire items for assessing foreign language anxiety were adapted from the scale developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986),

which has been widely used and has shown good reliability and validity. Previous research using this scale has reported Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.80 to 0.90, indicating high internal consistency. In the current study, the reliability analysis of the attitudes and anxiety scales yielded good Cronbach's alpha values (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
INSTRUMENT RELIABILITY

Instrument	<i>N</i>	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Attitude scale</i>	20	0.943
<i>Anxiety scale</i>	8	0.889

Additionally, a pilot study was conducted with a small sample of 10 participants to assess the clarity and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items. Based on the feedback received, minor revisions were made to improve the clarity of the items.

D. Data Analysis

To analyze data quantitatively, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used. Initially, a normality test was conducted to assess the distribution of data obtained from the questionnaire. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test indicated that participants' responses were normally distributed in both scales. Therefore, an independent sample *t*-test was used to determine any significant difference between the two anxiety groups. Moreover, an independent samples one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was carried out to determine any significant differences between the three language proficiency groups in their attitudes towards teacher code-switching. Furthermore, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the existence of a correlation between the variables in question. Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, and percentages, were employed to provide an overview of learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching.

To analyze the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended question, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was used. This approach involved a systematic process that involved becoming familiar with the data, coding, developing themes, reviewing themes, refining themes, labeling the identified themes, and reporting the findings. By using this approach, it is possible to identify and analyze the main themes that emerged from participants' responses to the open-ended question.

IV. RESULTS

A. Learners' Attitudes Towards Teacher Code-Switching

The first question aims to assess learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching in classrooms. A descriptive analysis was conducted, calculating means and standard deviations to provide an overview of the data. The results, presented in Table 3, show the means and standard deviations for each of the four attitude constructs (teacher persona, subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations) and the overall attitudes towards teacher code-switching.

The findings revealed that learners hold a positive overall attitude towards teacher code-switching, as indicated by a mean score of 3.69 ($SD = 0.716$). Moreover, when analyzing the four attitude constructs, it was observed that learners consistently exhibited positive attitudes (see Table 3). For instance, the mean scores for teacher persona, subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations were 3.56, 3.85, 3.59, and 3.78, respectively. The relatively high mean scores and low standard deviations indicated a consistent preference among the participants, suggesting a generally favorable attitude towards teacher code-switching.

TABLE 3
LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TEACHER CODE-SWITCHING

Attitude constructs	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Teacher persona	146	3.56	0.826
Subject access	146	3.85	0.809
Classroom management	146	3.59	0.834
interpersonal relations	146	3.78	0.794
Overall attitude	146	3.69	0.716

Additionally, qualitative analysis of the open-ended question on the advantages of teacher code-switching provided further insights into students' attitudes (see Table 4). The analysis revealed that most of the students (66.02%) associated teacher code-switching with enhancing the learning experience. Other advantages mentioned by students included increased attention (12.82%), reduced anxiety (10.25%), increased interaction and communication (7.05%), fun and enjoyment (2.56%), and increased motivation (1.28%). These findings suggest that students perceive teacher code-switching as a beneficial instructional, psychological, and communicative tool in various aspects of their learning.

TABLE 4
LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ADVANTAGES OF TEACHER CODE-SWITCHING

Theme	N	(%)
Enhancing learning experience	103	(66.02)
Increasing attention	20	(12.82)
Reducing anxiety	16	(10.25)
Increasing interaction and communication	11	(7.05)
Creating Fun and enjoyment	4	(2.56)
Increasing motivation	2	(1.28)
Total	156	(100)

B. Effect of Learners' Language Anxiety on Attitudes Towards Teacher Code-Switching

The second research question investigated the effect of learners' language anxiety on their attitudes towards teacher code-switching. It was hypothesized that learners' language anxiety would have a significant effect on their attitudes towards teacher code-switching. To test this hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the attitude constructs between the two groups: the low-anxiety and high-anxiety groups.

The *t*-test results revealed that learners' anxiety had no statistically significant effect on their attitudes towards the teacher's persona, as indicated by a *t*-value of -1.934 ($p = 0.055$). This suggests that there was no significant difference in attitudes towards the teacher's attributes between the low-anxiety group (mean = 3.41, $SD = 0.905$) and the high-anxiety group (mean = 3.68, $SD = 0.738$).

In contrast, the *t*-test results showed significant differences between the two anxiety groups in regard to the other three attitude constructs: subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations (see Table 5). The *t*-values of these constructs were -3.592, -4.287, and -3.844, respectively (all $p < 0.001$), indicating significant differences. The low-anxiety group exhibited more negative attitudes towards subject access (mean = 3.59, $SD = 0.912$), classroom management (mean = 3.28, $SD = 0.865$), and interpersonal relations (mean = 3.52, $SD = 0.853$) than the high-anxiety group (mean = 4.07, $SD = 0.638$; mean = 3.84, $SD = 0.716$; mean = 3.52, $SD = 0.853$, respectively).

In summary, while learners' anxiety did not have a significant effect on attitudes towards the teacher's persona, it did have a significant effect on attitudes towards subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations. These results highlight the role of anxiety in shaping learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching. They also suggest that learners' anxiety levels may influence their attitudes towards teacher code-switching.

TABLE 5
INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST

Attitude constructs	High anxiety			Low anxiety			<i>t</i> -test	
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -value	Sig
Teacher persona	79	3.68	0.738	67	3.41	0.905	-1.934	.055
Subject access	79	4.07	0.638	67	3.59	0.912	-3.592	<.001
Classroom Management	79	3.84	0.716	67	3.28	0.865	-4.287	<.001
Interpersonal Relation	79	4.01	0.669	67	3.52	0.853	-3.844	<.001
Overall attitude	79	3.90	0.571	67	3.45	0.794	-3.834	<.001

C. Learners' Attitudes Towards Teacher Code-Switching and Language Proficiency

The third research question examined the effect of language proficiency on learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching. The hypothesis posited that language proficiency would have a significant effect on attitudes towards code-switching. To test this hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted to compare learners' attitudes towards code-switching across different proficiency levels.

Contrary to the hypothesis, the results of the one-way ANOVA indicated no statistically significant difference among the attitudes towards teacher code-switching across the three proficiency groups (see Table 6). This is evidenced by the level of statistical significance, which is greater than 0.05. For the attitude construct of teacher persona, the *F*-value was 1.661 ($p = 0.194$), indicating no statistically significant differences among proficiency groups' attitudes towards teacher persona. Regarding the attitude construct of subject access, the *F*-value was 0.453 ($p = 0.636$), indicating no statistically significant differences among the proficiency groups' attitudes towards subject access. For the attitude construct of classroom management, the *F*-value was 0.928 ($p = 0.398$), indicating no statistically significant differences among the proficiency groups' attitudes towards classroom management. Regarding the attitude construct of interpersonal relations, the *F*-value was 0.826 ($p = 0.440$), suggesting no statistically significant differences among the three proficiency groups. For the overall attitude, the *F*-value was 0.907, indicating no statistically significant differences among the proficiency groups' overall attitudes towards teacher code-switching. Consequently, the null hypothesis is accepted, which states that there are no statistically significant differences between students' attitudes towards teacher code-switching due to their proficiency level.

TABLE 6
ONE-WAY ANOVA TEST

Attitude constructs	Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Teacher persona	Between groups	2.250	2	1.125	1.661	0.194
	Within groups	96.840	143	0.677		
	Total	99.090	145			
Subject access	Between groups	0.598	2	0.299	0.453	0.636
	Within groups	94.403	143	0.660		
	Total	95.002	145			
Class management	Between groups	1.294	2	0.647	0.928	0.398
	Within groups	99.693	143	0.697		
	Total	100.987	145			
Interpersonal relations	Between groups	1.046	2	0.523	0.826	0.440
	Within groups	90.492	143	0.633		
	Total	91.538	145			
Overall attitude	Between groups	0.931	2	0.466	0.907	0.406
	Within groups	73.446	143	0.514		
	Total	74.377	145			

In summary, the findings of the one-way ANOVA test revealed no statistically significant differences in learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching based on their language proficiency level. This suggests that language proficiency does not play a significant role in shaping learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigates EFL learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching in the classroom and examines the influence of foreign language anxiety and language proficiency on these attitudes. The findings revealed that Saudi EFL learners generally hold a positive attitude towards teacher code-switching in terms of teacher persona, subject access, classroom management, and interpersonal relations. Moreover, the analysis of students' attitudes towards the advantages of teacher code-switching indicated that most students perceived it as an instructional tool to enhance the learning experience. This finding supports Larbah and Oliver's (2015) study. Furthermore, the study found that learners' anxiety significantly influenced their attitudes towards teacher code-switching, particularly in the dimensions of subject access, classroom management, and teacher interpersonal relations. This finding supports the work of Rezaee and Fathi (2021), highlighting the effect of anxiety on learners' perception of teacher code-switching. It is important, however, to note that no significant difference was observed between the low- and high-anxiety groups in terms of their attitudes towards teacher persona. This suggests that anxiety may not play a significant role in shaping learners' perceptions of the attributes of teachers who use code-switching. Furthermore, the study found that language proficiency has no significant effect on learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching. This finding contrasts with the previous studies conducted by Hamouda and Aljumah (2020) and Rezaee and Fathi (2016), which reported significant differences in attitudes based on language proficiency.

The pedagogical implications of this study are significant for EFL teachers and learners as well as language educators and researchers. Firstly, teachers should be attentive to learners' perspectives on code-switching, especially regarding subject access, classroom management, and teacher interpersonal relations. By understanding learners' attitudes and preferences, teachers can adapt their use of code-switching to meet individual needs. Additionally, teachers should be aware of the potential effect of language anxiety on learners' attitudes towards code-switching. Anxiety can have a significant influence on how learners perceive and evaluate the use of code-switching in the classroom. To address this, teachers can implement strategies to create a supportive learning environment that helps reduce anxiety levels. Furthermore, the findings of the study suggest that language proficiency does not significantly affect learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching. This implies that teachers should not rely solely on learners' language proficiency when deciding whether to use code-switching as an instructional tool. Instead, they should consider individual needs and preferences, taking into account the potential benefits of code-switching for enhancing the learning experience.

This study has certain limitations, however, that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the data collection relied on self-reported measures, such as questionnaires and open-ended responses, which are subject to potential biases. Future research could consider employing additional methods, such as interviews or classroom observations, to triangulate the findings. Moreover, the study focused primarily on language anxiety and language proficiency as factors influencing attitudes towards code-switching. Future research could consider a broader range of variables to provide a more comprehensive analysis.

Understanding learners' attitudes towards teacher code-switching, along with the influence of individual differences, will contribute valuable insights to the field of second-language learning and inform instructional practices in EFL classrooms.

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