

## The Role of Code-Switching in Learning English Grammar among Non-Native Speakers

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### Abstract

Code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages in communication, has emerged as a significant linguistic strategy in multilingual classrooms. This paper explores the role of code-switching in facilitating the learning of English grammar among non-native speakers. While traditional pedagogical approaches often discourage the use of the mother tongue in English language teaching, recent research suggests that controlled and meaningful code-switching can enhance comprehension, retention, and grammatical accuracy. By drawing upon classroom observations, teacher-student interactions, and relevant linguistic theories, this study investigates how learners employ their first language (L1) as a cognitive and communicative tool to bridge gaps in understanding complex grammatical structures of English (L2). The analysis reveals that code-switching functions as a pedagogical scaffold, allowing learners to make sense of grammatical rules, clarify meanings, and express ideas more effectively. It also fosters confidence and participation, particularly in mixed-proficiency classrooms. However, excessive or unplanned switching may impede target language immersion. The paper concludes that when strategically integrated, code-switching can serve as a valuable pedagogical resource rather than a hindrance in English grammar instruction. It calls for a balanced approach that recognizes the linguistic realities of multilingual learners and encourages teachers to adopt flexible language practices that promote both accuracy and fluency.

**Keywords:** Code-switching, English grammar learning, non-native speakers, bilingual education, language pedagogy, L1 interference.

## Introduction

In today's globalized world, English has become a dominant medium of education, communication, and professional exchange. For non-native speakers, mastering English grammar remains one of the most challenging aspects of language learning, as it requires not only memorization of rules but also the ability to apply them accurately in real-life contexts. In multilingual classrooms, learners often draw upon their first language (L1) as a cognitive and communicative support when acquiring English as a second language (L2). This linguistic behavior, known as *code-switching*, involves the deliberate or unconscious alternation between two or more languages within a single discourse, sentence, or conversation.

Code-switching is often viewed with skepticism in traditional English language teaching, where it is perceived as a sign of linguistic deficiency or lack of proficiency. However, modern sociolinguistic and pedagogical research has begun to challenge this view, recognizing code-switching as a natural and productive phenomenon in bilingual communication. It can serve as an effective instructional strategy to clarify complex grammatical concepts, reinforce comprehension, and promote interaction between teachers and learners.

The role of code-switching in learning English grammar, therefore, deserves careful examination, particularly in contexts where English functions as a second or foreign language. Understanding how and when code-switching aids grammatical understanding can help educators design more inclusive and effective teaching methodologies. This paper investigates the pedagogical functions of code-switching in grammar instruction, analyzing its potential to enhance grammatical accuracy, learner confidence, and classroom participation among non-native speakers.

## Code-Switching

Code-switching refers to the **alternation between two or more languages or language varieties** within a single conversation, sentence, or discourse. It is a common linguistic behaviour among **bilingual and multilingual speakers**, reflecting their ability to shift from one linguistic system to another depending on the social context, topic, or communicative need.

According to Poplack (1980), “*Code-switching is the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent.*” It occurs naturally in multilingual communities and is often influenced by the speakers’ comfort level, cultural identity, and the linguistic situation.

In classrooms where English is taught as a second or foreign language, code-switching often happens between **English (L2)** and the **learner’s mother tongue (L1)**, serving as a bridge to understanding new or complex ideas.

### Types of Code-Switching

#### 1. Inter-Sentential Code-Switching

- Switching occurs between sentences or clauses.
- *Example:* “I can’t attend the class today.  
(Translation: “My mother is not well.”)

#### 2. Intra-Sentential Code-Switching

- Switching occurs within the same sentence.
- *Example:* “She is my *akka* (sister) and she works in Chennai.”

#### 3. Tag or Emblematic Code-Switching

- Insertion of short phrases, fillers, or tags from another language.
- *Example:* “That’s correct, *la!*” or “Yes *pa*, I finished my homework.”

#### 4. Intra-Word Code-Switching

- Occurs when a single word contains elements from two languages.
- *Example:* “He *the* file.” (Mixing English with Tamil verb form.)

### Causes of Code-Switching

Speakers switch codes for various **linguistic, social, and psychological reasons**:

- **To express a concept more precisely** (some ideas may be easier to express in one language).
- **To clarify meaning** or ensure understanding.
- **To show identity or group belonging.**

- **To fill lexical gaps** when a suitable word is unavailable in one language.
- **To emphasize a point or express emotion.**
- **To make learning easier** in bilingual classrooms.

### Functions of Code-Switching in the Classroom

1. **Instructional Function:**

Teachers use L1 to explain difficult grammar rules or vocabulary in L2, ensuring comprehension.

2. **Managerial Function:**

Used to manage classroom interactions (e.g., giving directions, discipline, or encouragement).

3. **Affective Function:**

Creates a relaxed and friendly learning environment; helps students feel emotionally secure.

4. **Interpersonal Function:**

Builds rapport between teacher and students by using familiar linguistic elements.

### Role of Code-Switching in Learning English Grammar

Code-switching plays a crucial pedagogical role in helping **non-native learners** understand **English grammar**. When learners encounter difficult grammatical concepts—such as tense, prepositions, or sentence structure—they often switch to their mother tongue to compare or internalize the rule.

This process:

- **Enhances comprehension and retention** of grammatical rules.
- **Reduces anxiety** and builds learner confidence.
- **Encourages participation** in discussions and exercises.
- **Facilitates cognitive connection** between the known (L1) and the new (L2).

However, **excessive code-switching** can hinder fluency and limit exposure to English. Hence, it should be used **strategically**—as a **supportive tool**, not a substitute for immersion in the target language.

## English Grammar Learning

Learning English grammar is a fundamental component of second language acquisition. Grammar provides the structural framework that enables learners to form meaningful and accurate expressions. It governs the way words are arranged into sentences, how tenses are used to indicate time, and how meaning is conveyed through syntax and morphology. For non-native speakers, mastering grammar is often the most demanding aspect of learning English, as it involves understanding a system of rules that may differ significantly from those of their first language (L1).

English grammar learning requires both **explicit knowledge**—awareness of grammatical rules—and **implicit knowledge**—the ability to use those rules spontaneously in communication. Traditional methods of teaching grammar often emphasize rote learning and error correction. However, modern approaches in linguistics and pedagogy emphasize **communicative competence**, which integrates grammatical accuracy with fluency, appropriateness, and understanding of context.

Non-native learners frequently face difficulties in acquiring English grammatical structures such as articles, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and tense usage. These challenges often arise due to **interference from the native language**, where grammatical patterns do not align with those in English. For example, many Indian languages do not use articles (“a,” “an,” “the”), leading learners to omit or misuse them in English.

In multilingual learning environments, **code-switching** becomes a natural and effective pedagogical strategy to address these difficulties. By referring to learners’ L1 equivalents, teachers can explain abstract or complex grammatical concepts more clearly. This bilingual approach allows learners to understand grammatical rules not as isolated facts but as meaningful patterns related to their linguistic experience.

Effective grammar learning thus combines exposure, practice, and reflection. When learners are encouraged to connect English grammar with their native linguistic structures through guided code-switching, they develop a deeper, more functional understanding of the target language. Therefore, code-switching serves as a **cognitive bridge**, facilitating the internalization of English grammar and promoting overall language competence among non-native speakers.

## Non-Native Speakers

A **non-native speaker** is a person who learns and uses a language that is not their mother tongue. In the context of English language learning, non-native speakers are individuals whose **first language (L1)** is different from English but who use English as a **second language (L2)** for academic, professional, or social communication. These learners form a large and diverse group worldwide, especially in multilingual countries like India, where English functions as an associate official language and a major medium of education.

Non-native speakers differ from native speakers not only in pronunciation and fluency but also in their **language acquisition process**. Unlike native speakers who acquire language naturally through immersion from early childhood, non-native speakers learn English **consciously and systematically**, often through formal instruction. This means their grammatical competence develops through explicit learning of rules, memorization, and practice rather than intuitive usage.

However, non-native speakers bring significant advantages to the learning process. Their **bilingual or multilingual background** provides them with metalinguistic awareness—the ability to think about and analyze language structures consciously. This awareness allows them to compare English grammatical patterns with those of their L1, which can both aid and interfere with learning. For example, differences in sentence structure or word order between English and Indian languages may lead to grammatical errors, but they also encourage deeper reflection on language use.

In English language classrooms, non-native speakers often rely on **code-switching** as a communicative and cognitive tool. Switching between their native language and English helps them clarify meanings, grasp complex grammatical concepts, and participate actively in classroom discussions. Teachers also use the learners' L1 strategically to explain difficult grammar points, making lessons more accessible and relatable.

Understanding the linguistic and cultural background of non-native speakers is, therefore, essential for effective teaching. Recognizing their challenges—such as limited exposure to native-like input, influence of L1 grammar, and lack of confidence—allows educators to design supportive, inclusive learning environments. Through balanced use of code-switching and

communicative grammar instruction, non-native speakers can gradually develop both grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency in English.

## Review of Literature

The phenomenon of **code-switching** has been widely studied in the fields of **sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and language pedagogy**, with researchers emphasizing its role in bilingual communication and second language acquisition. Scholars generally agree that code-switching is not a random or careless linguistic behavior, but a **systematic and meaningful strategy** employed by bilinguals to achieve specific communicative and cognitive purposes.

Poplack (1980) provided one of the earliest and most influential definitions of code-switching, describing it as the “alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent.” Her research demonstrated that code-switching follows grammatical rules of both languages involved and reflects speakers’ linguistic competence rather than deficiency. Similarly, Gumperz (1982) viewed code-switching as a **communicative resource**, used to convey subtle social meanings such as identity, solidarity, or politeness.

In the context of **classroom language learning**, researchers such as Cook (2001) and Macaro (2005) have argued that using learners’ first language (L1) in moderation can facilitate second language (L2) learning. Cook introduced the concept of the “**multicompetent language user**,” emphasizing that bilingual learners should be seen as resourceful communicators who draw upon both languages for comprehension and expression. Macaro (2005) further suggested that strategic code-switching helps in explaining difficult grammar points, managing classroom discourse, and maintaining learners’ motivation.

Studies conducted in **non-native English contexts**, including India, Pakistan, and Malaysia, reveal similar findings. Auerbach (1993) found that code-switching in ESL classrooms enhances understanding, particularly when learners encounter complex grammatical structures. Canagarajah (1995) observed that in multilingual classrooms, teachers and students often switch codes to negotiate meaning, clarify instructions, and ensure comprehension. In India, Agnihotri and Khanna (1997) highlighted how bilingual teaching practices help bridge the gap between English and local languages, making grammar instruction more effective and culturally relevant.

Recent research has shifted toward recognizing code-switching as a **pedagogical tool** rather than a barrier. Probyn (2009) emphasized that bilingual teachers use code-switching to scaffold learning—moving gradually from familiar linguistic structures in L1 to new ones in L2. Likewise, García (2009) introduced the concept of **translanguaging**, where learners fluidly use their linguistic repertoire to learn and make meaning, further validating code-switching as a natural aspect of language learning.

Overall, the literature supports the view that **code-switching plays a positive role** in enhancing English grammar learning among non-native speakers. It assists in explaining abstract grammatical concepts, reduces learner anxiety, and encourages active participation. However, scholars also caution that overreliance on the L1 may limit exposure to the target language. Therefore, the key lies in **strategic and purposeful code-switching**, integrated into learner-centered, communicative grammar instruction.

## **Bilingual Education**

**Bilingual education** refers to an instructional approach that uses **two languages** as mediums of teaching and learning. In this system, learners are taught academic content in both their **native language (L1)** and the **target language (L2)**, with the goal of developing proficiency in both. Rather than viewing the first language as an obstacle, bilingual education recognizes it as a valuable cognitive and cultural resource that can enhance second language acquisition.

The roots of bilingual education lie in sociolinguistic and psychological theories that emphasize the interconnectedness of languages in the human mind. Cummins (1979) introduced the **Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model**, which argues that skills, knowledge, and concepts learned in one language can transfer to another. This theory supports the idea that using the mother tongue in classrooms does not hinder English learning but, in fact, strengthens comprehension and critical thinking skills.

In countries like India, where multilingualism is the norm, bilingual education plays a crucial role in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. English is often the medium of higher education, while regional languages dominate daily communication. In such contexts, a bilingual approach helps learners transition smoothly from their home language to academic English. Teachers often employ **code-switching**—the natural alternation between two languages—as a



practical tool within bilingual education to explain complex grammar, vocabulary, and concepts.

Research has shown that bilingual education improves **academic performance, cognitive flexibility, and language awareness**. García (2009) introduced the concept of **translanguaging**, where learners use their entire linguistic repertoire fluidly to make meaning, negotiate understanding, and learn more effectively. This approach aligns closely with modern bilingual pedagogy, which encourages dynamic use of both languages rather than rigid separation.

In the context of **English grammar learning**, bilingual education provides a supportive environment where students can compare linguistic structures across languages. For example, teachers may explain English tenses or prepositions using parallels from the students' L1, thereby making abstract grammatical rules more concrete and relatable. This process not only improves comprehension but also builds learner confidence and participation.

Thus, bilingual education, when implemented effectively, enhances both linguistic and cognitive development. It validates learners' linguistic identities, promotes inclusivity, and enables more meaningful engagement with English grammar and usage. In this way, bilingual education and code-switching together contribute to a more holistic and learner-centered model of language instruction for non-native speakers.

## **Language Pedagogy and L1 Interference**

### **Language Pedagogy**

**Language pedagogy** refers to the methods, principles, and practices used in teaching and learning languages. It encompasses various approaches—from traditional grammar-translation methods to modern communicative and learner-centered techniques. Effective pedagogy in English language teaching aims to develop learners' **linguistic competence** (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and **communicative competence** (fluency, coherence, and contextual appropriateness).

Over the years, the focus of language pedagogy has shifted from mere grammatical accuracy to communicative proficiency. However, **grammar instruction** remains a core component because it provides the structural foundation of any language. Modern language pedagogy

emphasizes the integration of grammar within meaningful contexts rather than teaching it in isolation. Approaches such as the **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)** method and **Task-Based Learning (TBL)** encourage learners to use grammar functionally—to express ideas, negotiate meaning, and solve problems through interaction.

In multilingual settings, pedagogy must account for learners' **linguistic backgrounds**. Teachers often adopt **bilingual or code-switching strategies** to make grammar instruction more accessible. By relating English grammatical structures to those of the learners' first language (L1), educators can scaffold understanding and reduce confusion. For instance, explaining English tense structures or prepositions through examples in the native language enables learners to comprehend abstract grammatical rules more effectively. This bilingual pedagogical approach reflects a growing recognition that learners' existing linguistic knowledge is a powerful resource for acquiring new languages

## L1 Interference

**L1 interference**, also known as **mother-tongue influence** or **language transfer**, occurs when patterns, structures, or sounds from a learner's first language affect the learning and use of a second language (L2). This phenomenon can be both **positive** and **negative**.

- **Positive transfer** happens when elements of the L1 and L2 are similar, making it easier for learners to apply familiar rules (e.g., subject-verb-object sentence order in both English and many Indian languages).
- **Negative transfer** occurs when the rules of L1 differ from L2, leading to grammatical or phonological errors.

For example:

- Learners may omit **articles** ("a," "an," "the") because many Indian languages do not use them.
- They may misuse **prepositions**, as L1 equivalents do not align with English usage (e.g., "discuss about" instead of "discuss").
- Differences in **tense and aspect** can lead to errors such as "I am studying yesterday" instead of "I studied yesterday."

L1 interference is a natural and unavoidable part of second language learning. Rather than viewing it as a weakness, modern pedagogy interprets it as an indication of **cognitive connection** between linguistic systems. Teachers can use this awareness to anticipate common grammatical errors and address them explicitly during instruction.

When **code-switching** is used strategically, it can minimize negative interference by highlighting the contrasts between L1 and L2 structures. For instance, when explaining the difference between simple past and present perfect tenses, teachers can use the L1 to clarify subtle distinctions in meaning or time reference. This approach enhances learners' metalinguistic awareness and reduces fossilization of grammatical errors.

## Conclusion

The present study highlights the significant role of **code-switching** as a pedagogical tool in facilitating **English grammar learning** among **non-native speakers**. Far from being a sign of linguistic weakness, code-switching emerges as a **strategic and purposeful communication practice** that enhances comprehension, bridges linguistic gaps, and fosters a supportive learning environment. By drawing upon learners' first language (L1), teachers can effectively explain complex grammatical rules, clarify meaning, and connect new concepts to familiar linguistic structures.

The study also underscores the importance of **bilingual education** and **context-sensitive language pedagogy** in multilingual classrooms. Learners' native language serves as a valuable cognitive resource, enabling them to internalize English grammar through meaningful comparison and transfer of knowledge. At the same time, awareness of **L1 interference** helps teachers anticipate common grammatical errors and address them through contrastive analysis and guided correction.

However, the findings also emphasize the need for **balance**. Overreliance on L1 may limit exposure to authentic English use and hinder fluency development. Therefore, teachers should employ code-switching **strategically and selectively**, using it as a **scaffold** to support learners' progression toward greater independence in English communication.

In conclusion, the integration of code-switching within grammar instruction represents an effective, inclusive, and realistic approach to language teaching in multilingual contexts. It

acknowledges the linguistic diversity of learners, promotes deeper grammatical understanding, and contributes to the overall goal of developing **competent, confident, and communicatively capable users of English**. Future research may further explore how digital tools and interactive pedagogy can enhance the positive effects of code-switching in English language education.

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