

CODE-SWITCHING AS A BRIDGE TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A MULTILINGUAL JOURNEY

Ahli Kode sebagai Jembatan Akuisisi Bahasa: Sebuah Autoetnografi Perjalanan Multibahasa

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study aims to explore the role of code-switching as a language acquisition and self-discovery strategy within an English language learner’s journey. This research integrates personal narrative and reflection to analyze the author’s own linguistic experiences. The research data was gathered through retrospection, narrative journaling, and an analysis of personal linguistic interactions. The data was then thematically analyzed to identify emerging patterns and meanings in the use of code-switching, connecting them to the processes of language acquisition and identity formation. The findings indicate that code-switching serves not only as a functional tool but also as an adaptive mechanism that facilitates cognitive and cultural understanding. This process highlights how multilingualism can be leveraged to transcend monolingual limitations, leading to a deeper mastery of the language and a richer sense of self.

Keywords: *autoethnography, code-switching, language acquisition, multilingualism, reflection*

Abstrak

Penelitian autoetnografi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi peran alih kode sebagai strategi akuisisi bahasa dan penemuan diri dalam perjalanan seorang pembelajar bahasa Inggris. Studi ini mengintegrasikan narasi pribadi dan refleksi untuk menganalisis pengalaman linguistik penulis. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui retrospeksi, jurnal naratif, dan analisis interaksi linguistik pribadi. Data kemudian dianalisis secara tematis untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan makna yang muncul dari penggunaan alih kode, menghubungkannya dengan proses akuisisi bahasa dan pembentukan identitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa alih kode berfungsi bukan hanya sebagai alat fungsional, tetapi juga sebagai mekanisme adaptif yang memfasilitasi pemahaman kognitif dan budaya. Proses ini menyoroti bagaimana multibahasa dapat dimanfaatkan untuk melampaui batasan monolingual, yang mengarah pada penguasaan bahasa yang lebih mendalam dan pemahaman diri yang lebih kaya.

Kata-kata kunci: autoetnografi, alih kode, akuisisi bahasa, multibahasa, refleksi

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INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a dynamic vehicle for human expression, building bridges across cultures and facilitating global communication. In a country as linguistically diverse as Indonesia, home to a national language and hundreds of regional languages, the process of

acquiring a foreign language like English is a unique and intricate journey. Within this multilingual context, code-switching—the practice of alternating between two or more languages within a single conversation—is not only a common communicative feature but also a significant area of pedagogical research.

Prior research has widely acknowledged the benefits of code-switching in foreign language classrooms. Numerous studies have shown that it can enhance comprehension, clarify complex concepts, and foster a more inclusive learning environment (Chowdhury, 2013; Modupeola, 2013). Scholars have also demonstrated that leveraging a student’s native language can increase participation and boost confidence, ultimately facilitating English proficiency (Greggio & Gil, 2007; Ibrahim et al., 2013). These studies have collectively established code-switching as a valuable pedagogical tool, viewing it primarily from an external or observational perspective. However, while the external benefits of this practice are well-documented, a gap remains in understanding the internal, lived experience of the learner. Less is known about how code-switching is felt and navigated from a first-person perspective, shaping not only linguistic skills but also personal identity. This autoethnography addresses this gap by exploring my personal odyssey of learning English. My journey is rooted in a vibrant, multilingual upbringing in Bandar Lampung, where I was surrounded by a mosaic of languages, including Indonesian, my native Lampung dialect, Javanese, and Sundanese. This early exposure to linguistic diversity became the foundation for my approach to language learning and continues to shape my perspective today.

This study, therefore, offers a distinct contribution to the field. By employing an autoethnographic method, it moves beyond observing the phenomenon to providing a firsthand account of how code-switching fundamentally shaped my individual path to English proficiency. It examines this practice not as a detached pedagogical strategy, but as an integral part of my cognitive and affective processes, identity formation, and linguistic development. In doing so, this research aims to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of language acquisition from the inside out. Thus, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: How does the practice of code-switching within a multilingual context influence the development of English proficiency from a personal, autoethnographic perspective?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Code-Switching as a Cognitive and Social Scaffold

Code-switching is defined as the practice of alternating between languages within a single communicative event (Myers-Scotton, 1995). Far from being a random or deficient linguistic behavior, it is a strategic and often spontaneous tool that multilingual speakers use to navigate complex social and cognitive tasks (Bullock & Toribio, 2016; Fricke & Kootstra, 2016). In educational settings, its function as a learning scaffold is particularly significant. Cognitively, switching to a native language helps students overcome vocabulary limitations, clarify complex grammatical rules, and grasp difficult concepts, thereby making the target language more accessible (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009; Blair & Morini, 2023). This practice allows learners to use their entire linguistic toolkit to build new knowledge, tapping into the broader cognitive benefits of multilingualism, such as enhanced problem-solving skills and creativity (Bialystok & Craik, 2010).

Beyond this crucial cognitive support, code-switching serves a powerful social and affective function. The anxiety often associated with foreign language production can be a significant barrier to learning, and research shows that code-switching can lower this affective filter, fostering a more comfortable and participatory classroom environment (Candilas et al., 2023). When teachers permit and strategically use code-switching, they validate their students’ linguistic backgrounds and cultural identities (Wunseh & Charamba, 2023). This validation is

essential for building the confidence required for successful language acquisition and helps learners to see multilingualism as a source of strength. By celebrating linguistic diversity, this practice helps preserve cultural heritage and foster a more profound global understanding within the classroom (Ng & Lee, 2019). Ultimately, this approach transforms the learning space from one that may penalize linguistic differences to an inclusive environment that acknowledges and leverages students' existing knowledge as a valuable asset.

Multilingualism and Learner Identity

Beyond its practical application in the classroom, multilingualism is deeply intertwined with identity. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a vessel for history, culture, and a sense of self (Ng & Lee, 2019). For learners of a foreign language, the process of navigating multiple linguistic systems inevitably involves negotiating their own identity. Adopting a strict monolingual approach in the classroom can place learners in the uncomfortable position of trying to imitate a native speaker. This can feel inauthentic, inhibit self-expression, and create a conflict between the learner's established identity and the one they are expected to perform in the target language.

In contrast, embracing multilingual practices like code-switching allows learners to integrate their identities into the learning process. It is a dynamic and evolving linguistic practice that reflects the complexity of communication in diverse societies (Wunseh & Charamba, 2023). By switching between languages, learners can maintain a connection to their cultural roots while engaging with the target language, allowing them to express their ideas more comprehensively while navigating linguistic challenges. This approach aligns with the concept of translanguaging, which views a multilingual individual's linguistic knowledge not as separate language systems but as a single, integrated repertoire that can be drawn upon as needed (García & Lin, 2016; Wei, 2018).

Code-switching is a natural and common phenomenon in everyday communication for fluent bilinguals, used for various social, cultural, and psychological reasons (Myers-Scotton, 2017). It serves as a powerful tool for navigating the complexities of grammar and discourse (Nawaz et al., 2023) and for contextualizing communication within a specific setting (Nilep, 2006). When learners are empowered to code-switch, they are not abandoning one language for another but are instead operating from a position of multilingual strength. This allows them to create a hybrid identity that is uniquely their own, reinforcing their sense of self as competent, multilingual communicators rather than deficient monolingual impersonators.

METHOD

This study employs autoethnography, a research method that utilizes personal experience to understand broader cultural and social phenomena (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004). As both the researcher and the subject, I analyze my own journey of learning English to illuminate the role of code-switching in language acquisition and identity formation. This approach allows for a deep, nuanced exploration of the cognitive and emotional processes that quantitative or observational studies may not capture.

Data Collection and Sources

The data for this study were gathered through a systematic process of personal reflection and documentation over several years (Ellis, 2004). Through the lens of code-switching theory, I reflected on my language learning journey, drawing from reflective notes and personal anecdotes. This methodology aligns with the autoethnographic tradition, which emphasizes the

significance of the writer’s lived experiences in understanding broader cultural and social phenomena (Anderson, 2006).

The primary data sources include: 1) narrative journaling: I maintained a reflective journal to document critical moments, thoughts, and feelings related to my language learning experiences, particularly instances of code-switching; 2) retrospection: I systematically recalled and documented key memories from my educational journey, from my early struggles in monolingual-focused classrooms to my eventual embrace of multilingual practices; and 3) personal artifacts: I collected and analyzed personal language artifacts, such as past academic assignments, essays, and recordings of presentations, to identify patterns in my use of code-switching over time.

Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, I used a structured thematic analysis approach. The process involved several stages:

- 1) Familiarization: I repeatedly read through my journal entries and reflective notes to immerse myself in the data.
- 2) Initial Coding: I identified significant statements and experiences related to code-switching, language anxiety, identity, and proficiency.
- 3) Theme Development: I grouped the initial codes into broader, recurring patterns. This process was iterative, involving constant comparison and refinement until a clear set of themes emerged.

The primary themes identified through this process, which form the structure of the Findings and Discussion section, are presented below:

Table 1. Results of Thematic Analysis

No.	Theme	Description
1	Overcoming Monolingual Anxiety	Explores the initial pressure and fear associated with “English-only” policies and how code-switching served as a tool to reduce anxiety.
2	Code-Switching as a Cognitive Bridge	Examines how switching between languages facilitated comprehension, vocabulary retention, and the ability to articulate complex ideas.
3	Negotiating a Multilingual Identity	Focuses on the shift from attempting to imitate a native speaker to embracing a fluid, multilingual identity that felt more authentic.
4	Tangible Learning and Communicative Outcomes	Details the measurable impact on academic performance, standardized test scores (IELTS), and overall communicative competence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings organized by the key themes that emerged from the analysis of my autoethnographic data. Each theme is supported by personal narrative from my lived experience, which is then connected to the existing literature to illuminate broader patterns in language acquisition and identity formation.

Overcoming Monolingual Anxiety

My early language learning experiences were defined by the immense pressure of strict “English-only” classroom policies. In both secondary school and external courses, instructors enforced this mandate with explicit threats of punishment, such as, “If I hear someone talking in a language other than English, she or he will get punishment”. This created a high-pressure environment where the fear of making mistakes was overwhelming. I recall feeling constantly

anxious, which stifled my participation and negatively impacted my academic performance, as evidenced by a quiz score of 1.8 out of 10 in my second year of high school. This approach created a high affective filter, where emotional factors like fear and anxiety became a significant barrier to language acquisition. The classroom, which should have been a supportive space, instead felt alienating and counterproductive.

This stood in stark contrast to my experiences outside the classroom. An international trip with AIESEC, a global youth organization, exposed me to a myriad of cultures and languages. Despite having imperfect English skills, my classmates and I successfully navigated a foreign culture by focusing on communication rather than perfection. That journey ignited a passion for authentic, multilingual communication, highlighting that my desire to connect was far stronger than my fear of imperfection. This crucial realization demonstrated that the problem was not the English language itself, but the rigid, monolingual pedagogy of the classroom that induced anxiety.

The turning point occurred during my undergraduate studies when I encountered a professor who strategically used code-switching in their teaching. This approach immediately validated my linguistic reality and gave me the confidence to express myself without the paralyzing fear of judgment. This personal experience strongly aligns with the findings of Candilas et al. (2023), who argues that code-switching serves as a crucial strategy for bolstering students' confidence and reducing the anxiety that can impede oral communication. By allowing myself to switch to my mother tongue to clarify a point or find a word, I was able to participate more freely and authentically in the learning process, transforming my relationship with the language from one of fear to one of empowered engagement.

Code-Switching as a Cognitive Bridge

Beyond its affective benefits, code-switching functioned as a powerful cognitive tool for comprehension. Rather than viewing my native language as a barrier, I began to see it as a resource that connected my existing knowledge to the new linguistic world of English. For instance, during self-directed learning, I frequently incorporated both English and my mother tongue into my practice to facilitate easier retention of English vocabulary. This process of anchoring new information (English words) to existing cognitive schemas (native language concepts) was fundamental to my progress. This practice is supported by the research of Blair and Morini (2023), who found that code-switching can be an effective strategy for vocabulary learning in adult second-language learners.

This cognitive scaffolding was not just for comprehension but also for production. When conveying complex narratives or ideas in my Basic Speaking class, I sometimes found myself “compelled” to use native expressions to articulate my thoughts with precision, as my English vocabulary was still developing. This practice maximized my expressive power, allowing me to communicate my intended meaning fully rather than being constrained by my still-developing English vocabulary, a phenomenon described by Tulloch and Hoff (2023). It transformed my learning process from a rigid, monolingual struggle into a fluid and dynamic interchange between languages.

This realization was so profound that it became a cornerstone of my own pedagogical practice. When given the opportunity to teach a creative writing course, I implemented code-switching as an integral part of our discussions and peer-review sessions to create an inclusive and dynamic learning environment. By encouraging students to use their full linguistic repertoire, I observed how it unlocked new avenues of creativity and enabled them to articulate nuanced feedback that might have been lost in a monolingual setting. This experience reinforced my belief that embracing linguistic diversity can make learning more engaging and

meaningful, a conclusion supported by studies showing that students feel they understand information better when teachers code-switch (Benu, 2018; Modupeola, 2013).

Negotiating a Multilingual Identity

Initially, my goal was to achieve “native-like” fluency, a standard imposed by the educational environment that required me to engage in a form of pretense. Embracing code-switching marked a profound shift in this perception. I moved away from the pressure of imitation and toward developing an authentic voice that embraced my full linguistic repertoire, allowing me to speak in a way that felt natural (Tamargo et al., 2016). This change was so noticeable that my classmates began to ask about my newfound confidence. These interactions became an opportunity to articulate a new philosophy: that the goal was not to sound perfect, but to be comfortable with the blend of languages that represented my true self. This was a crucial psychological transition from viewing my multilingualism as a deficit to embracing it as an asset.

This evolving identity became particularly evident in my daily interactions outside the classroom. With family, for instance, I would instinctively switch between English, Indonesian, and our local Lampung language, with each language serving a specific social or emotional function. A request might be made in Indonesian for clarity, such as, “Niii, please *cariin*” (“Niii, please find it for me”), a practice which aligns with research on using code-switching for precision in communication (Sinclair & Fernández, 2023). Conversely, a reply might incorporate a local expression like “*wah*” to add humor and cultural richness, a social function of code-switching noted by Abdullahi (2023). This fluid, purposeful practice reflects what Ng and Lee (2019) describe as the construction of a multilingual identity, where languages are not kept in separate boxes but are blended to create authentic communication. This approach also aligns with the concept of translanguaging, which views a multilingual individual's linguistic knowledge not as separate systems but as a single, integrated repertoire that can be drawn upon as needed (García & Lin, 2016; Wei, 2018). It was no longer about mastering English by erasing my other languages, but about enriching my English *through* them, thereby forging an identity that was both multilingual and whole.

Tangible Learning and Communicative Outcomes

The strategic use of code-switching had a clear and measurable impact on my academic and communicative success. The confidence and deeper comprehension it fostered contributed directly to my academic performance, culminating in a near-perfect GPA of 3.91 and the honor of being named the best graduate of my bachelor's program. The moment captured in Figure 1, where I am reading the Alumni Pledge at graduation, symbolizes the pinnacle of this journey. These achievements were a direct result of a learning process that was authentic and effective precisely because it embraced multilingualism.



Figure 1. Alumni Pledge Reading

This proficiency was further substantiated through standardized testing and professional opportunities. Facing the IELTS examination with only a brief preparation window, I achieved an overall band score of 7.0, a testament to a deep and functional command of the language. This directly counters any argument that code-switching hinders the development of high-level, testable proficiency and supports research linking the practice to learner success (Nawaz et al., 2023). This demonstrated proficiency was also instrumental in securing a scholarship for postgraduate studies at a prestigious institution.

Finally, the outcomes extended beyond academic metrics. My communicative abilities were enhanced, allowing me to tailor my style to diverse audiences and foster stronger connections. For example, when interacting with a former student from France, her adept transitions between English and French did not create a barrier; instead, her code-switching allowed me to gain valuable insights into her cultural background. Among the frequently used phrases, I noted her consistent pronunciation of “*aussi*” for “also,” “*jardin*” for “garden,” and “*maman*” as an endearing reference to her mother.

The cognitive flexibility gained from this practice is invaluable (Kroff et al., 2018), reflecting a heightened cultural intelligence and communicative prowess. This aligns with the argument by Wunseh & Charamba (2023) that proficiency in code-switching is pivotal for academic success in multilingual environments. The result of this journey was not just proficiency in English, but a more sophisticated ability to operate effectively and authentically as a communicator in any multilingual context.

CONCLUSION

This autoethnographic journey reveals that code-switching was far more than a simple linguistic tool; it was a transformative force in my acquisition of English. It served as an essential scaffold for overcoming anxiety, a cognitive bridge for deeper understanding, and a vehicle for forging an authentic multilingual identity. The findings demonstrate that embracing a learner's full linguistic repertoire, rather than enforcing a restrictive monolingual approach, can lead to more effective, meaningful, and successful language learning. This personal narrative gives voice to the internal processes that underpin the widely observed pedagogical benefits of code-switching, highlighting its role in empowering learners to achieve both linguistic proficiency and a richer sense of self.

The insights from this study offer practical implications for EFL education, particularly in multilingual contexts like Indonesia. First, educators should consider viewing student' native languages as a resource, not a hindrance. Strategically incorporating and permitting code-switching can lower the affective filter, build confidence, and facilitate comprehension. This requires a shift from a language-policing role to that of a language-aware facilitator. Second, educational policies and curricula could be designed to be more inclusive of students' multilingual realities. Instead of “English-only” rules, classrooms can become spaces where translanguaging is recognized as a legitimate and effective learning practice, reflecting the way multilingual individuals naturally use language in the real world.

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