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✉ Yixin Jiang jiangyixin@graduate.utm.my
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6734-1554>

Between Policy and Practice: English Teachers' Challenges and Functions of Code-switching in Tertiary EFL Classrooms

Yixin Jiang

Language Academy,
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
Johor Bahru, Malaysia

Farhana Bakar

Language Academy,
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
Johor Bahru, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms operate under English-only policies to maximise students' exposure to the target language. However, these policies often present challenges for teachers, especially when students struggle with comprehension. Therefore, this study investigates how and why tertiary EFL teachers use code-switching despite institutional English-only policies. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers at a private university in China. This study found that teachers' code-switching practices served discourse functions, including reiteration, message qualification, quotation, addressee specification, and personalisation versus objectivisation. Two key themes emerged regarding the reasons for code-switching: students' challenges related to language acquisition, learning motivation and limited engagement; and teachers' challenges concerning their own English expressions (proficiency), classroom management and interaction. These findings suggest that teachers' code-switching practices are shaped by a range of classroom challenges, many of which stem from an exam-oriented learning environment. This study underscores the need to provide training programs that address teachers' code-switching practices, particularly in EFL contexts where exam-driven approaches and limited pedagogical support prevail.

KEYWORDS: Classroom Code-switching, Classroom Challenges, Discourse Function, University EFL Classrooms, EFL Teaching Policy

INTRODUCTION

Language policies in EFL contexts, such as Japan, South Korea, China, Thailand, and Türkiye, often mandate the exclusive use of English during instruction (Patanaporn et al., 2022; Kim & Jeon, 2005). The rationale is grounded in the belief that increased exposure to the target language accelerates acquisition (Başok, 2020). While this immersion approach may benefit students, it can place undue pressure on teachers, particularly when students have limited proficiency or classroom dynamics that require clarification and encouragement. For example, Sondang and Bonik (2018) found that Indonesian EFL teachers code-switched when students failed to understand English instructions. Similarly, in Ethiopia, limited students' exposure to English led teachers to code-switch to clarify vocabulary and sentence meaning (Temesgen & Hailu, 2022).

In the context of EFL in China, several factors contribute to the challenges Chinese students face in achieving English fluency and the difficulties English teachers encounter in teaching the language. Teo (2017), who studied English teacher talk in high schools, identified key issues, such as the emphasis on exam-oriented learning, where exams focus minimally on spoken English. As a result, students devote more time to practising test-related skills. Additionally, traditional teaching methods, such as rote memorisation and translation, are not conducive to developing conversational fluency (Teo, 2017; Liu, 2023). Hence, these factors collectively hinder students' communicative competence, leading to tensions between official language policies and actual classroom practices, prompting English teachers to resort to code-switching to bridge the gap between curriculum expectations and student needs.

At the university level in China, Guidelines for College English Teaching (2020 version) (hereinafter referred to as Guidelines) emphasise the importance of the use of English in instruction and enhancing students' ability to use English in both classroom and real-life contexts. This suggests that university teachers are encouraged to teach English proficiency courses primarily in English. However, Jong and Zhang (2021) indicated that teachers often switched the codes between English and students' first language (L1) while teaching in the classes and felt guilty about it. Furthermore, most studies on teachers' code-switching practices within Chinese universities (e.g., Li, & Pei, 2024; Luo, 2019) have focused on examining the usage, attitudes, and motivations behind code-switching, offering limited insight into the challenges teachers face in their instructional practices. This raises a critical question: Is code-switching at the university level employed to facilitate students' English proficiency, or do university teachers encounter similar difficulties to those reported in high school, as highlighted by Teo (2017)?

Therefore, this study investigates how tertiary EFL teachers in Chinese university English proficiency classes use English–Mandarin code-switching in classroom discourse and explores the classroom challenges encountered by teachers that influence this practice. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do teachers use code-switching in Chinese university English proficiency classes?
2. What classroom challenges influence teachers' code-switching in Chinese university English proficiency classes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English-only Teaching Policies in Higher Education EFL contexts

Many EFL countries emphasise developing students' English communicative competence through official curriculum guidelines, advocating that teachers exclusively use English to maximise language exposure and practical proficiency, particularly in university EFL classrooms. For example, Türkiye's Ministry of National Education officially advocates English-only instruction to enhance students' communicative abilities (Başok, 2020). Similarly, Thailand officially supports English-only classroom environments to cultivate students' communicative proficiency and global engagement (Patanaporn et al., 2022). In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) mandates that university EFL classes should be conducted primarily in English under an English-only policy aimed at improving students' integrated communicative skills (Qiu et al., 2023). South Korea, in alignment with Japan in their aim of developing students' communicative competence, adopts English-medium instruction in university EFL classrooms (Yang & Jang, 2022). Across these EFL contexts, English-only policies share a similar rationale of maximising exposure to strengthen communicative competence. However, the implementation of these policies may be shaped by classroom realities and institutional demands.

Similar to the EFL countries discussed, English education in China prioritises enhancing students' language proficiency and communicative competence. To achieve this objective at the tertiary level, the National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board revised the Guidelines between 2013 and 2020, ultimately issuing the 2020 version for English proficiency classes in Chinese universities (Rao, 2023). According to the Guidelines (National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020), university English proficiency courses are mandatory for non-English major students. Specifically, the Guidelines emphasise the enhancement of students' communicative competence, enabling them to effectively use English across various contexts, including academic learning, daily interactions, and future careers. Additionally, the Guidelines encourage students' engagement in critical thinking by prompting them to articulate their perspectives in English on social issues or specialised topics related to their majors. Thus, these objectives implicitly require teachers at the university level teaching English proficiency courses to use English as the medium of instruction.

Despite sharing the communicative goals of other EFL contexts, China's English education system features distinct curriculum structures (Kim & Jeon, 2005). The Guidelines emphasise the development of students' foundational linguistic competency, focusing on five fundamental language skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and translation. These objectives extend from the high school curriculum into the university level (National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020). Notably, in order to achieve these goals, non-English major students are required to take standardised English proficiency examinations, namely the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and Band 6 (CET-6). CET-4 is frequently a graduation requirement, while CET-6 denotes a more advanced level of proficiency (NCCEC, 2016). While the Guidelines implicitly support English-only instruction, the standardised tests may limit teachers' practical implementation of full English-medium teaching to meet test preparation demands. This suggests a potential policy-practice tension. While English-only expectations emphasise communicative competence, exam-related demands may require teachers to prioritise instructional efficiency and student comprehension.

Code-switching in EFL Classrooms

Code-switching is a common and natural linguistic phenomenon appearing in teaching and learning contexts, particularly in EFL classrooms. These classrooms serve both educational and social functions, supporting language acquisition and interaction among teachers and students with shared social backgrounds (Lin, 2013). Teachers in EFL teaching and learning contexts alternate between English and students' L1 to support academic comprehension and clarify essential subject matter during classroom activities (Temesgen & Hailu, 2022; Fajardo, 2024). This suggests that code-switching may function as a resource for sustaining classroom communication when English-only instruction becomes challenging in practice.

Code-switching differs from related concepts, such as code-mixing and translanguaging. According to Köppe and Meisel (1995), code-mixing refers to the combination of linguistic elements from multiple languages or dialects by bilingual speakers within a single sentence, typically occurring in informal conversation. Translanguaging, on the other hand, refers to the process by which bilingual speakers use all their language resources as a single, flexible system to express ideas and engage with content across language boundaries (García & Wei, 2014). In other words, it does not treat languages as separate entities but recognises the dynamic and fluid nature of language use. For example, in teaching and learning settings, translanguaging views language use as a unified and integrated system, enabling students to blend multiple languages flexibly and strategically, without maintaining strict boundaries between them (Sahan & Rose, 2022; García & Wei, 2014).

Thus, this study uses the term “code-switching” for two reasons. Firstly, understanding teachers' code-switching practices can enhance clarity in classroom instructions and explanations, as it is typically structured and grammatically coherent (Köppe & Meisel, 1995). Secondly, teachers' code-switching closely aligns with educational policy expectations in EFL countries, such as China and Korea (Yang & Jang, 2022; Rao, 2023). This alignment occurs because an “English-only” policy encourages teachers to maintain clear boundaries between languages by exclusively using English for pedagogy and communication purposes. In such contexts, code-switching reflects the view that languages should be kept separate, treating them as distinct systems with clearly defined linguistic boundaries in classrooms. While translanguaging promotes the fluid integration of multiple languages (Sahan & Rose, 2022), it may not be fully compatible with educational policies that emphasise strict language separation in formal settings.

Discourse Functions of Code-switching in the EFL context

Recent research (e.g. Bhatti et al., 2018; Ngan, 2018; Patmasari & Agussatriana, 2019) has explored the functions and roles of teacher code-switching in EFL teaching and learning contexts, such as the explanation of task instructions and the introduction of linguistic contents. These findings position teachers' code-switching as a pedagogical tool. However, it is equally important to explore its functions at the discourse level. From a discourse perspective, and particularly drawing on Gumperz's (1985) framework, teachers' code-switching is not only a teaching tool but a communicative resource that constructs instructional meaning and organises the flow of classroom discourse.

Gumperz (1985) identified six discourse functions that code-switching serves, including quotation, addressee specification, interjection, reiteration, message qualification, and personalisation versus objectivisation. In EFL classrooms, these functions go beyond conveying information and help organise the structure of classroom interactions. Through reiteration and message qualification, used to restate and explain information (Gumperz, 1985), teachers enhance classroom discourse coherence

and emphasise key learning content (Fachriyah, 2017). Meanwhile, interpersonal functions, including personalisation vs objectivisation and interjection, supporting changes between formal instruction and relational conversations (Gumperz, 1985; Ataş & Sağın-Şimşek, 2021). Additionally, Gumperz (1985) noted quotation functions (reproducing utterances in L1) and addressee specification (directing speech to particular individuals). Although many studies describe teachers' code-switching as a pedagogical strategy (e.g., for translation, repetition, and instruction-giving), fewer studies examine how code-switching operates as discourse regulation in naturally occurring classroom interaction, particularly in tertiary EFL contexts shaped by English-only expectations. Integrating a discourse-functional perspective can therefore strengthen explanations of not only why teachers switch languages, but also how code-switching organises classroom discourse.

Therefore, this study investigated code-switching functions for organising and maintaining classroom interaction in EFL contexts, guided by Gumperz's (1985) framework. This is because, from a discourse perspective, code-switching serves not merely as a pedagogical tool but as a communicative resource for meaning construction and discourse regulation (Gumperz, 1985).

Classroom Challenges Influencing Teachers' Code-switching in Various University EFL Classrooms

Previous studies into code-switching have demonstrated that teachers switch the codes between English and students' L1 because of classroom challenges in lessons and classroom interactions in various university EFL classrooms. These challenges encountered by both teachers and students include two key dimensions: 1) students' language and social challenges in English acquisition and classroom interaction, and 2) teachers' language and classroom management challenges. Across studies, these challenges suggest that teachers' language choices are often shaped by the need to maintain comprehension, participation, and classroom order.

In various university-level EFL classrooms, students encounter language challenges during lessons and classroom interaction. These language challenges students face are their comprehension difficulties, particularly in understanding vocabulary and grammar. For example, Horasan (2014) found that in EFL university classrooms in Türkiye, students' limited vocabulary knowledge hindered effective classroom interaction, consequently influencing teachers' code-switching practices. Similarly, research by Grant and Nguyen (2017) indicated that students' struggles with English vocabulary in university EFL classrooms in Vietnam led teachers to switch languages for translation. Furthermore, previous research conducted in various EFL contexts, including Iran (Ghaderi et al., 2024) and Bangladesh (Obaidullah, 2016), observed teachers' use of code-switching from English to students' L1. These studies highlighted students' inadequate comprehension of grammatical rules as an unavoidable teaching challenge, which caused teachers to alternate languages to facilitate the explanation of the complex grammar knowledge.

Students also encounter social challenges, including inactive participation in classroom activities and their anxiety about English expressions in public. Firstly, Alrabah et al. (2015) revealed that students' lack of active participation triggered teachers to switch from English to Arabic (students' L1) to create a relaxing learning atmosphere in college classrooms in Kuwait. Secondly, students experience anxiety when speaking English in classrooms. For example, in Iran, Ghaderi et al. (2024) interviewed 30 teachers in private language institutes offering English proficiency classes to adults (mostly undergraduates). They found that students showed anxiety and a lack of confidence during English classroom communication. This challenge influenced the teachers to alternate the languages from English to Farsi (students' L1) to build rapport with their students. These findings also highlight a

tension between English-only expectations and students' willingness to participate, as anxiety and low confidence may reduce classroom interaction in English.

In different university EFL settings, teachers also face language and social challenges. Regarding the language challenge, teachers may experience uncertainty about using particular English expressions to communicate their intended meanings clearly and accurately. Such uncertainty may influence teachers to switch the codes to maintain accuracy and avoid making mistakes in front of their students (Altarawneh & Almithqal, 2019). For example, a study conducted by Köylü (2018) at six Turkish universities shows that teachers may feel unsure about accurately explaining vocabulary in English. This challenge influenced them to switch to Turkish (teachers' L1) to provide direct translations of vocabulary items, rather than relying on English-only explanations.

Regarding social challenges, teachers encounter difficulties in classroom management. For example, university teachers in Pakistan had difficulties in organising classroom activities when teaching mixed-ability students, as they came from diverse districts of Pakistan, bringing a wide range of learning backgrounds and capabilities. Teachers, hence, alternated between students' L1 (Urdu) to maintain discipline and ensure the continuation of activities (Bhatti et al., 2018). Similarly, Ataş and Sağın-Şimşek (2021) explored that managing classroom noise during interactive sessions, such as vocabulary pronunciation activities, posed significant difficulties for teachers in Turkish university EFL classrooms. These disruptions hindered teachers' ability to monitor and correct students' pronunciation effectively. To address these challenges, teachers switched the codes from English to Turkish (students' L1) to restore order and facilitate the teaching process.

However, in China, studies on code-switching have focused on teachers' code-switching practices in Chinese university English proficiency classes. Among these studies, most of them (e.g., Liu & Wei, 2022; Wu, 2013) have explored the use of teachers' code-switching practices in promoting students' English learning and modulating teacher-learner relationships. Some studies (e.g., Cheng, 2013; Du, 2016; Liu, 2010) focus on the reasons and factors for teachers' code-switching practices. For instance, Liu (2010) concluded that students' limited English proficiency levels and the language difference between Chinese and English influenced teachers' code-switching practices from English to Mandarin. Cheng (2013) also agreed that students' limited proficiency in English results in difficulties in understanding the teachers' English information.

The existing studies mentioned above do not comprehensively explore the classroom challenges that shape teachers' code-switching practices. Investigating these challenges may offer a clearer understanding of when code-switching is necessary and how its overuse can be avoided (Jong & Zhang, 2021). Some of these challenges may stem from the exam-oriented learning culture, as identified by Teo (2017) in a study of high school English teachers. This culture places limited emphasis on English communicative competence in secondary education. However, it remains unclear whether university teachers experience similar difficulties. Therefore, this study aims to explore the specific classroom challenges that influence teachers' code-switching practices as they strive to meet the objectives outlined in the Guidelines, and to understand how code-switching is used for teaching and communicative purposes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach, chosen for its suitability in exploring complex social processes within real-world educational settings. As Creswell (2012) notes, such an approach enables an in-depth investigation of a specific case, such as an activity or process, within its authentic context. Hence, this approach was appropriate for the in-depth understanding of the classroom challenges experienced by both teachers and students and the use of teachers' code-switching practices in real teaching and learning contexts.

Research Context

The research context is located in a private university at the undergraduate level in China. This is because this university follows national EFL teaching policies outlined in the Guidelines while preparing students for English proficiency examinations. It means that teachers must balance the dual demands of educational policy and practical classroom realities.

In this university, English proficiency classes are offered at three levels: advanced, upper-intermediate, and intermediate. Students are placed into these classes based on their English subject scores in the national college entrance examination. Each class typically consists of around 50 students and is taught by one teacher. The courses run for 16 weeks during each semester.

Selection of Participants

Twelve well-experienced English teachers participated in this study. Each teacher taught English proficiency classes to students across a range of proficiency levels. The teachers were recruited through purposive sampling, a strategy suited to selecting individuals who meet predefined criteria relevant to the research focus (Creswell, 2012). The requirements of selection include: 1) passing either the TEM-8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8) or obtaining an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 7.0 or above, 2) holding at least a master's degree in relevant English and English teaching majors, and 3) possessing a minimum of three years' experience teaching English at the university level. Table 1 shows an overview of their profile, including pseudonyms, gender, academic title, highest level of education, years of teaching, and their students' majors.

Table 1
Teachers' Profiles in This Research

Teacher	Gender	Academic title	Highest level of education	Years of teaching	Students' majors
Gong	Female	Associate professor	Ph.D	11	Computer science
Huang	Female	Senior lecturer	MA	4	Accounting and Human resource management
Rui	Female	Senior lecturer	MA	14	Leadership and management
Song	Female	Associate professor	MA	7	Leisure sports and Accounting
Ting	Female	Senior lecturer	Ph.D	9	Integrated circuit
Wang	Male	Senior lecturer	MA	9	Business

Xia	Female	Associate professor	MA	17	Digital media and Networks and New Media
Yang	Female	Associate professor	MA	18	Primary education
Yu	Female	Teaching assistant	Ph.D	6	Aircraft dynamics
Yue	Female	Teaching assistant	MA	3	Electronic commerce and Aircraft dynamics
Zhou	Male	Associate professor	Ph.D	12	Computer science
Zhu	Female	Teaching assistant	MA	3	Digital media, Electronic Commerce, and Esports and Gaming

Data Collection

This study collected data through two stages. The first involved classroom observations of audio-recorded lectures with twelve teachers, followed by one-on-one interviews with them. All teachers were provided with informed consent, acknowledging that participation is voluntary. They could decline to answer any question and could withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants' identities were anonymised using pseudonyms, and any identifying information was removed from transcripts. All audio files and transcripts were securely stored with access restricted to the research team to maintain confidentiality.

The data collection process began with audio-recorded classroom observations conducted from May to June 2023. Audio-recorded observations were conducted across three lectures (approximately 70 hours of classroom instruction). The first researcher used a wireless microphone as an audio-recording device to capture the lectures. To minimise any potential disruption to the classroom atmosphere, the first researcher remained seated at the back of the classroom while recording (Creswell, 2012). The first researcher also took descriptive field notes during observation. These notes documented specific instances of teachers' code-switching and students' behavioural responses in classroom interaction.

The second stage of data collection in this study was one-on-one interviews using semi-structured questions, which offer a flexible approach to gaining a comprehensive understanding of a given phenomenon (Dörnyei, 2007). Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. During the interviews, researchers used a set of semi-structured questions to investigate the classroom challenges that influence teachers' code-switching practices, as well as their perceptions of these practices. The interview questions were adapted from previous studies (e.g., Adriosh & Razi, 2019; Köylü, 2018), which similarly explored the reasons behind code-switching in higher education by examining classroom challenges in specific teaching contexts. Teachers were given the option to respond in either Mandarin or English, allowing them to express their ideas more accurately. All audio data were transcribed by the first researcher, in collaboration with experts in both English and Mandarin translation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a two-stage process. The first stage was to analyse the data from classroom observation. The classroom observation recordings were transcribed by the first researcher. Following transcription, the first researcher identified all occurrences of teachers' code-switching across the classroom observation dataset. From these, illustrative extracts were selected purposively for detailed

analysis (Sidnell, 2010). Due to word limit constraints, only a subset of extracts was included in the reporting section of this paper. The occurrences were then analysed based on Gumperz's (1985) functions of code-switching. After the first researcher's analysis, the second researcher reviewed the extracts together with the corresponding transcripts to check transcription accuracy, extract boundaries. Functional categories were resolved through discussion with reference to the sequential context until a shared understanding was reached.

After the interviews were transcribed, the first researcher analysed the interview data using thematic analysis following King, Horrocks, and Brooks (2019). The analysis proceeded iteratively in three stages. First, the first researcher conducted descriptive coding by re-reading the transcripts and labelling meaning units related to classroom challenges (e.g., "Students' Limited Grammar Knowledge"). Second, descriptive codes were compared and clustered into interpretive themes that captured broader patterns in teachers' accounts (e.g., "Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Insufficient Grammatical Knowledge"). Third, interpretive themes were refined and synthesised into overarching themes that directly addressed the research question (e.g., "Students' Challenges in English Language Acquisition"). The second researcher reviewed the full set of codes and themes to ensure consistency and alignment with the data and research questions. Any analytical differences were resolved through discussion with reference to the transcript evidence.

FINDINGS

The Discourse Functions of Teachers' Code-switching in Chinese University English Proficiency Classes

It was found that twelve teachers in Chinese university English proficiency classes alternated between English and Mandarin. Table 2 shows the discourse functions identified in teachers' code-switching, with the number of observed instances for each function. Among these functions, message qualification and reiteration were the most common functions across the teachers. This suggests that code-switching was often used to clarify or elaborate on instructional content. Other functions, such as addressee specification, quotation, and personalisation versus objectivisation were observed to a lesser extent. Notably, interjections played a minimal role. One possible explanation is that teachers aim to maintain structured classroom discourse and deliver clear instructional input, rather than focusing on emotional expression (Sert, 2015). It means that interjections, as affective discourse features (Gumperz, 1985), were less likely to occur in teachers' code-switching during classroom interactions. Extracts illustrating five core functions, message qualification, reiteration, addressee specification, quotation, and personalisation versus objectivisation, are presented below.

Table 2

The Discourse Functions of Teachers' Code-switching in Chinese University English Proficiency Classes

Discourse Functions of code-switching	Gong	Huang	Wang	Rui	Ting	Xia	Song	Yang	Yue	Yu	Zhu	Zhou
Quotation	3	4	2	6	2	1	1	3	2	1	0	3
Addressee specification	12	6	7	0	7	8	2	3	6	13	2	5
Interjection	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0

Reiteration	24	22	28	29	29	39	24	23	32	22	31	39
Message qualification	37	31	37	51	48	54	35	50	49	34	57	52
Personalisation versus objectivisation	8	7	5	2	5	3	2	4	6	3	7	11
Total	85	72	80	88	91	106	64	84	96	73	98	110

Reiteration

All teachers in the English proficiency classes employed code-switching from English to Mandarin to repeat key content, reinforcing students' understanding through reiteration. This discourse function is evident in the following extract.

Extract 1.

Song: Budweiser *bǎi wēi píjiǔ* (Budweiser) *Tā shì yī kuǎn měiguó* (It is an American) style *de yīgè píjiǔ* (beer.) American style beer

In Extract 1, Song employed code-switching as a means of reiteration to emphasise “Budweiser”. She began by introducing this term in English and immediately repeated its meaning in Mandarin, reinforcing this term and making it more accessible for students to understand. After that, she continued describing this product in Mandarin and then repeated the same phrase in English: “American style beer”, thereby reframing the item with culturally meaningful attributes.

Message Qualification

Another discourse function of teachers' code-switching practices is message qualification to further specify meaning (Gumperz, 1985). Specifically, all teachers alternated the languages between Mandarin and English to clarify and explain instructional content during classroom interactions. The following extract is illustrative of this practice.

Extract 2.

Ting: What is red meat? *Hóngsè de ròu* (The colour of the meat is red.) *Wǒmen píngshí chī de shíwù zhōng shénme yàng de ròu* (Think about the food we usually eat) *chéngwéi* red meat (named red meat)

Initially, Ting switched from English to Mandarin to clarify the meaning of “red meat” by specifying its visual feature. Following this, she continued using Mandarin to further illustrate the term using familiar food contexts drawn from students' daily lives. Through this code-switching, Ting made the explanation easier to follow by segmenting it into smaller units to support students' comprehension.

Quotation

In this study, eleven teachers employed code-switching between English and Mandarin for the discourse function of quotation (Gumperz, 1985). This involved citing Chinese idiomatic expressions and others' speech to convey information and highlight how language reflects cultural differences in meaning.

Extract 3.

Yang: In Chinese, when we say *lóng* (dragon), it represents some kind of God, right? very great creature *lóng fēng chéng xiáng* (prosperity brought by the dragon and the phoenix) *lóng téng hǔ yuè* (a scene of bustling activity with dragons rising and tigers leaping)

In Extract 3, Yang employed code-switching for the discourse function of quotation, embedding culturally authoritative expressions into the classroom interaction (Gumperz, 1985). Yang alternated from English to Mandarin to frame the culturally positive and mythical portrayal of the dragon in Chinese culture. Notably, she enhanced her explanation by quoting two four-character idioms: “*lóng fèng chéng xiáng* (prosperity brought by the dragon and the phoenix)” and “*lóng téng hǔ yuè* (a scene of bustling activity with dragons rising and tigers leaping)”. The idioms emphasised the symbolic value of the dragon in Chinese culture by constructing a positive and mythical image, which is associated with strength, luck, and prosperity (Liu, 2015). Hence, this use of quotation through code-switching enabled teachers to draw on broader cultural narratives to guide students' interpretation within classroom discourse.

Addressee Specification

The analysis of the classroom observations revealed that the fourth discourse function of teachers' code-switching was addressee specification (Gumperz, 1985). In particular, eleven teachers employed code-switching to specify the addressee, such as nominating students to respond or redirecting attention during key moments of classroom interaction. The following extract illustrates typical instances of this function.

Extract 4.

Zhu: It is not appropriate to blame the internet. *hǎo* (OK) *nà biān dài zǐsè màozi de nǚshēng lái gào sù wǒ zhège appropriate shì shénme yìsi.* (The girl wearing a purple cap tells me what the meaning of “appropriate” is.)

It was evident that Zhu employed code-switching to explicitly allocate the next turn-taking. In the extract illustrated above, she observed that a student, wearing a purple cap, disengaged from the lesson during ongoing instruction. In response, Zhu embedded the Chinese discourse marker “*hǎo* (OK)” as a soft boundary signal (Li, 2022), preparing the conversational ground for the forthcoming addressee specification (Gumperz, 1985). She then continued in Mandarin to nominate the student by visually identifying her and asking her to explain the meaning of “appropriate”. By explicitly referring to this student in Mandarin, Zhu shifted the participation framework from the whole class to an individual student.

Personalisation versus objectivisation

Teachers' code-switching served the discourse function of personalisation versus objectivisation (Gumperz, 1985). Specifically, all teachers switched between English and Mandarin to offer praise or share their subjective opinions in classroom discourse. These code-switching practices marked a shift from a formal instructional voice to a more personal and relational stance (Gumperz, 1985; Sert, 2015). An example of this function is in the following extract.

Extract 5.

Zhou: *rúguǒ nǐ bùshì xiàng tā nà zhōng yǐjīng yǐngxiǎng dào tā rìcháng shēnghuó de qíngkuàng qíshí shì méiyǒu biàoyào zhēngxíng de* (In fact, there is no need for plastic if your appearance has not affected your daily life like hers.) You are just yourself. Be yourself *zuò zìjǐ shì zuìměi de duì ba* (Being yourself is the most beautiful, right?)

In Extract 5, taken from Zhou's discussion of a student's plastic surgery experience, his code-switching was employed to navigate between fact description and emotional alignment, illustrating the discourse

function of personalisation versus objectivisation (Gumperz, 1985). Specifically, Zhou initially employed Mandarin to convey health-related information related to plastic surgery, suggesting that plastic surgery may be unnecessary unless one's appearance has significantly impacted daily life. By delivering medically grounded content in Mandarin, he adopted the role of an authoritative advisor and constructed an objectivised stance (Gumperz, 1985). Following this, Zhou switched to English to offer emotional encouragement and affirm students' self-worth. This code-switching moved objective explanations to affective personalisation, performing the function of personalisation. Zhou also embedded a Chinese discourse marker “*duì ba* (right)” (Li, 2022) to guide student alignment at the end. Through these code-switching practices, Zhou switched between institutional authority and emotional unity.

Overall, the discourse-function findings show that teachers' code-switching served both instructional clarity (reiteration and message qualification) and interactional management or stance work (addressee specification and personalisation versus objectivisation). This synthesis highlights patterns across teachers rather than treating the extracts as isolated cases.

Classroom Challenges Teachers Face in the English Proficiency Classes

This section presents varying teachers' perceptions of classroom challenges shaping their use of code-switching practices in the English proficiency classes. These challenges included students' language development challenges, their social engagement and learning motivation challenges, teachers' English expression concerns, and their classroom management and interaction difficulties.

Students' Challenges in English Language Acquisition

Students' challenges in acquiring English included three sub-themes: insufficient grammatical knowledge, limited vocabulary mastery, and difficulties in articulating thoughts fluently in English. These themes are illustrated through extracts from the teachers' interview transcripts presented below. Firstly, five teachers identified insufficient grammatical knowledge as a major language challenge affecting students' engagement with English-medium instruction. This challenge led teachers to switch to Mandarin. Zhou, for instance, reported using code-switching during grammar instruction.

‘yǔfǎ jiǎngjiě de shíhòu, yīnwèi dàxué yīngyǔ shòukè de duìxiàng dōu shìfēi yīngyǔ zhuānyè de, suǒyǐ tāmen duìyú hěnduō zhuānyè yīngyǔ shì bù liǎojiě de’

(I often switched the languages when explaining grammar. The students in English proficiency classes are all non-English majors. Thus, they are not familiar with many professional English grammar concepts).

Zhou attributed this challenge to the students' unfamiliarity with English grammatical metalanguage created a barrier to comprehension. Since they were not majoring in English, they had limited exposure to formal language training and lacked familiarity with technical grammatical concepts (Gao & Wang, 2023). As a result, many students had challenges in understanding complex or abstract grammar explained in English. Switching to Mandarin allowed Zhou to bridge this gap by explaining technical terms in a language students were more comfortable with.

Secondly, four teachers highlighted that the challenge students faced in acquiring English was their limited vocabulary mastery. This challenge hindered students' ability to comprehend English learning

materials, leading teachers to support them in understanding abstract or complex vocabulary. Teachers stated:

'Jiǎngkè wén shí, yǒuxiē dāncí xuéshēng tīng bù dòng' (Students cannot understand some words during reading activities).

(Ting)

'Yīxiē bǐjiào fùzá shēngpì de cíhuì, xuéshēng bù dòng wǒ jiù zhíjiē fānyì.' (If students don't understand some complex and unfamiliar words, I translate them directly.)

(Yu)

Thirdly, four teachers reported that students struggled to articulate their thoughts clearly and accurately in classroom discussions. Teachers noted:

'Tāmen bùnéng yòng yīngyǔ zhǔnquè dì biǎodá zìjǐ de yìsì' (Students cannot express their meaning accurately in English.)

(Zhou)

'yīngyǔ cíhuì liàng bù tài gòu, zhǐ huì yīxiē zhīlípòsuì de broken de dōngxī' (Students only express a few simple words and speak very simple and fragmented sentences.)

(Xia)

Across the interviews, three challenges in students' English language acquisition emerged. Teachers consistently linked students' limited grammar metalanguage, restricted vocabulary, and fragmented spoken production to moments when English-only interaction became difficult to sustain, particularly during grammar explanation, reading activities and classroom discussion.

Students' Challenges in Social Engagement and Learning Motivation

Students also faced social challenges, including decreased learning motivation in an English-only environment and anxiety during English communication. These issues hindered classroom participation and undermined learning engagement.

Three teachers indicated that students experienced a decreased motivation to learn English within English-only classroom environments. Teachers stated:

'gǎnjué lǎoshī hěn niú, Shàngkè quán zài jiǎng yīngwén, dànshì shà yě méi xué dào' (Certain teachers have high English proficiency levels and speak English all the time, but their students learn nothing in the classes.)

(Rui)

'English only huì pòhuài tāmen de xuéxí yīngyǔ de motivation.' (English-only may negatively impact their motivation to learn English.)

(Zhu)

Moreover, six teachers highlighted that students experienced anxiety, stemming from nervousness and a fear of making mistakes in front of their peers, in English communication tasks. This reluctance to speak freely hindered students' willingness to express themselves freely, a central objective outlined

by the Guidelines (National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020). Teachers noted:

'Yǒuxiē xiǎopéngyǒu jiùshì bù gài biǎodá' (Some students do not have enough courage to express themselves.)

(Yue)

'Our students are always very shy and nervous. They do not want to make mistakes in public. It's hard for them to speak English in the classroom.'

(Yang)

Students encountered several social challenges, notably students' anxiety when speaking English. Another challenge is a decrease in learning motivation within an English-only environment. This could be because the English-only teaching approach in EFL classrooms may lead to a lifeless learning environment, where students may find it difficult to maintain active learning motivation (Obaidullah, 2016). Consequently, the teachers chose to switch codes between English and Mandarin to better support student engagement and understanding during classroom interactions.

Teachers' English Proficiency Concerns During Classroom Interactions

Despite their high level of English proficiency, teachers faced a language challenge: teachers' temporary breakdown in English expression, which shaped their code-switching practices from English to Mandarin. This challenge was identified as the only sub-theme under the category of language challenges encountered by teachers. In the interviews, regardless of their strong English proficiency, three teachers mentioned that their English expressions still influenced their code-switching practices when explaining concepts or engaging with students. For example, commenting on the use of code-switching, Gong said:

'zìjǐ túrán méiyǒu xiāng qílái nénggòu hěn hǎo de yòng yīngyǔ biǎodá de cí de shíhò, huì huàn chéng hànyǔ'

(When I suddenly cannot find an appropriate way to express an idea in English, I will switch to Chinese.)

This highlighted that she encountered a temporary mental block in expressing herself with appropriate English expressions, reflecting concerns about her ability to express instructional content accurately and efficiently in English during ongoing classroom interaction. This challenge led to code-switching practices to avoid delays and maintain the process of classroom interactions. This challenge may stem from China's exam-oriented educational environment and teachers' persistent time constraints and instructional intensity (Liu, 2023). Under such pressures, teachers often prioritised communicative efficiency over linguistic consistency to sustain instructional pace and ensure comprehension.

Teachers' Challenges in Classroom Management and Classroom Interaction

Teachers encountered social challenges in the process of managing classrooms and engaging with students. These challenges were primarily related to two aspects: managing student behaviour in large-sized classrooms and the negative emotional pressures during lessons.

Four teachers in this study identified the management of student behaviour in large classes as a social challenge. Within the research context, classroom sizes typically exceeded 50 students, which posed

considerable difficulties for effective classroom management. As a result, this challenge influenced teachers to code-switch from English to Mandarin in order to maintain the flow of instruction and meet their teaching objectives. For instance, Huang stated:

'shì yīgè dà jiàoshì, bān shàng qǐmǎ yǒu 50 duō gè tóngxué. wǒ wúfǎ guānzhù dào měi gè xuéshēng. Suǒyǐ jiù zhíjiē yòng zhōngwén, yòng yīgè dàjiā dōu bǐjiào néng jiēshòu de, huòzhě shì gèng gāoxiào de fāngfǎ'

(We teach in a large classroom. There are at least 50 students in the class. I cannot keep track of every student's situation. So, I use Chinese, a more effective and acceptable method.)

In her interview, Huang explained that the large size of the class made it difficult for her to monitor students' individual learning conditions effectively. In particular, students with limited self-discipline may go unnoticed due to the teacher's restricted capacity to attend to everyone, potentially resulting in classroom disruption or low levels of participation (Wright & Zheng, 2016). Therefore, in such situations, Huang intentionally employed code-switching practices to restore order and encourage active student engagement.

Besides, three teachers reported that their negative emotions influenced them to switch languages between English and Mandarin in classroom interactions. For example, Wang noted that his anxiety influenced him code-switch. This emotional reaction was triggered by students' silence or miscommunication. As he put:

'Zài kètáng chūxiàn lěngchǎng xiànniàng shí, wǒzhāojí. yī zhāojí yǔ sù jiù huì kuài yīxiē, ránhòu zhè dǎozhì tóngxuémen huì gèng tīng bù dòng. Zài zhège guòchéng zhōng, bùdé bù zuò yǔ mǎ zhuǎnhuàn'

(I was anxious when students were silent in the class. The anxiety caused me to speak faster in English, which unfortunately made it more difficult for the students to understand me. In such a situation, I had to switch the codes.)

In the interview, Wang's anxiety hindered students' comprehension and disrupted the flow of classroom interaction. In response to this challenge, Wang used code-switching practices to mitigate the negative emotion and simultaneously promote students' understanding and communication.

Thus, the findings reveal that teachers face two social challenges that influence their classroom code-switching practices and emotional experiences during interactions with students on managing student behaviour in large-sized classes and coping with negative emotional pressures during lessons.

DISCUSSION

This study explored why and how English language teachers at a private university in China navigate institutional English-only policy by employing code-switching to address communicative and pedagogical challenges. The findings highlight clear dissonance between policy expectations and classroom realities, underscoring the critical role of code-switching as both a communicative and instructional resource. Importantly, the study adds to the field by showing that teachers' code-switching is not merely a reaction to low proficiency but a strategic discourse practice that enables classroom instruction to continue under policy constraints.

The teachers in this study consistently used code-switching to serve various discourse functions, particularly reiteration, message qualification and addressee specification. These practices are drawn from Gumperz's (1985) framework, which suggests that code-switching is not random but functionally motivated. Taken together, these functions demonstrate that teachers' code-switching operates at the level of discourse organisation, participation management, and stance-taking, rather than functioning only as translation or vocabulary support. This strengthens the argument that code-switching should be understood as a classroom discourse that helps teachers sustain instructional coherence while responding to students' immediate interactional needs.

The data also reveal a range of classroom challenges that directly influenced teachers' code-switching behaviours. Teachers reported students' limited vocabulary, grammar issues, and difficulties in expressing themselves in English, all of which corroborate findings from previous research in similar EFL contexts (e.g. Adrioso & Razi, 2019; Ghaderi et al., 2024). Beyond linguistic barriers, teachers noted social-affective factors such as student anxiety, low engagement, and fear of making mistakes, which discouraged active participation in English. This study adds a more integrated account of how linguistic challenges and social-affective pressures interact in real-time classroom discourse, making code-switching both a pedagogical scaffold and a participation strategy. This suggests that code-switching is not simply used because students are weak, but because teachers must simultaneously achieve instructional goals, maintain interactional flow, and sustain students' willingness to participate.

Notably, teachers themselves faced challenges with language proficiency and classroom management, particularly in large classes exceeding 50 students. Temporary lapses in lexical retrieval and expressions in English led some teachers to switch to Mandarin to maintain instructional flow. These findings challenge the policy and curriculum orientation. This orientation is reflected in official guidelines that prioritise maximising English use in university EFL instruction, where teachers are positioned as consistent models of target-language use (e.g., National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, 2020; Rao, 2023). Instead, they highlighted the reality that even experienced teachers may rely on their L1 as a practical pedagogical tool in complex classroom situations.

While the intention behind such policies is to maximise English exposure, they may inadvertently undermine effective teaching if they ignore the nuanced, strategic and student-responsive use of code-switching. The teachers' use of Mandarin was not a sign of instructional weakness but a deliberate and adaptive strategy to mediate learning. Therefore, this study adds empirical support for a principled flexibility approach, where English remains the primary medium of instruction, but teachers are allowed to draw on Mandarin strategically to support comprehension, participation and classroom management. In light of this, the study supports classes for more nuanced language policies that recognise the value of L1 use in EFL pedagogy. Additionally, teacher training programmes should include practical guidance on the principled use of code-switching, helping educators distinguish between over-reliance and strategic deployment. This is particularly important in university-level proficiency courses, where the goals of communicative competence and exam performance must be balanced.

IMPLICATIONS

In this section, the pedagogical and policy implications derived from the study's findings are outlined.

Drawing on teachers' reported classroom challenges and the discourse functions of teachers' code-switching, the analysis highlights a discrepancy between English-only policy orientations and the interactional realities of tertiary EFL classrooms. The implications are organised into four areas: rethinking English-only policies, strengthening teacher training and professional development, supporting teachers' pedagogical autonomy, and reforming exam-oriented approaches.

1. Rethinking English-Only Policies

The findings call for a more flexible interpretation of English-only policies in tertiary EFL education. In this study, teachers' code-switching was most frequently used for message qualification and reiteration, indicating that Mandarin was strategically employed to clarify key concepts, explain unfamiliar vocabulary and reinforce understanding during teacher-fronted instruction. This suggests rigid enforcement may hinder comprehension and participation, especially among lower-proficiency learners (Obaidullah, 2016). Thus, institutions should consider policy adaptations that legitimise principled, pedagogically justifiable code-switching rather than treating all L1 use as a policy violation. Universities could issue an "English-first but not English-only" guideline that permits brief Mandarin use for clarification of key terms, explanation of complex instructions and restoring participation during extended silence.

2. Teacher training and professional development

Educator training programmes should incorporate modules on the principled use of code-switching. The findings of this study show that teachers used Mandarin not only for content explanation but also for interactional management, such as nominating students through addresses specification and shifting stance through personalisation versus objectivisation. Teachers also reported that students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes reduced participation, and that code-switching helped lower tension and reengage learners. Rather than discouraging all L1 use, training should emphasise how and when code-switching can support instructional clarity, engagement, and classroom management (Du, 2016).

3. Supporting pedagogical autonomy

Empowering teachers to make informed decisions about language use can foster more adaptive and student-centred teaching practices. The findings indicate that teachers made rapid language choices in response to real-time constraints, including large class size (often exceeding 50 students) and students' uneven proficiency levels. Teachers also described temporary breakdowns in English expression, which led them to switch to Mandarin to maintain instructional flow. These realities suggest that English-only expectations may overlook the interactional demands placed on teachers, even when they have high English proficiency. Recognising the legitimacy of teachers' professional judgement, particularly in contexts where they face large class sizes and exam-oriented pressures, is essential (Wright & Zheng, 2016).

4. Reforming exam-oriented approaches

Many of the instructional challenges that trigger code-switching stem from a focus on grammar-based, exam-driven learning. In this study, teachers frequently reported that students struggled with grammar concepts, vocabulary and speaking fluency, and these difficulties often required teachers to clarify meaning through Mandarin to ensure lesson progress. This suggests that when success is measured

mainly through accuracy driven examinations, teachers may feel pressured to prioritise comprehension efficiency over sustained English interaction. A shift toward communicative language teaching (CLT) and performance-based assessment may reduce the pressure on teachers to revert to Mandarin to ensure students' success (Wright & Zheng, 2016). Universities could gradually increase speaking-based and task-based assessment components alongside test preparation. This would align classroom interaction with the Guideline's emphasis on communicative competence and reduce the mismatch between policy goals and assessment demands.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the discourse functions of teachers' code-switching and the classroom challenges faced by both teachers and students that shape the use of code-switching in university-level English proficiency classes in mainland China. Twelve teachers from one Chinese university were participated in interviews and classroom observations. The analysis of these observations and interview transcripts revealed that teachers primarily used code-switching for discourse functions such as reiteration and message qualification. Importantly, teachers' code-switching was an intentional strategy designed to facilitate teaching. Besides, four categories of classroom challenges emerged: students' language acquisition difficulties, students' social engagement and learning motivation challenges, teachers' English expression concerns, and teachers' classroom management and interaction challenges. These challenges, stemming from the exam-oriented learning environment, prevent teachers from fully achieving the language, communicative, and pedagogical objectives outlined in the Guidelines, thereby shaping them to code-switch.

This study highlights the tensions between policy expectations and teaching realities. By demonstrating how and why teachers code-switch, this research advocates for flexible language policies that acknowledge the value of the students' L1. Moreover, this study emphasises the importance of improving teacher training programmes, enabling them to avoid over-reliance on code-switching effectively. These insights are also broadly relevant to other EFL contexts, particularly where exam-oriented learning cultures create similar tensions between policy and teaching practice.

While this study provides valuable insights into teachers' code-switching practices, there remain several areas for further exploration. This research was grounded in one university in China. Future studies could benefit from a broader sample across diverse regional settings, capturing a wider range of EFL teaching experiences. This can also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between classroom challenges and teachers' code-switching practices in various international contexts.

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