

Code Switching in Iraqi EFL Context

Asst. Prof. Dr. Nesaem Mehdi Abdullah nasaem_rose_i@yahoo.com

Lect Dr. Manal Adnan Sadoon manaladnan70@gmail.com

University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Dept. of English

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to investigate code switching between English and Arabic by Iraqi learners at the University of Babylon, College of Education for Human Sciences, Dept. of English. Specifically, the present study aims to find students' and teachers' stands concerning the process of code switching. A questionnaire is piloted on a sample group of 48 undergraduate English majoring students and five teachers at the same Dept. This research primarily uses qualitative and quantitative analyses using Microsoft Excel. It is found that most male students at different levels prefer using code switching while female students believe that switching is a sign of weakness and lack of knowledge and aptitude in the foreign language learning. Teachers on the other hand believe that code switching may facilitate learning provided that it should be sparingly used. Implications are drawn for education programs and for further research concerning actual classroom practices.

Key words: code switching, EFL, bilinguals, strategies, functions

1. Rationale

Code-switching is a very intriguing linguistic phenomenon. Though much of the previous century's research indicated that it occurred chaotically, the modern opinions of linguists and ethnographers argue for the systematic nature of code-switching in natural contexts. Currently, there is much research on the subject of code-switching as a linguistic peculiarity typical of bilinguals and multilinguals; however, the true nature, functions, and reasons or purposes of code-switching are still vaguely defined (Gardnar-Chloros, 2009: 34).

Alternation between languages in the form of code switching has also been widely observed as a phenomenon in foreign language classrooms. As such, there has been a heated debate between different views on whether it is helpful or impeding to switch back and forth between the target language and the native language in the foreign language learning classroom. When researchers address the issue, especially the use or the role of native language and the target language, there appear to be two opposing language attitudes among them: the target language exclusivity and the opposition. The proponents of the first attitude

believe that switching to the first language undermines the process of learning since the use or overuse of the mother tongue in foreign language classrooms will deprive learners of valuable target language input. For example, when learners are used to hearing their teacher use of native language, they will tend to ignore the target language and therefore do not benefit fully from valuable target language input. On the other side, it is believed that the native language deserves a place in the foreign language classroom. To let students use their mother tongue is a humanistic approach, as it permits them to say what they really want to say. The learners inevitably work from a native language reference base, so it can be helpful for them to orient themselves in the target language through the native language medium or by relating target language phenomena to their equivalents in their native language (See Jingxia: 2013; Nilep: 2006; Stern: 1992).

Most students believe that their failure to understand the target language can be due to insufficient explanation being given in the native language. The exclusion of the native language from the foreign language learning classrooms would sharply limit the possibilities of foreign language teaching. The native language as a resource instead of a barrier to successful foreign language learning would help to create more authentic users of the target language (Rezvani and Rasekh: 2011). Drawing upon the above incompatible rubrics, the present study tries to answer the following questions:

1. Do teachers and students stay nearly the same stance on the attitudes towards code switching?
2. Is it practical or impractical to exclude the native language from foreign language learning classroom?
3. What are the most prevalent functions of code switching in Iraqi EFL Context?
4. Why do Iraqi EFL learners code switch?

2. Preliminaries

In the context of foreign language learning classroom, code switching refers to the alternate use of the native language and the target or foreign language as a means of communication by language teachers when the need arises (Qian et al: 2009). This contact phenomenon is a natural product of bilingual education where students consistently receive information in two languages. Classroom code switching research has focused on both teacher– learner interaction and the influence code switching may exert on students' learning (Greggio and Gill: 2007). Therefore, it is a discourse strategy which is more amenable to such

contexts where learners and teachers have homogenous ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (Carless: 2004).

2.1 Functions

Code switching performs several functions which may be automatic and unconscious. Foreign language teachers tend to use the learners' native language to serve a certain number of pedagogic and social functions (Abiy and Mohammed: 2012). They are listed as topic function, affective function, and repetitive function. In topic function, the teacher alters his language according to the topic that is under discussion especially in instructions dealing with particular grammar points. In these cases, the students' attention is directed to the new knowledge by making use of switching to the students' native tongue. The affective function serves for the expression of emotion. In this case code switching is used to build up solidarity and intimate relations with the students. This means that code switching contributes for creating a supportive language environment in the classroom. The repetitive function indicates that the teacher uses code switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge for students for clarity. The teacher switches to the native language in order to clarify meaning, and in this way stresses importance on the foreign language content for efficient comprehension (ibid.).

On the other hand, foreign language learners make use of code switching to perform a variety of functions. They are listed as: equivalence, floor– holding, reiteration and conflict control. Equivalence means that students use the native equivalents of certain lexical items in the target/foreign language. This can be correlated with the deficiency in linguistic competence of the foreign language. Thus, it is a defensive mechanism as it gives the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gaps resulting from foreign language incompetence. The second function is floor–holding. During a conversation in the foreign language, the students fill the stoppage with native language use. This mechanism/strategy is used in order to avoid gaps in communication which may result from not recalling the appropriate foreign language structures or lexis. Reiteration happens when messages are reinforced, emphasized or clarified where these messages are transmitted in one code but not understood. In this case, the messages in the foreign language are repeated by the students in the native tongue through which the learners try to give the meaning by making use of the repetition technique. That is, learners may think that it is more appropriate to switch so as to indicate to the teacher that the content is clearly understood by them (Karen: 2003) (For further information, see Eldrige: 1996; Numan and Carter: 2001; Ching: 2013).

2.2 Research Methodology

The research methodology followed in carrying out this study was a paper- and- pencil structured questionnaire administered to a number of respondents with researchers available for clarification and guidance. Clarification on the part of researchers could alleviate the problem of misinterpretation among these respondents as regards the concept of code switching. Some other respondents represented a random sample of the department strenuous teaching staff members. This research primarily used qualitative and quantitative analyses. The answers were read and the percentages of each choice were calculated using Microsoft Excel.

As far as the current study is concerned, the researchers set up their questionnaire to collect data from respondents about their conception and stance as far as the term code switching is concerned. The proposed questionnaire consisted of six questions directed to students who were requested to respond faithfully to them whereas one further question was directed to the randomly selected EFL teachers at the same department cognizant of this fervent topic put forward.

2.3 Sample of the Study

The sample of the study encompassed 48 undergraduate Iraqi EFL learners from the University of Babylon/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ Department of English during the academic year 2018–2019. The respondents were males and females whose native language is Arabic. They all have been studying English as a foreign language; therefore, they have been considered as having familiar and not too bad knowledge in English language inside EFL classrooms. Their ages were ranging from 18 to 23 since they were first year and fourth year students. The reason behind this variation in the choice of participants was to show whether participants' views regarding code switching could be liable to differ with respect to their gender and age. Along the same line of research, this paper aimed at exploring five EFL teachers' stance concerning code switching inside classrooms.

2.4 Results and Discussions

After conducting the questionnaire in which students and teachers were requested to faithfully answer, the researchers took the responsibility of scrutinizing the responses of the participants. Thus, what follows is an analysis of the answers of the students of each of the six questions directed to them.

With regard to the first question which reads as: (Is code-switching in EFL classrooms disruptive to the learners?), most students confirmed that code-switching in classrooms was a legitimate strategy. They appended that it was not disruptive because it provided an opportunity for language development. As a matter of fact, code switching may be used by teachers and learners alike as a strategy for promoting classroom interaction and ensuring classroom management. It can help cultivate and reinforce good habits of learning and foster a close learner- teacher relationship. Yet, perusal of the responses has shown the following variation in students' opinions as far as their age and gender is concerned:

1. First year students, unanimously (24, 24%), argued that code-switching was a beneficial strategy in teaching since it could help them overcome the difficulties they may face in understanding most of the terms and expressions they were hearing from their teachers.
2. Most fourth year female students (5, 5%) argued that code-switching was a disruptive strategy because it could kill the continuity of their ideas in the language they have been learning (English). Moreover, it could be a sign of weakness and lack of knowledge and aptitude in the foreign language. As such, they argued that this phenomenon should be avoided. Male students (9, 9%), on the other hand, mentioned that though code switching could be a disruptive, sabotaging strategy, it may still paramount in teaching English as a foreign language.

In line with Kang (2008), it may be unreasonable to expect the exclusive use of the native tongue inside foreign language classrooms because it can come in handy to achieve educating the learners and to ensure smoothness of classroom interaction. In this Iraqi EFL context, most male students preferred their teachers and class mates to use the native tongue (Arabic) sometimes or occasionally. They believed that switching to Arabic could benefit the EFL class but the majority of female students considered Arabic to be harmful and unwholesome. Female students vouched for limited use of the native language. This comes in congruent with Taskin (2011) who believes that too much use of the native tongue could deprive the learners of valuable input in the foreign language. The above percentages can be figuratively schematized in the following figure:

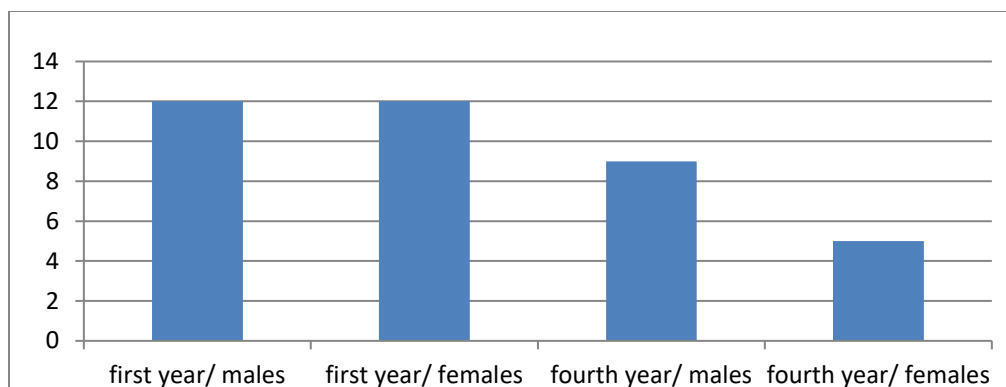


Figure (1): The Overall Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Question 1

As far as the second question is concerned (Does teachers' code switching in classrooms cause confusion?), participants' responses diversified between yes and no as follows:

1. Most first year students (12, 12% males and 9, 9% females) said that code switching strengthen their grasp of the English language. They argued that using some Arabic in classrooms while teaching English could pave the way to a better understanding of the English language. Hence, teachers' code switching in classrooms would not cause confusion because confusion itself could have been arisen when the teachers kept solely speaking in English. For them, as they mentioned, Arabic could be a means of clarification in English teaching classrooms. This accords with Rezvani and Rasekh (2011) maintaining that the judicious and skillful use of the mother tongue could boost the quality of teaching. In a nutshell, such a use can lead to better teacher– student classroom communication, help students' comprehension and foster a healthier and friendlier teacher–student relationship (Hobbs et al :2010).

2. Fourth year female students, particularly (12, 12%), argued that using Arabic while teaching English could be the primary cause of confusion inside classrooms since it may cut the successiveness of their ideas and lead to weaken their concentration. (6, 6%) male participants, conversely, said that though using Arabic sometimes may cause confusion, it could be still substantial for various reasons, the most important of which could be that of clarifying difficult terms and reminding them that Arabic, not English, has been ever since their own mother tongue. Having a quick peek over the subject, we can notice that female students had a negative attitude towards using the native tongue and they did not consider it as a beneficial tool in the English classes. According to them, it may be advisable that the mother tongue be

used in a limited manner at appropriate times in English classes. On the other hand, the majority of male students, however, had a positive attitude towards the use of the native language considering it as a beneficial tool in EFL context that could help ameliorate their comprehension.

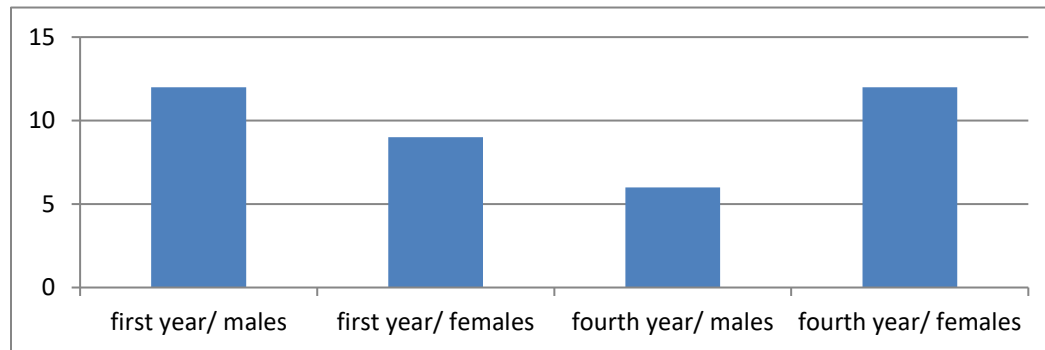


Figure (2): The Overall Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Question 2

Concerning the third question (Does the mixing of English and Arabic weaken your English or Arabic?), students' responses vary as follows:

1. First year female students (8, 8%) argued that although code switching between English and Arabic in EFL classrooms might weaken their capacities in learning English as a foreign language because it limited their fluency in English, they admitted that it was still beneficial for them especially they were first year students. As opposed to them, male students (12, 12%) argued that the mixing of English and Arabic strengthened rather than weakened their learning because it may open the doors to a better understanding of what the teacher said or explained. They appended that code switching could be a better medium of instruction and communication.

2. Fourth year students, notably females (3, 3%), suggested that the mixing of the two languages in EFL classroom could not be considered as a sign of development; instead, it could be a sign of going astray. They added that Arabic should not be used in EFL classes and it should be avoided as much as possible by having recourse to synonyms and antonyms in the foreign language (English) which could be a means of facilitating any difficulty the students were facing while listening to the teacher. Male students (8, 8%), on the other hand,

did not object the mixing of the two languages. Yet, they argued that it should be controlled and bordered.

In this vein, it is argued that the foreign language is to be preferred as it maximizes the learners' exposure to the language targeted. If the teachers code switch frequently, the learners will use their mother tongue rather than the foreign language more frequently compared to when teachers solely are in the habit of using the foreign language (Xiaoli: 2013 ; Macaro: 2005). To make a priori assumption, the frequent use of the mother tongue would lead to that both the linguistic input and out of the foreign language would decrease (Copland and Neokleous:2011). However, teachers sometimes tend to use the learners' mother tongue more frequently to serve a certain number of pedagogic and pragmatic functions which may be beneficial in foreign language learning environment such as translating unknown vocabulary items and expressions , explaining difficult grammar points and instructions, praising learners for doing well inside the classroom , managing the class, introducing background information and checking comprehension, making comparison between two languages and cultures, giving feedback to students, creating humorous atmosphere and reducing the learners' nervousness. These could all contribute to a better teacher– learner classroom interaction (Hobbs et al: 2010 and Gulzar: 2010).

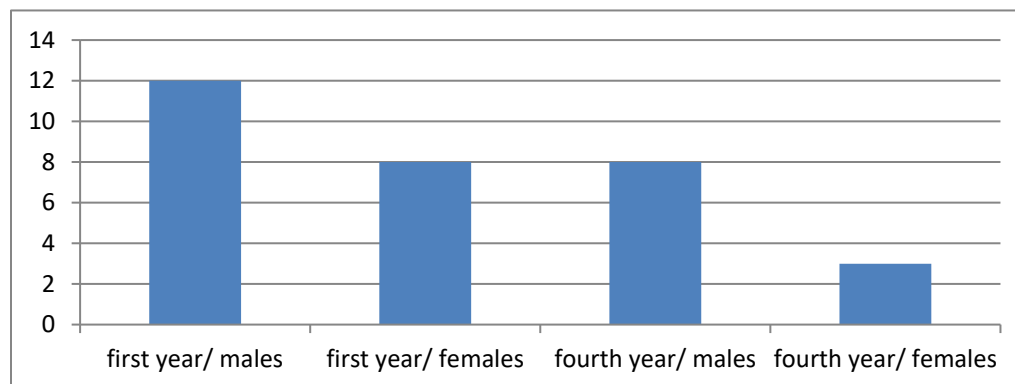


Figure (3): The Overall Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Question 3

With respect to the fourth question which reads as: (Is there consensus between the teachers' code switching patterns and the students' preferences?), most students, (12, 12%) first year males, (12, 12%) females, (12, 12%) fourth year males, and (5, 5%) fourth year

females, confirmed that there would be a wanted consensus between teachers' code switching patterns and the students' preferences.

Multifarious studies conducted on the issue of code switching have shown that the advantages of using the mother tongue outweigh the disadvantages. Thus, code switching to the first language is considered as a learning strategy and as a facilitator (Cheng: 2013; Jafari: 2013). The judicious use of the mother tongue inside foreign language classes could assist the learners in overcoming the problems, dilemmas and confusion generated by the extensive use of the foreign language (Taskin: 2011). In our educational setting, both the teachers and learners signaled out that code switching to Arabic has been found useful for informational and interpersonal purposes of communication. The majority of male learners believed that if teachers insisted to ignore the use of the mother tongue in the English classes, this may cause that their nationalistic identities be threatened. In compliance with Jagero and Odongo (2011), the researchers noticed that male learners had more code switching tendency than female learners.

Fourth year female learners (3, 3%) argued that progress in foreign language learning would be facilitated if only one code could be used in the classroom. Students may disagree with the teachers' code choice and may have different preferences for mother tongue use (Macaro: 2001). Accordingly, teachers can view code switching as a valid asset for low proficiency and novice learners. The teachers' use of mother tongue inside their classes aims in essence to create a safe language learning environment (Ahmad: 2008)

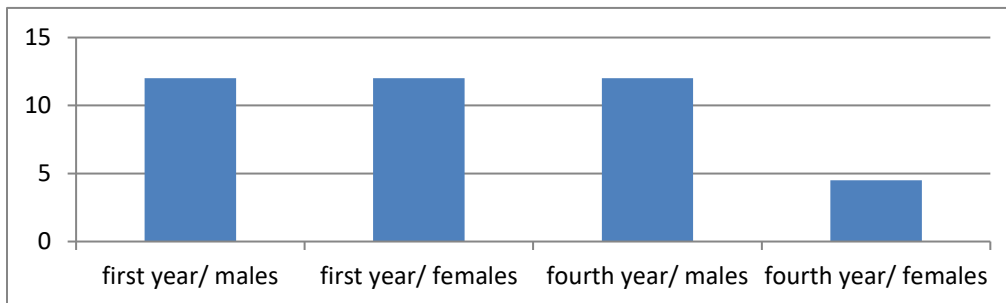


Figure (4): The Overall Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Question 4

Concerning the fifth question (Do you think that code switching outside classrooms, in public places for example, prestigious?), first and fourth year female students (12, 12%; 5, 5%

respectively) argued that code switching to English would be prestigious. It could be a matter of displaying linguistic skills and a matter of impressing others. First and fourth year male students (4, 4%; 5, 5% respectively), conversely, argued that code switching outside classrooms would be no more than a matter of showing off. They added that code switching in public places could be looked at as burlesque and ridiculous arguing that females always intended to capture attention and show off themselves through the language they used boastfully. Male students spoke in the full conviction that the use of the foreign language outside the classroom could not be seen as a way to scaffold each other's learning of a foreign language.

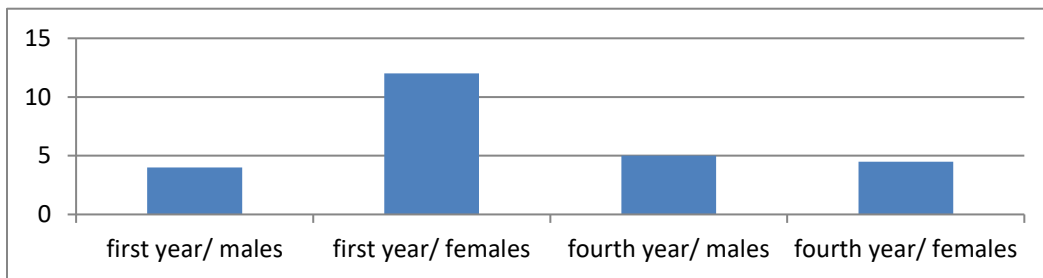


Figure (5): The Overall Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Question 5

As regards the sixth question (Does code switching have an effect on your passing the exam?), there was a strong agreement among students, particularly males, about the influential effect of code switching on their passing the exam arguing that difficult concepts should be explained in Arabic so as to give them the opportunity of answering the questions correctly. The students demonstrated that the preference for Arabic/English code switching was substantiated by the fact that some information needs to be explained in Arabic for more understanding. The numbers and percentages of students' responses can be represented as follows: (12, 12%) and (12, 12%) first year male and female students; (12, 12%) fourth year male students and (5, 5%) fourth year female students.

From the varied assumptions and findings on the issue of code switching, it is seen that the use of the mother tongue inside the class helps learners' comprehension greatly. It reduces students' language anxiety and assists in filling the gaps in using the foreign language adequately because of the learners' lack of English words and structures. That is why code switching is inescapable in EFL classroom.

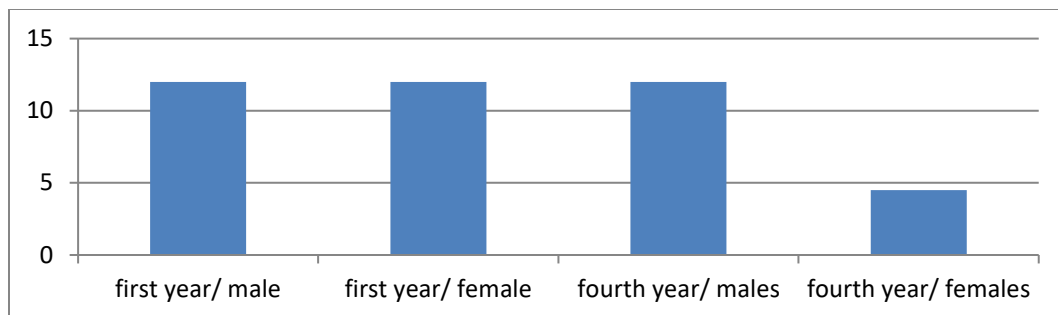


Figure (6): The Overall Percentages of the Subjects' Responses to Question 6

In order to shed light on teachers' dogmatism concerning code switching in EFL classrooms, five teachers have been asked the following question at the end of the questionnaire (When and why do teachers code switch?). In responding to this question, the teachers mentioned that code switching could be an important tool for both teachers and students when teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The five teachers who participated in the questionnaire agreed that their code switching would serve the purpose of facilitating the students' learning. They added that their code switching has depended on difficult matters or topics which required the shift from English to Arabic so as to make it easier for the students to penetrate into the main ideas.

For Simon (2001) and Kraemer (2006), code switching has commonly been used by teachers to save time and efforts and ensure the optimal efficiency of communication. Some teachers who apparently believe that they have used the foreign language exclusively and urged the students to speak the foreign language would themselves at times switch to the mother tongue to serve a number of pedagogic and pragmatic functions which would contribute to a better teacher– student classroom interaction (Gearon: 1998; Kim and Elder: 2005). It is essential to make teachers and educators understand the utility and benefits of code switching in the foreign language classrooms to override communicative stumbling blocks by falling back on the use of mother tongue (Gulzar et al.: 2013; Cummins and Swain: 1986).

2.5 Implications

a. Canny and well–advised use of code switching can lead to foster teacher– student classroom communication and indemnify the quality of teaching a foreign language.

- b. Educators and Syllable designers need to organize workshops and seminars to in-service teachers to enable them to decide on the proper use of the mother tongue in EFL context,
- c. EFL teachers could switch to Arabic to teach lexical items and grammar points and help their learners listen carefully so as to check whether the learners understand the points in EFL classes or not.
- d. There is no empirical evidence to substantiate the claim that the exclusion of the first language would necessarily improve learning efficiency (Cheng: 2013). On the contrary, the sparing use of the mother tongue can provide a natural short-cut to content and knowledge acquisition (Greer: 2007; Rios and Campos: 2013)
- e. Code switching can be considered to be a helpful language strategy where it is a valid asset for low proficiency learners (Wright: 2010).

3. Conclusions

- 1- Code switching is a readily available and frequently applied strategy for EFL teachers in classroom interaction and classroom management (Qian et al :2009).
- 2- Code switching is motivated by situational and stylistic factors and the switches between the first and the foreign languages are conscious and intentional.
- 3- Code switching is used for certain purposes, for instance, in certain situations and for certain individuals. Code switching selection depends on facts such as age, gender, proficiency levels and educational backgrounds of the learners.
- 4- Code switching makes a comfortable atmosphere in the EFL classroom in that learners use switching to express themselves better during interaction and negotiation of meaning and form (Amfast and Jorgensen:2003).
- 5. Code switching can be used to serve a certain number of pedagogic and social macro functions such as translation, explanation, praise etc. (Hobbs et al.: 2010).
- 6- Women use more standard and fewer nonstandard forms than men in relation to code switching. Females tend to use a higher proportion of correct language variants than their male speakers of the same class

Learners are divided on the value of code switching inside and outside classrooms. On the one hand, some believe that code switching propitiates linguistic laziness in that it might hinder fluency and promote some sort of mental laziness or limit the students' linguist skills range.

Thus, teachers should maximize their use of the target language to increase input for learners. On the other hand, some contend that code switching could be a useful strategy in classroom interaction if the aim is to make meaning clear and transfer the knowledge to the learners in an efficient way. This will encourage learners to participate more effectively in the learning process (Cf. Halasa and AlManaseer: 2012).

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