

Code-Switching Patterns of English Teachers in an Indonesian Preschool Context: A Case Study at TK Essential Education Bengkulu

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the patterns and functions of code-switching (CS) employed by English teachers in an Indonesian preschool setting. In the complex linguistic landscape of Bengkulu, where students navigate multiple local dialects alongside the national language, code-switching serves as a vital pedagogical bridge. The present study is a qualitative case study conducted at TK Essential Education Bengkulu during the 2025/2026 academic year. It was designed to explore how teachers utilize tag-switching, inter-sentential, and intra-sentential switching to maximize a restricted 30-minute instructional window for students with zero prior English exposure. The results revealed that: (1) code-switching is a deliberate scaffolding tool that ensures comprehension and maintains emotional security; (2) inter-sentential switching dominates classroom management, while intra-sentential switching is primarily used for vocabulary building; and (3) the integration of local codes (Melayu Bengkulu, Serawai, Rejang) prevents "subtractive multilingualism" and fosters a culturally responsive learning environment. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the strategic use of L1 (First Language) and regional codes accelerates the transition from receptive to productive language skills in early childhood education.

Keywords: Code-Switching, Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), Preschool Context, Pedagogical Scaffolding, Kurikulum Merdeka.

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Introduction

The integration of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the preschool level in Indonesia, specifically within the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) framework, presents a unique sociolinguistic challenge. At TK Essential Education in Bengkulu, this challenge is magnified by a complex linguistic landscape where students are navigating multiple codes simultaneously. The ability to manage these codes effectively is fundamental for early childhood educators seeking to bridge the gap between the students' diverse home languages and the target English language within a restricted instructional window (Musthafa, 2010). This linguistic management is not merely about translation but about creating a

"translanguaging" space where all linguistic resources are recognized as valid for meaning-making.

Discussing code-switching patterns, Poplack (1980) highlights that switching can occur in three primary forms: tag-switching (inserting short phrases), inter-sentential (switching at sentence boundaries), and intra-sentential (switching within a sentence). In the context of TK Essential Education, these patterns are not merely random linguistic occurrences but are strategic responses to the abbreviated instructional time of 30-minute sessions. As children aged 4–6 years typically possess an attention span of only 15 to 20 minutes, teachers must employ highly efficient communication strategies to maintain engagement (Cameron, 2001). Beyond the temporal constraints, teachers must navigate the "Double-Divide"—the gap between the local dialect (Melayu Bengkulu) and the national language (Bahasa Indonesia), alongside the third layer of English.

According to Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory, code-switching serves as a scaffolding tool within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is particularly crucial in Bengkulu, where the students' linguistic backgrounds are exceptionally diverse, ranging from the regional lingua franca (Melayu Bengkulu) to various ethnic languages such as Serawai, Rejang, Javanese, and Sundanese. Despite the widespread use of English in urban Indonesian schools, there remains a significant gap in understanding how teachers utilize these local codes to facilitate "enactive" learning—learning through physical movement and direct sensory experience—without compromising the target language acquisition (Gumperz, 1982). Furthermore, the role of the teacher as a "linguistic model" is contested in early childhood; while some argue for 100% target language exposure, others suggest that such an approach can lead to "linguistic shock," where a child shuts down due to the total absence of familiar auditory cues.

Research indicates that many preschool teachers are often discouraged from using the First Language (L1), yet strictly monolingual instruction in zero-exposure environments can lead to student disengagement and emotional alienation. This is often rooted in the "Monolingual Bias" in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, which erroneously views the L1 as a source of interference rather than an asset. Thus, understanding the nuances of how code-switching affects the "affective filter" and comprehension is crucial for educators working within the *Kurikulum Merdeka PAUD* framework, which emphasizes student-centered learning and the Strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5). This curriculum encourages teachers to be creative and autonomous, yet provides little concrete guidance on how to manage multi-dialectal classrooms in regions like Bengkulu.

Methods

In this research, the researcher used a qualitative case study approach, prioritizing depth of insight over statistical breadth. It represents an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity or phenomenon—in this case, the code-switching patterns at TK Essential Education Bengkulu. This study relied on classroom observations and interaction recordings conducted during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year (September–December 2025). The qualitative nature of the study allowed the researcher to capture not just the "what" of the code-switching, but the "why" behind the teachers' decisions in real-time.

Case Selection

The starting point for this case study was the unique demographic profile of TK Essential Education, located in the Ratu Agung district. The school was selected because of its explicit focus on early English exposure within a high-diversity student body. The study population consisted of 49 students distributed across four classrooms, primarily aged 4 to 6. Data collection was supported by two collaborating teachers who facilitated the recording of naturalistic classroom discourse. These teachers were selected based on their varying years of experience—one being a veteran with over 10 years of experience and the other a novice—to see if experience levels influenced switching frequency.

Analyzing

The ultimate object of analysis was the transcription of teacher-student interactions. These were coded based on Poplack's (1980) typology and analyzed to determine the pedagogical function of each switch. The coding process involved three stages: (1) Open coding to identify every instance of a language switch; (2) Axial coding to categorize these switches into types (tag, inter, or intra); and (3) Selective coding to link these patterns to specific instructional goals such as translation, clarification, praise, or conflict control. Reliability was ensured through "member checking," where the recorded teachers reviewed the transcriptions to confirm their intended meanings.

Synthesis

The findings were synthesized by comparing the frequency of different CS types against the specific instructional "chunks" of the 30-minute lesson. These chunks were categorized as: The Opening (Greeting and Circle Time), The Core (Game-based Learning and Vocabulary Introduction), and The Closing (Review and Prayer). By mapping switches to these phases, the research could identify whether certain pedagogical stages require more L1 support than others.

Result and Discussion

In recent years, the role of the teacher's L1 and regional languages has been re-evaluated in the field of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). This study examines the specific patterns used at TK Essential Education and their impact on classroom efficiency.

Patterns of Code-Switching

The findings reveal that teachers exhibited a high frequency of inter-sentential switching, particularly during classroom management. Because the 30-minute session is divided into rapid activity chunks, teachers use Bahasa Indonesia or Melayu Bengkulu to provide instructions, ensuring no time is lost to non-comprehension. For instance, a teacher might say: "Now, everyone stand up! Ayo, semuanya berdiri!" This immediate repetition in the L1 ensures that the flow of the activity is not broken.

Intra-sentential switching, however, was the dominant form for vocabulary introduction. Teachers often utilized a "sandwich" technique: "*Look at the flower, bunga ini warna red, ya*" (Saputra, 2025). This aligns with the findings of Hoffman (1991), who suggests that intra-sentential switching helps integrate new concepts into existing cognitive

frameworks. Interestingly, the data showed that tag-switching (e.g., adding "ya" or "kan" at the end of English sentences) was used most frequently to seek confirmation and keep students focused, acting as a "verbal anchor" in the sea of unfamiliar English sounds.

Pedagogical Functions and Emotional Security

A plethora of studies has explored the relationship between code-switching and students' emotional states. At TK Essential Education, the use of regional tags and home-language-influenced intonation served as an "affective bridge." By acknowledging the students' ethnic identities (Serawai, Rejang, etc.), teachers reduced "language anxiety" and created an inclusive environment. When a student became distressed or frustrated, the teacher immediately dropped the English code entirely to provide comfort in the student's home language. This "Empathic Switching" is vital in a preschool setting where the teacher also acts as a surrogate caregiver.

Furthermore, switching allowed for immediate "Conflict Control." In a classroom of 4-year-olds, safety is paramount. When a student attempted a dangerous action, the teacher's use of a sharp, L1-based command ("*Jangan!*" or "*Henti!*") was far more effective than an English equivalent the child might not yet have internalized. This suggests that code-switching is a tool for classroom discipline as much as it is for instruction.

Linguistic Interference and Resourceful Bilingualism

The implementation of code-switching also addresses phonetic and syntactic interference. Since the curriculum at this stage is strictly oral-aural, teachers use code-switching to contrast sounds: "Bukan 'se-rip', tapi 'sleep'. Tidur, ya." This suggests that the L1 is not an obstacle but a resource for "flexible bilingualism." By allowing regional languages to coexist with English, the school avoids "subtractive multilingualism," where the local culture is marginalized in favor of the foreign tongue (Apple & Muysken, 1987).

In the Bengkulu context, this is particularly important for the preservation of local identity. When a teacher uses a Melayu Bengkulu term like "*ancak*" (good/beautiful) alongside "*good job*," they are validating the student's local world while opening a window to a global one. This dual-validation fosters a "bilingual identity" from a very young age, preventing the alienation often felt by students who are told their home language has no place in "important" subjects like English.

Integration of Technology and Differentiation

The integration of digital platforms like Kahoot! or audio-visual media has shown that code-switching can be used to explain game rules or clarify digital prompts. Digital tools often come with English-only interfaces; without code-switching, the "Digital Divide" would widen for students with low English proficiency. Code-switching ensures that students with varying proficiency levels can engage with the text meaningfully.

Differentiated instruction, which considers students' varying home languages, allows teachers to tailor their switches to the specific linguistic needs of the group. For example, in a group with many Serawai speakers, the teacher might subtly adjust their intonation or use specific Serawai lexical items to clarify a point. This level of responsiveness further

substantiates the beneficial impact of these techniques on student engagement and participation.

Conclusion

In summary, code-switching patterns represent vital components of effective English instruction in the Indonesian preschool context. The evidence from this study illustrates that these strategies can significantly enhance students' comprehension, promote emotional security, and maximize limited instructional time. Far from being a sign of teacher incompetence or a "lazy" teaching method, code-switching at TK Essential Education is revealed to be a sophisticated, multi-layered pedagogical tool used to navigate a complex sociolinguistic environment.

As educators continue to adapt to the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the strategic and "judicious" use of code-switching should be prioritized. Training programs for preschool teachers should include modules on how to switch effectively—moving away from haphazard translation toward a structured "Translanguaging" approach. This will equip students with global competencies without severing their local linguistic roots. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of this scaffolding on the students' transition to formal primary school literacy, particularly in how it affects their ability to read and write in both Bahasa Indonesia and English.

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