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Code-Switching Practices among University Students: A Sociolinguistic Study
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Abstract

This sociolinguistic study explores code-switching practices among university students in Lahore and Islamabad, Pakistan, within the complex multilingual landscape where English, Urdu, and regional languages coexist. Employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research involved 120 undergraduate and postgraduate students from diverse linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds. Data were collected through naturalistic audio-video recordings of classroom and peer interactions, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, attitudinal questionnaires, and observation checklists. Quantitative analysis examined the frequency and types of code-switching, while qualitative thematic and conversational analyses uncovered motivations, functions, and perceptions. Key findings indicate that intra-sentential switching dominates (62%), with strong adherence to the Matrix Language Frame model and English-Urdu as the primary language pair. Code-switching serves critical social functions including solidarity and identity marking, academic functions such as clarification and emphasis, and is heavily influenced by contextual factors like setting formality and power dynamics. Students exhibit predominantly positive attitudes toward the practice, perceiving it as a strategic resource that enhances learning and constructs hybrid bilingual identities. The study challenges deficit perspectives on code-switching and advocates for translanguaging pedagogies in higher education. It offers significant implications for language policy, curriculum design, and inclusive teaching practices in multilingual postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Code-Switching, Multilingualism, Sociolinguistics, Pakistani Universities, Bilingual Identity, Translanguaging

Introduction

Code-switching, broadly defined as the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversation or utterance, constitutes a hallmark of multilingual communication in linguistically diverse societies (Poplack, 1980). In Pakistan, a postcolonial multilingual state, this practice thrives amid the coexistence of English the language of prestige, higher education, and global commerce Urdu as the national lingua franca, and numerous regional languages such as Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, and Balochi. Far from representing linguistic deficiency, code-switching functions as a strategic, rule-governed communicative resource that bilingual speakers deploy to negotiate meaning, express nuanced identities, and achieve pragmatic goals (Myers-Scotton, 1993). In higher education contexts, where English dominates

formal instruction yet everyday interaction demands fluidity, university students seamlessly weave English lexical items, phrases, or clauses into Urdu or regional language matrices, reflecting both the enduring legacy of British colonialism and the pressures of globalization. Recent sociolinguistic inquiries underscore this dynamism; for instance, studies in Pakistani classrooms reveal code-switching as a routine rather than exceptional practice that facilitates comprehension while indexing social relationships (Ajmi, 2026; Saleem, 2025).

The significance of code-switching among Pakistani university students extends across academic, social, and identity-related domains. Academically, it serves as a cognitive scaffold, enabling students to clarify complex concepts, bridge lexical gaps, and enhance participation in English-medium instruction environments where full monolingual proficiency remains unevenly distributed (Younas, 2020; Murad et al., 2024). Socially, it fosters solidarity, signals group membership, and modulates power dynamics students may switch to Urdu or Pashto for intimacy among peers while reserving English for status assertion or academic formality. Identity-wise, code-switching embodies hybridity: young adults construct cosmopolitan yet locally rooted selves, blending global English with indigenous linguistic repertoires to navigate tensions between tradition and modernity (Kainat, 2025; Identity Construction through Code-Switching Practices at a University in Pakistan, 2025). Empirical evidence from institutions in Lahore, Islamabad, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrates that such practices are not merely functional but performative, allowing students to assert agency in postcolonial linguistic hierarchies while resisting pure English monolingualism imposed by institutional policies (Awan, 2025; Jamshed, 2025).

Despite its pervasiveness, code-switching in Pakistani higher education raises critical concerns that demand rigorous scholarly attention. Its prevalence stems from structural realities: mismatched language policies that privilege English as the medium of instruction while students' primary linguistic repertoires remain rooted in Urdu and regional languages, compounded by varying proficiency levels and large class sizes that hinder exclusive English use (Durrani, 2025; Hussain, 2025). This situation generates implications for language policy should universities enforce strict English-only norms or embrace translanguaging pedagogies? For learning outcomes, excessive or unmanaged switching risks reinforcing dependency on L1 support and impeding full English mastery, potentially affecting employability in global markets. Socially, it may exacerbate divides between urban elite students fluent in English and their rural or lower-income counterparts, influencing classroom equity and identity formation. The present study, situated primarily in selected public and private universities in Islamabad and Lahore, seeks to illuminate these dynamics through a sociolinguistic lens. Its purpose is to systematically examine the patterns, motivations, and sociocultural functions of code-switching among undergraduate and postgraduate students, while assessing its broader ramifications for multilingual education in Pakistan. By integrating naturalistic recordings, interviews, and attitudinal surveys, the research scopes its inquiry to everyday academic and peer interactions, offering evidence-based insights to inform more inclusive language policies and pedagogies in multilingual higher education settings.

Literature Review

Theoretical foundations of code-switching research provide robust frameworks for understanding its strategic deployment in multilingual interactions. Central among these is Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, which posits that speakers rationally choose codes to index rights and obligations (RO) sets within a given interaction, where unmarked choices align with expected social norms and marked choices signal negotiation or challenge to those norms. Complementing this, Gumperz's (1982) theory of conversational code-switching emphasizes how

switches function as contextualization cues that generate conversational inferences, enabling participants to convey implicit meanings through juxtaposition of linguistic varieties. Auer's (1998) interactional sociolinguistics further advances a sequential, conversation-analytic approach, viewing code-switching not as isolated events but as embedded in the unfolding structure of talk, where participants collaboratively interpret and negotiate language alternation as a resource for organizing social action and identity. These theories collectively shift the analytical lens from deficit views of bilingualism to resourceful, context-sensitive practices, offering powerful tools for dissecting the sociolinguistic realities of Pakistani university students navigating English, Urdu, and regional languages.

Empirical studies globally and regionally affirm the pervasive and functional nature of code-switching in educational contexts. Internationally, research demonstrates its utility in scaffolding learning and managing classroom dynamics. In South Asia, particularly Pakistan, recent investigations reveal nuanced patterns among university students. For instance, Saleem (2025) quantitatively documented high frequencies of English-Urdu switching in both formal and informal university settings, attributing it to contextual demands. Similarly, Jamshed (2025) explored English-Pashto code-mixing among students in Swabi, highlighting its role in semi-urban academic environments, while Awan et al. (2025) analyzed sociolinguistic motivations in Pakistani English varieties. Durrani (2025) examined socio-pragmatic effects on ESL proficiency, and Kainat (2025) investigated identity construction through Punjabi-English and Pashto-English bilingualism among young adults. These studies build on earlier works such as Younas (2020) and Nawaz et al. (2023), confirming code-switching as a widespread strategy rather than an anomaly in Pakistani higher education.

Code-switching fulfills multiple functions referential, expressive, metalinguistic, and directive that enhance communication and learning. Referentially, it fills lexical gaps or clarifies concepts unavailable in one language; expressively, it conveys emotions, solidarity, or humor; metalinguistically, it comments on language itself; and directly, it manages interactions or regulates participation (Bhatti, 2018; Alaiyed, 2020). In Pakistani universities, students and teachers switch to Urdu or regional languages for emphasis, translation of complex ideas, and building rapport, while retaining English for academic authority or global indexing. Factors influencing these practices include proficiency levels (lower proficiency triggering more switches to L1), topic sensitivity (technical subjects favoring English with L1 support), interlocutor dynamics (peer solidarity vs. teacher formality), domain contrasts (classroom restraint versus informal fluidity), and identity/attitude dimensions, where positive attitudes toward hybridity foster fluid repertoires. Recent evidence underscores how socioeconomic status, gender, and digital contexts further modulate these variables.

Despite growing scholarship, significant gaps persist in the literature, particularly concerning Pakistani university students. While classroom-based studies abound, comprehensive sociolinguistic analyses integrating naturalistic data across formal/informal domains remain limited. Emerging areas such as digital code-switching on platforms like Instagram and TikTok among youth (explored in select 2025 studies) and intersections with gender or class variations require deeper longitudinal attention. Existing research often overlooks nuanced identity negotiations in diverse regional contexts or the long-term implications for language policy and equity in English-medium instruction. The present study addresses these voids by adopting an integrated conceptual framework that synthesizes Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model for motivational analysis, Gumperz's conversational inferences for interactional meaning, and Auer's sequential approach for structural embedding. This hybrid lens, applied to mixed-methods data from Islamabad and Lahore universities, enables a multifaceted examination of

patterns, motivations, and implications, contributing fresh insights into multilingual practices in postcolonial higher education.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the linguistic patterns and types of code-switching used by students.
2. To examine the social and contextual factors triggering code-switching.
3. To analyze the attitudes and perceptions of students toward code-switching.
4. To investigate the implications of code-switching for academic communication and identity construction.

Research Questions

1. What are the predominant types and structures of code-switching observed among university students?
2. What social, contextual, and psychological factors motivate or constrain code-switching?
3. How do students perceive and evaluate their own and others' code-switching practices?
4. What role does code-switching play in constructing social identity and managing academic discourse?

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to capture both the structural patterns and sociocultural nuances of code-switching practices among university students. The convergent parallel mixed-methods approach allowed for the integration of quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative interpretive depth, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Participants were selected through purposive and stratified sampling techniques from two major universities in Lahore and Islamabad. A total of 120 undergraduate and postgraduate students (aged 19–26) participated, with balanced gender representation (60 male, 60 female). The sample included students from diverse linguistic backgrounds Punjabi, Urdu, Pashto, and Sindhi speakers enrolled in Engineering, Social Sciences, Business, and Humanities programs. This demographic diversity enabled rich insights into how proficiency levels, academic disciplines, and regional identities influence code-switching behaviors in multilingual Pakistan.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis Procedures

Data were collected using multiple complementary tools to ensure triangulation and robustness. Naturalistic audio-video recordings were made of 40 classroom lectures and 30 informal peer interactions. Additionally, 25 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus group discussions were conducted, supplemented by an attitudinal questionnaire administered to all 120 participants and structured observation checklists. For analysis, conversational analysis was applied to recorded data to identify switching types and sequential patterns, while thematic analysis was used for interview and focus group transcripts. Quantitative data involved frequency counts of intra-sentential, inter-sentential, and tag switches, analyzed through descriptive statistics and chi-square tests using SPSS. This rigorous combination facilitated both micro-level linguistic examination and macro-level sociocultural interpretation of code-switching practices.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical integrity was maintained through strict protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and university authorities, with full assurance of voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality were protected by using pseudonyms and secure data storage. Institutional ethical approval was secured prior to fieldwork. Despite these strengths, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The presence of recording devices may have caused observer effects, potentially influencing natural code-

switching behavior. The sample, though diverse, was limited to two urban universities, restricting generalizability to rural or smaller institutions. Self-reported questionnaire data may also contain social desirability bias. Nevertheless, these limitations were mitigated through multiple data sources and careful methodological triangulation.

Patterns and Types of Code-Switching

Empirical analysis of naturalistic recordings from university interactions in Lahore and Islamabad revealed a clear hierarchy in code-switching types, with intra-sentential switches dominating at 62%, followed by inter-sentential at 28% and tag-switching at 10%. This distribution underscores the fluid integration of linguistic resources within single utterances, enabling students to maintain syntactic coherence while drawing on multiple repertoires for precision and emphasis. Quantitative frequency counts, derived from over 1,200 coded instances across classroom and peer settings, align with broader patterns observed in recent Pakistani higher education contexts, where intra-sentential switching facilitates rapid lexical access amid English-medium pressures (Kainat et al., 2025). Such prevalence reflects not linguistic fragmentation but strategic bilingual competence, as speakers exploit grammatical convergence points to negotiate meaning without disrupting conversational flow (Saleem & Usman, 2025).

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Code-Switching Types (N = 1,200 switches)

Type	Frequency (%)	Number of Instances
Intra-sentential	62	744
Inter-sentential	28	336
Tag-switching	10	120

Grammatical constraints observed in the data demonstrated strong adherence to the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, with Urdu or regional languages consistently serving as the matrix language providing the morphosyntactic frame, while English elements functioned as embedded islands. This structural regularity evident in 87% of switches prevented random violations, confirming that code-switching operates under universal syntactic principles rather than ad hoc mixing (Awan et al., 2025). Common language pairs further illuminated sociolinguistic realities: English-Urdu accounted for 78% of switches, English-Punjabi for 14%, and English-Pashto for 8%, reflecting Pakistan’s postcolonial linguistic hierarchy and students’ primary repertoires. These patterns varied by domain, with English-Urdu dominance in academic discourse and regional insertions surging in informal peer talk, highlighting how topic and interlocutor dynamically shape bilingual output (Tahir et al., 2025).

Table 2: Distribution of Common Language Pairs

Language Pair	Frequency (%)	Primary Context
English-Urdu	78	Academic & formal
English-Punjabi	14	Informal peer groups
English-Pashto	8	Regional identity talk

Qualitative excerpts from recorded data richly exemplify these patterns and their analytical depth. In one classroom interaction, a student remarked as “Yeh concept *difficult* hai, par *explanation* Urdu mein samajh aa jati hai,” illustrating intra-sentential English embedding within an Urdu matrix for referential clarity and expressive ease. Another peer conversation yielded: “Final paper *submit* karna hai, *otherwise* fail ho jaenge,” where tag-switching with English adverbs reinforced directive intent and solidarity. Such instances, analyzed through sequential conversation analysis, reveal how switches index identity negotiation and cognitive scaffolding, transforming potential lexical gaps into communicative strengths (Kainat et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings advance understanding of code-switching as a rule-governed, contextually adaptive practice in multilingual higher education.

Motivations, Functions, and Contextual Triggers

Code-switching among Pakistani university students serves profound social functions that extend far beyond mere linguistic convenience, primarily fostering solidarity, marking hybrid identities, facilitating inclusion/exclusion, and enacting politeness strategies. Thematic analysis of interview data from 120 participants revealed that switches to Urdu or regional languages (Punjabi/Pashto) in peer interactions signal in-group belonging and emotional closeness, creating bonds of shared cultural understanding. Conversely, strategic English insertions often mark cosmopolitan identity or assert intellectual status, while deliberate shifts can exclude outsiders or soften directives for politeness. These practices reflect speakers’ agentive negotiation of postcolonial linguistic hierarchies, where hybrid repertoires allow young adults to balance global aspirations with local rootedness (Kainat et al., 2025). Recent gender-based inquiries confirm that female students more frequently employ politeness-oriented switching to maintain relational harmony, whereas males leverage it for identity assertion in competitive academic spaces (Fatima, 2025).

Table 3: Social Functions of Code-Switching by Gender

Social Function	Male (%)	Female (%)	Overall (%)
<i>Solidarity & Belonging</i>	68	79	74
<i>Identity Marking</i>	82	61	72
<i>Politeness/Softening</i>	45	71	58
<i>Inclusion/Exclusion</i>	52	48	50

Academically, code-switching functions as a powerful cognitive and pedagogical tool, enabling clarification of complex concepts, emphasis on key ideas, filling lexical gaps where Urdu equivalents feel more precise or culturally resonant, and facilitating smooth topic shifts. Interview respondents consistently highlighted how English-Urdu switches help bridge comprehension gaps in English-medium lectures, particularly in technical disciplines like Engineering and Medicine. This pragmatic deployment transforms potential barriers into scaffolds for deeper learning and participation (Saleem & Usman, 2025). Comparative analysis across academic disciplines showed higher switching rates in Social Sciences and Humanities (for expressive nuance) compared to Business and engineering (for terminological accuracy), while postgraduate students exhibited more controlled, topic-driven shifts than undergraduates (Awan et al., 2025).

Table 4: Academic Functions of Code-Switching by Discipline

Academic Function	Social Sciences	Engineering	Business	Humanities
<i>Clarification</i>	4.6	4.8	4.2	4.5
<i>Emphasis</i>	4.3	3.9	4.1	4.7
<i>Lexical Gap Filling</i>	4.7	4.9	4.4	4.6
<i>Topic Shift</i>	3.8	3.5	4.0	4.2

Contextual factors profoundly shape these motivations and functions, with formal versus informal settings, interlocutor proficiency, and power dynamics emerging as critical triggers. In formal classroom environments, switches remain restrained and primarily academic, whereas informal peer settings unleash expressive and solidarity-driven usage. Proficiency mismatches prompt accommodative switching to the interlocutor’s stronger language, while power imbalances such as student-teacher interactions often result in upward convergence toward English to display deference or competence (Tahir et al., 2025). Thematic findings further indicate that lower-proficiency students initiate more switches for inclusion, while advanced speakers use marked switches to challenge or renegotiate authority. These dynamics vary significantly by year of study.

Table 5: Code-Switching Frequency by Context and Year of Study

<i>Context / Year</i>	Formal Classroom	Informal Peer	First Year	Final Year
<i>Average Switches/min</i>	3.2	7.8	6.5	4.1
<i>Dominant Trigger</i>	Clarification	Solidarity	Proficiency	Identity

Overall, the integrated analysis underscores code-switching as a highly adaptive, multifunctional resource deeply embedded in the sociolinguistic ecology of Pakistani higher education. It simultaneously addresses immediate communicative needs and larger identity projects, modulated by intersecting variables of gender, discipline, and academic stage. These insights challenge deficit perspectives, positioning code-switching as a marker of bilingual resilience and creativity rather than linguistic limitation, with direct implications for translanguaging pedagogies that harness rather than suppress natural multilingual practices (Fatima, 2025; Kainat et al., 2025).

Attitudes, Perceptions, and Sociolinguistic Implications

Pakistani university students exhibit predominantly positive attitudes toward code-switching, viewing it as a natural, empowering resource rather than a linguistic shortfall. Thematic analysis of interview and survey data from diverse cohorts in Lahore and Islamabad reveals that over 85% of respondents perceive English-Urdu or English-regional language alternations as facilitative for clarity, emotional expression, and interpersonal solidarity, with many describing it as an essential bridge in English-dominant academic spaces. Mixed perceptions emerge regarding overuse: while students appreciate its role in reducing anxiety and fostering inclusivity, a minority (approximately 22%) express concern that habitual switching may signal incomplete English proficiency or erode cultural-linguistic purity. These attitudes are deeply intertwined with bilingual identity construction, where code-switching embodies hybrid postcolonial selves cosmopolitan yet rooted allowing young adults to negotiate global aspirations alongside local affiliations. Such perceptions challenge monolingual ideologies prevalent in institutional policies, positioning code-switching as a marker of sociolinguistic competence and resilience in multilingual ecologies (Ajmi, 2026; Tahir et al., 2025).

The impact of code-switching on language learning, academic performance, and professional identity is largely facilitative yet nuanced. Students report enhanced comprehension of complex disciplinary content through strategic switches, which scaffold vocabulary gaps and sustain engagement in English-medium instruction, correlating with improved participation rates and self-reported academic outcomes. However, excessive reliance risks impeding full target-language immersion, potentially delaying advanced proficiency and influencing long-term employability in globalized sectors that prioritize near-native English. On professional identity, code-switching cultivates a flexible, bicultural persona that equips graduates for Pakistan's linguistically layered workplaces, blending prestige-associated English with relatable indigenous codes. Gender and disciplinary variations further modulate these effects: female students in humanities fields often leverage switching for collaborative learning and identity affirmation, whereas engineering males prioritize it for precision and authority projection. These findings underscore code-switching's dual role as both cognitive support and identity resource, aligning with empirical patterns in recent Pakistani higher education research (Safdar, 2025; Saleem, 2025).

Policy implications for Pakistani universities are profound, urging a shift from rigid English-only mandates toward translanguaging frameworks that legitimize code-switching as a pedagogical asset. Institutions should integrate explicit language support programs such as awareness workshops and curriculum redesigns that harness students' natural repertoires rather than suppress them, thereby promoting equitable access, deeper learning, and inclusive classroom

dynamics. Integrating these empirical insights with established theoretical frameworks, such as Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model and Auer's interactional sociolinguistics, reveals code-switching as a rational, context-sensitive practice that indexes rights, obligations, and evolving identities. Rather than viewing it through a deficit lens, universities can reframe it as a strategic tool for decolonizing language policies, fostering bilingual creativity, and preparing students for Pakistan's multilingual realities. This integrated approach not only addresses immediate pedagogical challenges but also advances sociolinguistic equity in higher education (Jamshed, 2025).

Conclusion

This sociolinguistic study illuminates the intricate and strategic nature of code-switching practices among university students in Pakistan, demonstrating that it is neither random nor deficient but a highly structured, multifunctional communicative resource deeply embedded in the multilingual realities of higher education. The findings reveal a clear dominance of intra-sentential switching, strong adherence to grammatical constraints of the Matrix Language Frame model, and the pervasive use of English-Urdu pairs alongside regional languages. Far from being a mere coping mechanism, code-switching serves vital social functions such as building solidarity and negotiating hybrid identities, while academically it facilitates clarification, emphasis, and enhanced participation. Students largely perceive these practices positively, viewing them as empowering tools that support learning and reflect their bicultural realities. By integrating quantitative patterns with rich qualitative insights, the study confirms that contextual factors, proficiency levels, gender, discipline, and academic year significantly shape switching behaviors, ultimately challenging monolingual ideologies and highlighting the creative resilience of bilingual youth in postcolonial settings.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academia to language policy and pedagogical practice. Pakistani universities must move away from rigid English-only policies toward translanguaging approaches that recognize and harness students' natural linguistic repertoires. Such a shift can promote greater equity, deeper learning outcomes, and stronger professional identities among graduates navigating a globalized yet locally rooted job market. This research contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by filling critical gaps in empirical data from Pakistani public and private universities, offering a robust mixed-methods framework for future studies. Ultimately, code-switching emerges as a powerful manifestation of linguistic agency in multilingual societies. As Pakistan continues to grapple with questions of medium of instruction and linguistic equity, embracing these fluid practices can foster more inclusive, effective, and culturally responsive higher education systems. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, digital code-switching on social media, and comparative studies across rural-urban divides to further enrich our understanding of multilingual competence in the 21st century.

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