BRIDGING LINGUISTIC GAPS: HOW INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS INTEGRATE L1 IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE DIGITAL CHATS

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana mahasiswa internasional secara strategis mengintegrasikan bahasa pertama mereka (L1) dalam percakapan digital berbahasa Inggris, dengan fokus pada interaksi di aplikasi WhatsApp. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya telah membahas alih kode dalam konteks kelas, peran L1 dalam komunikasi digital informal masih kurang mendapat perhatian. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan observasi naturalistik dan analisis dokumen, studi ini menganalisis 137 percakapan otentik dari mahasiswa asal Indonesia, Yaman, Thailand, dan Palestina. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa L1 tidak digunakan sebagai tanda ketidakmampuan, tetapi sebagai strategi kompensasi dan pragmatis. Terdapat dua pola utama: (1) alih kode leksikal, di mana ungkapan budaya seperti "mbak," "insyaAllah," dan "555" digunakan untuk menjaga kelancaran dan ekspresi emosi, serta (2) alih kode gramatikal, yang mencakup tag, intra-sentensial, dan inter-sentensial, berfungsi menjaga kejelasan sintaksis. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pelajar memanfaatkan seluruh kemampuan bahasa yang dimiliki untuk mengatasi keterbatasan kosakata, ketidakpastian tata bahasa, dan untuk mengekspresikan identitas budaya. Praktik ini mencerminkan kemahiran bilingual, bukan kekurangan. Studi ini menantang bias monolingual dalam pedagogi EFL dengan merekontekstualisasi penggunaan L1 sebagai sumber daya yang memperkuat kompetensi komunikasi dalam konteks informal. Disimpulkan bahwa pengakuan terhadap L1 dalam interaksi digital dapat membantu pendidik mendukung proses belajar, terutama dalam lingkungan otentik yang rendah tekanan. Rekomendasi diberikan untuk pembelajaran EFL agar menerima integrasi L1 secara strategis sebagai bagian alami dari pengembangan bahasa kedua.

Kata kunci: *Alih Kode, Penggunaan L1, Komunikasi WhatsApp, Strategi Bilingual, Pembelajar EFL*

Abstract: *This study investigates how international students strategically integrate their first language (L1) into English-language digital chats, focusing on WhatsApp interactions. While previous research has examined code-switching in classroom settings, the role of L1 in informal digital communication remains underexplored. Employing a qualitative design with naturalistic observation and document analysis, this study analyzes 137 authentic chat exchanges from students originating from Indonesia, Yemen, Thailand, and Palestine. The findings show that L1 is not used as a sign of deficiency but as a compensatory and pragmatic strategy. Two primary patterns emerge: (1) lexical code-switching, where culturally specific expressions such as "mbak," "insyaAllah," and "555" help maintain fluency and emotional tone, and (2) grammatical code-switching, including tag, intra-sentential, and inter-sentential forms, which support clarity and syntactic cohesion. These results demonstrate that learners rely on the full range of language resources they possess to navigate vocabulary gaps, grammatical uncertainty, and express their cultural identity. Such practices indicate not linguistic failure, but adaptive bilingual competence. The study challenges the monolingual bias in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy by reinterpreting L1 use as a valuable asset that enhances communication in informal settings. It concludes that acknowledging L1 in digital interaction helps educators better support multilingual learners particularly in low stress, real-world contexts. The paper recommends that EFL instruction embrace strategic L1 integration as a natural and beneficial component of second language development.*

Keywords: *Kode-Switching, L1 Use, WhatsApp Communication, Bilingual Strategy, EFL Learners*

INTRODUCTION

When dealing with the difficulties of second language learning, there are some second language learners who resort to using their mother tongue as a communicative strategy. Foreign students, while acquiring English as a Foreign Language, have difficulty articulating their ideas using this second language in the course of learning. Insufficient vocabulary, confusion with grammar, and non-fluency may impair their ability to participate in class discussions conducted only in English.. This behavior reflects an adaptive and resourceful approach to the complexities of acquiring English in a non-native context, rather than a lack of effort or competence (García & Wei, 2014).

EFL learners encounter language barriers by using L1 in L2 communication as a frequent compensatory strategy. Students frequently incorporate L1 components to sustain fluency and prevent communication failures. They struggle to remember particular English vocabulary or grammar. EFL learners are enabled to be involved in the conversation by this approach and effectively express their ideas. Strategic L1 use can support language development by filling gaps in L2 proficiency (Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

Code-switching is a common linguistic strategy used by international students to alternate between their first language (L1) and second language (L2) during communication (Wei, 2018). This behavior frequently happens when students struggle to convey certain concepts in English, leading them to use L1 terms or expressions to ensure clarity. Students engage more confidently in a discussion by code-switching to maintain continuity of the dialogue. They adaptively use their linguistic resources to achieve their communicative objectives. Code-switching demonstrates adaptability and linguistic awareness in a multilingual environment, rather than a deficiency (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Limited language knowledge, including a small vocabulary and uncertainty about grammar, leads some language learners to incorporate L1 into L2 as a means to maintain smooth and acceptable communication. International students often utilize their first language (L1) in second language (L2) communication for several reasons, including limited vocabulary, uncertainty in grammar usage, and a desire to maintain conversational flow (Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

Anxiety or lack of confidence in speaking English is what can cause students to use their L1 as a useful resource. The use of the L1 encourages students who interact with others to understand each other. It also improves their social relationships if they use the same mother tongue. This evidence indicates that L1 is used consciously to aid their communication. International students are advised to use L1 in L2 conversation as an attempt to overcome linguistic gaps and emotional challenges in the learning process (Sert, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

This research seeks to examine how international students employ code-switching as a method to incorporate their first language (L1) into interactions in their second language (L2). It aims to determine how code-switching takes place in different informal interactions and which linguistic forms are switched most often. Furthermore, the study seeks to explain the fundamental reasons that lead students to depend on L1 when utilizing English, particularly regarding linguistic constraints. Through examining these elements, the research aims to offer a more profound insight into how international students manage their challenges in acquiring a second language within informal communication contexts. The way L1 uses aids to their communication and learning requirements will be examined more thoroughly.

The study conducted by Zhang (2022), explored how a Chinese international student utilized their first language (L1) during the English writing process. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research revealed that L1 played a strategic role in supporting second language (L2) writing, particularly in idea generation, vocabulary selection, and overall text organization. Data collected from interviews, observations, and writings emphasize that participants do not view their linguistic repertoire as a barrier, but as an asset. The cognitive and social importance of L1 use is emphasized in Sociocultural Theory, Interlanguage Theory, and Translanguaging Theory in bilingual learners' written text on the WhatsApp chat application. This study encourages educators to recognize the practical role of L1 as a support for L2 advancement, particularly in writing situations.

Cassim & Nihmathulla, n.d. investigated the influence of translanguaging on writing among multilingual secondary school students in Sri Lanka. Through a qualitative case study approach, the researcher collected essays and conducted interviews with students and teachers over a twelve-month period. The results showed that translanguaging improved students' writing fluency and complexity while also functioning as a means of expressing identity and creativity. Nevertheless, the research also highlighted difficulties, especially the opposition from educators shaped by monolingual beliefs. Rooted in Translanguaging Theory and the principle of scaffolding, this research advocated for more inclusive language policies that recognize students' multilingual assets and enhance pedagogical adaptability in writing practices within the classroom.

Domalaon & Gilbas, 2023, focused on cross-linguistic influence (CLI) in the spoken English of Filipino college students. Through qualitative descriptive research using thematic analysis, the study examined how students used various languages such as English, Tagalog, and local dialects inside and outside the classroom. The findings revealed strong CLI effects on vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation, with many instances of L1 interference, including phonological substitutions and grammatical transfers. These factors were associated with sociocultural and educational elements, including the use of language at home, parental level of education, and the lack of rigorous institutional language regulations. The research relied on CLI Theory and Sociocultural Theory, highlighting the necessity for schools to establish supportive linguistic environments, like English only policies, to foster steady L2 growth.

This study seeks to address the gap noted in earlier research by exploring the interlanguage phenomenon in international students, specifically regarding digital communication. While extensive focus has been placed on translanguaging and cross-linguistic influence in formal academic writing or classroom discussions, scarce research has examined how international students employ their first language (L1) when crafting messages in English on informal digital platforms, like the WhatsApp chat application. This study examines two primary issues: how international students integrate their L1 while composing digital chats in English, and the motivations driving their use of L1 in such written communications. Through analyzing this routine language activity, the research aims to enhance the comprehension of interlanguage progress in casual, technology-driven settings where multilingual resources are dynamically negotiated.

METHOD

Qualitative research design is used in exploring the real-life contexts of the international students as the subject of the research. Naturalistic observation is particularly used to examine how international students insert L1 as a compensatory strategy in second language communication. This will give a deeper understanding of the language learners' linguistic behavior, emphasizing the meaning and function behind language choices rather than quantifiable outcomes.

The data obtained were then classified into 2 parts. Primary data in the form of written chats in the Whats-app application, containing words, phrases, and sentences produced by four international students. Each student came from a different country, namely Indonesia, Yemen, Thailand, and Palestine. Communication in WhatsApp chat describes spontaneous communication with an informal language style. This is authentic evidence of how students overcome linguistic gaps in English. Naturalistic observation notes are secondary data in this study. It documents students' behavior and communication patterns in their daily communication. This data helps relate digital conversations and increases knowledge about the use of L1 when communicating L2.

Document analysis is used in the data collection. The document is in the form of students' digital chats. All digital messages were gathered with the informed consent of the participants to ensure ethical integrity. The chats represent naturally occurring language use, offering valuable material for analyzing the interplay between L1 and L2. The observation of their everyday communication in informal settings is also taken. Observation notes were used to record instances of code-switching or language mixing in spoken interaction, complementing the written data.

In the validation of the data, some strategies are employed to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Triangulation was used by collecting data from multiple sources digital chat transcripts and observation notes to crosscheck findings. In addition, member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review the interpretations of their language use to confirm accuracy and minimize researcher bias.

After collecting the data, then it will be reduced, classified then discussed. The data analysis process involved thematic classification with a specific focus on how L1 was utilized as a compensatory strategy in L2 communication. The analysis identified

patterns in which students used L1 to fill lexical gaps, clarify grammatical structures, maintain conversational flow, or reduce anxiety. Both lexical and grammatical forms of L1 use were examined, revealing how learners strategically integrate their full linguistic repertoire to support communication. The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data.

HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

This study reveals how international students strategically integrate L1 into English-language digital chats (*how*) and the compensatory motivations behind this practice (*why*). The analysis uncovers two key dimensions: lexical and grammatical code-switching, both serving as adaptive communication strategies to bridge L2 proficiency gaps.

How L1 is Used: Lexical and Grammatical Integration

Grammatical code-switching, on the other hand, includes three specific forms as categorized by (Poplack, 1980) and further elaborated in (Fauziati et al., 2019) linguistic analysis. Short L1 expressions such as "iyaa I am waiting" or "oke hati-hati kak" are embedded in English sentences without altering their grammatical structure. These expressions serve pragmatic functions like politeness, solidarity, or emotional nuance. As (Fauziati et al., 2019)) notes, tag switching acts as a social marker and cultural expression that fosters friendly interaction among bilingual peers.

This is the most prevalent and complex form of code-switching observed in the study. It involves embedding L1 elements within English sentences while maintaining syntactic coherence. Examples such as "I will pray first in lantai 3" or "Thanks mbaak" demonstrate the cultural significance of honorifics like *mbak*, *pak*, and *bu*, especially in the context of Javanese social hierarchy. According to (Fauziati et al., 2019), these instances exhibit bilingual fluency and pragmatic sensitivity, supporting (Poplack, 1980) claim that intra-sentential switching reflects advanced linguistic competence.

Though less frequent, this form of switching is also present, where full clauses in L1 are used alongside English clauses. For instance, "Di lantai 2" is used entirely in Indonesian to communicate a location effectively. (Fauziati et al., 2019) notes that this form often emphasizes clarity and comfort in expressing culturally specific content when interacting with peers who share the same native language.

Overall, the use of L1 in digital chats among international students reflects intentional and strategic code-switching. Tag, intra-, and inter-sentential switches are employed not just for communicative efficiency, but also to express identity, convey emotion, and maintain cultural values.

Lexical code-switching occurs when words, phrases, or clauses from L1 are inserted into L2 sentence structures. This practice is primarily intended to maintain conversational flow and compensate for limited vocabulary in English.

Students frequently inserted L1 words, phrases, or clauses into English sentences to maintain fluency during communication. This practice allowed them to navigate

linguistic gaps while preserving cultural and emotional nuance. For instance, culturally specific terms such as Indonesian honorifics like *mbak* ("Thanks mbaak R") and Arabic religious expressions like *insyaAllah* were used to retain socio-pragmatic meanings that lacked direct English equivalents. Additionally, affective expressions such as the Thai numeric laughter *555* (representing "hahaha") conveyed emotional tones more naturally than L2 alternatives, highlighting the strategic and expressive value of L1 use in online interaction.

Why L1 is Used: Comptensatory Strategies

The analysis indicates that international students use L1 as a compensatory strategy to address their limitations in English language proficiency. This strategy manifests in two primary areas: lexical and grammatical.

Lexical switching occurs when learners use words, phrases, or clauses from L1 while speaking or writing in L2. This helps them maintain conversational fluency and clarify their messages, especially in informal settings. (Sert, 2001)states that speakers tend to switch to their native language to fill vocabulary gaps and maintain fluency. (Canagarajah, 2011) adds that this practice is part of a broader communicative approach, where multilingual individuals draw from all linguistic resources to enhance understanding.

Dornyei (1995) defines compensatory strategies as "tactics used by language learners to bridge gaps in their linguistic knowledge so that communication can continue despite limitations in their L2 proficiency." Similarly, (Tarone, 1980) refers to them as "a learner's attempt to express meaning when the precise linguistic forms are unavailable."

In WhatsApp conversations, students frequently use culturally loaded L1 terms as a compensatory tool. For example, Indonesian students use honorifics like "bu," "pak," "mbak," and "mas" in phrases such as "Thanks mbaak R" and "Pak K and Mas M mau online." These terms convey social hierarchy and politeness, which are culturally specific and difficult to translate into English without losing nuance. Dörnyei & Scott, (1997) consider such expressions deliberate strategies to maintain meaning and cultural identity.

Similarly, religious expressions like "insyaAllah," "solat," and "Ya Allah," used by students from Indonesia, Yemen, and Palestine, illustrate spiritual and emotional depth. "Me insyaAllah" reflects humility before divine will—something that cannot be fully captured by English expressions like "hopefully."

Thai students use numeric laughter "555555," where the number five sounds like "ha" in Thai, thus representing "hahaha." This shows their reliance on familiar cultural expressions to convey affective meanings, particularly when English lacks equivalent subtlety.

These examples highlight that students use L1 not simply due to linguistic deficits, but to preserve cultural context, express emotional nuance, and maintain social norms. This aligns with both Newmark's and Dörnyei's frameworks.

Grammatical elements from L1 are also employed to maintain fluency and structure in communication, particularly when students struggle with complex English grammar. By inserting familiar L1 structures, students can continue communicating effectively while still engaging with English, reflecting a practical and strategic adaptation to language learning challenges.

Both lexical and grammatical code-switching emerged as compensatory strategies that helped students navigate the limitations of their L2 proficiency. In instances of lexical gaps, learners substituted untranslatable L1 terms—such as the Javanese *pak* for "Mr."—when suitable English vocabulary was inaccessible, supporting Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) observations on communicative strategies. Similarly, grammatical scaffolding occurred through intra-sentential switches, where students embedded L1 words like *lantai* into English structures. This provided syntactic stability when grappling with complex L2 grammar, echoing Tarone's (1980) work on interlanguage variability.

Beyond linguistic necessity, code-switching also served to preserve cultural identity. The use of L1 honorifics and religious expressions—such as *solat* and *Ya Allah*—allowed students to maintain socio-cultural authenticity, aligning with Wei's (2018) view that code-switching extends beyond utilitarian functions to reflect personal and cultural meaning. Notably, such practices resist deficit-based interpretations of L1 use. For example, Thai students' preference for *555* over the English "hahaha" was not due to linguistic deficiency, but rather a deliberate choice to convey affective resonance more authentically, demonstrating what Canagarajah (2011) terms strategic competence.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that EFL instruction should recognize and validate L1 as a legitimate scaffold in digital and informal communication, rather than viewing it as a hindrance. Theoretically, the prevalence of intra-sentential switching challenges monolingual norms and suggests that grammatical blending may signal advanced bilingual proficiency, as argued by Poplack (1980) and Fauziati et al. (2019). Such perspectives call for a reconceptualization of L1 use in multilingual learning as a marker of pragmatic and adaptive language expertise.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that the use of L1 by international students in English digital chats is not merely incidental but represents a strategic and meaningful linguistic practice. Their multilingual competence enables them to navigate communication challenges by drawing on their full linguistic repertoire. As such, L1 use becomes an inevitable aspect of their language interaction, particularly when faced with limitations in vocabulary and grammar in L2. Rather than hindering the learning process, the inclusion of L1 plays a facilitative role especially within informal academic settings by maintaining clarity, emotional expression, and cultural alignment. The various forms of code-switching, including lexical, tag, intra-sentential, and inter-

sentential switching, highlight the flexibility and resourcefulness of multilingual students as they adapt to their communication environments.

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