

The Code-Switching Attitudes of Students in an EMI University

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Code-switching (CS) is a widely-observed linguistic phenomenon in bilingual and multilingual communities. This study examines the CS phenomenon particularly in an English-medium instruction (EMI) university, where both students and instructors frequently code-switch between their L1 (Turkish) and L2 (English) in academic and social interactions. For the purposes of this study, CS is defined as the alternating use of two languages within a single discourse or interaction, while “bilingualism” is approached as a flexible continuum rather than a strict dichotomy.

CS has often been associated with linguistic deficiency or lack of proficiency.¹ However, recent research challenges this view, arguing that CS is a sign of linguistic competence and a flexible communicative strategy.² Attitudes toward CS remain context-dependent, varying across cultural, institutional, and educational settings.³

This study investigates the Turkish-English CS attitudes of students at Middle East Technical University (METU), a prominent EMI institution in Türkiye. Specifically, it examines whether students perceive CS as an indicator of linguistic proficiency, a marker of social identity, or a conversational strategy for effective communication.

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore how factors such as multilingualism, English proficiency, and duration of study at METU shape students’ attitudes toward CS. The primary data source is a Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure attitudes. While the current analysis is based on responses from 92 participants, the survey phase is ongoing with the goal of expanding the number of participants to increase the survey’s reliability and generalizability. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are planned to further investigate students’ experiences with and perceptions of CS in an EMI context. These interviews aim to enrich the quantitative findings by providing deeper insight.

A total of 92 METU students participated in the study, with a near-equal gender distribution (53% female, 47% male). Of those who shared their sexual orientation, 82% identified as heterosexual and 18% as queer. Most participants (70%) had attended METU’s English Preparatory Program, and 62% identified as multilingual, though many reported only beginner or elementary proficiency in their additional languages. Senior students formed the largest group of respondents.

Overall, participants rejected the idea that CS is caused by language deficiency. Approximately 70% disagreed that CS stems from weak Turkish proficiency, and 67% rejected the idea that it results

¹ S. Poplack, ‘Sometimes I’ll Start a Sentence in Spanish Y TERMINO EN ESPAÑOL: Toward a Typology of Code-Switching’, *Linguistics*, 18.7-8 (1980), 581–618

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1980.18.7-8.581>; A. C. Zentella, *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*, *Lingua*, 103.1 (1997), 59–74.

² J. M. Dewaele and L. Wei, ‘Attitudes Towards Code-Switching Among Adult Mono- and Multilingual Language Users’, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 35.3 (2014), 235–251; ¹ J. Gafaranga, *Bilingualism as Interactional Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

³ P. Gardner-Chloros, ‘Sociolinguistic Factors in Code-Switching’, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Code-Switching*, ed. by B. E. Bullock and A. J. Toribio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 97–113.

from poor language skills overall. However, only 30% agreed that CS indicates high English proficiency, and only 20% associated it with general linguistic competence. These responses reflect that CS is not seen as a sign of weakness, but also not necessarily a marker of exceptional linguistic skill. 40% of participants agreed that CS may result from difficulty organizing thoughts, suggesting that some link CS to cognitive processing rather than language ability. Still, the majority viewed CS as a flexible and context-sensitive practice: 74% agreed that CS is helpful in certain situations, and 73% felt that it should be utilized based on social context. 66% said CS helps them express themselves better, and 65% found it appropriate to METU culture. An overwhelming 84% agreed that CS is normal within METU, indicating broad acceptance of CS in this EMI setting. Students generally did not associate CS with annoyance or superiority. Nearly half disagreed that CS is annoying, while 87% rejected the idea that it signals admiration for other cultures or personal superiority. Similarly, 70% disagreed that avoiding CS reflects national loyalty. Most students (85%) reported not feeling nervous when others CS in shared environments. These attitudes reinforce the perception of CS as a functional tool rather than a socially disruptive or ideological act.

Gender differences shaped certain responses. Female participants were more likely to emphasize the communicative usefulness and social appropriateness of CS but also more likely to report anxiety in conversations with CS. They were also more sensitive to its complexity. Male participants more often viewed CS as creative and linked to cultural identity. They also showed slightly more agreement with the idea that CS reflects poor Turkish proficiency.

Queer participants showed the most consistently positive attitudes toward CS. They were significantly more likely to agree that CS is helpful, creative, and contextually appropriate, while also more likely to reject the notion that it is annoying. At the same time, they were more aware of its social risks, with a larger proportion agreeing that CS can cause social exclusion. This suggests that queer people have heightened awareness of both CS's potential for empowerment and its role in social dynamics.

Contrary to expectations, preparatory program attendance and multilingual status had no significant impact on attitudes. This unexpected result suggests that shared experiences within the METU academic environment may play a stronger role in shaping students' attitudes toward CS than individual linguistic backgrounds like multilingualism or preparatory education. However, year of study did matter: Acceptance of CS increased with academic seniority, as did agreement that it distinguishes METU students from those at non-EMI universities. Nervousness about CS declined over time, suggesting greater comfort with bilingual practices as students gain experience.

Chi-square analyses revealed strong positive correlations between items emphasizing CS's communicative value, such as its usefulness, cultural fit, and role in self-expression, while these were negatively correlated with nervousness about CS. These patterns highlight a consistent orientation toward CS as a pragmatic, context-driven behavior rather than an ideological or proficiency-based one.

By shedding light on the ways EMI students perceive CS and the interplay between language proficiency, identity, and social dynamics in an EMI context, this research highlights the importance of recognizing bilingual communication practices and attitudes in higher education. Future studies can build on these findings by exploring how faculty members, administrators, and policymakers perceive CS and whether institutional language policies align with students' real-world linguistic practices. As global education increasingly embraces EMI, understanding the sociolinguistic dimensions of CS can inform policies that foster inclusive and effective multilingual learning environments.

Keywords: code-switching; sociolinguistics; bilingualism; English-medium instruction.