

# Code-Switching Between Arabic and English as a Communicative Strategy Among Preschool Bilingual Saudi Children

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## Abstract

This study was conducted on four Saudi preschool children enrolled in an international school in Saudi Arabia. It aims at investigating the social motivations for the occurrence of code-switching in the speech of the study sample. In order to investigate the presence of this phenomenon, both qualitative and quantitative research designs were applied. For the purpose of the study, two research tools were used: a parental questionnaire and a storytelling activity session. Furthermore, to identify the different types of code-switching that occurred in the participants' speech, Poplack's (1980) classification approach was used. Findings show that Saudi children use only two types of code switching, and inter-sentential code-switching is used more frequently than intra-sentential code-switching. The results also indicated three communicative functions of Arabic/English code-switching among Saudi preschool children, i.e., to decrease the social distance, ask for the equivalent word in another language, and express feelings and thoughts.

**Keywords:** code switching, sociolinguistics, communicative strategy, bilingualism

## 1. Introduction

The concept of code-switching has been known for the past fifty years, when linguists were interested in bilingual speech phenomena. Blome and Gumperz (1972) studied how people in a Norwegian village spoke two dialects and used each one in specific situations. After that, many scholars conduct research on code-switching. According to Chukueggu (2010), code switching between languages is a common feature of a bilingual or multilingual community. The code-switching phenomenon has emerged in multilingual and bilingual communities as a type of communicative strategy used by multilingual or bilingual speakers for various needs (ZainalAriff, 2012). Code switching is defined as the ability to switch from using one language to another within one's verbal interactions (Barbara & Almeida, 2012). This means that a speaker is more likely to switch languages when conversing with another speaker simultaneously. Code switching, as Ja'afa and Maarof (2016) defined, is "considered as a communicative phenomenon of constantly switching between two languages in a bilingual's speech collection" (p. 212). According to Gumperz (1982), code-switching is the use of two languages together and switching between them in one single conversation. The concept of code-switching is widely discussed in linguistic fields such as psycholinguistics, anthropology, and sociolinguistics.

Saudi Arabia is considered a monolingual country. However, most children recently can speak English as a Second Language (ESL), and some of them are bilingual because they acquired their L2, English, at an early age with the same time of acquiring their mother tongue, first through the Internet "YouTube" and then they enrolled in international schools at the age of three.

Most people think that a bilingual person is simply anyone who can speak two different languages fluently, but it is more complex than that, as people who learn two languages in their early years are different from those who learn their second language later in life. And for a bilingual child, it is very complex; he/she may unintentionally code-switch back-and-forth between Arabic and English in the same sentence.

This study will examine the presence and nature of code-switching between English and Arabic among bilingual Saudi children at an early age, and it will discuss the types of code-switching they use in their speech. The main purpose of this study is to examine the social motivations behind code-switching.

## 2. Literature Review

Code-switching is widely observed in the speech of bilingual children. Many definitions for this phenomenon involve alternating between languages or even dialects in oral or written communication. According to Woolard (2005), code-switching is a linguistic process in which a speaker uses two or more codes together in one conversation. Gumperz (1982) defines code-switching as “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” (p. 59). In contrast, Myers Scotten (1990) states that code-switching can occur between more than two languages in a single conversation. Moreover, Hamers and Blance (2000) refer to code-switching as a communication strategy that takes the shape of alternating between two languages inside a one language interaction, which bilingual speakers effectively employ to interact. In this study, the term code-switching is used to refer to the alternating between the two languages (Arabic and English) that occur in the speech of preschool bilingual Saudi children.

Different perspectives of code switching have been studied in relation to language acquisition, such as language interference, language development, and educational code switching. For example, some scholars such as (Offiong & Okon, 2013; Cook, 1991; Skiba, 1997) associate code-switching with language interference because code-switching is typically a process of transferring elements from one language to another at various levels. On the other hand, Arias and Lakshmanan (2005) looked at bilingual children’s code-switching from the language development point of view. For example, in a study done by Nakamura (2005) stated that “the balance and quantity of the two languages changed; Japanese increased while English decreased. Consequently, the amount of code-switching also decreased” (p. 1688).

Moreover, several studies, such as those by Backus (2010), Bentahila and Davies (1983), Poplack (1981), and Redouane (2005), studied the code-switching phenomenon from two perspectives, structural and sociolinguistic. Studying code-switching through the structural approach is usually concerned with the grammatical aspects; according to Poplack (1981), grammatical and syntactic approaches classify different types of code-switching according to grammatical criteria, such as inter-sentential intra-sentential switching and tag switching. On the other hand, code-switching has been investigated using the sociolinguistic approach, which looks at code switching as a discourse phenomenon and is concerned to understand how meaning is created in code-switching and the function of code-switching in context (MacSwan, 2000; Alrowais, 2012; Milroy & Wei, 1995; Yamamoto, 2001). In addition, some studies have been concerned with bilingual children, investigating how code-switching may occur in its early stages and how children differentiate between codes (Meisel, 1994; Lindholm & Padilla, 1978).

### 2.1 Code-Switching Between Arabic and English

According to Al-Hourani and Afizah’s (2013) study, “the Arabic-English code-switching phenomenon is widely observed among Arab speakers” (p. 40). Since this phenomenon is widespread among bilingual and multilingual Arab speakers, sociolinguists are curious to understand more about it and the details of its occurrence. There are several reasons for code-switching, such as coherence, social topics, and fondness (Sharaf Eldin, 2014). Alsalam (2021) hypothesized that bilinguals with high-level proficiency switched between Arabic and English more because they found English vocabulary more expressive and helped them deliver their ideas more effectively. Alhourani (2018) argues that there are different communicative functions of Arabic-English code switching among bilinguals, such as showing off, changing topics, or expressing feelings. Although many studies on Arabic-English code switching have been conducted, most of them have not focused on a particular age group of bilingual speakers. Therefore, this paper will investigate the social motivations and the types of Arabic-English code-switching among bilingual Saudi children in their early ages.

### 2.2 Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to determine the occurrence and frequency of code switching among bilingual preschool Saudi children by answering the three questions below.

- 1) How frequently does code-switching occur among Saudi bilingual children?
- 2) What are the types of code-switching used by Saudi children?
- 3) What are the social motivations for using code-switching by bilingual Saudi children?

### 2.3 Research Hypotheses

- 1) This study will measure the overall frequency of code-switching within the study sample.
- 2) Based on several theories which differentiated the types of code-switching according to their occurrence in a sentence, it was hypothesized that two types of code-switching would occur in the speech of this sample, i.e.,

inter-sentential and intra-sentential.

3) Depending on the results of this research on using code-switching between Arabic and English in the child's speech. It will be discovered some social motivations for the occurrence of code-switching.

#### 2.4 Gap of the Study

Most of the studies have not focused on one particular group or specific age of Saudi bilingual speakers. Therefore, it could be argued that there is a lack of studies that have been carried out on code switching among preschool bilingual Saudi children. So this research hopes to fill this gap.

### 3. Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques based on the proposed research questions.

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants for this study will be four bilingual Saudi children (girls only) between the age of 4 to 6, and they are enrolled in an international school.

The table below indicates the participants' language backgrounds taken from the parental questionnaires.

Table 1. The participants' language backgrounds

Child	Age	Age Began Speaking Arabic	Age of Exposure to English	School Language	Home Language
Seba	6	1	3	English	Arabic/English
Bana	6	2	2	English	Arabic/English
Alanoud	5	2	1	English	Arabic/English
Malak	4	2	2	English	Arabic/English

#### 3.2 Research Context

This research was conducted at an international school in Buraidah. It educates children aged four to ten, but this study will only focus on preschool children. The aim of this school is to teach all subjects in English so the children can have enough knowledge to communicate in the English language.

#### 3.3 Data Collection and Instruments

Two research instruments will be used for the study: a parental questionnaire and recordings of Arabic and English storytelling sessions.

##### 3.3.1 Parental Questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisted of four sections was given to the participants' parents. The questionnaire was adapted from Alasmari's (2016) questionnaire and modified to suit the study's purposes and context. The questionnaire aims to collect the most important information about the language background of the study sample and the parents' perspectives about the reasons for the occurrence of code-switch switching in the children's speech. All information provided in this questionnaire, as well as information provided by the participants' parents, was kept confidential and used solely for the purposes of this study.

##### 3.3.2 Storytelling Activity

In this activity, a sequence of five pictures—each addressing a different story—were given to the participants. Then, each participant was instructed to tell a story about what she saw in the picture. In each session, all five pictures were used. This exercise took four sessions. In the first two sessions, participants were asked to tell a story in Arabic, and the other two sessions followed the same instructions, but the participants were asked to tell the story in English instead of Arabic. This activity aims to discover the types of code-switching that could occur, and the recording of these sessions will examine the accordance of code-switching among the participants.

### 4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data includes both qualitative and quantitative methods to devise a valid set of results. The analysis steps were carried out as detailed below.

The first step involved analyzing the parental questionnaire and linguistic profile for each participant. These data allowed the researcher to develop a more complete picture of the language background and preferences of the participants.

In the second step, the data audio recordings were transcribed and coded. Each utterance was analyzed in order

to answer questions regarding the frequency and percentage of code switching during a storytelling activity.

The third step was the analysis of qualitative information. After annotating and measuring the frequency of instances of code switching that occurred, the types of code switching were identified. Furthermore, each occurrence of code switching was categorized according to Poplack's (1980) classification of code switching (inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and extra-sentential). Moreover, it is important to note that the English translation was added after the case of Arabic code switching.

## 5. Results

This section presents the results of the current study, which attempted to investigate the frequency, types, and social motivations for the occurrence of code switching among four bilingual Saudi children.

### 5.1 Frequency of Code Switching

In order to answer the question "How frequently does code switching occur among bilingual Saudi children?" which aimed to assess the occurrence of code switching among the study sample, this study included around two hours of audio recording for the storytelling activity. In the storytelling activity, the participants produced about 346 utterances; there were 77 (22%) instances of code switching in their utterances, either as inter-sentential or intra-sentential, whereas 269 (78%) of their utterances did not involve any type of code-switching.

The overall percentage of code switching in a storytelling activity is shown in the chart below.

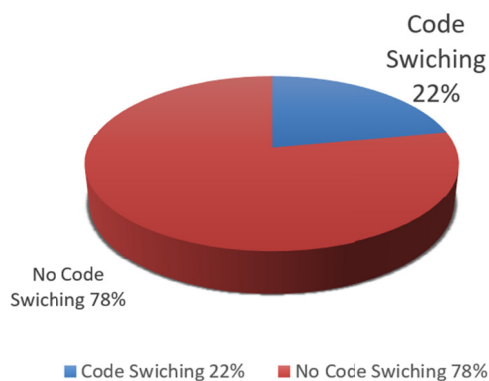


Figure 1. Frequency of code switching

### 5.2 Types of Code Switching

According to Poplack (1980), there are three types of code-switching according to their occurrence in a sentence. Inter-sentential code-switching takes place between sentences; intra-sentential code-switching occurs within clause boundaries; and extra-sentential or tag switch, which refers to the insertion of small units (words or phrases) from one language into an utterance in another.

In the storytelling activity, the participants of this study produced only two types of code switch, inter-sentential and intra-sentential. In the present study, 65 (84%) of the 77 instances of code-switching were inter-sentential, while just 12 (16%) were intra-sentential.

The percentage of inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching that occurs during the storytelling activity is shown in the graph below.

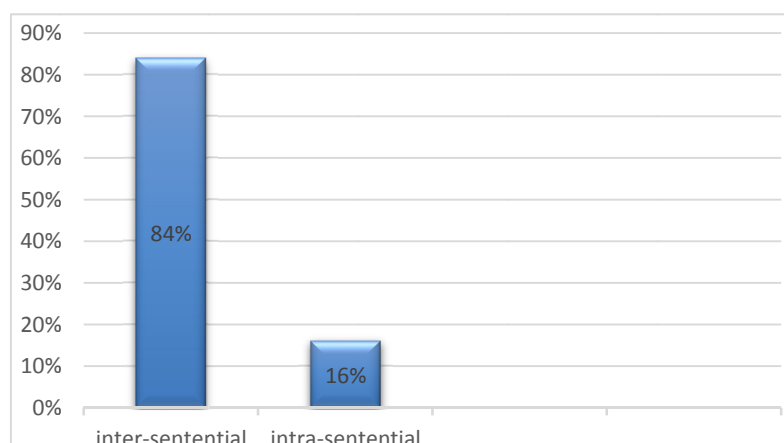


Figure 2. Percentage of inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching

### 5.2.1 Inter-Sentential Code Switching

Inter-sentential code-switching is seen in Example 1. The direction of code-switching in this example is from Arabic to English. Here, Malak tells a story about a young girl shopping with her mother.

#### Example 1

- 1) Malak: البنت راحت مع أمها للمحل
- 2) شافت البنت فستان هناك
- 3) wait for me بنتها قالت لها
- 4) جابت الفستان لأمها
- 5) بعدين اشتروه

#### Translation

- 1) Malak: The girl went with her mother to the store
- 2) She saw a dress there
- 3) Her daughter said to her, wait for me
- 4) She gave her mother the dress
- 5) Then they bought it

### 5.2.2 Intra-Sentential Code Switching

The example below represents the occurrence of intra-sentential code-switching. The code-switching direction in this example is from English to Arabic. Here, Bana tells a story about a father who reads his daughter a bedtime story.

#### Example 2

- 1) Bana: The father reads a story for his daughter
- 2) يعني to sleep
- 3) It is a Cinderella story
- 4) She got a magic shoes
- 5) I love this story

#### Translation

- 1) Bana: The father reads a story for his daughter
- 2) I mean, to sleep
- 3) It is a Cinderella story
- 4) She got a magic shoes

### 5) I love this story

As shown in this graph, the occurrence of inter-sentential code-switching in the participants' utterance was more than intra-sentential code-switching; this could be attributed to the fact that inter-sentential code-switching is not as complex as intra-sentential because it requires a fair degree of fluency in the two languages, whereas intra-sentential requires the same fluency and proficiency in both languages (Poplack, 1981).

### 5.3 Social Motivations of Code-Switching

#### 5.3.1 Code-Switching to Express Feelings

Based on the parental questionnaire, all parents agree that their children could sometimes switch to express their feelings and thoughts, which is also shown in the storytelling activity.

#### Example 3

- 1) Bana: فيه بنت تساعد امها تغسل الملابس
- 2) Seba: ماتغسل تسفط شوفي
- 3) Bana: [laugh] اوه
- 4) Seba: صح علي...، شوفي فستان pink ، حلو صح؟
- 5) Bana: I like pink
- 6) Seba: حتى أنا

#### Translation

- 1) Bana: There was a girl helping her mother wash clothes
- 2) Seba: She is not washing, but folding .. look
- 3) Bana: Ohh, [laugh]
- 4) Seba: I am right ..., look a pink drees, beautiful is not it?
- 5) Bana: I like pink
- 6) Seba: me too

In example 4, Bana started telling a story in Arabic about a girl helping her mother with the laundry, and Seba participated in this story. In (line 5) Bana produced a sentence in English to express her personal feelings towards the picture, although Arabic was the language of the session. The switching from Arabic to English in this example was for the purpose of expressing feelings.

#### 5.3.2 Code Switch to Decrease the Social Distance

#### Example 4

- 1) Seba: there was a girl, and that girl loves to cook in the kitchen, she makes a cake and (here) she mixing it with a spoon then she put it in the oven
- 2) Hmmm, is it chocolate or strawberry cake?
- 3) بأي نكهة هذي الكيكة؟ يلااا قولوا
- 4) [pause 2 seconds]
- 5) Alanoud: أنا أقول strawberry
- 6) Bana: الصورة مافيها الوان وشلون اعرف

#### Translation

- 1) Seba: there was a girl, and that girl loves to cook in the kitchen, she makes a cake and (here) she mixing it with a spoon then she put it in the oven
- 2) Hmmm, is it chocolate or strawberry cake?
- 3) What flavor is this cake?
- 4) [pause 2 seconds]
- 5) Alanoud: I think strawberry
- 6) Bana: The picture without colors, how doI know?

In example 5, Seba was given a picture and asked to tell a story in English about a girl cooking a cake. After the

story, there was a conversation between Seba, Bana, and Alanoud. In this example, Seba successfully told the story in English; at the end, she wondered about the cake flavor, and she asked in English, but no one participated. As a result, she switched to Arabic, as seen in line 3, because she wanted her friends to interact with her. Seba repeated the question in Arabic because she was aware that Arabic was the language preferred by the group members. All the turns that followed the story were in Arabic. It appears that code-switching occurred in order to fill the linguistic gap with a language that the participants were more proficient in.

Changing the code in this example could be seen as a strategy to create alignment. The participant switched to encourage others to participate in the conversation and to decrease the social distance.

### 5.3.3 Code Switch for the Lack of Equivalence

It was found that code-switching could occur when the speaker has difficulty recalling a target word.

#### Example 5

- 1) Bana: This boy was very happy because he going to swim with his friends
- 2) His father told him to wear this jacket first
- 3) Malak: it is like a balloon
- 4) Bana: hmmm no, it is a jacket
- 5) [pause 2 seconds]
- 6) Seba: Why he wears a jacket in a swimming pool?
- 7) Seba and Malak: [laugh]
- 8) Bana: because he was afraid to to to ...
- 9) يعني ايش يغرق ؟
- 10) Seba: hmm, drown
- 11) Bana: ايه صح يعني هو afraid to drown in the pool

#### Translation

- 1) Bana: This boy was very happy because he going to swim with his friends
- 2) His father told him to wear this jacket first
- 3) Malak: it is like a balloon
- 4) Bana: hmmm no, it is a jacket
- 5) [pause 2 seconds]
- 6) Seba: Why he wears a jacket in a swimming pool?
- 7) Seba and Malak: [laugh]
- 8) Bana: because he was afraid to to to ...
- 9) What does (drown) mean?
- 10) Seba: hmm, drown
- 11) Bana: Yeah, you are right; I mean, he afraid to drown in the pool

In this example, English was the language of the session, and the participants were following the instruction to tell a story in English about the picture. Bana took her turn in this conversation, and then there was a pause for about two seconds. In line 9, Bana switched to Arabic to ask for the English equivalent for “يغرق”, which means “drown”.

Bana’s code-switching reflects her lack of vocabulary in English as she switched to Arabic to ask her friends about the word in English. That might be because she did not know the word or maybe forgot it. Sert (2005) states that the speaker may employ their first language when they don’t know a certain word in the target language, so the child’s switching could be attributable to her limited proficiency in English.

In this case, the occurrence of code-switching served the purpose of asking for the equivalent word in the other language.

## 6. Discussion

According to the quantitative analysis, code-switching accounted for 22% of the data acquired during the storytelling activity. Of the 77 utterances containing code-switching, 62 (81%) were from English to Arabic, and

only 15 (19%) were from Arabic to English.

Based on the classification of code switching suggested by Poplack, the various types of code switching were analyzed (1980). The results indicated a preference for inter-sentential code switching over intra-sentential code switching, since inter-sentential code switching occurred more frequently than intra-sentential code switching. These results support Alasmari's (2016) conclusion that Saudi bilingual children produced inter-sentential code switching more than intra-sentential code switching. These results can be explained by Poplack's assertion that intra-sentential code switching is more complicated than other types and requires a deeper understanding of the syntactic structure of both languages. She also emphasized that inter-sentential code switching is most prevalent among bilinguals in which one language is dominant over the other. As it appeared that Arabic was the dominating language among the participants, this study supported Poplack's hypothesis. However, this result also contradicted the claims of several studies that intra-sentential code switching occurs more frequently among bilingual children than intra-sentential code switching (e.g., Bader, 1998; Takemoto, 2010).

As for the storytelling activity, Arabic was the participants' preferred language. Participants usually switched to Arabic for specific purposes, such as to decrease social distance, engage others in interaction, make alignment, or ask for equivalence. However, based on the data analysis, it was found that there are three social motivations of Arabic/English code-switching among Saudi preschool children that are used most of the time, i.e., to decrease the social distance, to ask for the equivalent word in other languages, and to express feelings and thoughts. This study concurred with the findings of prior research (e.g., Myers-Scotton, 2002; Bolonyai, 2005) claiming that bilingual children are rational and social actors who choose a specific code deliberately to attain certain social goals in an interaction.

## 7. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the social motivations for code-switching among four bilingual Saudi children at an early age. A mixed methods research design was used to investigate the social motivations, types, and frequency of code-switching. For the purpose of the study, two research tools were used: a parental questionnaire and recorded storytelling sessions. Based on the analysis of the data, it was found that code switching accounted for approximately 22% of all utterances. Of the 77 (22%) instances of code switching, 65 (48%) were inter-sentential, and only 12 (16%) were intra-sentential. This could be explained by the fact that intrasentential code switching is more difficult than intersentential code switching since it usually requires a deeper understanding of both languages' grammatical structures (Hammink & McLaughlin, 2000). Furthermore, it was found that there are three communicative functions of Arabic/English code-switching among Saudi preschool children, i.e., to decrease the social distance, ask for the equivalent word in another language, and express feelings and thoughts.

## 8. Limitation and Recommendation

Like previous studies, the present study has some limitations that should be considered. First, the results of this study cannot be generalized due to the small sample size of participants. Moreover, because the participants of this study were only girls, the results would be more generalizable if both sexes were included. Second, the number of images used for the storytelling activity were limited. Therefore, it is recommended for future studies to have larger numbers of participants and include both sexes in the study. Also, it is suggested to employ different activities to gather data to obtain more accurate results.

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## Appendix A

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Dear parent,

Please fill out the following questionnaire. This questionnaire will help me know about the language environment of your child. Also, please note that you can contact me at any time regarding any question.

Thank you.

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### Parental Questionnaire

General information about the child1.

1.1. Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1.2. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

1.3. How old was your child when she spoke his first word? \_\_\_\_\_

1.4. Which language do you think your child feels the most at home with? \_\_\_\_\_

1.5. At what age did his exposure to each language begin?

Arabic \_\_\_\_\_

English \_\_\_\_\_

1.6. Before your child was three years old, what percentage of the time was she exposed to the following languages? \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Current Skills

Note: 0 = not very well: 1 = a little less well: 2 = well: 3 = very well

2.1. How do you think your child expresses himself in ....?	Arabic				English			
	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3
2.2. Do you think your child has difficulties forming correct sentences?								
2.3. Are you satisfied with your child's ability to express himself in .....?								
2.4. Does your child feel frustrated when she can't communicate in .....?								

### 3. Language used at home

<i>Mother ⇔ Child</i>					
	0 Never (0%)	1 Rarely (25%)	2 Sometimes (50%)	3 Usually (75%)	4 Always (100%)
Arabic					
English					
<i>Father ⇔ Child</i>					
	0 Never (0%)	1 Rarely (25%)	2 Sometimes (50%)	3 Usually (75%)	4 Always (100%)
Arabic					
English					
<i>Babysitter ⇔ Child (if there)</i>					
	0 Never (0%)	1 Rarely (25%)	2 Sometimes (50%)	3 Usually (75%)	4 Always (100%)
Arabic					
English					

### 4. Languages spoken outside the home

#### 4.1. What language is spoken between your child and the friend she plays with regularly?

<i>Child ⇔ Friends</i>					
	0 Never (0%)	1 Rarely (25%)	2 Sometimes (50%)	3 Usually (75%)	4 Always (100%)
Arabic					
English					

#### 4.2. What language activities does your child do each week and in what languages?

Activities	English			Arabic		
	2 Every day	1 At least once a week	0 Never or almost never	2 Every day	1 At least once a week	0 Never or almost never
Reading (books, comic books, newspapers)						
Television/movies/cinema						
Storytelling						

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