



## CODE-SWITCHING AMONG BILINGUAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A STUDY OF LANGUAGE CHOICE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

**Faiza Saleem**  
[Faizasaleem508@gmail.com](mailto:Faizasaleem508@gmail.com)

MPhil English Linguistics scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Mianwali, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Tariq Usman**  
[tariq.usman@umw.edu.pk](mailto:tariq.usman@umw.edu.pk)

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Mianwali, Punjab, Pakistan.

### Abstract

Code-switching among Pakistani speakers of the English language is a commonly observable phenomenon; however, it makes a good amount of impression among university students across Pakistan with an indigenous first language and Urdu as a lingua franca. In the face of numerous qualitative studies available on code-switching, the study using a quantitative design, measures and explicates the frequency of code-switching among university students in formal and informal settings. The variations of code-switching in academic and social spheres, the key factors influencing it, and the effects of online and offline communication were the objectives of the study. Relying upon Interactional Sociolinguistics of Grumperz (1982), and the theoretical views of Poplack (1980), the study finds that in higher education settings, code-switching, in informal and academic settings, is highly frequent. Switching from one code to the other code chiefly relies upon the context; it is more frequent among peers than in academic contexts. Moreover, it is viewed as a positive communication style by the students. It is closely connected with the confidence and identity of students. However, negative perceptions of it are at their lowest. The study concludes that code-switching among university students is one of the most docile and pliant ways of communication and learning.

**Keywords:** *Pakistani Students, Communication, Code-Switching, Frequency.*

**Corresponding Author:** Tariq Usman (Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Mianwali, Punjab, Pakistan).  
**Email:** [tariq.usman@umw.edu.pk](mailto:tariq.usman@umw.edu.pk)

## 1. Introduction

Language is a fundamental way of communication and a significant part of daily life, education and social interaction. In a multilingual society, such as Pakistan, many students in universities are bilingual, using both Urdu and English, depending upon the situation. This often leads to code-switching, where the students switch from one language to another in the same conversation or discourse. Understanding this behaviour is important to the study of patterns of language use in academic and social situations. University students communicate in a number of different settings, such as in classrooms, with their peers, and online. These contexts determine the manner and frequency of language switching among students. However, there are not many studies that quantify the frequency of students' code-switching and the contexts that contribute to language-switching the most. Most studies conducted so far have been oriented towards qualitative observations, and there is a gap in quantitative research studies in terms of measurable language choice behaviour among bilingual students.

This paper aims to fill the gaps mentioned above by exploring how often code-switching occurs and what role the contexts of communication play in choosing a language among the bilingual university students in Pakistan. Using structured surveys, the research will obtain measurable data on when the students change over from Urdu to English, both online and face-to-face. The findings will provide a more accurate knowledge of code-switching patterns and contextual factors that influence the use of language by students, and will add to the field of linguistics, as well as education.

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Pakistan is a multicultural and multilingual society, and students in university often switch between languages based on social context and language choice. This behaviour has a certain modulation due to the communication setting, purpose of interaction, and social conventions and results in measurable patterns of language use, which could be studied quantitatively. University students communicate in a variety of situations, such as in the classroom, in peer interactions, in groups, and via online platforms, which influence the frequency of language switching. Although studies on code-switching have been conducted in different countries, there is a dearth of research in Pakistan, especially in relation to quantitatively establishing the extent of frequency of language switching and the impact of communication contexts. Most of the research that exists is focused on

qualitative observations and leaves a gap in statistical understanding about this phenomenon among bilingual students. The digital media is growing rapidly, and considering advancements in the internet, it has become very necessary to include both online and offline media when switching between languages. This study aims to address this gap and investigate how often code-switching occurs and what the contextual factors affecting the language choice of bilingual university students are, with the provision of clear and measurable evidence that contributes to linguistic studies and will also provide valuable information for the educational context in Pakistan.

### **1.2. Statement of Problem**

Code-switching among bilingual university students represents a complex linguistic phenomenon, reflecting the interplay between language proficiency, social identity, and communicative context. Despite its prevalence in academic and social interactions, the empirical understanding of the frequency and situational determinants of code-switching in Pakistan remains limited. Most research on the topic is qualitative in nature, providing detailed accounts yet failing to offer systematic and quantitative evidence that can account for language alternation patterns in different communicative situations. Moreover, the proliferation of digital platforms has transformed student interactions, yet the extent to which online versus face-to-face communication environments shape language choice remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential to advance both theoretical and applied knowledge of bilingual communication, as measurable insights into code-switching can illuminate how contextual factors influence linguistic behaviour, inform pedagogical practices, and contribute to policy development in higher education. This study therefore seeks to quantitatively investigate the occurrence of code-switching and the contextual determinants of language choice among bilingual university students, providing robust evidence that situates the phenomenon within the broader framework of sociolinguistics research.

### **1.3. Research objectives**

The following were the objectives of the study:

- To study the frequency of language switching in bilinguals in the university setting during academic and social interactions.
- To examine the key factors contributing to students' code-switching in university settings.
- To investigate the effects of online and offline communication media on bilingual students' choice of language

#### 1.4. Research Question

- How often do bilingual university students code-switch into their various academic and social contexts?
- 2.What is the effect of offline and online communication channels on bilingual students' language selection?

#### 1.5. Significance of the study

This study offers a quantitative understanding of the code-switching behaviour of bilingual university students in Pakistan in response to a gap in empirical research regarding frequency and contextual factors that determine language switching. By examining online and offline forms of communication, this research brings to light how social and academic contexts affect language choices and deepens an understanding of bilingual communication patterns. The findings will be valuable for linguists, educators and policymakers, having the potential to provide evidence-based information to aid the support of effective multilingual communication, inclusive educational practices and the awareness of the way in which language is related to social identity, confidence and cultural adaptability. Additionally, the research also contributes to the scarce quantitative literature on code-switching in the Pakistani higher education context, which will provide a basis for further research in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

#### 2.Literature Review

Language is a basic instrument for communication, social contact, and the formation of identity. In multilingual societies, people tend to have access to more than one linguistic system, which they use depending on the social, cultural, and contextual demands of communication (Rojas, 2025). Bilingualism and multilingualism not only help speakers move between different social spheres, but also to express nuances of meaning and to connect with different communities. The dynamics of language choice within multilingual contexts are shaped by social norms, communicative objectives, and environmental factors, resulting in patterns of language use that can be observed and analysed.

Within multilingual situations, code-switching becomes a major lingual behavior. It refers to switching between two or more languages in a single conversation, discourse or communicative event on purpose (Rahman, Gunawan, Said, & Mardi, 2025). Code-switching is not only about linguistic convenience, but is a mechanism for identity negotiation, social positioning, and audience adaptation (Ray et al., 2024). Bilingual speakers will often choose languages to meet the expectations of their interlocutors, convey group membership or highlight certain social or emotional meanings (Filipi, 2025).

Rojas (2025) emphasizes that code-switching is a conscious and strategic process with the intention of increasing the communicative efficiency, managing social relationships and demonstrating linguistic competence.

University students, being a bilingual population, code-switching frequently occurs in academic and social interaction. Research indicates that students use languages interchangeably for facilitation of understanding, expression of complex ideas and peer relationships (Filipi, 2025; Rehman, Usman, & Iqbal, 2025). In Pakistani universities, English is often the language used for formal academic interaction while Urdu and regional languages are the predominant means of informal interaction among peers (Butt, Khan, & Anwar, 2025). Philippi (2025) says similar results among international students in Australia, in class discussion, when they switch languages, that will support the cognitive-processing, and students can express their nuanced academic concerns. These observations underscore the functional role of code-switching in both the comprehension and social engagement in academic environments.

Code-switching is also important in the construction of cultural and social identity. Al Yousef et al. (2025) found that bilingual speakers in Jordan tend to use Arabic language for personal or emotional conversation, while English would be used for official or professional communication. In Pakistan, academic bilingualism is also reported to be associated with English as a prestige and modern language, and native languages are associated with cultural heritage and social belonging (Butt, Khan, & Anwar, 2025). By the strategic mixing of languages, bilingual people negotiate modernity and tradition, and at the same time social integration and self-expression. Rojas (2025) states that such behavior promotes social cohesion, expresses competence and inclusivity, and shows the sociolinguistic importance of code-switching beyond linguistic choice.

The growth of digital media has changed the practices of language with bilingual students. Online platforms, such as social media, messaging apps and e-learning forums, mean more linguistic freedom and experimentation (Rahman et al., 2025); (Suleiman & Yousif, 2025). Bilingual students frequently switch between languages in digital spaces to express their identities, regulate social relations, or carry out certain communicative actions (Rayo et al., 2024). Rahman, Gunawan, Said, and Mardi (2025) note that English is mainly used when communicating in formal or academic context in online communication, while native languages are used to communicate casually with peers. These results highlight the context-dependent characteristic of code-switching and the need to consider the online and offline communication in current research.

Quantitative and mixed methods research point out patterns in code-switching frequency. Rahman et al. (2025) report that university students use various language switches in a single interaction and this is related to the complexity of the topic, interaction with peers and the social context. Rehman, Usman and Iqbal (2025) have discovered that

English is preferred in academic discourse, but native languages are preferred in informal social contexts. Rayo et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 32 studies, highlight these patterns are well-structured, intentional, and socially motivated linguistic behavior and not random lapses. Understanding these patterns is important to both theoretical and practical understanding of bilingual communication.

Code-switching is not only a social phenomenon, but a cognitive tool that helps individuals to learn and understand. Filipi (2025) shows that bilingual students use language switching to accommodate cognitive load and ease in problem-solving with academic work. Rahman et. al, (2025) students retain and understand content more if instructors use strategic code-switching. Such practices facilitate academic achievement while preserving cultural and linguistic identity and thus code-switching appears to be a pedagogically valuable strategy in bilingual university.

While there has been a lot of research on code-switching internationally, there is a dearth of quantitative studies on Pakistani university students. Existing research mostly provides qualitative observations or involves younger subjects (Butt, Khan, & Anwar, 2025; Rahman et al., (2025). Moreover, there is a lack of research about the comparative implications of online and offline communication on frequency and patterns of code-switching (Scotton, C. M., & Ury, W. (1977) );(Suleiman & Yousif (2025). Addressing this gap is important in understanding the language behaviour of bilingual students, the role of communication contexts and its implications for education, identity construction and digital literacy in Pakistan.

Code-switching is a purposeful, socially meaningful and cognitively significant behavior of bilinguals in a university environment. It helps in the negotiation of identities, promotes social cohesion and enables academic functioning. Empirical studies highlight that language alternation is context-sensitive, quantifiable and affected by online and offline communication media (Rojas, 2025; Rahman et al., 2025; Al Yousef et al., 2025; Rehman, Usman, & Iqbal, 2025; Philippi, 2025; Butt, Khan, & Anwar, 2025; Rayo et al., 2024; Scotton, C. M., & Ury, W. (1977). Investigating these dynamics in Pakistani universities will offer useful insights into the patterns, determinants and implications of code-switching that will enhance both theory and practice in linguistics and education.

### **2.1. Research Gap**

Although code-switching has been studied extensively in multilingual settings all over the world, there is a dearth of quantitative studies on Pakistani university students and especially on measurable patterns of language switching across various communication contexts. Most of the existing research in Pakistan is qualitative in nature that emphasizes more on the cultural and social interpretations and lacks statistical evidence of frequency, factors and contextual influences (Butt, Khan, & Anwar, 2025;

Rahman et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is a paucity of literature that compares online and offline communication in the context of code-switching behaviour, even though digital platforms are the focus of a growing amount of centrality in students' academic and social interactions (Scotton, C. M., & Ury, W. (1977); (Suleiman & Yousif (2025). Addressing this gap is crucial for building an understanding of the multiple languages jointly used by bilingual students in Pakistan in the context of different communicative situations and for informing language policy, pedagogical strategies and social communication practices in the higher education arena.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The research was designed in quantitative approach to investigate the frequency, situational factors, and motivation factors for code switching amongst bilingual university students in Pakistan. The target population was undergraduate and postgraduate students that used both Urdu and English in their academic and social interactions. A structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions was created for obtaining measurable information about the language choice of students in different online and offline communication contexts, such as classrooms, peer communication, digital platforms, etc. A random sampling method was used to select 80 participants from several universities to promote diversity in terms of academic disciplines and demographic backgrounds. The collected data was analyzed by using Google form statistics such as frequencies, percentages and mean scores that would quantify the patterns of language switching. Additionally, correlation analysis was undertaken to investigate the correlation between communication contexts and code-switching behaviour. This methodology was designed to ensure a systematic understanding of bilingual students' language practices in the form of data-informed social and communicative practices.

#### **3.1. Theoretical Framework**

This research is informed by theoretical views by John J. Gumperz (1982) and Shana Poplack (1980) which provide a comprehensive understanding of code-switching phenomenon. Gumperz's Interactional Sociolinguistics is concerned with the role of code-switching as an indication of an interactional contextualization in communicating, showing that bilingual speakers use language strategically to achieve communication, social relations and identity-negotiation in specific social contexts. Poplack's model emphasizes the structural and functional dimensions of language switching, the choices that language bilinguals are implied to make grammatically, situational choices and communicative choices. Together, these frameworks postulate that code-switching is a conscious and important act, one which reflects the social awareness, cultural identity and communicative competence of the bilingual individual. Applying these theories, the

current study deals with the understanding of the way that university students in Pakistan employ their preferred languages, Urdu and English, in both the face-to-face and online environments, and in the process, they throw some light on the patterns of identity formation, social belonging and adaptive communication in multilingual environments.

#### 4.Data Analysis

The data for this study was gathered using a structured questionnaire with the help of Google Forms. It was a close-ended questionnaire consisting of questions regarding the demographic characteristics of the students, code switching frequency, factors influencing code switching, code switching in context, and general perceptions of code switching. Google Forms automatically created bar charts of all the questions, and these served as the main source for data analysis. A descriptive approach has been followed to interpret the dominant trends and patterns evident from these graphs. The analysis is presented following the sections of the questionnaire to ensure clarity and coherence.

##### 4.1. Demographic Overview

This section provides the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as age, gender, year of study, and academic department of study. The total number of respondents who participated in this study comprised of 80. However, because of partial non-responses, the number of valid responses varies slightly from questionnaire item. The analysis of each item is thus based on the number of valid responses received for each question.

Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of age of the respondents. The bar chart reveals that the majority of the participants is within the usual age group of university students, so the sample should be good to investigate the code-switching practices of university students.

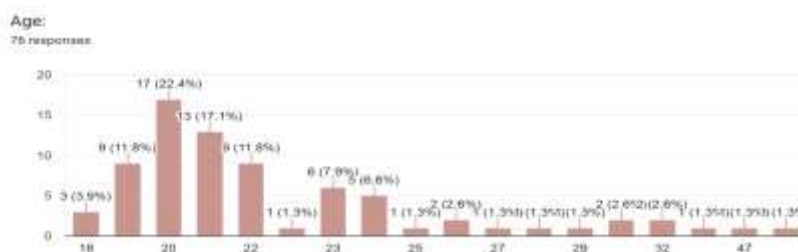
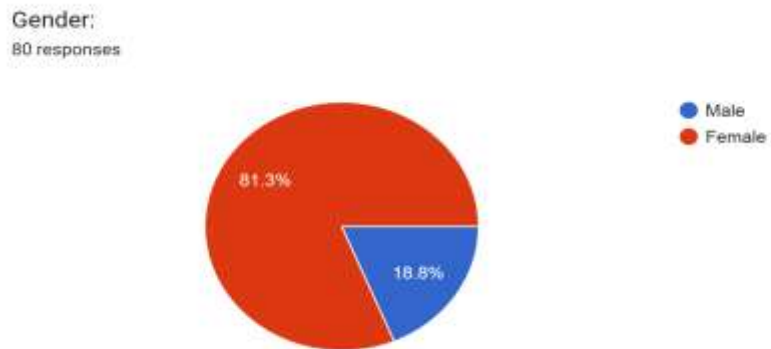


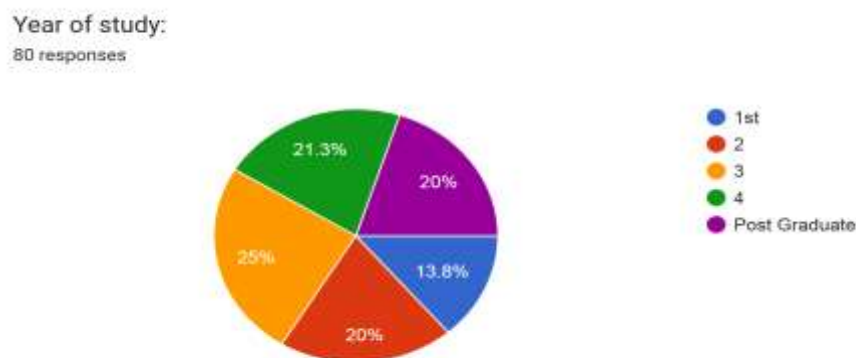
Figure 4.1.1. Age of Respondents

The gender composition of the participants is shown in Figure 4.2. The graph is representative of both males and females to participate in the classroom which gives an impression of gender balance.



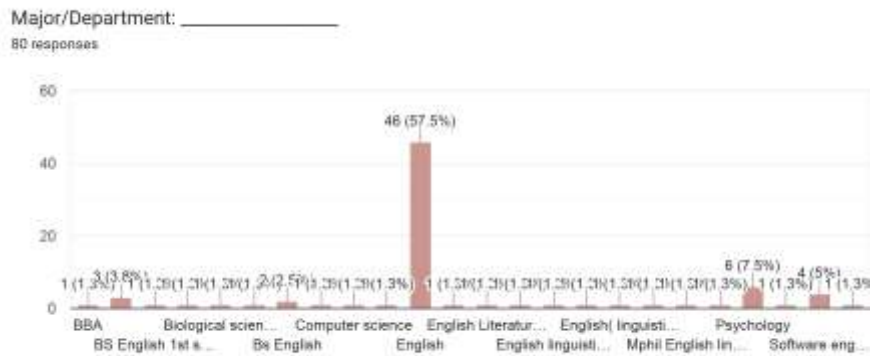
**Figure 4.1.2. Gender of Respondents**

Figure 4.3 shows the year of study of the respondents. The responses indicate that students of different academic years participated in the study which provides variation in academic experience.



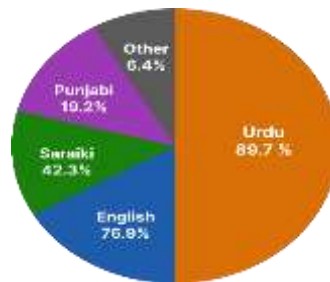
**Figure 4.1.3. Year of Study**

Figure 4.4 shows the academic departments or majors of the respondents. The chart has the participants representing a spectrum of disciplines, which helps to increase the variety of perspectives in the study.



**Figure 4.1.4. Major Departments**

The languages spoken by the respondents are presented in Figure 4.5. The bar chart shows that the majority of the participants is bilingual, with Urdu and English as the most common languages to be known. This confirms that the sample is appropriate to the study of code-switching practices, as respondents use more than one language in their daily communication.



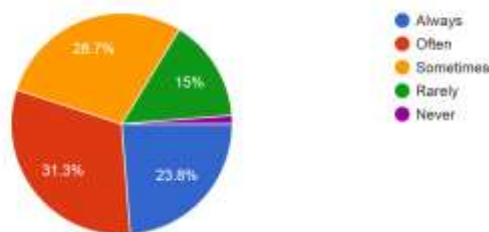
**Figure 4.1.5. Languages Spoken by Respondents.**

## 4.2. Frequency of Code-Switching

This section provides an analysis of the frequency at which students use Urdu and English language during communication in different communicative situations.

Figure 4.2.1 shows how frequent code-switching is during face-to-face conversations with peers. The highest responses are under the categories "often" and "sometimes," which suggest that code-switching is a common form in informal peer interactions.

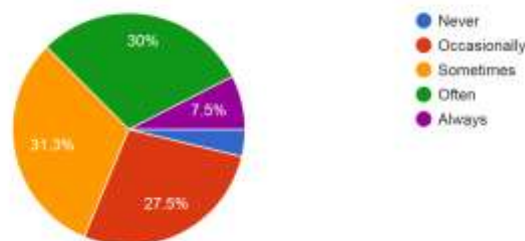
How often do you switch between Urdu and English in face-to-face conversations with peers?  
80 responses



**Figure 4.2.2. Frequency of Code Switching in Face-to-Face Conversation with Peers.**

Figure 4.7 includes the frequency of language switching at times of online communication which includes social media, whatsapp and emails. The presence of many respondents changing language regularly in the online environment emphasises the malleability of online communication.

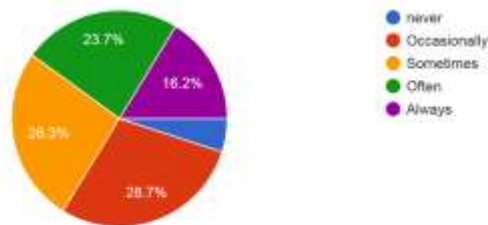
How often do you switch languages during online communication (social media, WhatsApp, email)?  
80 responses



**Figure 4.2.3. Frequency of Language in Online Communication**

The frequency of code-switching in academic discussions (classroom interactions and group work) is shown in Figure 4.8. As compared to the informal situations, the utterances show more controlled and occasional language switching, which possibly reflects more awareness of academic norms.

In academic discussions (classroom or group work), how frequently do you switch languages?  
80 responses



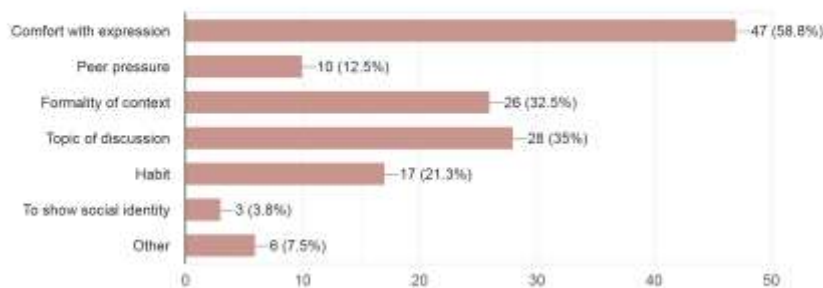
**Figure 4.2.4. Frequency of Code Switching in Academic Discussions**  
**Factors Affecting Code Switching**

### 4.3. Factors Influencing Code Switching

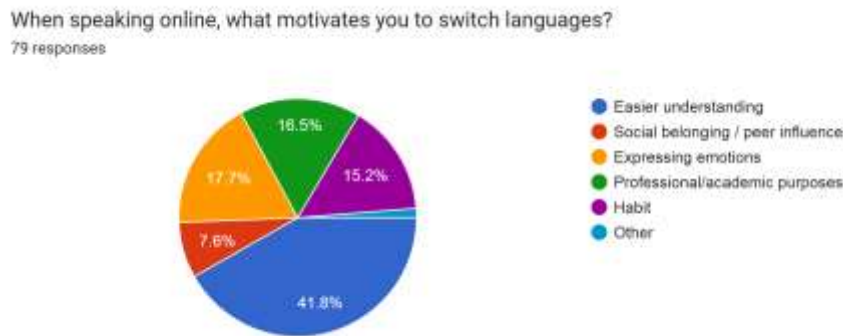
This section is dedicated to the factors affecting the decision of students to change languages.

The factors affecting code-switching in conversations are indicated in Figure 4.9. The dominant responses indicate comfort with expression, topic of discussion, and social interaction as being important reasons for switching languages.

What influences your decision to switch languages in conversations? (You can choose more than one.)  
80 responses



**Figure 4.3.1. Factors Affecting the Choice of Switching Languages in Conversations**

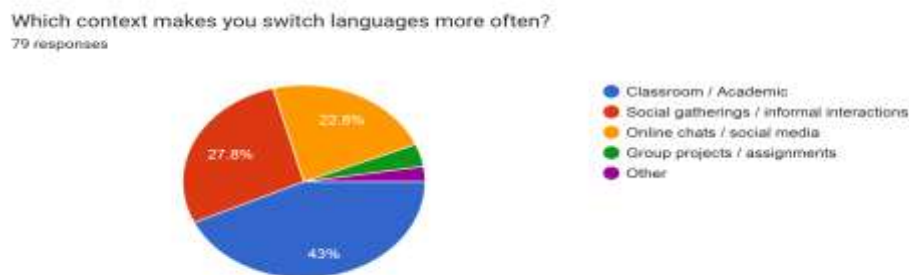


**Figure 4.3.2. Reasons For Code-Switching During Online Communication**

In the graphs that are kept in mind and especially online communication, motivations such as convenience, speed and familiarity with multi-language digital discourse have the highest frequency. This brings us to the importance of technology in influencing the modern bilingual communication patterns.

#### 4.4. Contextual Influence

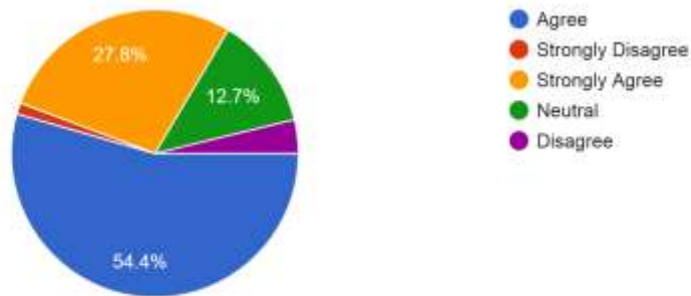
Figure 4.1 illustrates the contextual influences which often make students switch language. The Higher number of students switch language in classroom or academic background.



**Figure 4.4.1. Situations Favorable to Increased Frequent Code-Switching**

It demonstrates the general perception and feelings of students when they are switching from one language to another. Majority agrees that code switching helps in effective communication.

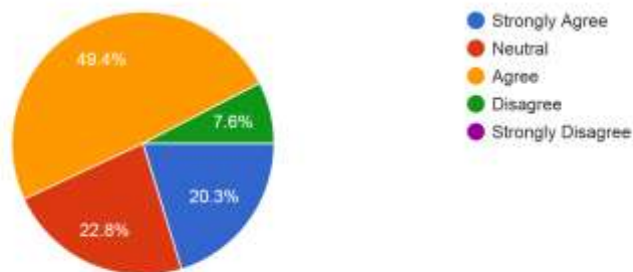
Do you feel switching languages helps you communicate more effectively?  
79 responses



**Figure 4.4.2. Perceptions of Code-Switching as Useful in Effective Communication**

It shows that majority of the students agrees that code switching is the sign of social identity and confidence.

Do you believe code-switching reflects your social identity or confidence among peers?  
79 responses



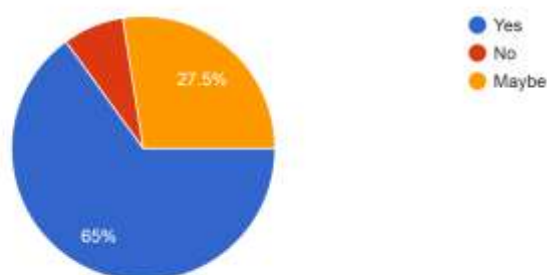
**Figure 4.4.3. Code-Switching as a Sign of Social Identity or Confidence**

#### 4.5. Perceived Effectiveness of Code Switching

The bar graph on whether code-switching helps the students communicate more effectively shows a strong positive trend. The majority of the responses cluster around agree and strongly agree and a small number falls under disagreement. This visual pattern is consistent with a positive perception of code-switching among the students overall. Similarly, the graph that answers the question about the impact of code-switching on

learning and communication has most of the respondents answering yes or maybe, thus, they mostly support code-switching to be regarded as beneficial to their academic experience.

Do you think code-switching has a positive impact on your learning and communication?  
80 responses



**Figure 4.5.1. Perceived Positive Impact of Code-Switching on Learning and Communication**

Overall, the data analysis of the questionnaire shows that code-switching between Urdu and English is a common and natural phenomenon amongst bilinguals (University students). The demographic results confirm that the respondents have a linguistic background that is necessary for engaging in bilingual communication. The results based on frequency of language show that students change language more often in the informal and online world than in the formal academic world, which suggests the importance of context in language choice. Furthermore, factors such as comfort, ease of expression, topic of discussion, and social interaction have a great impact on code-switching behavior. The attitudinal findings show a positive perception of code-switching by the majority of the students as they relate to it efficient communication with other people, building confidence, social identity and learning experiences. Taken together, these results suggest that code-switching is a useful communicative strategy, and not a linguistic shortcoming in the context of the university.

## 5. Findings

Based on the visual analysis of the graphs from Google Forms, the following major findings were made:

- Code-switching is very commonly used by students in higher education and especially in informal and digital settings.

- Context is a strong factor in choosing language, with greater levels of code-switching in peer conversations and online communication and greater control of language use in academic settings.
- Students exhibit positive attitudes towards code-switching in the form of the dominant agreement that is displayed in multiple bar graphs.
- Code-switching is closely related to identity and confidence with many students indicating that it is a representation of who they are in their social groups.
- Negative perceptions are at a minimum, as indicated by the consistently low bars for disagreement in graphs.

## 6. Conclusion

According to the graphical data produced during the Google Forms, this study concludes that code-switching between Urdu and English is the typical and functional and also accepted practice amongst university students. The visual trends across bar charts show that students use code-switching strategically, to aid communication, identity expression and to facilitate learning. Rather than considering code-switching a problem, the findings indicate that it should be realized as a communicative resource in both social and educational contexts. Acknowledging students' bilingual practices may help educators to create more inclusive classrooms. Future research could complement questionnaire-based graphical analysis with interviews or classroom observations to get deeper insights into bilingual language use.

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