

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Functions of code-switching among Iranian advanced and elementary teachers and students

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This paper reports on the findings of a study carried out on the advanced and elementary teachers' and students' functions and patterns of code-switching in Iranian English classrooms. This concept has not been adequately examined in L2 (second language) classroom contexts than in outdoor natural contexts. Therefore, besides reporting on the findings of the study, the paper also argues for bringing the use of L1 (first language), more narrowly code-switching, into the classroom and emancipating both teachers and students from the shackles of traditional approaches to teaching which were strongly against the process of code-switching and considered it as a debilitating behavior in the classroom. To this end, 60 Iranian students and 30 Iranian teachers were selected to come up with the data of this study which were sought through two sets of questionnaires, one for the teachers and the other for the students. Each one of the participants was given the questionnaire and some time to fill it in based on what he/she has remembered from their classes. Findings revealed that the elementary teachers and students, for most of the functions, ranked higher than their advanced counterparts, which is still quite indicative of the practice of the traditional methods in the classroom. The reasons why it turned out so is in detail explained, and the pedagogical implications are also accordingly examined.

**Key words:** Code-switching, teachers, students.

## INTRODUCTION

Code-switching, "the seemingly random alternation of two languages both between and within sentences" (Poplack, 1980), has been around for some time. But there is no plethora of research studying the whole phenomenon in a classroom context. Since code switching involves a switch to another language, some teachers and researchers believe that it is a kind of negative transfer and try hard to minimize its use so as to maximize the exposure to and use of the target language in the classroom (Eldridge, 1996). This kind of appreciation of

audio-lingual method were built (Larsen, 2000; Richards and Rogers, 2001). The justification behind this principle L1 in the classroom as a debilitating force was also one of the very basic principles on which direct method and was that since L1 learners were exposed just to one language in their childhood, L2 learners had better do so, too. But this view on L1 as a kind of interfering force did not enjoy its full potential, and soon afterwards it came to be considered a kind of "facilitating factor" in the classroom (Brown, 2000). Skinner, as early as 1985, was one of those people who believed that abandoning L1 use may appear detrimental in the process of L2 learning. He believed that since the learners' thoughts and ideas are already developed in the first language, doing away with students' first languages may hinder the learners'

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process of concept formation which is, in large part, constructed through their L1 (Macaro, 2001). There are some reasons why L2 researchers are against L1 use in the classroom. One reason they put forward is that exclusive use of the target language makes the classroom seem more real and authentic. Another reason is that in a multilingual class where there may be different first languages, it seems quite impossible to take account of all of them (Cook, 2001).

The use of L1 in the classroom serves different functions. Cook is one of the proponents of L1 use in the classroom. He believes that the use of L1 in the class cannot be all interfering, but it has some positive sides to it. He claims that grammar can be explained via L1 because meaning can be conveyed more effectively. The classroom can be handled more easily, and L1 itself can be a kind of strategy to draw on (Cook, 1999, 2001). Some other researchers like Lucas and Katz (1994), Anton and Dicamilla (1999) propose some other functions different from those of Cook. By using L1 and L2 learners can engage into interaction more effectively and access to the prior knowledge would be easier to do rather than the target language (Lucas and Katz, 1994). Anton and Dicamilla's (1999) study reveal that the use of L1 in the classroom serves three functions: "Construction of scaffolded help, establishment of intersubjectivity and use of private speech".

Some other concerns have also been voiced from the critical theories of education, the most important among them is Critical Pedagogy (CP). Akbari (2008) believes that "an individual's L1 is part of his identity and a force which has played a crucial role in the formation of that identity". Canagarajah (1999) is another scholar who is against the abandoning of L1 in the classroom. He claims that "teaching English without reference to the first language of the students may disempower them in the multilingual life in the post-modern world" (Canagarajah, 2005). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the advanced and elementary school teachers and students' functions of codeswitching in Iranian English language classrooms. The research questions of the study are:

- (1) Are there any differences and similarities between advanced and elementary school teachers' patterns of code-switching?
- (2) Are there any differences and similarities between advanced male and female students' patterns of code-switching?
- (3) Are there any differences and similarities between elementary male and female students' patterns of code-switching?
- (4) Are there any differences and similarities between

advanced and elementary students' patterns of code-switching?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

This paper is concerned with code-switching among students and teachers, the participants were divided into two distinct groups. The student group consists of an elementary and an advanced group. The elementary group comprised of 30 Iranian students; 15 male and 15 female, learning English in different language schools in Qom, a city near Tehran. The second group in the student group comprised of 30 advanced students; 15 male and 15 female, learning English for about two years or more in different institutes. All the student participants are between 14 and 20 years old. Most of the students are bilinguals speaking Persian and English. But among them there are a few trilingual students speaking either Turkish or Arabic besides Persian and English. The participants all come from the middle class families and have no conspicuous challenges in their lives in terms of financial need. The second group of participants are teachers, 15 at the elementary level and 15 at the advanced level, comprising of both male and female. The teachers are mainly between 20 and 30 years old. They come from middle class families, too. Like the student group most of them are bilinguals, but among them a few are trilingual speaking either Turkish or Arabic besides the other two aforementioned languages. They are in large part graduates in English Translation Studies, but some are also graduates in English Literature.

### Materials

#### Questionnaires

Two sets of questionnaires were distributed among the participants, one catering for teachers and the other for students. The questionnaires are written in English and besides seeking demographic information about the teachers and the students, it seek their answers to the statements made on the functions of code-switching practised in the classroom. The functions in the questionnaire are written based on the previous studies conducted on code-switching. The questionnaire for students (Appendix A) consists of three parts. In the first part the purpose of the study and other information are presented. In the second section, 11 functions, based on previous studies, are outlined and in the third section the students are required to mention any further functions not mentioned in the first section. Another questionnaire (Appendix B) was used with the teachers. This one also consists of three parts. In the first part the purpose of the study is explained. In the second part 10 functions of code-switching that was taught are mainly used among the teachers was written and a third part is devised for them to write any further functions or patterns they have observed in their classes.

### Procedures

The data of the study mainly includes the students and the teachers' answers to the statements in the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed among the students at the end of

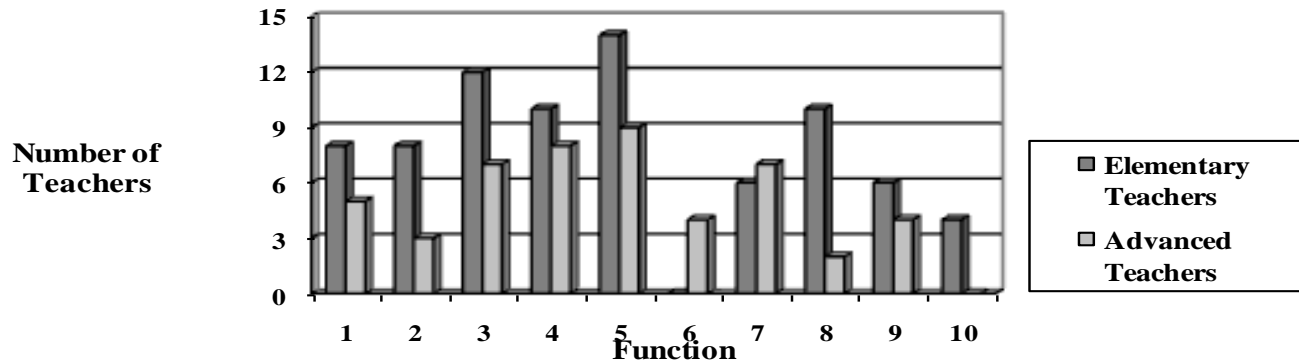


Figure 1. Advanced and elementary teachers' functions of code-switching.

their classes. The purpose of the study was explained to them and their anonymity was guaranteed. Each item was first read by the students and then fully explained by the researchers, and the students were given a few seconds to choose the intended answer. At the end of the questionnaire some empty space was provided for further comments or ideas, though the students professed that the questionnaire covered all their code-switching patterns. The same procedure was followed with the teachers. The difference being that the procedure with the teachers was more time-consuming because each item with each other at length was discussed.

### Analysis

Since the study was mainly in the form of a survey, there were no statistical tests used. The questionnaire for students consists of 11 items and 10 teachers. Each item deals on a specific point as far as student and teachers' patterns and functions of code-switching are concerned. Through the data produced by questionnaires frequencies were sought so as to come up with specific patterns. It was decided to count the frequencies for every item in the questionnaire, and then compare and contrast elementary and advanced teachers, advanced male and female students, elementary male and female students and the elementary and advanced students in general.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Advanced and elementary teachers' functions of code-switching

As far as teachers' code-switching patterns are concerned, Figure 1 reveals that elementary teachers code-switched more than advanced teachers. This is not due to the lack of competence in elementary teachers because from the figure, it is evident in function six, that all elementary teachers claimed to be able to speak every thing in English, even the specific ones. So this has nothing to do with teachers' abilities, rather it is

considered that a third element is at work here. The reason why elementary teachers code-switched more is perhaps because of their students' level. Since the students were not advanced enough, sometimes they saw the need to code-switch in order to be in line with students' abilities and proficiency level. As far as pledging loyalty to L1 through code-switching is concerned, the elementary teachers seemed to show more loyalty to the L1 since a quarter of them code-switched to do so, while none of the advanced teachers felt the need to do so. It is important to note that, because advanced teachers did not code-switch does not mean that they were not loyal to their L1. Perhaps they pledged their fidelity to the use of one language (English) since they are teachers. However, the reason why elementary school teachers code-switched to show loyalty was perhaps because they had recognized the importance of L1 in the classroom and that through just using English in the classroom they might be subject to linguistic imperialism. Perhaps they made intentional use of L1 in class to give equal status to their mother tongue and challenge the mere monopoly and dominance of English language.

In just two functions the advanced teachers outnumber the elementary ones, one as far as the lack of competence, appropriate vocabularies to talk about a specific topic is concerned, and the other the ability to make use of codeswitching so as to embellish the speech process. This second one has to do with teachers' style of speaking rather than anything else. Elementary teachers seemed to code-switch less than the advanced teachers because they thought that their elementary students, were not yet able to recognize the potential of codeswitching and hence acted as a source of ambiguity among their students. And the reason for advanced teachers was that they saw their students as pragmatically and stylistically competent when they made

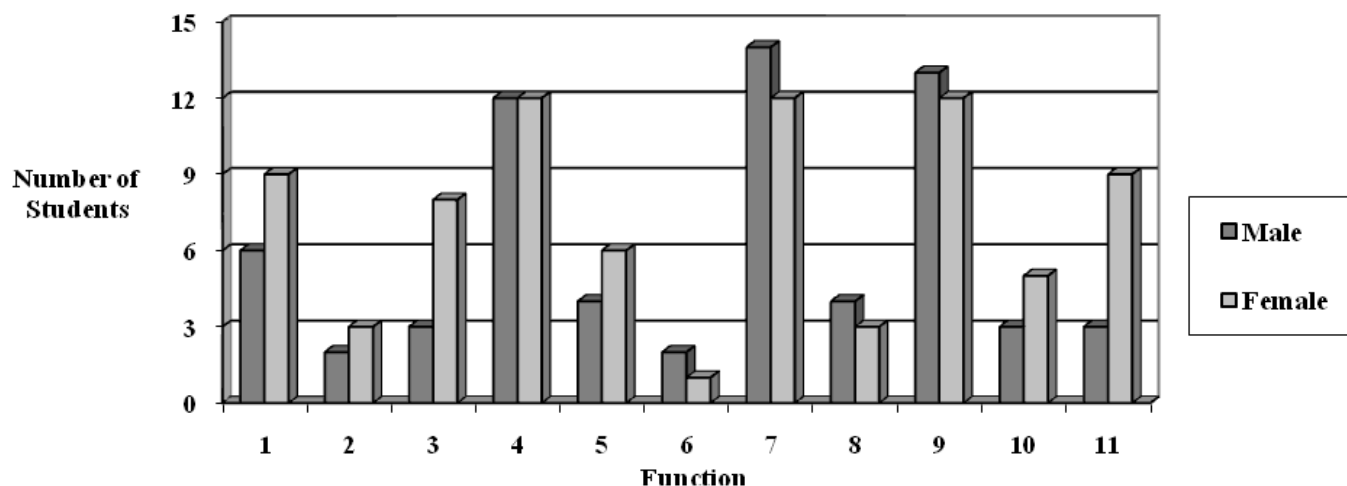


Figure 2. Advanced male and female students' functions of code-switching.

use of this function. In teaching new vocabulary and grammatical structures, the elementary teachers code-switched more than the advanced ones which seemed to be more due to the current proficiency level of students rather than the instructional potential of L1 in teaching a second language. It should be noted that both elementary and advanced teachers should be aware of the instructional potential of L1 since from the data by advanced teachers it seems that as the level of students goes up, the use of L1 goes down.

#### Advanced male and female students' functions of code-switching

According to the findings shown in Figure 2, as far as advanced students code-switching is concerned it seems that for some functions male students outnumber and for some female students. The female students would rather code-switch more than male students for reasons like looking for equivalents, commenting on the task, participating in group membership, taking the floor and putting emphasis on the utterance. The reasons for male students were pledging loyalty to L1, casting a comic sense on the utterance, adding colour to the utterance and codeswitching when the topic under discussion is demanding. The reason why female students resort to Persian to find the equivalent was perhaps because they were unable to circumlocute or maybe they did not see the phenomenon as face threatening. It is believed one of the reasons why male students did not code-switch as much as female students is because they found it face

threatening in English classes and thought that in an English class where they were to learn English, switching to their L1 to use a word was a sign of lack of power and dexterity, hence they would rather avoid the word for which they did not know the English equivalent or circumlocute instead. For showing in-group membership, females mainly resorted to code-switching as one of the strategies or means to show their in-group membership. But males did not use this strategy as females did because they could show their in-group membership via other means like appearance, style of speaking or their accent. The women mainly tried to assert their identity through their L1, and code-switching was one of the best means to do so. When loyalty to L1 is concerned males seemed to be more loyal to their L1 through performing code-switching. This was perhaps mainly because women looked at English as the prestige language or variety and tried hard to minimize their L1 use while speaking with this variety. But for men their L1 was a part of their identity and in-group membership. So they made use of it frequently to show their identity and in-group membership; moreover, since men were mainly endowed with power in the society they did not want to regain it through language, while the means of gaining power for women was just through language, and they did so by learning and merely using a prestige language which was English. It seems that males are more comic than females. This is something which was observed in the data. In the last function, there seems to be an eye-catching difference as females code-switched three times more than males with regards to emphasis. The reason for this is not clear, perhaps emphasis on certain words

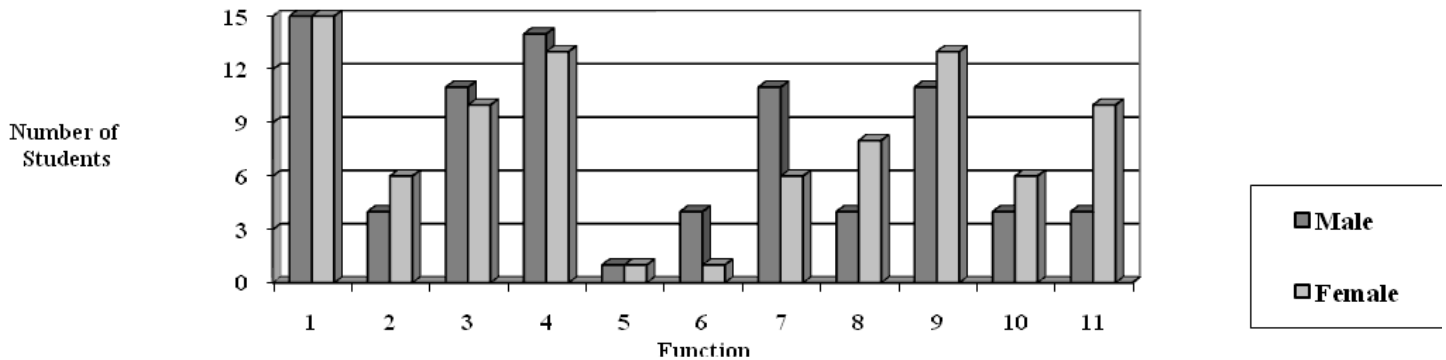


Figure 3. Elementary male and female students' functions of codeswitching.

or group of words through codeswitching was a kind of style for females which is not prevalent among the males.

#### Elementary male and female students' functions of codeswitching

According to the findings shown in Figure 3, like the advanced students the patterns and functions of codeswitching among elementary students were not regular among males and females, the researcher tries to find why. Both male and female elementary students codeswitch when they did not know the English equivalent, so they used a Persian word instead. This might be because they were not able or did not have the ability to avoid it through circumlocution, so the best way to overcome the problem was to codeswitch.

For functions 2, 3, 4 and 5 they have shown regular patterns, no specific difference was observed. But the point is that they did not use code-switching very much to show their in-group membership as they made use of other functions. This might be because of the fact that they did not feel the need to establish their in-group membership yet. For function six, males again outnumber females. This is perhaps mainly because males' L1 was part of their identity and they were not willing to abandon it in order to get a new one which was English, so they code-switched and make use of Persian words frequently in order to show that they were still loyal to their L1. Though this was not observed in women mainly because they looked upon English as a prestige language and by using it looks as if they have acquired an identity associated with prestige. In casting jokes, males outnumber females. The reason for this is that females seem to be more reserved and conservative as far as the use of the language is concerned. In function eight, now it

is females' turn to outnumber the males because this function concerns the style of speaker, and wherever one speaks of style, women are the pioneers. This is again because women want to gain power through using and speaking an eloquent variety or language, style being a part of it, too. For functions 9 and 10 they have shown similar patterns. They both code-switch when the topic was demanding and when they wanted to take the floor, with women outnumbering slightly in these two functions. Like the advanced female students, it seems that elementary female students made use of codeswitching more than males in order to emphasise the utterance. The reason for this is not clear yet and perhaps it needs more investigation.

#### Elementary and advanced students' functions of code-switching

After analyzing the code-switching patterns of advanced and elementary female and male students separately, let us now turn to the differences between the advanced and elementary students in general. In function one, elementary students outnumbered advanced ones twice. It seems that all elementary students resorted to code-switching when they were not able to locate a word in English, hence they use Persian word. They could not circumlocute when they did not know the English equivalent. In functions two and three the elementary students outnumber the advanced ones mainly because they did not have the ability to manage the tasks in English, hence they resorted to Persian in so doing. From the data observed in function four, it seems that the level of the students was not so much influential in the task since both groups had shown similar patterns. Both groups looked at this function more as a strategy than a

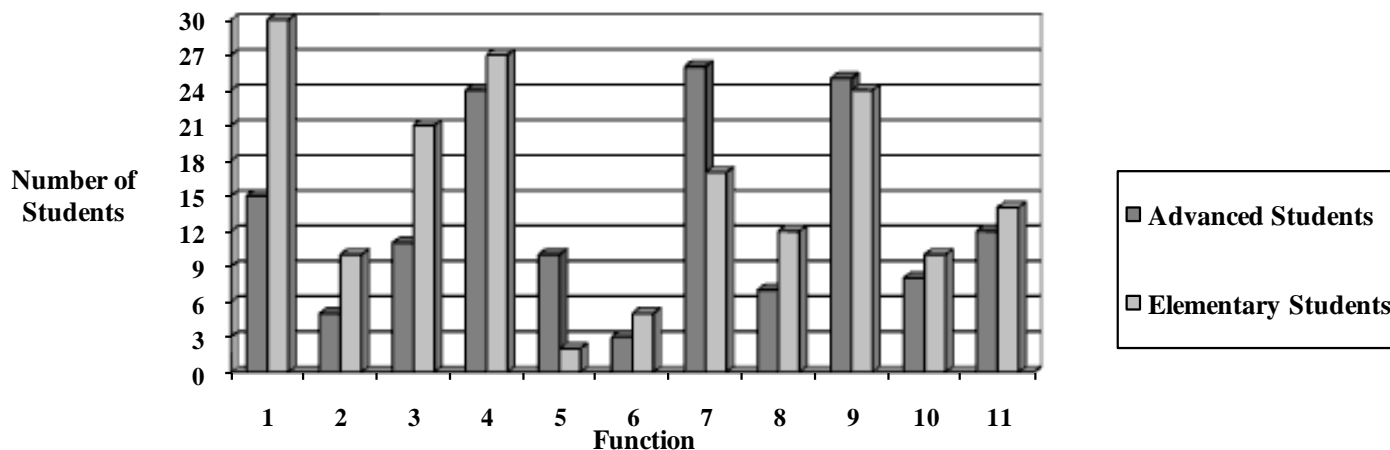


Figure 4. Elementary and advanced students' functions of codeswitching.

way to avoid problems. As far as showing in-group membership is concerned the data shows that the advanced students were more skillfull in using this function or strategy. The reason for this is that advanced students are by now skillfull bilinguals who have equal access to both languages, so it seems to be more using this strategy. In showing loyalty to L1 the order is the opposite. The elementary students outnumber the advanced ones. It is perhaps because the elementary students still felt fully attached to their L1 and saw it as part of their identity. This shows that the more students study English the less they feel loyal to their L1, this could be tantamount to language shift or change. Advanced students were also more skillfull in using language in a jokous manner, while elementary students showed more tendency toward using code-switching so as to add colour to their utterance. These data were not consistant with the claim that elementary students codeswitch because they were lacking in English because this time they made use of code-switching as a stylistic choice. The data also shows that proficiency level of students had nothing to do with students' code-switching when the topic was difficult to talk about. This is mainly because they both learned general English not English for specific purposes (Figure 4).

### Conclusions and implications

This paper was a report on the findings of a study conducted on the patterns and functions of code switching among the teachers and students. Through coding the teachers' questionnaires it was found that

elementary school teachers made more use of code-switching functions in the classroom. This is rewarding as far as teaching in elementary levels is concerned, but the importance of code-switching in advanced classes should also be argued. L1 should be used and considered as a useful instructional resource in advanced classes. Teachers in advanced classes should not think that since their students are able to cope with English in the class, it is ideal to resort completely to English in the classroom. The differences between male and female students both in elementary and advanced classes were discussed with some males outnumbering in some functions and some females outnumbering in other functions. The last research question concerned the differences between the advanced and elementary students in general. For most of the functions the elementary students outnumbered the advanced ones. This is mainly because of the proficiency level of the students. The study has different pedagogical implications. One is to look at code-switching as a resource to be used at all levels. This data from the study, also argues for the use of codeswitching among advanced teachers and students. Teachers should not think that because their students are highly proficient in English, so they should handle the classroom in English and abandon the use of L1 in the classroom. In the review of literature of this study the advantages and the disadvantages of L1 use in the classroom were discussed. I mainly argue that L1 use in the classroom is more advantageous rather than detrimental and argue for bringing the L1 and codeswitching into the classroom.

This study was also subject to some shortcomings. One of them was that the participants were not selected

at random because there were not enough students or teachers to make a subject pool out of them. The other shortcoming may be that of authenticity of student response, they might not have expressed their ideas sincerely and cannot be controlled since the study was mainly a survey based. By resolving these problems in this study, the future researcher can run studies of similar kind, with different classroom data, to see whether the findings of this study will be replicated or not.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**APPENDIX A**

**Questionnaire for students**

Data collected from this anonymous survey will be used for resaerch on advanced and elementary students' functions of code-switching in the classroom. The purpose of the study is mainly to examine the different functions used in the Iranian classrooms. There are no risks or benefits to you from participating in this resaerch. If you do not wish to participate, you may simply return the blank survey or stop at any time, with no penalty to yourself. If you do choose to participate, completion and return of the survey indicates your consent to participate in this study.

Age:

Education:

Gender:

Proficiency Level:

- 1. I code-switch because I do not know the English equivalent, so I use a Persian word.  
Yes No
- 2. I code-switch because I want to hold the floor in an interaction through using Persian speech fillers.  
Yes No
- 3. I code-switch because I want to talk about or comment on the task in hand in Persian.  
Yes No
- 4. I code-switch because my partner could not understand my message, so I need to clarify it in Persian.  
Yes No
- 5. I code-switch because I want to show in-group membership.  
Yes No
- 6. I code-switch because I do not want to speak English, in this way show loyalty to my first language (Persian).  
Yes No
- 7. I code-switch because I want to cast a comic sense on my utterance.  
Yes No
- 8. I code-switch because I want to add colour to my utterance.  
Yes No
- 9. I code-switch because the topic under discussion is demanding or something.  
Yes No
- 10. I code-switch to attract attention so as to take the floor in the conversation in this way.  
Yes No
- 11. I code-switch because I want to put emphasis on the utterance.  
Yes No

Other reasons for code-switching:

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**Thanks for your participation.**



**APPENDIX B**

**Questionnaire for teachers**

Data collected from this anonymous survey will be used for research on advanced and elementary teachers' functions of code-switching in the classroom. The purpose of the study is mainly to examine the different functions used in the Iranian classrooms. There are no risks or benefits to you from participating in this research. If you do not wish to participate, you may simply return the blank survey or stop at any time, with no penalty to yourself. If you do choose to participate, completion and return of the survey indicates your consent to participate in this study.

Age:  
Gender:

Education:  
Students' Level:

- |     |  |     |    |
|-----|--|-----|----|
| 1.  | I code-switch because I want to give the procedural instructions in English.                               | Yes | No |
| 2.  | I code-switch because I want to manage or control the class.   | Yes | No |
| 3.  | I code-switch because I want to teach new vocabulary.  | Yes | No |
| 4.  | I code-switch because I want to teach new grammatical items.   | Yes | No |
| 5.  | I code-switch because I want to clarify the message.   | Yes | No |
| 6.  | I code-switch because I lack the competence to talk about a particular topic.                              | Yes | No |
| 7.  | I code-switch because I want to add color to the utterance.  | Yes | No |
| 8.  | I code-switch because I want to attract attention so as to take the floor in the conversation in this way. | Yes | No |
| 9.  | I code-switch because I want to put emphasis on the utterance.   | Yes | No |
| 10. | I code-switch because I want to pledge loyalty to my first language (Persian).                             | Yes | No |

Other reasons for code-switching:

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 .....  
 .....

**Thanks for your participation.**