

Code-Switching Among Kuwaitis in the Social Context: Attitudes and Practices

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Received: March 7, 2021 Accepted: April 22, 2021 Online Published: May 8, 2021

doi:10.5539/ells.v11n2p42 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v11n2p42>

Abstract

This paper investigates the Kuwaiti attitudes and code-switching practices between the two most common languages used: Arabic and English. Additionally, it discusses which factors may affect how Kuwaitis code-switch, as well as their attitudes toward this phenomenon. In this study, a qualitative approach was used to collect data by conducting one-on-one interviews with seven participants. The study results showed that four of the seven participants had positive attitudes toward code-switching, whereas the remaining few had either neutral or negative attitudes. The thematic analysis of the qualitative narratives revealed that all of the participants habitually employed code-switching in their social interactions, despite their different attitudes. Being a bilingual speaker is an advantage—it can widen users' horizons and open new socioeconomic opportunities thanks to globalization and English as a *lingua franca*. Therefore, parents, teachers, and policymakers are encouraged to work and help create bilingual speakers who are competent users of their mother tongue and their second language, English.

Keywords: code-switching, language attitude, language practice, EFL

1. Introduction

Bilingualism and multilingualism are widespread throughout the world because of colonization and globalization, with English established as the *lingua franca* (Grosjean, 2010). One of the outcomes of bilingualism and multilingualism is code-switching, an essential topic in the field of linguistics. Despite the number of studies conducted on code-switching in the Kuwaiti educational context, few studies have focused on the practice of code-switching in social contexts outside the classroom.

1.1 Problem Statement

Code-switching has become one of the most controversial topics in Kuwaiti society (Dashti, 2015)—a judgment tool by which Kuwaitis form their opinions about one another. People discuss it on several platforms, including social gatherings and social media platforms. Although some perceive code-switching negatively, they nevertheless want their children (and themselves) to practice it. The negative attitude toward code-switching is that many believe it is only used as a bragging tool or that speakers exaggerate their reliance on it in almost every situation among their peers.

1.2 Research Questions

This study investigates the Kuwaiti attitudes toward code-switching in the social context and seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the Kuwaiti attitudes toward English-Arabic code-switching in the social domain?
- 2) What are the practices of code-switching in Kuwait among Kuwaitis?
- 3) What factors affect Kuwaiti attitudes toward code-switching?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Attitude

Attitude is broadly defined as “an individual’s feeling, prejudice, or belief about a given topic” (Likert, 1932, p. 10). Language attitudes are the evaluation of a language user and the speech itself. They can be positive or negative and

classify, judge, and stereotype the social object, for example, a language, a person, or a law (Fasold, 1984; Garrett, 2010). Carrie (2017) added that behavior is an important element when defining attitudes—she noted “an internal state of readiness that guides behavioral responses and is inferred from introspection and self-reporting” (p. 430). According to Weinreich (1953), “the ideal bilingual is someone who is able to switch between languages when required to do so by changes in the situation but does not switch when the speech situation is unchanged and ‘certainly not within a single sentence’.”

2.2 Code-Switching

Different researchers have suggested different definitions for code-switching. Myers-Scotton (2006, p. 239) gave a general definition of code-switching as “the use of two language varieties in the same conversation” (p. 239). Several researchers have adopted Gumperz’s (1982) definition of code-switching: “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” (p. 59). However, this definition neglects the fact that not only bilinguals code-switch, but multilingual speakers as well. According to Hymes (1971), code-switching is a term that describes the alternating between two or more languages or varieties of languages or speech styles. Additionally, Auer (2013) defined code-switching as “the alternating use of two or more codes within one conversational episode” (p. 1). Therefore, although bilinguals commonly use code-switching, monolinguals can also switch between styles and dialects (Aranoff & Miller, 2003; Auer, 2013). According to Bullock and Toribio (2010), there are three main approaches to code-switching: the structural approach, the psychological approach, and the sociolinguistic approach. This study will focus on the sociolinguistic approach to determine the Kuwaiti attitudes and practices regarding code-switching.

2.3 Factors Behind Code-Switching

According to Baker (2001), code-switching does not happen randomly, there is always a reason for code-switching. Gardner-Chloros’s article, in Bullock and Toribio (2009), classify the factors behind code-switching into three main and general types. The first type includes the independence of particular speakers and their specific circumstances; for example, prestige or other specific contexts. The second type is related to the speakers as individuals and as part of a group. The third type is related to the discourse in which code-switching occurs—where bilingual users have more tools than are available to monolinguals (Auer, 2013).

2.4 Age and Gender

According to Bullock and Toribio (2009), “gender is considered one of the most important sociolinguistic categories” (p. 107), and it can play a role in affecting the context where code-switching takes place. Factors, such as age and gender, can also shape a person’s attitude toward code-switching (Hughes & Shaunessy, 2006; Lawson & Sachdev, 2000). Several studies on the relationship between gender and code-switching in different parts of the world reveal that code-switching between any language and English is preferred more by women than men (Dewaele & Wei, 2014; Fattah & Ilyas, 2018; Lawson & Sachdev, 2013). Farida and Buriro (2018) and Panhwar (2018) added that women’s positive attitudes toward code-switching are due to the high status of the English language in the context of Pakistan where the studies took place. The situation is similar in the Kuwaiti context. A study conducted by Dashti (2015) demonstrated that female bilinguals code-switch more than male bilinguals in Kuwait.

According to Dashti (2015), the English language status in Kuwait has changed, and it is now seen as the language of the future—as well as technology. Fattah and Ilyas (2018) mentioned that the younger generation is more accepting of code-switching, whereas Dewaele and Wei (2014), in contrast, stated that older people—specifically those in their forties and older—were more accepting and in favor of code-switching.

2.5 Globalization

Code-switching is one of globalization’s effects on language use. Studies have shown that people’s attitudes to code-switching are different around the world depending on their perception of globalization. “any kind of language change, which is an inevitable process in almost every world language, has always been resisted in Saudi Arabia mostly due to national identity and religious factors” (Omar & Ilyas, 2018, p. 78). Because of globalization and English as a lingua franca, code-switching has become common in Saudi Arabia (Omar & Ilyas, 2018).

In contrast, from a cultural perspective, globalization can be seen as a cause of clashes and tensions between different cultures (Della, 2006). Due to globalization and a diversity of different religions and cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups in the Arab world, researchers believe that code-switching can be considered an obstacle when seeking to create a national identity (Kumaraswamy, 2006). Take Morocco, for example. Studies have shown that Moroccans have negative attitudes toward code-switching for two main reasons: (a) it is considered a sign of “showing off” and (b) it reflects the effect of colonization on Moroccans. Finally, to some Moroccans,

code-switching demonstrates disloyalty to their country (Bentahila, 1983; Ennaji, 2005).

3. Method

In this study, a qualitative approach was used to collect data by conducting one-on-one interviews with seven participants. The focus was to achieve a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the code-switching phenomenon by focusing on the “why” and “how.” Participants were asked a range of questions that fall under four categories: personal information and education, the use of code-switching, gender and age, and place and time. The chosen interview method was the semi-structured interview, and interviews were conducted after asking the participants to fill out a consent form. Although a questionnaire would cover a larger number of participants, face-to-face interviews were chosen to provide more in-depth information. First, the idea was to help make the participants more comfortable while talking because it was more or less a structured interview. Second, the participants were free to express themselves in the way they preferred. Third, the ages and proficiency levels were different from one participant to another. Therefore, the semi-structured method was chosen to make it possible to reword and reorder the questions and translate them to the participants’ first language, Arabic.

The interviewees were asked to provide background information, such as social environment, education, and language proficiency level. In the second part of the interview, participants were asked to express their opinions and attitudes toward code-switching. The interviewees described code-switching and why they engaged in it. Following this, the interviewees were asked to describe their code-switching relationships between age, gender, place, and time from their perspective and how people around them perceive it.

3.1 Participants

The participants were selected through personal connections. To find answers to the research questions and to develop a more detailed understanding of the Kuwaiti perspectives and attitudes toward code-switching, factors, such as age, gender, social class, and education, were considered when selecting the participants.

These criteria were chosen to reflect the different geographical and social features of Kuwaiti society. The ages ranged from 18 to 57 years, reflecting three generations. Among the seven participants, three were male and four were female. All of the participants worked in different fields and came from different educational backgrounds. During the interview, participants were asked to use the language and the speaking style with which they were most comfortable. Therefore, both literal and interpretive analyses have been used in the findings and discussion sections to analyze the data collected.

4. Results

The data collected from the interviews were categorized into three main themes: participants’ code-switching practices, participants’ attitudes toward code-switching, and factors affecting participants’ attitudes and code-switching practices.

4.1 Participants’ Code-Switching Practices

Analysis of the interviews shows that some participants code-switch based on the specific context, whereas others code-switch all the time in all contexts. For instance, people who rarely code-switch mentioned that code-switching between two languages signifies that the speaker is not a competent language user and it is a sign of weakness. People who rarely codeswitch use this method either consciously or unconsciously to employ technical terms and concepts that can be hard to explain or are not commonly used. This is common when using religious terms, such as “In sha’a Allah,” which means “if God will” when speaking in English.

Interviewee three, who studied public relations and advertising in English, mentioned it is more convenient for him to codeswitch to English when discussing topics related to his field of study. Additionally, interviewee three stated,

“We have to codeswitch at the company, because there are some terms that you can’t say in Arabic, or it is not commonly used . . . such as ‘client,’ ‘social media,’ and ‘post.’ I can’t imagine myself saying ‘wsael altawasol alejtmae’ or saying post in Arabic . . . I don’t even know what the translation of ‘post’ in Arabic is.”

Moreover, he noticed that other employees with low English proficiency started to code-switch on topics related to their field of work because of the English input they receive daily. Four out of the seven speakers mentioned that they code-switch all the time and that code-switching is their natural speaking style.

According to interviewee four, only using his first language required more effort and more focus when speaking. This usually happens in social contexts, such as large family gatherings where he communicates with older people or speakers who do not speak English. Alternatively, two interviewees found it impossible to form long conversations in Arabic without switching to English. The three speakers believed that code-switching made their speech more coherent. Interviewee five added that she found switching to English helped her find more precise

words when expressing her emotions.

4.2 Participants' Attitudes Toward Code-Switching

This paper draws on the Garrett (2010) definition of language attitudes—how attitudes toward a language can be determined to interpret the findings. Attitudes toward code-switching varied in the interviews among positive, negative, and neutral, and the participants who had a positive attitude toward code-switching did not think it would negatively affect themselves or society, so they encouraged the act. Furthermore, they felt it helped them express themselves, allowing for better communication.

The interview indicated that the same participants who mentioned that they practiced code-switching also had a positive attitude toward code-switching. Four speakers saw code-switching as a tool that helped them deliver their emotions and their messages more easily. Interviewee four also mentioned that code-switching helped him when he wanted to say something to his wife without their young children understanding. Additionally, he believed it helped in the learning process because he saw code-switching as an opportunity to practice a second language and to learn new lexicons.

Although three out of the four interviewees had a positive attitude toward code-switching, they also believed it could be problematic. One interviewee noted that young children overused it to the detriment of their first language, Arabic. However, according to interviewee five, the practice of code-switching should not affect the user's proficiency in their mother tongue. Interviewee five believed that, although being bilingual was important, neglecting the Arabic language can have negative consequences. She emphasized the importance of learning a new language but was concerned about code-switching causing speakers to neglect or regard their mother tongue as a lesser language. Code-switching, for some, is considered a negative phenomenon when users utilize it to the detriment of their Arabic skills.

4.3 Kuwaitis' Negative Attitudes Toward Code-Switching

Interviewee two had a negative attitude toward code-switching. Her attitude stemmed from her concerns about the effect of code-switching on the mother tongue. Although she thought that learning languages was quite beneficial, she felt that code-switching was destroying the identity of Kuwaiti society as an Arabic country. Additionally, other participants mentioned that code-switching would be seen as a harmful practice only when it is overused. Code-switching might make a child speak only English and forget Arabic. A third reason for having a negative attitude toward code-switching is that it might affect the process of English language learning, especially for people with low proficiency levels, who often switch to Arabic when communicating in class instead of trying to search for the word in English.

4.4 Globalization

According to interviewees one and three, code-switching became commonly used in Kuwait because of the need to be connected economically, socially, and educationally with the rest of the world. Globalization forced Kuwaitis to code-switch; therefore, it became a necessity. Interviewee one mentioned that, during the 60s and 70s, using English in everyday communication was not expected. He also added that the Arab nationalism ideologies were dominant in Kuwaiti society. People take pride in speaking Arabic, and nationalism affects their attitudes toward code-switching and using English in everyday communication.

4.5 Age and Gender

All interviewees stated that they did not think age or gender affected code-switching practices in contemporary Kuwaiti society. People from all age groups use code-switching; however, it is most common among young people because of their greater English exposure. Interviewee five stated, "*Age and gender are not an issue. My mom code-switches, but my dad doesn't. That's only because my mom is better at English, and she needs to use it.*" Interviewee five also agreed that code-switching is not related to age or gender but, instead, to the English proficiency of the language user.

5. Discussion

5.1 Attitudes Toward Code-Switching

Based on the Aghheyisi and Fishman (1970) classification of language attitude studies mentioned in the literature review, the results in the discussion focus on the social significance of code-switching by analyzing the social practices and attitudes toward code-switching outside the classroom context.

The interviewees' findings agree with Taqi (2010) and Dashti (2015), who found that code-switching between English and Arabic in social contexts was a sign of higher status among Kuwaitis and that those who engage in code-switching were regarded as more highly educated. This is a consequence of the English language being

considered a prestigious language in Kuwait. In line with other research findings (Akbar, 2007; Taqi, 2010), all participants mentioned that English was seen as the most prestigious language in Kuwait compared to the other commonly spoken languages and dialects, such as the Kuwaiti dialect and Standard Arabic. This attitude is similar in other countries in the Arabian region, such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, where use of the English language is associated with higher socioeconomic status (Alissa & Dahan, 2011; Hussein, 2018).

Al-Rawi (2012) noted that educated parents prefer their children to be bilingual, and they like to show off their children's knowledge of languages. Similar to Garrett (2010) definition of language attitude, the participants' attitudes toward code-switching are based on a stereotypical perspective that employ such linguistic variety in social contexts, which implies a higher educational background. This stereotype leads Kuwaitis who have little English knowledge to use it to give the impression they are educated. In contrast, many people see code-switching as a communication style used in business; nevertheless, many still prefer using Arabic and code-switch less when they are with their family or in formal social gatherings, such as weddings or *diwanyah* (Dashti, 2015).

Although interviewee two believed that bilingual speakers should not code-switch and should speak using one language in one conversation, she saw the English language as a sign that the speaker received a privileged education. One of interviewee two's negative attitudes toward code-switching came from the negative effect of code-switching on learning a new or second language. This finding supports Weinreich (1953) opinion mentioned earlier in the literature review and is in contrast to Ennaji (2005), who mentioned that code-switching could be seen as less patriotic and socially less attractive.

According to interviewees one and four, code-switching has become a "communication necessity," connecting Kuwaitis with the rest of the world. Due to globalization and other global political events, it has become standard practice to code-switch, especially among the younger generation and even for some older generations who may not practice code-switching. Additionally, factors, such as the growing number of foreigners and bilingual schools in Kuwait, have made code-switching a more acceptable practice.

5.2 Practices and Purposes of Using Code-Switching

The findings of this study also reflect the types of factors mentioned by Gardner-Chloros (2009). Similar to Dashti's (2015) findings, some participants code-switch, regardless of their English proficiency level, to inject humor, express a concept that does not have an equivalent in Arabic, or help when a person either forgets or does not know the word in Arabic. For many, making a request or apologizing in English is more accessible and less of an embarrassment than using Arabic. English is sometimes necessary when communicating with those who do not know Arabic, such as interviewee six's American mother. Finally, some participants relate their practice of code-switching to the social discussion topic—the type of education received or the language input and exposure to a language result in an alternation between different speaking styles.

5.3 Relationship Between Participants' Code-Switching Attitudes and Practices

This study agrees with Carrie (2017) explanation of the relationship between attitude and behavior. People's attitudes toward English or code-switching affect how (or if) they practice it or how they might judge others. The more people have a positive attitude toward it, the more they will use it.

The interviewees who had positive attitudes toward code-switching would code switch more often than those who stated that they had a negative or neutral attitude toward this phenomenon. Interviewee two rarely used code-switching because of her negative attitude toward code-switching.

The interviews also provided clear support of Baker (2001) position that the phenomenon of code-switching was not a random practice; evidently, there are logical reasons behind people practicing it. These factors affect peoples' attitudes to, and practices of, code-switching—differing from one community to another and from person to person. Therefore, discussing the factors that affect the attitudes is an important consideration.

5.4 Age and Gender

Although Dewaele and Wei (2014) stated that people who are in their forties and fifties are more accepting of code-switching, our results from interviews agree with Fattah and Ilyas (2018) view that the younger generations are more accepting of code-switching. Thus, in Kuwait, age and gender do not affect how Kuwaiti people judge the other code-switchers, yet it arguably can influence when, where, and how they practice code-switching.

The interviews suggested that men and women use code-switching for different purposes and in different settings. Reflecting on the interviews, the female participants suggested that code-switching became a communication necessity to express themselves and their emotions. However, male participants use it for purposes such as communication and humor. Cheshire and Gardner-Chloros (1998) explored code-switching among the Greek

community in London, England, and their findings also suggested that, although the purposes of code-switching were different for men and women, men and women code-switch equally. However, this was not the case among the seven Kuwaiti participants in this study. The results of the interviews showed that female interviewees practice code-switching at a rate higher than male interviewees. Thus, the results of this study support the argument that women code-switch more often than men (Dewaele & Wei, 2014; Fattah & Ilyas, 2018; Lawson & Sachdev, 2013).

5.5 The Effect of Education on Shaping Attitudes Toward Code-Switching

Edward (1982) mentioned that attitudes toward code-switching are based on three components, which are cognitive (beliefs), affective (feelings toward an object), and behavioral (intended reaction). The negative attitude toward code-switching by interviewee two was formed by her observation of the behavior of Kuwaiti society and the people around her. She mentioned that one of the reasons that influenced a more negative attitude toward code-switching was its perceived detrimental effect on the language learning processes—especially on children's performance in, and acquisition of, their mother tongue. Assagheer (2011) emphasized that teaching the English language as a second language, especially at early ages, can negatively affect a child's acquisition of their native language. Conversely, the Ghasemi and Hashemi (2011) research on foreign language learning during childhood confirmed it was easier for children to acquire a foreign language than adults, who may find it more difficult to separate their first language system from the other language systems they are learning. Therefore, parents need to find a balance and place a greater effort on the type and amount of secondary language input their children receive.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates Kuwaiti's attitudes and practices toward code-switching and the other factors that might affect their practices and attitudes toward the same phenomenon. Attitude and practice are two related aspects that rely on each other; therefore, this study shows how peoples' attitudes depend on whether people practice code-switching or accept people who code-switch.

The study results show that four out of seven participants had a positive attitude toward code-switching, whereas two had a neutral perspective, and only one had a purely negative attitude. Additionally, this study uncovered that all participants use code-switching despite their attitudes toward it. Two significant factors affect the attitude and practice of code-switching in Kuwait: globalization and education. All participants believed that code-switching is seen as a sign of being well educated.

In the past, factors such as age, gender, and social class would affect how people code-switched or their attitude toward it. This study revealed that factors, such as age and gender, do not affect participants' attitudes toward code-switching or its practices. Yet, other factors play a role in shaping the attitudes and practices of code-switching in and among Kuwaitis: globalization and education.

Being a bilingual speaker is an advantage, opening both cultural and socioeconomical opportunities. Living in a country where the percentage of bilinguals is high encourages people to be compatible users of their mother tongue and second language (usually English in Kuwait). Globally, English is considered a lingua franca; therefore, code-switching between Arabic and English became a communication necessity. Language policymakers should put more effort into encouraging and offering opportunities for learning English and Arabic equally. Parents, teachers, and policymakers should be aware of the importance of bilingualism and code-switching might result. Last, parents should pay attention to the amount of language input their young children receive and focus on creating bilingual speakers who are excellent in both languages to avoid domain loss.

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