



Mapping the Cognitive Dimensions of Bilingual Speakers: An Exploration of Code-Switching Strategies at Bina Budaya Pontianak

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Abstract

Code-switching studies have generally focused on socio-pragmatic aspects, leaving the cognitive dimension in bilingual speakers' language decision-making relatively underexplored. In fact, language switching occurs through processes that interactively involve social, linguistic, and cognitive factors. To address this gap, this phenomenological qualitative study involved three active bilingual participants with backgrounds in Indonesian, English, Italian, Japanese, and Tagalog at Lembaga Bina Budaya Pontianak. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation and were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The findings indicate that executive control, working memory, and metacognitive awareness play significant roles in determining the timing and form of code-switching. Participants employed tag switching, inter-sentential switching, and intra-sentential switching adaptively in accordance with social context and communicative objectives, thereby enhancing semantic precision, maintaining social relations, and managing interactional nuances. Emotional factors and personal experiences also influenced language preferences. Theoretically, this study underscores the importance of a cognitive-phenomenological perspective in bilingualism research. Practically, these findings are relevant to the development of language instruction and intercultural communication. Thus, bilingualism may be understood as a communicative practice that involves the management of cognitive processes in determining language choice.

1. Introduction

Bilingualism has increasingly become an integral part of communicative practices in multilingual societies in the era of globalization (Anisa, 2021; Saptadi et al., 2024). In everyday interactions, speakers who command more than one language frequently engage in code-switching (Amrillah, 2023; Tsani & Musthafa, 2024), namely the alternation of languages within a single speech event. This practice functions not only as a social strategy to accommodate interlocutors or conversational situations, but also involves cognitive processes that enable speakers to manage language choices flexibly. Therefore, code-switching is not merely understood as a linguistic phenomenon (Nisa & Septiani, 2024), but rather as a communicative practice that requires the management of cognitive resources to optimize language selection (Saptadi et al., 2024; Yunidar, 2025).

In contrast to studies emphasizing the impact of bilingualism on cognitive abilities, this study focuses on the cognitive processes operating during instances of code-switching. These processes include executive control, selective attention, and working memory (Green & Abutalebi, 2013; Grosjean, 2021). Executive control refers to the ability to regulate and inhibit activation of irrelevant languages; selective attention relates to focusing on specific linguistic stimuli; while working memory enables the simultaneous storage and processing of information during conversation. These factors determine when and how a speaker switches from one language to another in social interaction. Thus, the cognitive dimension plays a direct role in bilingual communicative strategies.

A context that represents this dynamic is Bina Budaya Pontianak, an educational institution and cultural activity center that brings together individuals from diverse national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. This environment constitutes an intensive multilingual interactional space through language learning activities and cultural exchange. In such situations, bilingual speakers are observed employing various language-switching strategies to adapt to conversational dynamics and communicative needs (Alimin & Ramaniyar, 2020; Murny & Hamdani, 2022). These strategies are used adaptively in accordance with diverse social contexts (Nafisah et al., 2024; Iryana et al., 2024), thereby making Bina Budaya Pontianak a relevant site for examining the relationship between cognitive dimensions and code-switching practices.

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological and narrative design to capture speakers' subjective experiences in making language decisions. The research focus extends beyond the linguistic patterns of code-switching to the underlying cognitive mechanisms operating within real social interactions. The participants consist of three late-adolescent bilingual speakers who are actively involved in multilingual activities at Bina Budaya Pontianak. Their linguistic backgrounds and cross-cultural interaction experiences provide a rich context for exploring how cognitive processes operate in linguistic decision-making.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between bilingualism and cognitive function through neurological and experimental approaches. Bice et al. (2020) utilized neurophysiological techniques such as EEG and MRI to identify patterns of brain connectivity in bilingual speakers, demonstrating the involvement of cognitive control networks in managing two languages. However, this approach operates at the biological level and in laboratory settings, thus offering limited insight into how these processes are enacted and interpreted in authentic social interaction.

On this basis, the present study does not adopt a neurophysiological approach, but instead employs a qualitative phenomenological design to access the dimension of subjective experience in language decision-making. Meanwhile, Gong et al. (2024) positioned bilingualism as a developmental variable and examined its impact on early childhood cognitive function through a quantitative-experimental design. In contrast to this orientation, the present study focuses on late adolescents (± 17 years old) whose executive functions are relatively mature; accordingly, the emphasis is directed not toward the developmental impact of bilingualism, but toward the procedural mechanisms of language decision-making in communicative practice. Tyborowska et al. (2024) investigated bilingual executive control through controlled experiments, which, although providing robust evidence regarding the roles of inhibition and attention, were nonetheless conducted in structured contexts.

Overall, these studies enrich understanding of the impacts and cognitive mechanisms of bilingualism; however, exploration of how these processes operate contextually in code-switching within authentic interaction remains relatively limited. This study contributes to addressing this need through a phenomenological approach that positions speakers' experiences as the locus of analysis.

Based on this review, the present study contributes to filling the gap by exploring the role of cognitive processes in code-switching strategies within real interactional contexts in a multicultural environment. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the cognitive processes involved in code-switching decision-making; (2) describe the forms of code-switching strategies employed in social interaction; and (3) analyze how social factors and personal experiences influence the use of these strategies. Thus, this research not only enriches bilingualism studies from a cognitive-phenomenological perspective, but also provides practical implications for the development of language instruction and intercultural communication.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological-narrative design to explore language decision-making experiences in code-switching practices among bilingual adolescents. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focus is process-oriented and contextual (Andriani

et al., 2025; Putra, 2023). This approach seeks to understand how cognitive mechanisms are experienced and interpreted within authentic social interaction, rather than measuring the effects of bilingualism experimentally.

Theoretically, this study draws on phenomenological research that emphasizes the exploration of lived experience and reflection on the meanings attributed to such experience (Nurhayati et al., 2024). A narrative approach was employed to analyze how bilingual experiences are constructed and articulated in the form of personal narratives, including the negotiation of linguistic identity (Mariyono, 2024). The integration of both approaches was conducted sequentially: phenomenological analysis was used to identify the essence of cognitive experience, while narrative analysis examined how these experiences were organized within story structures and self-reflection.

The study was conducted over three months (November 2025—January 2026) at Lembaga Bina Budaya Pontianak, a volunteer-based nonprofit institution engaged in education and intercultural exchange, partnering with AFS Intercultural Programs headquartered in New York, United States (Firmansyah, 2025). Approximately 1,800 international students from diverse linguistic backgrounds are administered by the central office in Jakarta. The observed activities included language classes, community discussions, cultural exchange programs, and informal interactions among members.

Participants were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling: (1) aged 16–18 years, (2) actively involved for at least six months in the Pontianak community, (3) using more than one language in daily interaction, and (4) willing to participate in interviews and observation. Three participants (all aged 17) were selected to maintain consistency in cognitive developmental stage.

The three participants involved in this study possessed diverse linguistic backgrounds. SO (female, Italy) is a native speaker of Italian, with high proficiency in English and intermediate proficiency in Indonesian, and has resided in Indonesia for one year. ST (female, Japan) is a native speaker of Japanese, with high proficiency in Indonesian and intermediate proficiency in English, and has lived in Indonesia for six months. DDD (male, Philippines) is a native speaker of Tagalog, proficient in English, and has intermediate proficiency in Indonesian, with a length of residence in Indonesia of approximately eight months. All participants took part voluntarily without receiving financial compensation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted twice with each participant (a total of six interviews), each lasting 60–90 minutes, using Indonesian or English according to the participants' preference. The questions focused on experiences of language choice, awareness of code-switching, social pressure, and identity reflection. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified through member checking.

Participant observation was conducted in eight sessions (± 2 hour/session). The researcher assumed the role of participant-observer. Field notes documented the interactional context, the languages used, instances of code-switching, and the social responses to such occurrences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) through stages of familiarization, inductive coding, theme development and refinement, and phenomenological interpretation, which were subsequently deepened through narrative analysis to understand the construction of bilingual experience. Coding was conducted manually in two cycles and interpreted in dialogue with recent developments in bilingual language control theory, including the updated Adaptive Control framework (Green & Abutalebi, 2020) and cognitive dynamics-based models of language control (DeLuca et al., 2025).

Credibility was ensured through triangulation of interview and observational data, member checking, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. All participants provided informed consent, their identities were anonymized, and the data were stored securely for academic purposes.

3. Result

This study involved three bilingual participants with different linguistic backgrounds. SO (female, Italy) is a native speaker of Italian, proficient in English, and has intermediate proficiency in Indonesian after residing in Indonesia for one year. ST (female, Japan) is a native speaker of Japanese, with high proficiency in Indonesian and intermediate proficiency in English, and has lived in Indonesia for six months. DDD (male, Philippines) is a native speaker of Tagalog, proficient in English, and has intermediate proficiency in Indonesian, with a length of residence of approximately eight months. All three actively use their languages according to context: SO, tends to use English in academic discussions and Indonesian in social interactions; ST predominantly uses Indonesian in daily activities while maintaining Japanese in specific contexts; whereas DDD uses Tagalog with fellow speakers and switches to Indonesian or English in heterogeneous groups.

The number of participants was limited to three because this study employed a qualitative approach with an in-depth case study design that emphasizes depth and richness of data rather than statistical generalization. Each participant was analyzed intensively through observation and interviews; therefore, three cases were considered sufficient to identify patterns of similarity and difference without compromising analytical rigor. The following table presents a summary of the overall research findings.

Aspect	Research Findings
Cognitive processes in code-switching	Participants demonstrated varying levels of awareness in managing two or more languages. They actively selected code-switching strategies based on social context, interlocutors, and communicative goals.
Factors influencing code-switching strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Metacognitive awareness: Participants recognized when to switch languages to enhance comprehension or create social closeness. 2. Working memory: The ability to store and process information simultaneously contributed to flexibility in code-switching. 3. Emotional associations: Certain words or phrases in specific languages were more closely linked to participants' personal or cultural experiences, influencing language choice in interaction.
Dominant code-switching strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tag switching: The use of words or phrases from another language without altering sentence structure. 2. Inter-sentential switching: Switching languages between sentences, particularly when explaining more complex concepts. 3. Intra-sentential switching: Switching languages within a single sentence, often used to emphasize meaning or clarify intent.
Dynamics of code-switching in social interaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adjustment to interlocutors: Participants adapted their language use based on the preferences and linguistic abilities of their interlocutors. 2. Contextual adaptation: Code-switching occurred more frequently in informal situations than in formal settings. 3. Role of linguistic identity: Bilingualism was used as a tool to negotiate cultural identity in multilingual interactions at Bina Budaya Pontianak.

From the total conversational data analyzed, three primary types of code-switching were identified: tag switching, inter-sentential switching, and intra-sentential switching.

Inter-sentential switching was the most frequently occurring form. This pattern emerged when participants completed one sentence in one language and continued the next sentence in another language. This form was dominant in academic discussions and situations involving conceptual explanation. For example, SO stated:

“Menurut saya konsep ini cukup kompleks. Maybe we can approach it from a different perspective.”

The shift occurred at the sentence boundary and maintained the grammatical structure of each language.

Intra-sentential switching appeared in the form of inserting phrases or technical terms within a single sentence. For instance, DDD stated:

“Kita harus adjust strateginya supaya lebih effective.”

In this example, the words “adjust” and “effective” were integrated into the Indonesian syntactic structure.

Tag switching occurred in the form of particles or short expressions such as “ya,” “okay,” or “hai” inserted without altering the main sentence structure. This form was more frequently found in informal interactions and casual conversations. Overall, inter-sentential switching was structurally the most stable, whereas intra-sentential switching required greater grammatical integration and occurred more frequently among participants with longer bilingual experience.

Cognitive Dimension

The first theme concerned lexical access and working memory management. Language switching often occurred when participants experienced difficulty retrieving specific vocabulary. ST stated in an interview:

“Sometimes I know the meaning in Japanese, but I don’t immediately remember the Indonesian word, so I use Japanese first.”

Conversation observations revealed brief pauses before language shifts occurred, indicating a lexical retrieval process.

The second theme concerned language control and attentional shifting. In discussion settings requiring extended explanations, SO demonstrated the ability to maintain one language within a discourse unit before switching in a controlled manner. No ungrammatical structural mixing was observed, indicating relatively stable language system management.

In addition, there were indications of metacognitive awareness in language choice. SO, stated:

“Kalau topiknya serius, saya lebih nyaman pakai English supaya lebih precise.”

This statement indicates that language selection was not entirely spontaneous, but also reflective.

Social Dimension

The third theme related to identity and group solidarity. DDD stated:

“If there is a Filipino friend, I automatically use Tagalog. It feels closer.”

In observations of heterogeneous groups, he immediately switched to Indonesian when the participant composition changed. This pattern indicates that language choice was influenced by social configuration and group affiliation.

Based on observation and interviews, several indications of cognitive mechanisms in code-switching practices were identified. First, executive control was evident in maintaining one language within a particular discourse unit before switching. Second, working memory use was observed in vocabulary search situations, marked by pauses and subsequent language shifts. Third, metacognitive awareness emerged when participants explicitly articulated reasons for language choice based on semantic precision or formality context. These findings are grounded in conversational observation data and explicit participant statements in interviews, rather than solely on theoretical inference.

Cross-Participant Patterns

Similarities were observed in sensitivity to context and efforts to maintain communicative fluency. All three participants employed code-switching as a strategy to sustain interactional continuity. However, differences were found in the dominant factors triggering language shifts. For SO, language choice was more strategic and contextual. For ST, code-switching was more frequently triggered by lexical access. For DDD, social identity factors and group composition were more dominant. Overall, the findings indicate that code-switching in multilingual contexts is not random, but follows structural, cognitive, and social patterns that can be empirically observed.

4. Discussion

Cognitive Dimension: Executive Control, Working Memory, and Metacognitive Awareness

The findings of this study indicate that code-switching among the three participants was not a random phenomenon, but rather the result of controlled language regulation. This is consistent with bilingual control models that emphasize the role of executive control in language selection and inhibition (Bice et al., 2020; Tyborowska et al., 2024). Code-switching performed in a planned manner—particularly in academic contexts—suggests the presence of conscious and strategic language selection processes.

The metacognitive awareness demonstrated by SO strengthens the argument that bilingual speakers do not merely respond to linguistic limitations, but also engage in reflective evaluation regarding the appropriateness of language choice in relation to communicative goals. This finding extends the understanding proposed by Gong et al. (2024) that bilingual flexibility depends not only on cognitive capacity, but also on regulatory awareness in language use.

Furthermore, code-switching triggered by difficulties in lexical access—as observed in ST—supports the view that working memory plays a central role in bilingual processing. Research by Saptadi et al. (2024) and Suharti et al. (2021) indicates that working memory capacity correlates with fluency in managing two language systems. In this study, language switching emerged as an adaptive

mechanism to reduce processing load; thus, code-switching can be understood as a cognitive strategy rather than merely a communicative strategy. Accordingly, these findings both reinforce and extend cognitive models of bilingualism by demonstrating the simultaneous interaction among executive control, working memory, and metacognitive awareness.

Social Dimension: Adaptation and Strategy

Beyond cognitive aspects, the findings confirm that code-switching also functions as a strategy of social adaptation. Language shifts that follow group composition reflect sensitivity to interactional norms and inclusivity needs. These findings align with Gurning et al. (2024) and Yunidar (2025), who emphasize that code-switching in multilingual contexts is often used to build relationships and maintain social harmony.

However, this study demonstrates that social adaptation does not operate independently; rather, it functions concurrently with cognitive considerations. In other words, language choice results from a simultaneous negotiation between processing efficiency and relational effectiveness. This synthesis enriches previous literature by affirming that social and cognitive dimensions are intertwined in everyday code-switching practices.

Identity Dimension: Language as the Negotiation of Affiliation

The finding regarding DDD's maintenance of their first language in certain situations reinforces the sociolinguistic perspective that language functions as a marker of identity and social solidarity (Putri, 2024). In this context, language choice is driven not only by communicative needs, but also by the desire to express closeness, belonging, and cultural affiliation. When DDD continued to use their first language while interacting with speakers who share a similar cultural background, this reflected an effort to preserve identity while simultaneously building solidarity.

This study also demonstrates that linguistic identity is not fixed, but flexible and contextual. DDD was able to switch languages when social situations changed without losing their identity. In other words, language adaptation does not imply the abandonment of identity; rather, it becomes part of the way individuals negotiate their identity across different situations. Thus, identity and adaptability operate dynamically alongside one another.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

Overall, these findings support bilingual control models that emphasize the role of executive control and working memory (Bice et al., 2020; Tyborowska et al., 2024), while extending them by incorporating metacognitive awareness and social negotiation as concurrent influencing factors. Whereas Gong et al. (2024) emphasize cognitive flexibility as the core of bilingualism, this study demonstrates

that such flexibility is also mediated by social and identity considerations in real-world contexts. Accordingly, code-switching can be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving the integration of cognitive regulation, social adaptation, and identity affirmation simultaneously.

These findings have implications for multilingual education and communication training. Language curriculum development should emphasize metacognitive awareness and language regulation strategies, rather than focusing solely on structural competence. Furthermore, cross-cultural communication training can utilize an understanding of code-switching as an adaptive strategy to enhance interactional effectiveness in both academic and professional contexts.

This study has several limitations. First, the participants were situated within a single institutional context, thus the generalization of the findings should be approached with caution. Second, the participants' age range was homogeneous. Third, the qualitative approach allows for the possibility of interpretive bias.

Future research may involve a larger sample size, greater variation in language pairs and age groups, as well as quantitative approaches or experimental designs to examine the relationship between cognitive control and the frequency of code-switching in a more measurable manner. Longitudinal studies are also needed to explore the development of code-switching strategies over the long term.

5. Conclusion

This study affirms that code-switching among bilingual individuals is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but a process that simultaneously involves cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. Participants actively managed their language use based on social context, interlocutor characteristics, and communicative goals. Metacognitive awareness played a crucial role in determining the timing and form of language shifts, while working memory capacity influenced the fluency and flexibility of interlingual transitions. Emotional factors also shaped preferences and associations with specific vocabulary items.

The dominant strategies included tag switching, inter-sentential switching, and intra-sentential switching, which were employed to emphasize meaning, clarify messages, and facilitate social adaptation. Code-switching also functioned as a means of negotiating cultural identity, affirming that linguistic identity is dynamic and contextual. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the linkage between cognitive control and identity construction; practically, linguistic flexibility should be understood as an adaptive competence. However, because the participants were drawn from a single institutional context with a homogeneous age range and the study employed a qualitative approach, the generalization of the findings should be undertaken with caution.

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