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Suburban Vietnamese EFL Freshmen's Perceptions of Teachers' Classroom Code-Switching: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ABSTRACT: *The use of code-switching (CS) has been increasingly acknowledged as an effective teaching approach in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, especially for students with limited language proficiency. Yet, little is known about how learners in rural areas of Vietnam perceive this practice. This study investigates the perceptions of first-year non-English major students in the Mekong Delta regarding their teachers' use of CS, with a particular focus on its pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural functions. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, involving a questionnaire completed by 116 university freshmen (A1-A2 CEFR levels), followed by semi-structured interviews with 13 purposively selected participants. Quantitative data indicated generally positive student perceptions of teachers' CS, with the sociocultural function receiving the highest ratings, followed closely by pedagogical and affective roles. Thematic analysis of interview data supported these findings and revealed that CS was perceived as a helpful strategy for clarifying complex content, reducing anxiety, and contextualizing learning within students' lived experiences. Students also emphasized the importance of balanced language use, recommending approximately 70-80% English and 20-30% Vietnamese instruction. Perceptions were influenced by factors such as proficiency level, prior English exposure, learning preferences, and long-term goals. The findings underscore the need for context-sensitive instructional practices and suggest that strategic use of CS may enhance learner engagement and comprehension in under-resourced educational settings. Pedagogical implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.*

KEYWORDS: **Code-switching (CS), EFL education, mixed-methods, student perceptions, Vietnamese rural areas.**

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1. Introduction

The language choices within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings have drawn considerable scholarly attention in recent years. This is especially true in contexts where English language acquisition poses significant challenges (Tran, 2024). In Vietnam, while no formal guidelines dictate the language of instruction (Luong, 2022). Still, many schools prefer that teachers speak only English. Many educators follow to this monolingual approach and avoid the use of Vietnamese, the learners' first language (L1). They assume that total English immersion accelerates learning. Nevertheless, this method may prove less effective in rural environments characterized by limited resources and a scarcity of qualified instructors (Hoang & Bui, 2023). Consequently, a substantial proportion of students do not reach the expected level of English levels of proficiency (Nguyen, 2011).

Despite beginning English studies in the third grade, a significant number of rural Vietnamese students exhibit persistent difficulties with fundamental English skills even after a decade of instruction (Nguyen, 2011). Alarmingly, some do not even reach the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This can be attributed to factors such as instructor shortages, resource limitations (Bui et al., 2022), and restricted exposure to English outside formal classroom settings (Ngo & Tran, 2024; Trinh & Mai, 2019). In such contexts, a strictly English-only approach may be counterproductive, neglecting the potential

benefits of pedagogical code-switching (CS), the strategic use of both English and Vietnamese to facilitate learning (Le, 2014; Luong, 2022).

Research has demonstrated that CS fulfills vital socio-pedagogical roles, including clarifying teacher explanations and building student rapport, as well as affective roles, such as alleviating anxiety and enhancing learner confidence (Ataş & Sağın-Şimşek, 2021; Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; Cahyani, *et al*., 2016; Fallahpour, 2015; Keong *et al*., 2016; Paez, 2018; Raman & Yigitoglu, 2015; Siboro & Agung, 2022; Temesgen & Hailu, 2022; Xiaofang, 2017; Yazdi & Bakar, 2014). These functions are particularly salient in areas like the Mekong Delta, where students face increased obstacles to English language development (Le, 2011; Grant & Nguyen, 2017). However, there is a dearth of research exploring CS within the Vietnamese educational landscape, particularly concerning the viewpoints of rural first-year university students. This case study aims to address this research gap by investigating the perceptions of EFL freshmen in the Mekong Delta region regarding the implementation of CS in their English language learning experience.

2. Literature review

2.1. The controversy of L1 use in EFL classrooms

The role of learners' L1 in EFL classrooms has been debated for decades. Stern (1992) describes it as a "long-standing controversy", reflecting differing views on L1's impact on L2 acquisition. Advocates of an L2-only approach, such as Krashen (1985), Moeller and Roberts (2013), and Brown (2000), argue that full immersion in the target language fosters authentic communication and accelerates learning, rendering L1 use unnecessary or even harmful.

However, many scholars challenge this strict L2 stance, especially for lower-level learners. Phillipson (1992) found little evidence linking high L2 input with academic success, leading Macaro (2001, 2005) and Critchley (2002) to support a more flexible approach that uses L1 strategically to clarify complex content and reduce cognitive overload.

Others, like Cook (2001) and Vaezi and Mirzaei (2007), highlight the benefits of CS, particularly for students with limited L2 proficiency. They argue that integrating L1 can enhance understanding and create a more supportive learning environment. When used judiciously, L1 can aid comprehension and promote more effective L2 learning.

2.2. Definition and concept of code-switching

Pedagogical CS encompasses "the simultaneous use of the target language and the learners' L1, or two varieties (one standard and one nonstandard) of the target language, for classroom interactions and instructional exchanges" (Nguyen *et al*., 2016, p. 1334). This practice is notably widespread in multilingual communities and educational contexts, functioning as an essential communicative technique (Cook, 2001). Within EFL classrooms, CS frequently arises as a natural coping mechanism for the linguistic obstacles encountered by both educators and students, enabling them to transition between English and their L1 to achieve greater clarity in communication (Cook, 2016).

The theoretical framework surrounding CS has undergone substantial development over time. Initially perceived as unplanned, and at times, discouraged behavior, CS is now acknowledged as a purposeful and strategic linguistic instrument that demonstrates a speaker's linguistic proficiency and flexibility (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Heller (1988) highlights that CS is not simply a haphazard switching between languages, but rather a complex process that integrates linguistic components from multiple languages to optimize communication within specific social and cultural settings. In educational environments, particularly within EFL classrooms, this deliberate application of CS plays a pivotal role in facilitating learning and cultivating a more welcoming and inclusive classroom atmosphere.

2.3. Functions of code-switching

Scholarly classifications of CS functions vary. For instance, Appel and Muysken (2005), along with Nazri and Kassim (2023), approach CS from a sociolinguistic standpoint, identifying five distinct categories: referential,

directive, expressive, metalinguistic, and poetic. Conversely, Nguyen et al. (2016) conceptualize pedagogical CS as "a communicative resource, fulfilling three primary roles: ideational, textual, and interpersonal" (p. 1335). However, this specific investigation centers on Vietnamese EFL university classrooms situated in rural settings, with a focus on the most prevalent and pertinent scenarios wherein CS manifests. Consequently, this study narrows its scope to three essential functions: (1) instructional functions (analogous to Nguyen et al.'s (2016) ideational functions), which facilitate teaching and learning processes; (2) emotional functions (akin to interpersonal functions), which contribute to rapport building and anxiety reduction; and (3) socio-cultural functions, which establish connections between English language learning and students' cultural and social environments.

Instructionally, CS helps students link L1 knowledge to L2 content, especially when facing complex grammar or vocabulary (Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; Keong et al., 2016). Teachers use L1 to clarify difficult points and ease understanding (Cahyani *et al*., 2016; Ngo & Phuong, 2018), while also aiding classroom management and discipline (Xiaofang, 2017; Zainil & Arsyad, 2021). Purposeful CS thus fosters a more organized, engaging learning space (Thongwichit & Ulla, 2024).

Emotionally, CS helps reduce learners' anxiety, frustration, and fear of making mistakes (Pham, 2007; Ayaz, 2017). It strengthens teacher-student relationships (Xiaofang, 2017), boosts motivation, and encourages participation (Siboro & Agung, 2022; Han *et al*., 2022). Strategically using L1 builds a supportive classroom culture that promotes confidence and communicative risk-taking (Nguyen & Ho, 2012; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002).

Socioculturally, Paez (2018) pointed out that CS connects English learning with students' backgrounds, enhancing relevance and meaning. It supports intercultural competence by linking home and target cultures (Kamwangamalu, 2010) and enables learners to express their identities while engaging more personally with content (Yazdi & Bakar, 2014).

2.4. Classroom Code-switching Research in the Vietnamese Context

Vietnamese-context research has identified multiple reasons why teachers use CS in EFL classrooms. Teachers often switch to the L1 to explain grammar, clarify vocabulary, check understanding, give instructions, manage tasks, and maintain classroom discipline (Dong & Ngo, 2023; Luong, 2022; Nguyen *et al*., 2016; Phan, 2021; Nguyen, 2012; Le & Pham, 2019). CS is particularly helpful when students struggle with English-only instruction (Luong, 2022).

From students' perspectives, CS aids comprehension, supports idea expression, builds rapport with teachers, and makes lessons more enjoyable. It, according to Dong and Ngo (2023), also serves interpersonal purposes, such as greetings, humor, or topic shifts, which enrich classroom interactions.

Overall, both teachers and learners generally view CS as a beneficial teaching strategy, especially for anxious or lower-proficiency students (Luong, 2022; Phan, 2021). However, concerns remain. Some educators worry that overusing CS may hinder L2 development or signal linguistic weakness (Nguyen, 2021). Others argue it may be less useful for more advanced learners (Phan, 2021; Nguyen *et al*., 2016) or demotivate students who prefer more L2 exposure (Luong, 2022; Nguyen, 2024).

CS frequency is influenced by learner proficiency, time constraints, institutional policies, cultural norms, teacher beliefs, and students' learning preferences (Nguyen, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2016). Its use may also vary between public and private universities (Nguyen, 2012). Teachers must often balance pedagogical benefits with pressures to follow English-only policies (Phan, 2021), while being mindful of students' perceptions and the long-term impact on L2 development (Luong, 2022; Nguyen, 2024).

2.5. EFL Students' Perceptions of Code-switching in Language Learning

In language education, students' perceptions refer to how they interpret and experience the learning environment, including attitudes toward teaching methods, classroom activities, and

language use (Mamad & Vígh, 2024; McDonald, 2012; Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Wang, 2007). These perceptions vary among learners and can significantly influence motivation, engagement, and achievement. This means that students with positive views of instruction tend to participate more actively and perform better (Makhura *et al*., 2021; Mustafa *et al.*, 2015; Wu & Wang, 2025).

Understanding learner perceptions, such as views on teacher talk or instructional strategies, allows educators to better tailor their approaches to student needs, fostering more inclusive and effective classrooms (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Chan & Hu, 2023). In EFL settings, perceptions play a critical role in shaping learning outcomes.

Studies have increasingly explored students' views on CS. Chinese university students preferred occasional L1 use over full English immersion (Luo, 2019), while Indonesian learners found CS helpful for comprehension, vocabulary learning, and speaking fluency (Elias *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, Saudi students and lecturers valued Arabic for enhancing understanding and interaction (Al-Marzouki & Albeyali, 2025). Even among Chinese-as-a-foreign-language learners, CS was seen as beneficial although advanced students preferred it less (Hu *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the global attention to this issue, few studies have addressed CS in Vietnamese EFL classrooms from the learner's point of view, as most existing research has centered on teachers' perspectives (Nguyen, 2024). Internationally, gaps also remain, such as the lack of research comparing learners' perceptions across proficiency levels (Khodabakhshzadeh & Khosravani, 2020). More notably, the perspectives of Vietnamese freshmen in rural areas, particularly in regions like the Mekong Delta, have received little attention, despite facing systemic challenges such as underdeveloped education infrastructure, limited technological access, and low standards in public services (Bui, 2021; Government, 2017). These overlooked voices underscore the need for targeted studies that explore how under-resourced learners perceive CS in the classroom and whether it supports their engagement and achievement. In response to this gap, the present study investigates rural Vietnamese EFL freshmen's perceptions of and expectations regarding their teachers' use of CS, aiming to understand whether and how this practice contributes to their learning experiences and outcomes. This study seeks to address the following two main research questions:

RQ1: What are Vietnamese EFL freshmen's perceptions of teachers' use of code-switching in rural classroom settings, specifically in relation to its pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural functions?

RQ2: What factors influence students' perceptions of teachers' code-switching in these rural EFL classrooms?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The research began with the collection of quantitative data through a questionnaire administered to 116 first-year university students in a rural area of southeastern Vietnam. Following this, 13 participants were randomly selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. Conducted after the survey phase, these interviews aimed to provide deeper insights into the reasons behind students' perceptions and to identify the factors influencing their views on teachers' use of CS in the classroom.

3.2. Participants and Setting

This study utilized purposive sampling to select 116 first-year students (N = 116) with self-reported low English proficiency, classified at A1 and A2 levels on the CEFR scale, from a tertiary institution in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region. Although the initial survey was distributed to approximately 200 students, only those who identified as having low English proficiency were included in the final sample. This sampling method was chosen as it allows researchers to explore the full range of relevant issues in depth (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Subsequently, 13 participants (S1-S13) were purposively selected from the initial pool for follow-up interviews based on considerations of gender, proficiency

level, availability, and willingness to participate. The interview group comprised 4 male and 9 female students, with 6 students at the A1 level and 7 at the A2 level. This diversity in gender and proficiency was intended to ensure a range of perspectives and reduce potential bias in data interpretation.

This research was set in a rural context, which remains underrepresented in studies on English language learning. Learners in such regions often encounter limited opportunities to use English beyond the classroom environment (Ngo & Tran, 2024; Trinh & Mai, 2019). Gaining insights into their educational experiences is essential for enhancing English instruction in comparable settings, particularly since "perceptions can influence teachers' judgments, decisions, and teaching practices" (Mamad & Vígh, 2024, p. 181).

The participants in this study were first-year university students who did not major in English, a group that generally receives less structured English instruction compared to English majors. The study specifically targeted students who self-identified as having low English proficiency, corresponding to A1 or A2 levels on the CEFR scale. These learners often lack confidence and struggle with English communication. To assess their proficiency levels, a self-evaluation method was used. Students were provided with a Vietnamese-translated version of the description of the CEFR global scale (Cambridge ESOL, 2011; Council of Europe, 2001) and asked to select the level that best reflected their current English skills. Participant details are summarized in Table 1.

3.3. Instruments

This study employed two primary instruments for data collection: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. The questionnaire, offered in both Vietnamese and English, comprised two main sections. The first section collected participants' demographic details and contact information for potential follow-up interviews. The second section focused on students' perceptions of teachers' use of CS in the classroom, specifically examining its pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural roles. Grounded in established theoretical frameworks and previous studies (e.g., Nguyen *et al.*, 2016; Cahyani *et al.*, 2016; Kamwangamalu, 2010), the instrument consisted of 23 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The subscales were organized into three categories: pedagogical (8 items), affective (8 items), and sociocultural (7 items). The pedagogical dimension explored how CS assists in clarifying content, facilitating learning, and managing classroom activities. The affective component investigated the extent to which CS reduces learner anxiety, enhances motivation, and strengthens teacher-student rapport. The sociocultural subscale assessed how CS relates classroom English instruction to students' cultural contexts and real-life experiences. The questionnaire items were adapted and developed based on relevant literature concerning CS in EFL environments (Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; Siboro & Agung, 2022; Paez, 2018), with adjustments made to reflect the specific learning context of students in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. To ensure content validity, two researchers with expertise in CS and language education were consulted to review the items (see Appendix A).

The interview protocol was semi-structured and designed to complement the questionnaire by exploring participants' deeper views regarding teachers' use of CS in class. Interview questions were constructed around the same three functional dimensions including pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural. They also consisted of open-ended prompts (e.g., *what*, *why*, and *how*) to elicit detailed responses. Additionally, each section of the one-by-one interview included an *other* prompt, giving participants space to share perspectives that may not have been fully addressed in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Summary of Participants

Gender	Male		Female	
Self-perceived proficiency (CEFR)	A1: 9	A2: 33	A1: 21	A2: 53
Quantity	42		74	
Age range	18-19			
Total	116			

3.4. Data collection

At the outset, researchers reached out to available first-year students to invite participation in the questionnaire and, where applicable, follow-up interviews. Those who indicated interest by providing their contact information in the questionnaire were later considered for the interview phase.

Data collection unfolded in two main stages. During the first phase, participants completed a questionnaire designed to gather quantitative data on their perceptions of classroom experiences, specifically regarding teachers' use of CS. With the consent of classroom instructors, the questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms. To ensure the reliability of the responses, the researchers emphasized the importance of honest and thoughtful participation. Although the questionnaire was presented in Vietnamese to align with students' language comfort, additional verbal explanations were offered in Vietnamese as needed to prevent misinterpretation and enhance response accuracy.

In the second phase, 13 students were selected for semi-structured interviews, conducted either face-to-face or online via Google Meet for accessibility. Each interview, conducted in Vietnamese, lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription and analysis. Following recommendations by Johnson and Christensen (2019), the research team established rapport by clearly explaining the study's aims and reassuring participants of the confidentiality of their responses. Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview session. Throughout the interviews, researchers probed students' responses to gain deeper insights, with particular attention given to their expectations regarding teachers' use of CS in the classroom.

3.5. Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, supplemented with Omega plug-ins. The initial step involved data cleaning, during which any incomplete or irrelevant responses were removed to ensure the accuracy of the dataset. To assess the internal consistency of the instrument, the researchers calculated Cronbach's alpha, item-total correlations, and McDonald's Omega (ML) for the overall scale, each subscale, and individual items. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were then used to summarize participants' perceptions, offering a general overview of the trends in the data. To investigate whether perceptions differed by gender, an inferential statistical test was applied. Before determining the appropriate test, the Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to assess the normality of the distribution. Since the data did not meet the assumptions of normality, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used in place of the independent samples t-test.

The data from interviews were analyzed with 6-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This involves transcribing the audio recordings, immersing the researcher in the data, and initiating the coding process by marking key aspects of the data with various colours and notes. This coding process, as Braun and Clarke note, allows for an interpretive layer beyond the participants' expressed meanings. Following the initial coding, the researcher identified and refined themes, ensuring they accurately represented the data. These themes were then clearly defined and distinguished in preparation for a comprehensive report of the findings in the final phase. For the interview data, multiple approaches were adopted. Interviewees were reassured about the confidentiality of their responses and that their input had no bearing on their academic or professional standing (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Initially, non-threatening questions were used to make interviewees comfortable and more inclined to share their insights (Cohen *et al*., 2018). Any responses that were ambiguous, unclear, or seemed invalid were reviewed for clarification, ensuring that participants' true intentions were captured and aligned with the interviewer's queries (Hughes & Hughes, 2020). Conducting interviews in Vietnamese and recording them helped in reducing misunderstandings and facilitate thorough data analysis.

3.6. Research Ethics

Regarding ethical considerations, participation from students was entirely voluntary. From the outset, individuals were made aware of their right to either participate in or opt out of the study. They were fully briefed on the objectives of the research and assured of their protection from any potential issues arising from their involvement. Confidentiality of their identities was rigorously maintained. Throughout the research process, all participants were treated with dignity and ethical conduct.

4. Results

4.1. Results from the Questionnaire

The scale reliability analysis showed high McDonald's Omega and Cronbach's Alpha values for the whole scale and all subscales (see Table 2). All coefficients exceeded .70. All corrected item-total correlations exceeded .40, indicating satisfactory item performance (Hinton et al., 2023). Cronbach's Alpha would decrease if any item were removed, confirming item-level reliability.

Based on the perception scale classification proposed by Fang and Liu (2020), scores ranging from 1.00 to 2.99 reflect negative perceptions, scores from 3.00 to 3.90 indicate neutral perceptions, and scores between 3.91 and 5.00 suggest positive perceptions. Among the participants, 1 student (0.9%) expressed a negative perception, 35 students (30.2%) held a neutral perception, and 80 students (69%) reported a positive perception of teachers' use of CS in the classroom (see Fig. 1). In terms of specific functional categories, the sociocultural function of CS was rated the highest (M = 4.15, SD = 0.45), followed closely by the pedagogical function (M=4.13, SD=0.43), and the affective function (M = 4.04, SD = 0.51). The overall perception score was M = 4.10 (SD = 0.36), indicating that, on average, students held positive views toward all three dimensions of teachers' CS practices (see Table 3).

Table 2. McDonald's Omega & Cronbach's Alpha

Scales	α	Ω
The whole scale	.858	.860
Pedagogical	.774	.780
Affective	.802	.805
Sociocultural	.747	.757

To determine whether the data met the assumptions for parametric testing, both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality were conducted on the perception mean scores (see Table 4). The results indicated significant deviations from normality. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test yielded a statistic of $D(116) = 0.101$, $p = .006$, while the Shapiro-Wilk test produced a statistic of $W(116) = 0.955$, $p = .001$. Since the p-values for both tests were below the conventional alpha level of .05, the assumption of normality was violated. Consequently, non-parametric statistical methods were employed in subsequent analyses to ensure the robustness of the findings.

To explore potential gender-based differences in students' perceptions of teachers' use of CS, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was conducted, as the assumption of normality was violated (see Table 5). Four variables were examined: overall perception, and the three subscales: pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural functions. Results showed no statistically significant differences between male

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Scales	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Pedagogical	116	4.13	.43	2.63	5.00
Affective	116	4.04	.51	2.00	5.00
Sociocultural	116	4.15	.45	2.43	5.00
Overall	116	4.10	.36	2.70	4.96

Table 4. Normality Tests

Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
df	**Statistic**	**Sig.**	**df**	**Statistic**	**Sig.**
116	.101	.006	116	.955	.001

Table 5. Mann-Whitney U test

Scales	U	Z	p
Pedagogical	1517.00	-.215	.830
Affective	1285.50	-1.549	.121
Sociocultural	1454.00	-.579	.562
Overall	1387.50	-.958	. 338

and female students for overall perception scores (U = 1387.50, p = .338), pedagogical function (U = 1517.00, p = .830), affective function (U = 1285.50, p = .121), or sociocultural function (U = 1454.00, p = .562). Although female students had slightly higher mean ranks (MR) than male students across all categories, particularly in the affective subscale (MR (female) = 62.13, MR (male) = 52.11), these differences were not statistically significant. These findings suggest that male and female students generally shared similar perceptions regarding the pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural roles of teachers' CS in the classroom.

4.1. Results from the interviews

Thematic analysis of the 13 semi-structured interviews revealed that students perceived teacher CS as serving three major functions in the EFL classroom: pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural. All participants expressed positive or conditionally positive perceptions of CS. Several factors were found to influence these perceptions, including English proficiency level, prior exposure to English, learning preferences, learning goals, and the teacher's communication style (see Appendix B for a quote-to-theme mapping, showcasing how interview responses align with the three main functional categories of CS and the influencing factors).

All 13 participants acknowledged the pedagogical usefulness of CS. They reported that switching to Vietnamese helped clarify complex grammar points, new vocabulary, and assignment instructions. Students stated that this practice made the content easier to understand and contributed to more efficient learning, especially when encountering difficult topics. S2 noted that "*when the teacher explains grammar in Vietnamese, it becomes clearer and faster to understand*". S4 emphasized that CS reduced time spent on repeated explanations, especially for low-proficiency learners. Several students (e.g., 6, 8, and 10) indicated that Vietnamese was particularly helpful when teachers used English textbooks or presented unfamiliar structures. No participant rejected the pedagogical value of CS, though some recommended moderation to avoid dependency.

Twelve of the 13 students described CS as beneficial in terms of emotional support. They reported that hearing Vietnamese in the classroom made them feel less anxious, more confident, and emotionally connected to the teacher. S7 stated that "*When the teacher uses Vietnamese, I feel less nervous and more willing to try answering*". CS was said to reduce fear of making mistakes, especially for students who lacked confidence in their English ability. S3 and S9 highlighted that CS helped them feel understood and supported, particularly in moments of confusion. One student (S13) expressed mild concern that overuse of CS might hinder immersion, but still acknowledged its emotional value when used selectively.

Ten students discussed the sociocultural functions of CS. They observed that teachers often used Vietnamese to explain culturally loaded expressions, idioms, and examples from everyday life. S9 shared that the translation of the phrase "*break the ice*" into Vietnamese helped her fully understand both its meaning and context. S5 mentioned that teachers occasionally told stories or used Vietnamese references to help students connect with the lesson content. Several students (e.g., 1, 4, and 12) noted that this made English feel more relevant to their own lives and easier to relate to. Two students (11 and 6) suggested that CS should be adapted to classroom composition, especially when students have different degrees of cultural or linguistic exposure.

All 13 students supported the use of CS for

pedagogical purposes; 12 supported it affectively, and 10 recognized its sociocultural benefits. While no participant rejected CS outright, many expressed a preference for balanced use. The most commonly suggested proportion was approximately 70-80% English and 20-30% Vietnamese. CS was perceived most favorably when used intentionally to support learning, rather than as a default communication mode.

The thematic analysis also identified five key factors influencing students' perceptions of teachers' use of CS: English proficiency level, prior exposure to English, learning preferences, learning goals, and teacher communication style. These factors interacted with the three functional categories of CS, namely pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural. This shaped how students evaluated its usefulness, frequency, and appropriateness.

Students' self-assessed English proficiency emerged as one of the most prominent factors. These students who identified themselves as having low proficiency (A1-A2 CEFR levels) consistently valued CS for its clarifying role and emotional reassurance. For instance, Participant 3 explained, *"If the teacher only uses English, I don't understand. But when she switches to Vietnamese, I immediately get the point"*. Participant 6 echoed this sentiment, stating that CS helped her follow lessons that used PowerPoint in English: *"I often miss the details if it's only in English, but Vietnamese explanations help me catch up"*. Similarly, Participant 10 said, *"When teachers switch to Vietnamese, I feel less confused and more confident"*. In contrast, students with relatively higher proficiency (e.g., 1, 4, and 11) supported CS conditionally, emphasizing its value for difficult concepts but cautioning against overuse. S11 stated, *"I can understand most of the lecture in English, so too much Vietnamese can slow down my learning"*.

Students' previous experiences with English, whether through earlier schooling, private tutoring, or personal interest, also influenced their tolerance for and expectations of CS. S2, who had attended English centers before university, mentioned: *"I'm used to hearing English more, so sometimes I want the teacher to try explaining in English first before switching"*. Likewise, S8, who had minimal exposure before university, shared: *"For me, this is the first time learning English seriously, so using Vietnamese is very necessary"*. S13, who had some prior exposure, reflected a nuanced stance: *"It's good when Vietnamese is used to explain difficult grammar, but I also want to improve listening, so I prefer the teacher doesn't use Vietnamese too much"*.

Individual learning styles and preferences shaped how students responded to CS. Students who preferred structured, step-by-step explanations valued CS as a scaffolding tool. S7 noted, *"I learn better when things are explained clearly in Vietnamese first, then in English. It helps me organize the knowledge"*. S9 added, *"I prefer when the teacher switches to Vietnamese for summary or keywords. This helps me take notes more easily"*. Conversely, S5 shared that she enjoyed learning directly in English when the content was simple or familiar: *"If it's an easy topic, I want the teacher to try English only. It's good practice"*.

Students' long-term goals significantly shaped their views on how much CS was appropriate. Those with instrumental goals, such as passing exams or fulfilling course requirements, tended to favor more CS to maximize comprehension and reduce stress. S12 said, *"I just want to pass the test and get good marks. Vietnamese helps me study faster"*. In contrast, those with integrative or future-oriented goals (e.g., speaking English fluently, studying abroad) expressed a stronger desire for English-dominant classrooms. S1 explained, *"I want to improve my English for future work, so I hope teachers can reduce Vietnamese and speak more English, except when it's hard"*. S4 added, *"Even though I need Vietnamese now, I know I have to get used to English if I want to improve"*.

Students consistently emphasized the importance of how CS was used, not just how often. Teachers who used CS strategically, with clear purpose and sensitivity to students' needs, were perceived more favorably. S6 observed, *"My teacher always explains in English first. If we don't understand, she uses Vietnamese. I like that she tries both"*. S2 noted, *"The teacher is friendly*

and switches to Vietnamese at the right time, which makes us feel comfortable and respected". S13 appreciated when CS was accompanied by warmth and support: *"It's not just about language. When the teacher uses Vietnamese kindly, it feels more like she understands us"*. However, S 11 cautioned against inconsistent or excessive switching: *"Sometimes the teacher uses too much Vietnamese, and it feels like we're in a Vietnamese class, not English"*.

5. Discussion

This study examined Vietnamese EFL freshmen's perceptions of teachers' CS in rural university classrooms and explored the contextual factors shaping these perceptions. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the study provides a multidimensional account of how students perceive CS across pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural dimensions.

Overall, students demonstrated predominantly positive attitudes toward teachers' CS, particularly when it served a clear instructional purpose. These findings reflect a broader body of research emphasizing the pedagogical value of CS in supporting comprehension and classroom management (Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; Keong *et al*., 2016; Ngo & Phuong, 2018). The high ratings for sociocultural CS extend previous studies by highlighting the importance of contextualizing language learning in rural settings, where learners have limited exposure to English outside formal instruction. This pattern aligns with sociolinguistic scholarship suggesting that CS can help bridge cultural knowledge gaps and make content more relatable (Kamwangamalu, 2010; Paez, 2018).

The affective dimension of CS also emerged as an important consideration. Students' reflections indicated that CS contributed to a more emotionally secure environment that encouraged participation. This complements findings from earlier studies showing that strategic L1 use can reduce anxiety and support learners in taking communicative risks (Ayaz, 2017; Nguyen & Ho, 2012). Notably, emotional support appeared particularly relevant for rural learners, many of whom enter university with limited prior contact with English and higher levels of language anxiety.

Another key contribution of the study lies in identifying the factors that mediate students' perceptions of CS. Learners with lower English proficiency tended to rely more heavily on CS to process complex content, whereas those with higher proficiency or more extensive prior exposure to English expressed a preference for English-dominant instruction. This divergence mirrors trends observed in studies with mixed-proficiency cohorts (Hu *et al.*, 2022; Luo, 2019) and underscores the need for differentiated CS practices in rural classes that often include diverse learner profiles.

Learning goals also shaped students' preferences. Those driven by short-term academic objectives favored more CS due to its efficiency, while students with long-term communicative aspirations preferred reduced L1 reliance. This aligns with motivational research demonstrating that learners' visions of future selves influence their expectations of instructional approaches (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The tension between immediate comprehensibility and long-term proficiency is thus a meaningful pedagogical consideration for rural EFL contexts.

Teacher communication style further emerged as a central determinant of how CS was evaluated. Students responded more favorably when teachers used CS intentionally. Accordingly, teachers can provide English input first, clarify selectively in Vietnamese, and respond sensitively to learners' cues. This reinforces existing literature on strategic CS as a principled instructional choice rather than an automatic fallback (Appel & Muysken, 2005; Nazri & Kassim, 2023). The findings also indicate that relational factors, such as warmth, responsiveness, and instructor presence, influence the perceived appropriateness of CS.

The findings carry implications for rural EFL contexts in Vietnam, where learners may experience limited exposure to English and have heterogeneous proficiency levels. While CS clearly supports comprehension and emotional security, excessive reliance risks restricting English input, particularly for students with

higher proficiency or stronger long-term goals. Teachers in such contexts may benefit from adopting flexible, responsive CS practices that prioritize English as the default medium while integrating Vietnamese strategically to address documented learner needs.

Importantly, this study amplifies the voices of rural EFL learners, which is an underrepresented group in Vietnamese applied linguistics research (Government, 2017; Bui, 2021). Their perspectives reveal a nuanced position: CS is valued, but its effectiveness depends on intentionality, balance, and alignment with learners' trajectories. This suggests that debates about L1 use should shift away from "whether" teachers should code-switch toward "how" and "when" CS can best support learning in resource-limited environments

6. Conclusion

This study investigated Vietnamese EFL freshmen's perceptions of teachers' CS in rural university classrooms, focusing on its pedagogical, affective, and sociocultural functions. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the study revealed that students generally hold favorable attitudes toward CS, especially when it is used purposefully and in moderation. All three functional categories were positively perceived, with the sociocultural role of CS receiving the highest average rating. Importantly, students viewed CS not only as a tool for understanding but also as a way to feel supported, included, and culturally connected within the classroom. The study also identified several factors shaping these perceptions, including learners' proficiency levels, emotional readiness, learning goals, previous exposure to English, and cultural identity. While all participants acknowledged the benefits of CS, many emphasized the importance of balanced language input, warning against excessive reliance on the L1. Overall, the findings underscore the need for context-sensitive language instruction that acknowledges learners' backgrounds, emotional needs, and long-term goals.

The findings of this study yield several important implications for English language teaching, especially in rural or under-resourced settings. First, teachers should be encouraged to use CS strategically to support student understanding. Particularly, it can be used to explain complex grammar and vocabulary or to manage classroom interactions. Such practices have been shown to facilitate learning and reduce emotional barriers. Second, while students appreciate CS, they also value consistent exposure to English. Therefore, a balanced language use, such as maintaining 70-80% instruction in English and 20-30% in Vietnamese, may be optimal, particularly for lower-level learners. Third, teachers should be mindful of the emotional needs of their students, as thoughtful use of CS can build rapport, ease anxiety, and promote communicative risk-taking among less confident learners. Fourth, CS can serve as a cultural bridge, connecting English learning with students' sociocultural backgrounds. By doing so, teachers can enhance motivation and engagement in contexts where English use is limited outside the classroom. Finally, teacher education programs should incorporate training on the pedagogical and cultural aspects of CS to ensure teachers are equipped to use it both effectively and sensitively.

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size, though sufficient for exploratory mixed-methods research, was limited to 116 survey respondents and 13 interviewees from a single rural university in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, the findings may not fully generalize to students in urban or private university settings, or to learners from different regions of Vietnam. Second, self-reported data, particularly self-assessed proficiency levels, may not always reflect actual language ability. Future research could incorporate standardized English proficiency tests to better categorize learners' levels. Lastly, while this study focused on student perceptions, future research could benefit from triangulating student data with classroom observations or teacher interviews to explore the dynamics of CS in practice.

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