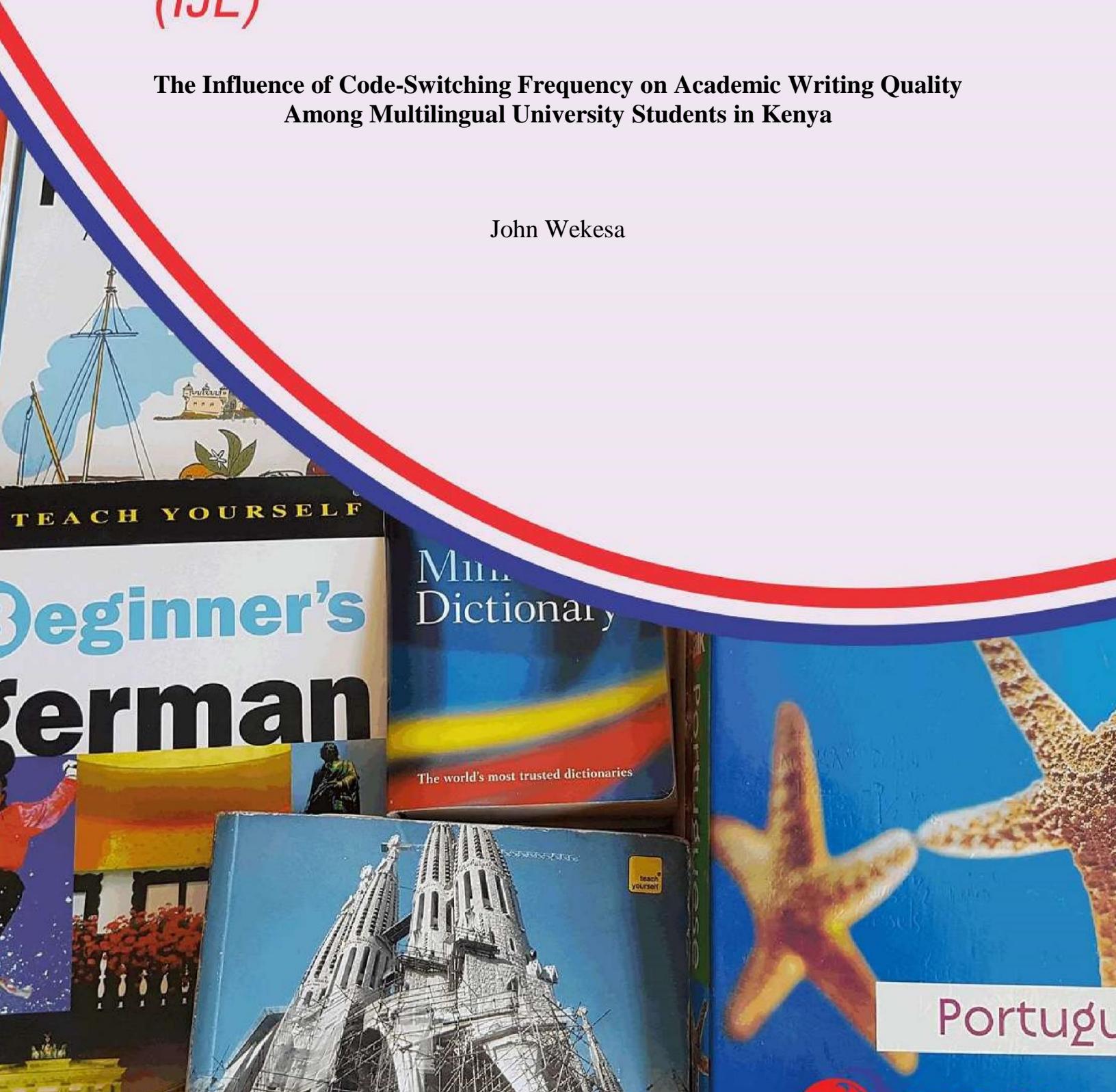


International Journal of Linguistics (IJL)

**The Influence of Code-Switching Frequency on Academic Writing Quality
Among Multilingual University Students in Kenya**

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The Influence of Code-Switching Frequency on Academic Writing Quality Among Multilingual University Students in Kenya



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Article History

Received 19th December 2025

Received in Revised Form 20th January 2025

Accepted 7th February 2026



Abstract

Purpose: To aim of the study was to analyze the influence of code-switching frequency on academic writing quality among multilingual university students in Kenya.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Speech recognition-based pronunciation instruction significantly improves English speaking fluency among university students in Japan by increasing speech rate, reducing pauses, and enhancing pronunciation accuracy. The immediate automated feedback encourages frequent practice and boosts learners' confidence to speak more spontaneously. However, while fluency improves noticeably, gains in grammatical accuracy remain limited, indicating the need to combine the technology with communicative language teaching activities.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Translanguaging theory, sociocultural theory of learning & interlanguage theory may be used to anchor future studies on the influence of code-switching frequency on academic writing quality among multilingual university students in Kenya. Universities should incorporate structured academic writing instruction that allows brainstorming in familiar languages but requires formal English in final submissions. Higher education institutions should develop language support policies that recognize multilingualism as a pedagogical resource while maintaining academic writing standards.

Keywords: *Code-Switching Frequency, Academic Writing, Multilingual, University Students*

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing quality in developed economies is generally characterized by strong argument structure, critical synthesis of literature, and adherence to citation conventions. Universities emphasize research integrity training and writing-center support, which significantly improves coherence and referencing accuracy. In the United States, structured writing programs have reduced undergraduate plagiarism rates from 37% to 24% between 2016 and 2022 after mandatory writing workshops were introduced (Stapleton, 2022). Similarly, UK universities report that over 72% of postgraduate students demonstrate advanced argumentation and citation competence after their first academic year (Wingate, 2021). These improvements reflect institutional investment in writing pedagogy and digital feedback systems.

Japan offers a contrasting but equally strong example where academic writing quality improved through explicit English for Academic Purposes (EAP) training. A nationwide university program increased students' mean academic writing rubric scores from 58% to 74% over four semesters (Sasaki & Hirose, 2023). Researchers attribute this growth to scaffolded feedback and corpus-based writing instruction techniques. The trend demonstrates a shift from grammar-focused teaching to rhetorical awareness training. Overall, developed economies show consistent improvement in writing quality due to structured curriculum and institutional support systems.

Academic writing quality in developing economies shows gradual improvement but remains uneven due to disparities in educational preparation and language proficiency. Many universities report strong content knowledge but weaker citation integration and argument coherence. In India, postgraduate thesis evaluation reports indicate only 46% of students demonstrate adequate literature synthesis skills, although this improved from 31% in 2017 following writing-skills modules (Kumar & Sinha, 2021). Malaysian universities similarly reported a 28% reduction in referencing errors after adopting supervised academic writing clinics (Rahmat, 2022). These trends suggest targeted instruction improves performance but adoption remains inconsistent.

Indonesia provides another illustration of transition-phase academic writing development. A multi-institutional study showed average academic writing scores increased from 62 to 70 out of 100 after structured peer-review activities were implemented (Widiati & Cahyono, 2021). However, critical argumentation remained the weakest component compared to language accuracy. Students often demonstrate descriptive writing rather than analytical reasoning due to prior exam-oriented education. Overall, developing economies show positive but slower improvement, strongly influenced by teaching approaches and exposure to academic discourse.

Academic writing quality in Sub-Saharan Africa is improving but still constrained by language transition challenges and limited research writing training at earlier education levels. Universities report that many students understand subject content but struggle with academic voice and citation conventions. In Kenya, only 41% of undergraduate research projects met full referencing standards in 2018, increasing to 57% by 2023 after research methods integration into first-year courses (Mwangi & Njoroge, 2023). Similarly, Nigerian universities recorded a 30% decline in plagiarism cases after implementing Turnitin-supported instruction (Adebayo, 2022). These changes show growing awareness of academic integrity.

South Africa demonstrates stronger progress due to established academic literacy programs. Students attending extended academic literacy courses improved writing rubric performance by 22% compared to non-participants (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). However, many learners still rely heavily on paraphrasing instead of critical synthesis. Limited prior exposure to scholarly writing remains a systemic barrier. Overall, Sub-Saharan academic writing quality is improving steadily but at a slower pace compared to developed economies.

Code-switching frequency refers to how often writers alternate between two or more languages while composing academic text, and conceptually it reflects the interaction between linguistic competence, identity expression, and cognitive processing. A low code-switching frequency (rare shifts into the first language) is often associated with higher academic writing quality because learners maintain lexical cohesion and discipline-specific terminology in the target academic language (Hyland, 2019). A moderate frequency, where students switch briefly for planning but not in the final text, can support idea generation and improve argument development through cognitive scaffolding (Macaro, 2020). However, high code-switching frequency within sentences may reduce clarity because readers encounter inconsistent terminology and disrupted rhetorical flow (Lee & Canagarajah, 2021). Very high frequency, especially direct insertion of vernacular vocabulary into academic prose, is commonly linked to reduced coherence and weaker citation integration due to limited academic register control (García & Wei, 2019).

Conceptually, these four frequencies can therefore be mapped onto academic writing quality as a continuum from facilitative to disruptive. Low switching supports precision, moderate switching supports planning and critical thinking, high switching weakens organization, and very high switching undermines academic discourse conventions (Hyland, 2019; Lee & Canagarajah, 2021). Research shows multilingual students often mentally translate ideas before reformulating them into formal language, meaning controlled switching functions as a cognitive strategy rather than an error (Macaro, 2020). The challenge emerges when switching moves from private cognition to visible text, where it affects readability and scholarly tone (García & Wei, 2019). Thus, academic writing quality improves when code-switching is internal and strategic but declines when it becomes frequent and textual.

Problem Statement

Universities in Kenya increasingly enroll multilingual students who regularly use two or more languages such as English, Kiswahili, and local languages in daily communication and learning environments. While English remains the official academic language of instruction, students frequently shift between languages during thinking, drafting, and sometimes within written assignments. Recent studies indicate that many Kenyan undergraduates struggle with cohesion, argument development, and academic tone, with more than half of first-year essays rated below expected academic writing standards (Mwangi & Karanja, 2021; Ochieng & Ngugi, 2023). Scholars attribute part of this challenge to linguistic interference, where frequent language switching affects vocabulary precision and sentence structure (Hyland, 2019; Lee & Canagarajah, 2021). Despite universities strengthening academic writing courses, lecturers continue reporting inconsistent writing quality and over-reliance on informal expressions among multilingual learners (Waweru, 2022).

However, the role of code-switching frequency remains unclear because switching can function both as a cognitive support strategy and as a source of textual inconsistency. Some research suggests controlled internal switching helps idea generation and planning, while excessive visible switching reduces coherence and academic voice (Macaro, 2020; García & Wei, 2019). Most Kenyan studies have focused broadly on English proficiency rather than examining how often students switch languages and how that frequency shapes writing quality. Consequently, universities lack evidence-based guidelines on whether to discourage, regulate, or strategically integrate multilingual practices in academic writing pedagogy. Without this understanding, writing interventions may address symptoms such as grammar errors while ignoring underlying linguistic processing behaviors. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the influence of code-switching frequency on academic writing quality among multilingual university students in Kenya in order to inform effective instructional approaches and language policies.

Theoretical Review

Translanguaging Theory

Translanguaging theory, originally advanced by Ofelia García and further developed with Li Wei, proposes that multilingual speakers do not operate separate language systems but instead draw from one unified linguistic repertoire to make meaning. The theory emphasizes that switching between languages can support comprehension, idea generation, and organization of complex thoughts rather than simply representing linguistic deficiency. In academic writing, multilingual students may think through concepts using familiar languages and then reformulate them into the language of instruction. This makes code-switching a cognitive strategy whose effect depends on whether it remains internal or appears in the final written text. The theory is therefore relevant to examining how different frequencies of code-switching among Kenyan multilingual university students may either support planning or weaken academic writing quality when excessive switching appears in the written product (García & Wei, 2019).

Sociocultural Theory of Learning

Sociocultural theory, originating from Lev Vygotsky, explains learning as a socially mediated process where language functions as a primary tool for thinking and knowledge construction. According to the theory, learners rely on familiar linguistic resources to scaffold complex cognitive tasks such as reasoning, argument formation, and problem solving. Multilingual students may therefore switch languages while drafting essays to clarify understanding or structure arguments before producing formal academic text. This perspective suggests that code-switching frequency can facilitate higher-order thinking but may still influence clarity and coherence in the final writing if not regulated. The theory is relevant to the study because it helps explain how internal language switching among Kenyan university students may support academic reasoning yet affect observable writing quality (Swain & Watanabe, 2021).

Interlanguage Theory

Interlanguage theory, proposed by Larry Selinker, states that second-language learners develop a transitional language system influenced by both their first language and the target language. This developing system often produces transfer features such as borrowed vocabulary, syntactic

interference, and mixed structures. Frequent code-switching can therefore signal reliance on first-language patterns, which may lead to grammatical inconsistencies and reduced academic register in formal writing. From this perspective, higher code-switching frequency in written assignments may correspond to lower academic writing quality because the learner's interlanguage has not stabilized toward standard academic English. The theory is relevant for analyzing how multilingual Kenyan students' switching behavior reflects language development stages and impacts the clarity and correctness of academic texts (Han & Tarone, 2019).

Empirical Review

Mwangi and Wambua (2021).

Mwangi and Wambua (2021) examined the relationship between code-switching frequency and coherence in undergraduate academic essays in Kenyan universities. The purpose was to determine whether the extent of language alternation affects academic writing quality. The researchers used a correlational research design involving 210 multilingual undergraduate students. Students submitted course essays which were evaluated using a standardized academic writing rubric. The rubric measured coherence, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and academic tone. Code-switching instances were counted and categorized into low, moderate, and high frequency levels. Statistical analysis showed that students who used frequent visible switching scored significantly lower in coherence. Moderate switching during drafting but not in final text did not significantly harm quality. The study also found that students with limited English vocabulary switched languages more frequently. Lecturers reported difficulty assessing arguments when local language insertions appeared in essays. Regression results indicated switching frequency negatively predicted writing quality scores. However, students reported switching helped them think through complex ideas. The authors concluded that switching functions as both a cognitive aid and a writing barrier. They recommended structured academic writing workshops to guide language use in essays. Universities were advised to teach strategies for planning in one language and writing in another. The study emphasized balancing linguistic flexibility with academic conventions.

Ochieng and Wekesa (2022) explored whether regulating code-switching during drafting improves academic writing performance. The purpose was to compare guided English drafting with free bilingual drafting among multilingual university students in Kenya. A quasi-experimental design was adopted involving 120 first-year students. Participants were divided into control and experimental groups. The control group wrote essays using unrestricted language switching. The experimental group followed structured drafting stages requiring English output in final drafts. Essays were evaluated using argument development and clarity indicators. Results showed the guided group produced stronger thesis statements and clearer paragraphs. The unrestricted group showed frequent shifts between English and Kiswahili in final submissions. Excessive switching led to fragmented arguments and repetition of ideas. Students in the experimental group improved over four writing tasks. The researchers also noted increased confidence among students after structured drafting. Interviews revealed students preferred initial brainstorming in familiar languages. However, final English-only drafting improved academic tone. The authors recommended scaffolded writing instruction rather than strict prohibition. They also suggested

lecturers provide explicit language transition guidance. The study concluded regulated switching enhances writing quality.

Njoroge, Kithinji and Gathogo (2020) investigated academic literacy challenges linked to code-switching in Kenyan university research reports. The purpose was to assess whether language mixing affects referencing and academic register. A content analysis method was used to examine 300 undergraduate research projects. Researchers identified and coded occurrences of language switching in chapters one and two. They compared switching frequency with citation accuracy scores. Findings showed high switching frequency corresponded with incorrect referencing formats. Many students inserted untranslated phrases from local languages. These insertions disrupted academic tone and clarity of definitions. Projects with minimal switching displayed stronger literature integration. Lecturers also noted misunderstanding of paraphrasing conventions. Students often translated concepts directly from mother tongue structures. The study revealed limited exposure to academic English at pre-university level. Regression analysis confirmed switching predicted citation inconsistency. The authors concluded language interference affects scholarly writing conventions. They recommended university-wide academic literacy programs. Writing centers were proposed to train citation and paraphrasing skills. They also suggested early orientation courses on academic discourse.

Kiprotich and Tanui (2023) examined the dual role of translanguaging in academic writing among Kenyan undergraduates. The purpose was to determine whether switching supports idea generation or harms writing accuracy. A mixed-methods design was employed using questionnaires and rubric scoring. The sample consisted of 180 multilingual university students. Students completed essays and self-reported their drafting language practices. Writing quality was scored across grammar, organization, and clarity. Moderate internal switching correlated with improved argument depth. However, excessive switching in final text lowered grammar accuracy scores. Students indicated they brainstormed better using familiar languages. Lecturers reported reading difficulty when switching appeared within sentences. The study found a threshold level where switching becomes disruptive. Controlled switching improved planning but uncontrolled switching reduced readability. The authors described this as strategic translanguaging. They recommended teaching students when and how to switch languages. Universities were encouraged to integrate multilingual pedagogy rather than impose bans. The study concluded balanced switching improves academic outcomes. Instruction should focus on awareness rather than restriction.

Achieng and Mutua (2021) explored language choice and its impact on academic writing performance. The purpose was to understand how planning language influences final writing quality. The researchers used interviews and writing assessments among 90 university students. Students described their thinking language during essay preparation. Essays were graded using institutional rubrics. Findings showed students who planned in Kiswahili but wrote in English scored higher. Those who mixed languages within final drafts scored lower. Participants reported switching helped conceptual understanding. However, they struggled translating ideas into academic vocabulary. Lecturers confirmed mixed language essays lacked clarity. The study showed separation between planning and writing improved quality. Students benefited from vocabulary support sessions. The authors recommended guidance on cognitive versus textual

language use. Universities should teach drafting strategies explicitly. They also advised bilingual brainstorming followed by monolingual writing. The research concluded strategic language separation improves academic writing quality.

Kamau and Njeri (2022) investigated whether peer feedback reduces code-switching in academic writing. The purpose was to evaluate collaborative editing as a writing improvement strategy. A sample of 150 university students participated. Students wrote essays and exchanged them for peer review. Reviewers highlighted unclear sections and language mixing. After revision, essays were rescored using writing quality rubrics. Results showed significant reduction in switching frequency. Cohesion and paragraph flow improved after peer feedback. Students became aware of language inconsistencies. Many replaced local expressions with academic vocabulary. Lecturers confirmed improved readability of final submissions. Students also gained confidence in academic writing. The intervention improved grammar and structure simultaneously. The authors recommended collaborative editing sessions in writing classes. They emphasized peer learning for language awareness. The study concluded feedback helps regulate code-switching behavior.

Otieno (2023) analyzed predictors of academic writing achievement in multilingual university contexts in Kenya. The purpose was to determine whether code-switching frequency predicts writing performance. A quantitative regression design was used. The sample included 250 undergraduate essays. Each essay was scored using standardized writing assessment criteria. Code-switching instances were counted and recorded. Statistical analysis showed switching significantly predicted writing scores ($\beta = -0.41$). Higher switching frequency corresponded with lower academic tone ratings. Students with strong English proficiency switched less frequently. Those with lower proficiency relied heavily on language mixing. The study also measured vocabulary diversity and cohesion indices. Both were negatively affected by frequent switching. The researcher concluded switching interferes with academic register stability. He recommended integrating language awareness training into first-year courses. Universities should combine writing instruction with multilingual competence training. The study confirmed code-switching frequency as a measurable determinant of writing quality.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gap

The reviewed studies consistently examine code-switching as either beneficial for cognition or harmful to written output, but they do not clearly conceptualize code-switching frequency as a multidimensional construct. For instance, Mwangi and Wambua (2021) and Otieno (2023) treat

switching mainly as a measurable predictor of writing quality, while Kiprotich and Tanui (2023) and Achieng and Mutua (2021) view it as a cognitive support strategy during planning. However, none of the studies distinguish between internal (mental), drafting-stage, and final-text switching within a unified theoretical model. Similarly, Ochieng and Wekesa (2022) and Kamau and Njeri (2022) focus on instructional regulation without specifying how different levels of switching frequency influence distinct dimensions of academic writing quality such as argumentation, cohesion, and academic voice. Therefore, a conceptual gap exists in developing an integrated framework linking types and frequency of code-switching to specific components of academic writing quality rather than treating writing quality as a single outcome.

Contextual Research Gap

Most studies focus primarily on classroom essays and general communication skills courses, overlooking discipline-specific academic writing contexts such as scientific reports, technical writing, postgraduate research writing, and digital academic submissions. For example, Njoroge et al. (2020) examine research reports but emphasize referencing rather than broader rhetorical competence, while Kamau and Njeri (2022) concentrate on peer feedback rather than institutional language policy or curriculum design. Additionally, the reviewed literature rarely considers moderating variables such as students' proficiency level, field of study, digital writing tools, or multilingual identity, which may influence the relationship between code-switching and writing quality. As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how switching frequency operates across diverse academic tasks and learning environments. Hence, a contextual gap exists in examining code-switching frequency within broader academic writing practices and pedagogical settings in universities.

Geographical Research Gap

Although all the reviewed studies are conducted in Kenya, they are largely limited to single universities or unspecified institutional settings, making it difficult to generalize findings across the country's diverse higher education landscape. None compares public vs private universities, urban vs rural institutions, or regional linguistic backgrounds of students. Furthermore, the studies do not position Kenyan findings within wider East African or Sub-Saharan multilingual university contexts to determine whether observed patterns are uniquely Kenyan or regionally shared. The absence of comparative regional analysis limits policy applicability and theoretical generalization. Therefore, a geographical gap exists in multi-institutional and cross-regional investigation of code-switching frequency and academic writing quality among multilingual university students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study on the influence of code-switching frequency on academic writing quality among multilingual university students in Kenya demonstrates that language alternation plays a dual role in academic writing. Moderate and internal code-switching supports cognitive processes such as idea generation, planning, and comprehension of complex concepts, especially in a multilingual learning environment. However, frequent visible switching in the final written text negatively affects coherence, academic tone, grammatical accuracy, and overall readability. This indicates

that the challenge is not multilingualism itself but uncontrolled transfer of conversational language into formal academic discourse.

Overall, academic writing quality improves when students strategically separate thinking language from presentation language and when institutions guide learners on appropriate language use. The findings suggest that effective writing instruction should not prohibit multilingual practices but regulate them through structured drafting, academic literacy training, and awareness of disciplinary writing conventions. Therefore, balanced and purposeful management of code-switching frequency is essential for improving academic writing outcomes among multilingual university students in Kenya.

Recommendations

Theory

The study recommends the development of an integrated multilingual academic writing framework that distinguishes between cognitive (internal) code-switching and textual (visible) code-switching. Future research should operationalize code-switching frequency into levels planning-stage, drafting-stage, and final-text switching to better explain its differential effects on academic writing quality. Scholars should refine existing translanguaging and interlanguage perspectives by demonstrating that multilingual practices are neither entirely beneficial nor entirely harmful but context-dependent. The findings contribute to theory by proposing that academic writing quality is shaped not only by language proficiency but also by how linguistic resources are strategically managed. Therefore, future studies should test models linking switching frequency to specific writing constructs such as cohesion, argumentation, and academic voice rather than treating writing performance as a single outcome.

Practice

Universities should incorporate structured academic writing instruction that allows brainstorming in familiar languages but requires formal English in final submissions. Lecturers should teach students explicit drafting strategies such as outline planning, vocabulary substitution, and self-editing to regulate switching frequency. Writing centers should train students on academic vocabulary development to reduce dependence on informal expressions. Peer-review activities and feedback mechanisms should be integrated to help students identify inappropriate language mixing. Additionally, digital writing tools such as grammar checkers and corpus-based learning platforms should be used to improve lexical precision. These recommendations contribute to practice by shifting instruction from banning multilingualism to managing it as a learning resource that enhances clarity and coherence.

Policy

Higher education institutions should develop language support policies that recognize multilingualism as a pedagogical resource while maintaining academic writing standards. Universities should introduce mandatory first-year academic literacy courses focusing on language awareness and discipline-specific writing conventions. National education regulators should incorporate multilingual writing competence into curriculum guidelines for communication skills courses. Policies should encourage establishment of writing centers and provide training for

lecturers on multilingual pedagogy. Furthermore, assessment rubrics should explicitly differentiate between acceptable cognitive use of multiple languages and unacceptable textual switching in academic submissions. These policy recommendations contribute by aligning language policy with learning realities in multilingual university environments while safeguarding academic writing quality.

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