The Effect of Task Difficulty on the Quantity and Quality of Iranian Lower-Intermediate EFL Learners' Code-Switching

Research Article

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Abstract

The objective of the present study was two-fold. First, the effect of speaking task difficulty on EFL lower-intermediate learners' quantity of code-switching was examined. Second, the effect of speaking task difficulty on the participants' quality of code-switching was studied. The participants of this study included 61 lower-intermediate language learners in a private English language institute in Iran. The participants performed twelve

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speaking tasks with easy, medium, and difficult levels of complexity developed by the researchers. The findings indicated that less than 10 percent of students' clauses included code-switching. The participants employed significantly more code-switching items under difficult task condition. The findings showed that the participants used code-switching for different purposes including vocabulary, syntactic structure, content, rubric clarification, turn-taking, and pronunciation. The learners employed expressive, referential, and directive language functions to fulfill their purposes and the number of directive items rose as the task difficulty level increased. Regarding the addressee of learners' code-switches, the inductive analysis of the data showed that the code-switches were self-directed, peer-directed, teacher-directed, teacher and then peer-directed, and peer and then teacher-directed. The participants addressed almost half of the code-switches to their peers; however, more difficult tasks resulted in a higher number of teacher-directed code-switching items.

Keywords: code-switching, speaking, task difficulty, code-switching purposes, language functions

Introduction

The presence of students' L1 in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes has been an interesting area of research for the last three decades. The use of students' L1 in classes is more probable when students are learning in a context in which English is regarded as a foreign language and students are of the same mother tongue (Bista, 2010). When students are not banned from employing their mother tongue, language learners, especially those with lower English language ability, are more likely to resort to their L1 to communicate with their addressee, including their classmates and their bilingual teacher. Furthermore, EFL students not only employ their first language to communicate their thoughts with their peers and teacher, but also use it to facilitate their process of learning L2 (Enama, 2016; Levine, 2003).

The students' alteration between two codes (languages) has been widely known as code-switching. In the realm of educational linguistics, code-switching has been examined through the lenses of sociolinguistics and pedagogy (Bista, 2010). While the former deals with how social factors result in students' alteration between the two (or more) languages at their disposal, the latter addresses the issues pertinent to why and how alterations occur due to pedagogical requirements. The present study deals chiefly with the pedagogical aspect of students' code-switching in an EFL context. Although several prior studies have investigated EFL learners' perceptions of code-switching and the forms and functions of their code-switching, the effect of speaking task difficulty on the quality and quantity of their code-switching is still an unexplored area of research. The present study aims to address this unexamined area by examining Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students.

Background

Use of L1 in EFL Classrooms

The use of students' L1 in second language learning classes has been judged differently. Some scholars have supported the English-only policy wherein it is recommended to employ the target language within the class time. The English-only policy is suggested as scholars believe that the use of students' native language can interfere with the system of the target language (Howatt, 1984). Furthermore, they find the English-only policy useful since learners' exposure to English language will be maximized if all utterances are provided in English (Ustunel, 2016). In addition, some teachers ban the use of students' first language as they find it prestigious to stick to the target language all the time (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009). This pressure, imposed by policy makers (Littlewood & Yu, 2011) and fellow teachers (Enama, 2016), can highly convince foreign language teachers to avoid students' first language in classes.

However, there are some scholars who welcome the use of students' L1 in EFL classes. Cook (2001), for example, argued that no systematic rationale has been suggested to justify the ban on the use of students' first language in foreign language classes. Cummins (2007), proposing the interdependency hypothesis, argues that students' first language can contribute to their acquisition of second language. Thus, to maximize the use of possible tools, the use of first language should not be prohibited in foreign language classes. Several scholars have supported the idea of Cummins by conducting empirical studies, and argued that the use of students' first language can lead to their positive cross-lingual transfer (Swain & Lapkin, 2000), phonological awareness (Durgunoğlu, 2002), and meta-linguistic knowledge (Hardin, 2020). The proponents of using students' first language in foreign language classes proposed a set of ideas which have been collected under the umbrella term of 'bilingual teaching' (Atkinson, 1993; Auerbach, 1993). The bilingual approach to teaching a foreign language presupposes this proposition that students' foreign language is built upon their first language knowledge and abilities. They believe that the starting point of learning a foreign language is students' first language (Enama, 2016; Hofweber et al., 2020; Narayan, 2019); thus, it should not be omitted from the foreign language learning story. Vygotsky (1962), too, argued that learning a foreign language is the extension of one's first language and ignoring it is not logical. Harbord (1992) has also stated that translation/transfer is an indispensable part of second language learning. Similarly, the bilingual approach to teaching finds code-switching an acceptable practice in foreign language teaching classes.

These two opposing views on code-switching in educational settings reflect the necessity of conducting more detailed studies on this topic to uncover the efficacy of code-switching in L2 learning contexts. To occupy a part of this niche, the present study has focused chiefly on the effect of task difficulty on learners' speaking performance and code-switching quantity and quality. In the following, a brief account of literature on these topics is provided.

Task Difficulty and Code-Switching

The investigation of the relationship between code-switching and task difficulty is an underexplored area of research. Only a few numbers of studies have investigated this issue. The analysis of the effect of task-difficulty on learners' code-switching quantity (the number) and quality (e.g., speech function, addressee of code-switching, purpose of code-switching) can reveal one of the reasons why L2 learners employ code-switching with different patterns on different occasions; however, all of the prior studies have focused on the quantity (the number) of learner code-switches. Chan (1996) argues that L2 learners are more likely to resort to their L1 when the task characteristics are more demanding. Myers (2008) investigated students' code-switching at a tertiary level in Canada. The mother tongue of the students was English and they wanted to become French teachers. The findings of this study indicated that when the difficulty of tasks was beyond teacher trainees' ability, they preferred to switch to their mother tongue to accomplish the tasks.

In another study, Qahfarokhi and Biria (2012) examined Iranian students' code-switching. The participants of their study included 30 intermediate and advanced students. The researchers examined the effect of both students' English language ability and task difficulty on the students' rate of code-switching. The results of their study indicated that both students' English language ability and task difficulty affected the rate of code-switching. To be more specific, the study found that more difficult tasks led the students to employ more code-switching to accomplish their tasks successfully. In a more recent study, Afroogh (2018) investigated L2 learners' use of code-switching in writing tasks. The results of his study indicated that more difficult writing tasks resulted in a higher number of code-switching items in an Iranian context.

Gap in the Literature and the Present Study

The present research project departs from prior studies as it fills several gaps in the literature of code-switching in educational settings. The review of the literature showed that prior studies investigating the effect of task difficulty on code-switching have focused merely on the quantity of learners' code-switching. They have only focused on the number of learner code-switching items in a single or across different conditions (Afroogh, 2018; Myers, 2008; Qahfarokhi & Biria, 2012). The absence of studies investigating the quality of learner code-switching can deprive us of significant information on how L2 learners switch to their mother tongue to fulfill different speech functions and language-related purposes, and select their addressee based on their needs. No prior study has investigated the effect of speaking task difficulty on both the quantity and quality of learners' code-switching to give us a comprehensive picture of learner code-switching under different tasks conditions. Furthermore, those studies that have investigated the quality of learners' code-switching in the literature have focused on the whole class interactions, and no study has examined the detailed dynamics of code-switching while performing speaking tasks under three task difficulty conditions.

The present study aims to contribute to the body of code-switching literature by filling this gap in the literature and examining the effects of speaking task difficulty on the learners' code-switching purposes, language function, and the addressee of their code-switching. Four research questions that guide the present study are as follows:

Research question one: *What is the effect of speaking task difficulty on lower-intermediate EFL learners' quantity of code-switching?*

Research question two: *What is the effect of speaking task difficulty on the language functions that lower-intermediate EFL learners employ in their code-switches?*

Research question three: *What is the effect of speaking task difficulty on lower-intermediate EFL learners' purpose of code-switching?*

Research question four: *What is the effect of speaking task difficulty on lower-intermediate EFL learners' addressee of code-switching?*

Method

Participants

The participants of this study included 61 lower intermediate English language learners. These participants, who were in four intact classes, were selected based on convenience sampling method. These learners were taking a general English course to reach the upper intermediate level in a private institute in Tehran. Two language teachers taught these classes and did their best to keep the procedures uniform in all classes. The students' age ranged between 18 and 35 years and both female (n = 36) and male (n = 25) students participated in this study. Although the institute had categorized these students as lower intermediate, the researchers gave the participants the Oxford Quick Placement Test to uncover their English language ability. Furthermore, the participants took an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) speaking section test. The students' mean score of the placement test was 33.54 (SD = 1.89), and their IELTS speaking score was 3.39 (SD = .41). The comparison of the students' performance at the beginning of the treatment indicated that the mean scores of students' English language proficiency and speaking ability were not significantly different across the four classes (F= .472, p >.05 and F = .97, p > .05). Furthermore, all the scores were distributed within one standard deviation from the mean scores and no outlier was pinpointed.

Instruments

Different instruments were employed to collect the required data. The following sections provide a brief account of these instruments.

Oxford Quick Placement Test. The Oxford Quick Placement Test (2001) was used to measure the participants' general level of English language proficiency. This test includes 60 multiple-choice items of vocabulary, collocation, and

grammar. This test is mainly employed for proficiency and placement purposes. The test has been validated in 20 countries by more than 6,000 students (Geranpayeh, 2003). This test was administered at the beginning of the study and the participants were given 45 minutes to complete the test.

IELTS Speaking Tasks. In order to examine the participants' speaking ability at the beginning of the study and run the analysis of learners' speaking performance in different conditions, four speaking tasks (Task Two) were taken from a book entitled as *"IELTS 14 General Training Student's Book with Answers with Audio (2019)",* which is published by Cambridge and provides its audience with authentic tests (Appendix D). Task Two was selected as it requires the test-takers to speak for at least one minute and could give the researchers enough amount of performance to draw conclusions about their speaking ability with a single task.

Speaking Tasks With Easy, Medium, and High Difficulty Levels. Following the oft-cited model provided by Skehan (1998), 12 tasks were developed by the researchers. Skehan (1998) provided a set of factors including the number of participants, abstractness of information, the extent to which a task is here-and-now or there-and-then, the retrieval or transformational nature of a task, and the extent to which the speakers are familiar with a topic. Based on Skehan's guidance of task difficulty, twelve tasks were developed (Appendix A).

To check the difficulty levels of the speaking tasks, the researchers sent the topics to 5 experienced English language teachers. All of them found the tasks acceptable, and one of them suggested that the word *overweight* could be difficult for the participants to understand and asked us to change it to the word *fat* (although there is a difference in their connotations). To examine the students' perceptions of the difficulty level of these three tasks, 25 students in two classes similar to those in the target sample gave scores between 1 and 20 to these three tasks. All the participants put these tasks into predicted levels. Except for one student in two cases, the other 24 students gave mean score of 3.45 (SD = .63) to the easy task, 11.3 (SD = .78) to the medium-difficulty task, and 14.4 (SD = .81) to the difficult task. These mean scores showed that the intermediate students' perceptions of the difficulty of the generated tasks were compatible with the expectations of the researcher.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The participants' general English and speaking abilities were assessed before administrating the speaking tasks. The results ensured the researchers that all students were lower intermediate English language learners and they were homogenous in terms of their speaking ability. In the four participating classes, the students were not either encouraged or discouraged to use their first language when they felt necessary. The teachers permitted them to use Persian language whenever they wanted. However, the extended use of Persian language (more than 30 seconds) was interrupted by the teachers using a question or giving the turn to another student to stop the flow of Persian language use in the class.

The whole semester went on for 18 sessions, and the data were collected in 6 consecutive sessions. The participants were put in four-member groups randomly (one group with five members) by the researchers. In each session, two of the participants were asked to speak about a topic for their groupmates. Having finished the speaking task, the participants in each group had at most 10 minutes to talk further about the topic. As shown in Table 1, because of the time limitations in each session, the tasks of each difficulty level were administered in two consecutive sessions. Four different topics were generated to avoid giving the students in the second session more planning time, which could jeopardize the internal validity of the study. The participants were asked to record the last 30 minutes of each session, which was allocated to speaking practice. One person in each group had to send the sound track to the teacher before leaving the classroom.

Table 1
Data Collection Timetable

Session	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6
Difficulty	Easy 1	Easy 2	Medium 1	Medium 2	Difficult 1	Difficult 2
Group members	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4

The data analysis included two main stages. In the first stage, the participants' speaking and general English abilities were analyzed. One of the researchers (the lead author) scored all of the collected samples using the scoring rubric provided by Cambridge IELTS; and a TEFL PhD holder, who is a formal examiner of IELTS in Iran, scored half of the speaking samples. The inter-rater reliability of the scoring procedure was as high as .92. The second stage dealt with the investigation of the quantity and quality of learners' code-switching. In order to categorize the students' code-switching items based on their language functions, the researchers employed a deductive approach. The code-switching items were categorized into three categories of word, phrase, and clause. In order to categorize the students' code-switching items based on their language functions, the researchers followed the categorization provided by Holmes (2001) and put the comments into directive, expressive, and referential categories. Although different categories are mentioned by well-known researchers (e.g., Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), several scholars (Holmes, 2001; Jafarigohar et al., 2018; Stracke & Kumar, 2016) have argued that the three functions of directive (utterances attempting to get someone to do something), referential (utterances providing information), and expressive (utterances expressing the speaker's feelings) are the most relevant ones to educational settings. In order to categorize the code-switching purposes and the addressee of the code-switching items, an inductive approach was employed and the categories emerged out of the initial categorization stage. Based on the collected data, the researchers categorized the code-switching items into different categories at the primary and final stages. The primary stage was conducted by analyzing 10 percent of the instances by the researchers of this study and a TEFL PhD holder.

The inter-coder reliability value of this stage was .86. The discrepancies in the categorizations were discussed extensively to reach unanimous decisions. The final categorization stage was conducted on the rest of the collected data and the analysis of 50 percent of instances yielded an inter-coder reliability of .93.

Results

Effect of Speaking Task Difficulty on the Quantity of Code-Switching

To uncover the effect of task difficulty on lower-intermediate learners' quantity and quality of code-switching, the frequencies and types of their code-switching were determined. Table 2 provides the frequencies of their code-switching under different task difficulty conditions in one hour (the administration of four tasks plus the follow-up discussions).

Table 2
Frequencies of Code-switching under Different Difficulty Levels

Task difficulty	All clauses	Frequency of clauses with code-switching	Percentage	Mean	**SD**
Easy	6976	566	8.11	38.82	4.28
Medium	6474	628	9.72	41.37	1.48
Difficult	6237	713	11.43	47.85	2.41
Total	19687	1907	9.68	42.68	6.16

As provided in Table 2, the participants employed code-switching 1907 times under three task difficulty conditions. The mean score of their code-switching was 42.68 (SD = 6.16) in an hour. The findings also showed that the participants employed code-switching 566 (M = 38.82, SD = 4.28), 628 (M = 41.37, SD = 1.48), and 713 (M = 47.85, SD = 2.41) times under easy, medium, and difficult speaking task conditions, respectively. Totally, 9.68 percent of on-task clauses produced while performing the tasks were in Persian. The highest amount of L1 use was found in the difficult condition (11.43%) and the lowest belonged to the easy condition (8.11%). The participants employed their L1 while performing the tasks with medium difficulty in 9.72 percent of clauses. In order to examine the differences between the participants' frequencies of code-switching under different task difficulty conditions, several Chi-square tests were run.

Table 3
Chi-Square for the Participants' Code-switching under Different Task Difficulty Conditions

	Pearson Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Total	41.47	2	.000
Easy-Medium	10.45	1	.000
Medium-Difficult	10.09	1	.001
Easy-Difficult	41.47	1	.000

As indicated in Table 3, the frequencies of learners' code-switching under different conditions were significantly different, X^2 (2, N = 3) = 41.47, p= .000. The

findings also showed that the participants employed significantly more code-switching items under the difficult condition in comparison to the easy, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 41.47, p = .000, and medium, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 10.09, p = .001, conditions. The results also showed that the participants' switches to their L1 under the medium condition was significantly more than theirs under the easy condition, X^2(1, N = 2) = 10.45, p = .000.

Effect of Speaking Task Difficulty on the Quality of Code-Switching

Language Functions. The effect of task difficulty on language functions of learners' code-switching was also examined in this study. The learners' switches to their mother tongue were deductively categorized into expressive, referential, and directive functions, which are the three main language functions in educational settings (e.g., Jafarigohar, et al., 2018; Stracke & Kumar, 2016). Table 4 provides the frequencies of different language functions under different task difficulty conditions.

Table 4
Frequencies of Code-Switching Based on their Language Functions

	Expressive	Referential	Directive
Easy	53 (9.36%)	253 (44.69%)	260 (45.93%)
Medium	48 (7.64%)	241 (37.24%)	339 (54.12%)
Difficult	73 (10.28%)	213 (29.87%)	427 (59.88%)

The findings indicated that under the three conditions, the directive function, which included requests, questions, and orders, was the most frequent language function. Code-switching with expressive language function, which dealt with the expression of the speakers' feelings, was the least frequent language function. The examples of this language function was "/tʃɛ sæxtɛ/!" (How difficult it is!), "/tʃɛ bɑhɑl/!" (Cool!), and "/bɪː xɪɑl/" (No way!) to show their surprise after reading the topic. As indicated in Table 6, at most 10 percent of code-switching items were employed to show the feelings of the speakers. An interesting point is that under the difficult condition, the majority of expressive code-switching items (N = 52, 71.23%) were showing the participants' dissatisfaction with the difficulty of the task or their unfamiliarity with the topic. Code-switching items with referential language function, which are used to convey information (without asking for any information), decreased as the difficulty level increased. An example of this code-switching type was "My friend is /topoluː/" (Chubby). The speaker did not want anyone in the group to provide her with the equivalence of /topoluː/, but she wanted to convey the meaning in the flow of information she was providing. To have a better understanding of the significance of the difference between the frequencies across different task difficulty levels, a set of Chi-square tests were run (Table 5).

Table 5
Chi-Square for Different Language Functions under Different Task Difficulty Conditions

	Pearson Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Expressive-Total	2.76	2	.251
Referential -Total	30.40	2	.000
Referential -Easy-Medium	4.9	1	.027
Referential -Medium-Difficult	10.77	1	.001
Referential -Easy-Difficult	29.94	1	.000
Directive -Total	24.72	2	.000
Directive -Easy-Medium	7.07	1	.006
Directive -Medium-Difficult	4.75	1	.029
Directive -Easy-Difficult	24.7	1	.000

As shown in Table 5, the participants employed code-switching to fulfill different language functions. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between the frequencies of expressive language function across different task difficulty levels, X^2 (2, N = 3) = 2.76, p = .251. The comparison of code-switching items fulfilling the referential language function at various difficulty levels indicated that the difference was significant, X^2(2, N = 3) = 30.40, p = .000. The examination of different pairs showed that the number of referential items provided under the difficult condition was significantly lower than that of the medium, X^2(1, N = 2) = 10.77, p = .001, and easy levels, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 29.94, p = .000. Finally, the number of referential items under the easy condition was significantly more than that under the medium condition, X^2(1, N =2) = 4.9, p = .027. The analysis of directive items under different difficulty conditions indicated that the frequencies were significantly different, X^2 (2, N = 3) = 24.72, p = .000. The findings also showed that the learners' frequency of using directive code-switching at the difficult level was significantly higher than theirs at the medium, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 4.75, p = .029 and easy, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 24.70, p = .000 levels. Further, the number of directive items under the medium condition was significantly higher than that under the easy condition, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 7.07, p = .006.

Purposes of Learners' Code-Switching

Another aspect examined in the present study was the purposes of learners' code-switching while performing their speaking tasks. Here, the purposes of learner code-switching refer to the functions that the learners aimed to accomplish by using their first language. An inductive process of categorization was employed to sort out the purposes of lower-intermediate EFL learners' code-switching. Table 6, below, presents a report of the findings.

Table 6
Purposes of Learners' Code-switching while Performing Speaking tasks under three Task Difficulty Conditions

	Vocabulary	Syntactic structure	Content	Task rubric clarification	Turn-taking	Pronunciation
Easy	229 (40.45%)	110 (19.43%)	83 (14.66%)	74 (13.07%)	36 (6.36%)	34 (6.13%)
Medium	227 (36.14%)	133 (21.17%)	103 (16.40%)	69 (10.78%)	52 (8.28%)	44 (7.24%)
Difficult	173 (24.26%)	197 (27.62%)	181 (25.38%)	117 (17.40%)	29 (4.26%)	16 (2.24%)
Total	629 (32.98%)	440 (23.07%)	367 (19.24%)	260 (15.21%)	117 (6.84%)	94 (4.93%)

As shown in Table 6, six main functions were extracted for the participants' code-switching while performing speaking tasks. The most frequent function was vocabulary, which accounted for 32.98 percent of all code-switching items. The general pattern of this area showed that learners' vocabulary-related code-switching decreased as the task difficulty rose. On the other hand, the frequencies of the second and third most common types (i.e., syntactic structure and content) increased as the task difficulty rose. The participants' use of code-switching for clarifying the task rubric did not follow any specific pattern, but the difficult task difficulty level led to the highest level of rubric clarification code-switching items. In the two least common areas, namely turn-taking and pronunciation, the frequencies of code-switching under medium task difficulty condition were more than those under the other two conditions, and the difficult condition led to the lowest frequencies. However, to have a more accurate examination of the difference between the frequencies under different conditions, a set of chi-square tests were run.

The results of Chi-square tests (see Appendix B for the extended table of results) indicated that while the frequencies of vocabulary-related code-switching items at the two easy and medium levels were not significant, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 2.34, p = .126, the participants' number of switches to Persian at the difficult level was significantly more than those of easy levels X^2 (1, N = 2) = 38.40, p = .000 and medium, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 22.52, p = .000. Similarly, the frequencies of code-switching for syntactic purposes at the two levels of easy and medium were not significantly different, X^2 (1, N = 2) = .558, p = .455. However, unlike the vocabulary-related code-switching items, the participants' switches to Persian for syntactic purposes at the difficult level were significantly more than those at the easy levels X^2 (1, N = 2) = 11.61, p = .000, and medium, X^2(1, N = 2) = 7.49, p = .004 The learners' content-related code-switching at the easy and medium levels was significantly lower than that under the difficult condition, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 22.14, p = .000 and X^2 (1, N = 2) = 16.14, p = .000. The difference between the content-level code-switching frequencies under the easy and medium levels, however, was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 2) = .683, p = .409.

Regarding the code-switching items for clarifying the task rubric purposes, the findings indicated that the difference between the frequency of code-

switches under the easy level was not significantly different from the frequencies under the medium, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 1.23, p = .267) and difficult, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 2.76, p = .096 levels; however, the frequency of code-switching for rubric clarification at the difficult level was significantly higher than that of the medium level. Another function for code-switching was turn-taking. The participants' frequency of code-switching for turn-taking purposes under the easy condition was not significantly different from those under difficult, X^2(1, N = 2) = 3.43, p = .064) and medium, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 1.6, p = .205) conditions. The number of turn-taking items under the medium condition, however, was significantly higher than that under the difficult condition, X^2(1, N = 2) = 10.44, p = .001. The least frequent function was pronunciation, which was chiefly in the form of directive language function. The results indicated that the only non-significant pair was easy-medium conditions, X^2(1, N = 2) = .487, p = .485, and the difference between the frequency of this code-switching type under the difficult level was significantly lower than those of easy and medium, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 11.89, p = .000, conditions.

Addressee of Code-Switching Items

The last aspect of learners' code-switching while performing speaking tasks investigated in this study was the addressee of their code-switching. Based on the recordings, the researchers (including the teachers of these classes) identified the addressees of learners' code-switching. Since identifying the addressees of expressive and referential items was impossible because the data were in the form of audio, the present section is based on the learners' directive code-switching items. The findings are provided in Table 7.

Table 7
Addressee of Code-switching Items

	Self-directed	Peer(s)	Teacher	Peer(s)> Teacher	Teacher> Peer(s)
Easy	15 (5.8%)	181 (69.6%)	28 (10.8%)	20 (7.7%)	16 (6.2%)
Medium	29 (8.6 %)	156 (46.0%)	56 (16.5%)	61 (17.7%)	38 (11.2%)
Difficult	46 (10.8%)	222 (52.2%)	88 (20.6%)	33 (7.9%)	43 (10.1%)
Total	90 (8.77%)	559 (54.48%)	172 (16.76%)	114 (11.11%)	97 (9.45%)

As the data provided in Table 7 indicate, the participants employed code-switching to talk with their peers in the majority of cases (54.48%). In 8.77 percent of cases, the participants talked with themselves aloud, without addressing the others. They mainly employed this type to keep the flow of speech and buy time to find the right vocabulary or structure to use in their sentences. In some cases, they referred only to their teacher (16.76%). In some other cases, they talked with their peer(s) and then immediately with their teacher (11.11%). They usually did the latter when they did not get satisfactory responses from their peers or they seemed uncertain about the responses, so they resorted to their teachers to get the response. The last code-switching type was when the

participants first talked with their teacher and then conversed about the topic under question with their peers (9.45%). To uncover the significant differences in the frequencies of each type under the different task difficulty conditions, a set of Chi-square tests were run.

The findings (see Appendix C for the extended table of results) indicated that, although the frequency of self-directed code-switching under the medium condition was not significantly different from those under easy, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 1.677, p = .195) and difficult, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 1.05, p = .305) conditions, the frequency of self-directed items under difficult condition was significantly higher than that under the easy condition, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 5.00, p = .025. Regarding the peer-addressed code-switching items, the results indicated that the frequencies of peer-directed code-switching items at the easy level was significantly higher than those under medium, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 33.29, p = .000, and difficult, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 20.7, p = .000 conditions; however, the frequencies of peer-directed code-switching items under the medium and difficult conditions were not significant, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 2.69, p = .101. A converse pattern was observed in teacher-directed code-switching items where the participants' use of this type of code-switching at the easy level was significantly lower than those under difficult, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 11.149, p = .000) and medium, X^2(1, N = 2) = 4.03, p = .045) conditions. The difference between the frequencies of teacher-directed items under medium and difficult conditions was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 2.07, p = .150). The last code-switching type in terms of the addressee was when the participants first switched to Persian to ask a question from their teacher and then immediately talked with their peers to elaborate on the issue. Under the easy condition, the participants employed code-switching of this type significantly less than when they performed speaking tasks under difficult, X^2 (1, N = 2) = 3.15, p = .044, and medium, X^2(1, N = 2) = 4.58, p = .032, conditions; however, the difference between the frequencies under medium and difficult conditions was not significant, X^2 (1, N = 2) = .259, p = .611).

Discussion

The present study aimed to answer four research questions. The first one dealt with lower-intermediate learners' quantity of code-switching while performing speaking tasks. The findings of the current study showed that the learners employed their L1 in 9.68 percent of clauses. This finding is in line with those of previous studies (Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002) where it was found that learners switched to their first language in less than 20 percent of the classroom interactions. While some prior researchers (e.g., Enama, 2016; Pachler & Field, 2001) have opposed the use of learners' L1 in EFL settings, the present study showed that no more than 10 percent of all clauses included learners' L1 use. The learners' code-switching, if controlled, seems to be worth implementing even if only a part of educational (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Hemmati & Hoomanfard, 2014; Kaushanskaya & Crespo, 2019; Rahayu & Margana, 2018), cognitive (Bosma & Blom, 2019; Cummins, 2007; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003), emotional (Balosa,

2006; Peregoy & Boyle, 2013), and identity-related advantages of code-switching helps learners experience a better L2 educational condition, which may have positive knock-on effects on their second language learning process in the long run.

The findings also pointed out the significant difference between the frequencies of learners' code-switching under different speaking task conditions. The findings showed that the learners' number of code-switching stepped up as the difficulty of tasks increased. This finding, pertinent to lower-intermediate L2 learners, concords previous studies (Afroogh, 2018; Chan, 2006; Mahmoudikia et al., 2014; Myers, 2008; Qahfarokhi & Biria, 2012), which found the significant effect of task difficulty on learners' number of code-switching while accomplishing speaking and writing tasks in a second language. Prior studies (Bao & Du, 2015; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) have shown that the increase in the task difficulty can lead to learners' overload of working memory, which may increase the extent of learners' L1 use. Centeno-Corte, & Jime´nez (2004) argue that when learners confront a difficult task, "breakdowns in the thinking process" are probable and L2 learners are more likely to revert to their L1 to accomplish their tasks (p. 20).

This study investigated the effect of speaking task difficulty on L2 learners' quality of code-switching. This section of the study was, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, totally innovative as no prior study has investigated the purposes of learners' code-switching merely while performing speaking tasks. Prior studies (e.g., Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; Ferguson, 2003; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005) focused on learners' code-switching items throughout a class time, which includes different sections, one of which is speaking practice; thus, comparing the findings of this study with those of prior studies seems not to be fruitful; however, the pertinent literature will be presented to elaborate on the findings.

One of the findings of this section showed that Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students employed code-switching to fulfill six main purposes (vocabulary, syntactic structure, content, rubric clarification, turn-taking, and pronunciation). The findings pointed out that the learners' focus on different purposes changed based on the difficulty of the tasks that they had to accomplish. For instance, the topic of the difficult tasks, which were about there-and then topics and were rather unknown to the participants, resulted in significantly more content-related code-switching items. The learners who were under pressure to speak as they were surrounded by their peers and the teacher found code-switching a suitable solution to find their way out of the content-related communicative breakdowns. The same pattern was found for syntactic structure and rubric clarification code-switching items. Under the difficult condition, the learners used their L1 to gain information from their peers and teachers more often to be able to complete the task; however, the significantly lower number of code-switching items under easy and medium conditions may show their lower level of difficulties in understanding the rubric and making sound syntactic structures. The use of L1 by learners for clarification purposes has been re-

ported by Bozorgian and Fallahpour (2015). In their study, which captured the whole class time, they found this function as the least frequent one. Similarly, in the present study, the findings showed that only code-switching items for pronunciation and turn-taking purposes had lower frequencies than clarification.

Further, a trade-off pattern was found in the learners' code-switching purposes. The learners' code-switching for vocabulary purposes decreased as the difficulty of tasks rose. When this finding is juxtaposed with the syntactic structure, rubric clarification, and content-related code-switching frequencies, it can be cautiously inferred that lower-intermediate learners prefer to save more chances for using their L1 to gain information on content-related and syntactic items and employ their existing lexical repertoire as much as they can to accomplish the task. On the other hand, when they perceived the task comprehensible and manageable in terms of content and syntactic structures, they focused more on lexical items. The same pattern was found for pronunciation-related code-switching items, which had the least proportional frequency under the difficult task condition, but was addressed more significantly under easy and medium conditions.

The examination of language functions employed to fulfill the pedagogical and pragmatic purposes by the participants showed that they employed the three main language functions (expressive, referential, and directive) while using their L1. The least frequent language function employed by the participants while switching to their L1 was expressive, which showed the speakers' feelings about the topic, the task, the peers' opinions, etc. Pavlenko (2008) argues that, when get excited, angry, or thrilled, multilinguals prefer to switch to their first language, even if it is in the form of a single word or phrase and then move back to their second language to continue communicating with their interlocutors. The same story was witnessed in our study as the participants mainly showed their feelings with single words or short phrases. This function was reported in prior studies (e.g., Bozorgian & Fallahpour, 2015; Ndayipfukamiye, 1994; Poplack, 2000); however, they brought it under interpersonal category. The reason might be the nature of their studies which included the whole class time, in which the whole class time consists of different activities, ranging from greeting and criticizing the teaching and practicing.

Another language function was referential, through which the participants provided a piece of information in their first language (and did not wait for the English equivalent). On these occasions, which were chiefly used for lexical items and turn-taking purposes, the participants employed a word or a phrase (and in rare cases clauses) in L1 among other words in English intentionally without any remarkable pause. In these situations, the learners seemed to have the full knowledge of content in L1, but could not find the equivalents in English. This code-switching type was more frequent in group discussions following the monologues, when the participants did not want to lose the turn and wanted to continue expressing their ideas about the topic under question. However, unlike the previous case, some of code-switching items were employed to seek for information in the form of question or request. A worth-

mentioning point about these two functions is that, by increasing the difficulty of tasks, the number of referential code-switching items dwindled, and more directive code-switching items were employed to fulfill learners' purposes. The reason might reside in the nature of the tasks with different difficulty levels. The linguistic and cognitive demands of the difficult tasks might have resulted in higher numbers of questions (and requests) as they did not know the required structures, lexical items, and content-related information to accomplish the tasks, but the participants seemed to have the required information in their L1, while having difficulty translating them into English. Maftoon and Amjadiparvar (2018) have stated that these two functions account for a significant part of learners' code-switching as the transfer of information from the speaker to the interlocutor is done through referential function; and demand for information in the forms of questions and requests takes place through directive code-switching items.

The current study also investigated the effect of speaking task difficulty on L2 learners' selection of their code-switching addressee. The findings indicated that the participants had five different choices (self-directed, peer-directed, teacher-directed, peer and then teacher, and teacher and then peer) while employing their L1 to obtain information at their disposal. An interesting finding of this study was the learners' self-directed code-switching, through which they loudly asked themselves a question while having switched to their L1. This type accounted for just under 10 percent of all directive code-switching items and was employed by the participants to buy some time to remember the items they believed (or played) they had already known. However, the majority of these self-directed questions were answered by a peer or a teacher. Almost half of all directive code-switching items were addressed toward peers; however, as the difficulty level of the tasks increased, the number of participants' referrals to their teacher for asking questions rose. In some cases, the participants asked their teacher questions and then discussed the same item in their groups to have a better understanding. In some other cases, the participants did not find the response of their peers satisfactory or did not trust the soundness of their peers' responses and asked the same questions from their teacher to get a reliable response. The issue of learners' mistrusting their peers is well-documented in the literature. Several prior studies (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hoomanfard et al., 2018; Narciss, 2008; Strijbos et al., 2010) have reported L2 learners' perceiving their teachers as significantly more reliable sources of knowledge. The increase in the number of teacher-directed switches to ask questions under the difficult task condition might be attributed to the learners' higher level of trust in their teachers' knowledge as a creditable source.

Conclusion

The present study may have contributed to the literature of code-switching in educational settings by providing a picture of how different speaking task difficulty levels can affect lower-intermediate learners' quantity and quality of code-switching. The findings of this study, which addressed an unexamined

area in the literature, showed the remarkable effect of speaking task difficulty level on learners' selection of their addressee when they decided to use their first language to ask a question, on their pedagogical and pragmatic purposes of code-switching, and thereupon language functions. Another finding of this study was the noticeably low amount of learners' code-switching while performing speaking tasks. If controlled in terms of quantity, the learners' use of their L1 to obtain knowledge, hold the floor, express their ideas, and clarify the task rubric (which can significantly affect the success of task completion) makes code-switching a precious pedagogical bootstrapping activity, which may result in learning and improved performance.

The findings of this study can have pedagogical implications for practitioners. Based on the findings of this study, EFL teachers should not deprive their students of a pedagogical tool, which can have educational, affective, and pragmatic benefits. If teachers and policy-makers are worried about the amount of L1 use, they can either set a limitation to each students' use of L1 in each session or control code-switching items by recording the group interactions. They can also employ the code-switching as a strong diagnostic tool, which can inform them about the learners' self-reported weaknesses. Different tasks with various characteristics can be employed to diagnose individualized L2 deficiencies in the first quarter of a semester and the teacher can have an L2 map of each learner to plan, monitor, and assess in the rest of sessions. These data can also be relayed to the teacher of the upcoming semester in the form of individualized portfolios.

The present study had suffered from some limitations, which can motivate future studies. The first one dealt with the scarcity of literature on the topic of the present study. While a bulk of studies have investigated the learners and teachers' perceptions of code-switching, code-switching under different speaking tasks in real classroom contexts was conducted in a few studies. This dearth in the number of similar studies has made the comparison of the results of the present research with those of prior studies impossible. Future studies can replicate the present study in other cultural and linguistic contexts to illuminate the possible differences. The participants of this study were lower-intermediate students in a private language institute context; other researchers can examine the participants with other English language ability levels and in other contexts (e.g., university). In addition, other researchers can use retrospective stimulated recall interviews to have a better understanding of L2 learners' switches to their L1. Although the content analysis of the interactions can reveal the purposes of code-switching items, stimulated recall interviews may result in more in-depth data for further analysis.

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Appendix A

Tasks With Easy, Medium and High Difficulty Levels

Difficulty level	Task
Easy	Find the similarities and differences in two pictures (1.5 min pre-task planning time)
	Tell a story based on six pictures (1.5 min pre-task planning time)
	Talk about your habits and hobbies on weekends (1.5 min pre-task planning time)
	Describe one of your teammates. Talk about his/her personality and appearance (1.5 min pre-task planning time)
Medium	Can you talk about tourist attractions in your city? (1.5 min pre-task planning time)
	What would you do if you lost your luggage at an airport (1.5 min pre-task planning time)
	What would you do if your neighbor threw a party the night before your important job interview? (1.5 min pre-task planning time)
	How often do you shop online? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
Difficult	The number of people who are risk of serious health problems for being fat is increasing. What is the reason for the growth in fat people in society? (1 min pre-task planning time)
	Some people do not agree with spending money on space projects. What is your opinion? (1 min pre-task planning time)
	Many people suffer from stressful lives. What are the causes of stress? How can we reduce our stress? (1 min pre-task planning time)
	What is your favorite communication technology? Why? (1 min pre-task planning time)

Appendix B

Chi-Square for Different Purposes Under Different Task Difficulty Conditions

	Pearson Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Vocabulary-Total	41.67	2	.000
Vocabulary -Easy-Medium	2.34	1	.126
Vocabulary -Medium-Difficult	22.52	1	.000
Vocabulary -Easy-Difficult	38.40	1	.000
Syntactic structure-Total	13.83	2	.001
Syntactic structure -Easy-Medium	.558	1	.455
Syntactic structure -Medium-Difficult	7.49	1	.004
Syntactic structure -Easy-Difficult	11.61	1	.000
Pronunciation- Total	18.15	2	.000
Pronunciation -Easy-Medium	.487	1	.485
Pronunciation -Medium-Difficult	17.71	1	.000
Pronunciation -Easy-Difficult	11.89	1	.000
Content-Total	28.20	2	.000
Content -Easy-Medium	.683	1	.409
Content -Medium-Difficult	16.14	1	.000
Content -Easy-Difficult	22.14	1	.000
Turn-taking-Total	10.36	2	.006
Turn-taking -Easy-Medium	1.60	1	.205
Turn-taking -Medium-Difficult	10.44	1	.001
Turn-taking -Easy-Difficult	5.43	1	.043
Task rubric clarification-Total	8.51	2	.014
Task rubric clarification -Easy-Medium	1.23	1	.267
Task rubric clarification -Medium-Difficult	8.21	1	.003
Task rubric clarification -Easy-Difficult	2.76	1	.096

Appendix C

Chi-Square for Different Addressees Under Different Task Difficulty Conditions

	Pearson Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Self-directed-Total	6.086	2	.042
Self-directed -Easy-Medium	1.67	1	.195
Self-directed -Medium-Difficult	1.05	1	.305
Self-directed -Easy-Difficult	5.00	1	.025
Peer-structure-Total	34.87	2	.000
Peer-Easy-Medium	33.29	1	.000
Peer -Medium-Difficult	2.69	1	.101
Peer -Easy-Difficult	20.7	1	.000
Teacher- Total	11.23	2	.004
Teacher -Easy-Medium	4.03	1	.045
Teacher -Medium-Difficult	2.07	1	.150
Teacher -Easy-Difficult	11.149	1	.000
Peer>Teacher-Total	23.09	2	.000
Peer>Teacher -Easy-Medium	12.73	1	.000
Peer>Teacher -Medium-Difficult	.01	1	.986
Peer>Teacher -Easy-Difficult	.000	1	970
Teacher>Peer-Total	4.71	2	.095
Teacher>Peer -Easy-Medium	4.58	1	.032
Teacher>Peer-Medium-Difficult	.259	1	.611
Teacher>Peer-Easy-Difficult	3.15	1	.044

Appendix D

Speaking Tasks

Describe a book that you have enjoyed reading because you had to think a lot.
You should say:
What this book was
Why you decided to read it
What reading this book made you think about
And explain why you enjoyed reading this book.

Describe something you like very much which you bought for your home
You should say
What you bought
When and where you bought it
Why you chose this particular thing
And explain why you liked it so much

Describe a difficult task that you succeeded in doing as a part of your work or studies.
You should say:
What task you did
Why this task was very difficult
How you worked on this task
And explain how you felt when you had successfully completed this task.

Describe a website you have bought something from
What the website is
What you bought from the website
How satisfied you were with what you bought
And explain what you liked and disliked about using this website.