

Code-Mixing Practice on Instagram as an Informal English Learning in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Code-mixing has become a common linguistic phenomenon in social media communication, particularly among English language learners. Previous studies have examined code-mixing across various digital platforms; however, limited attention has been given to its role in informal English learning through Instagram. Instagram was selected as the research context because it is one of the most popular social media platforms among university students, enabling frequent bilingual interaction through captions and comments in authentic communication. This study aimed to identify the types of code-mixing used in Instagram captions and comments, investigate the reasons for its use, and explore its contribution to informal English learning. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed involving five undergraduate English Education students. Data were collected through documentation of Instagram captions and comments, followed by semi-structured interviews, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed three types of code-mixing: insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization, with insertion being the most dominant type. The participants primarily used code-mixing to express feelings, construct identity, and enhance social prestige. Moreover, code-mixing contributed positively to vocabulary acquisition, increased confidence in using English, and encouraged continuous language exposure. These findings suggest that Instagram provides a meaningful environment for informal English learning while facilitating authentic bilingual communication.

Keywords: *Code-Mixing, English Language Learning, Informal Learning.*

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has transformed the way people communicate and use language in their daily lives. Instagram, as one of the most popular social networking platforms, provides users with opportunities to interact through captions, comments, stories, and other forms of digital communication (Ramadhany, 2025). Within these interactions, the practice of combining two languages in a single utterance has become increasingly common. This phenomenon is widely known as code-mixing, which refers to the use of linguistic elements from different languages within the same sentence or discourse. The growing presence of code-mixing on social media demonstrates how bilingual and multilingual speakers adapt their language choices to suit communicative needs in digital environments.

In Indonesia, English frequently appears alongside Indonesian in social media communication. Expressions such as “reminder buat aku,” “thanks a lot,” or “so happy for them” can easily be found in Instagram captions and comments. Rather than representing language deficiency, these expressions indicate speakers’ ability to utilize linguistic resources from different languages to convey meaning effectively. Instagram encourages spontaneous and contextual communication, allowing users to select words and expressions that best represent their intentions, emotions, and identities. As a result, code-mixing has become a natural feature of online interaction among young people and English language learners.

Code-mixing has been discussed extensively in sociolinguistic studies. Muysken classifies code-mixing into three major types: insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization (Muysken, 1997). Insertion occurs when lexical items from one language are embedded into the grammatical structure of another language (Pratama, 2022; Setiawan, 2023). Alternation refers to language shifts involving larger units such as phrases or clauses. Congruent lexicalization occurs when elements from two languages share a similar grammatical framework and can be combined freely within a sentence (Muysken, 1997). These classifications provide an important framework for understanding how bilingual speakers construct meaning through multiple linguistic systems.

Beyond its linguistic form, code-mixing also performs various social functions. According to Bourdieu, language can function as linguistic capital that carries symbolic value within society (Bourdieu, 1991). The use of English expressions may reflect modernity, educational background, or affiliation with global culture. Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model further suggests that speakers intentionally select particular language forms to construct identity, express solidarity, and achieve specific communicative purposes (Myers-Scotton, 2020). Consequently, code-mixing is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a social strategy used to negotiate identity and interpersonal relationships in digital communication.

The increasing use of code-mixing on social media has also attracted attention in the field of language learning. Informal learning theory suggests that language acquisition does not occur exclusively in formal educational settings. Learners may develop linguistic competence through everyday experiences and authentic interactions outside the classroom. Social media platforms expose users to a wide range of English vocabulary, expressions, and communicative practices, creating opportunities for incidental language learning (Hamat & Hassan, 2019; Rahmat, 2020). Through repeated exposure and active participation, learners may strengthen vocabulary knowledge, increase confidence in language use, and develop greater familiarity with English in meaningful contexts.

Several previous studies have investigated code-mixing in various settings, including menu brochures, WhatsApp groups, Twitter posts, and social media interactions. These studies primarily focused on identifying types of code-mixing, examining factors influencing language choice, and exploring communicative functions. However, limited attention has been given to Instagram as a contemporary platform where English language learners actively engage in code-mixing while simultaneously participating in informal learning processes (Cholsy & Asteria, 2026; Rojas, 2025; Sutrisno & Ariesta, 2019). Considering Instagram's dominance among young users and its role in shaping digital communication practices, further investigation is necessary to understand how code-mixing functions within this environment.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the types of code-mixing used in Instagram captions and comments, identify the reasons behind its use, and explore how code-mixing contributes to informal English learning through social media. The findings are expected to provide insights into the relationship between digital communication practices and language learning, particularly among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in contemporary social media environments.

Code-Mixing in Digital Communication

Code-mixing has become a common linguistic practice in multilingual societies, particularly in digital communication environments. Muysken defines code-mixing as the use of elements from two or more languages within a single utterance (Muysken, 1997). In social media interactions, users frequently combine English and Indonesian expressions to convey ideas more effectively and naturally. The flexibility of digital communication enables speakers to select linguistic resources that best represent their intentions, emotions, and social identities. As a result, code-mixing has emerged as an important feature of online communication among bilingual users (Nurdiana et al., 2026; Rahman et al., 2025).

Muysken classifies code-mixing into three categories: insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization (Muysken, 1997). Insertion occurs when words or phrases from one language are embedded into the grammatical structure of another language. Alternation involves switching between larger linguistic units such as phrases or clauses. Congruent lexicalization occurs when elements from different languages share a similar grammatical framework and are integrated within the same sentence. These categories provide a useful framework for understanding how bilingual speakers utilize multiple linguistic systems in digital interactions.

Code-Mixing and Social Identity

The use of code-mixing extends beyond linguistic purposes and serves important social functions. According to Bourdieu, language can function as symbolic capital that reflects social status, educational background, and group affiliation (Bourdieu, 1991). English is often associated with modernity, globalization, and higher educational achievement. Consequently, the incorporation of English expressions into Indonesian communication may help speakers project particular social identities and establish connections with broader communities (Mabule, 2015; Meliani et al., 2021).

Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model further explains that language choices are often deliberate and influenced by communicative goals (Myers-Scotton, 2020). Speakers may employ code-mixing to express emotions, demonstrate group membership, create solidarity, or emphasize particular meanings (Andini et al., 2026). In social media environments, these functions become increasingly visible because users continuously construct and negotiate their identities through language.

Informal English Learning Through Social Media

Language learning is no longer limited to formal classroom settings. Informal learning occurs through everyday experiences, interactions, and exposure to authentic language use. Social media platforms provide opportunities for learners to encounter English vocabulary, expressions, and communication patterns in meaningful contexts (Kumar & Nanda, 2024). Through repeated exposure, learners may gradually develop language competence without participating in structured instructional activities.

Instagram offers a particularly rich environment for informal English learning. Users regularly engage with captions, comments, stories, and other forms of content that contain English expressions (Gonulal, 2019). Through active participation in these interactions, learners can expand their vocabulary, increase confidence in language use, and develop greater familiarity with English communication. Therefore, code-mixing may function not only as a communication strategy but also as a medium that facilitates informal English learning in digital environments.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of code-mixing on Instagram as a form of informal English learning among English language learners. Qualitative research is appropriate for investigating social and linguistic phenomena because it allows researchers to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and language practices in their natural settings (Sandelowski, 2000). The study focused on identifying the types of code-mixing used in Instagram captions and comments, examining the reasons behind its use, and exploring its contribution to informal English learning.

Respondents

The participants of this study were five undergraduate students majoring in English Education at a university in Indonesia. They were selected using **purposive sampling**, a non-probability sampling technique that enables researchers to recruit participants who possess characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The selection criteria required participants to (1) be active Instagram users, (2) regularly post captions or

comments on Instagram, (3) frequently employ English–Indonesian code-mixing in their social media interactions, and (4) be willing to participate in interviews and allow their Instagram posts to be analyzed for research purposes. These criteria ensured that the participants had sufficient experience with code-mixing practices on Instagram and could provide rich, relevant, and authentic information regarding their motivations for using code-mixing and its contribution to informal English learning through social media.

Instruments

The primary instrument of this study was the researcher. In qualitative research, the researcher plays an essential role in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data. To support the data collection process, documentation and semi-structured interviews were employed. Documentation was used to collect Instagram captions and comments containing instances of code-mixing. The data were documented through screenshots of participants' Instagram activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper information regarding participants' reasons for using code-mixing and their perceptions of its contribution to English language learning.

Procedures

The research was conducted through several stages. First, a preliminary questionnaire was distributed to identify participants who met the research criteria. After the participants had been selected, the researcher collected Instagram captions and comments containing English-Indonesian code-mixing. The collected data were documented and organized according to the research objectives. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to explore their perspectives on code-mixing practices and informal English learning. All interview data were recorded and transcribed to facilitate further analysis. Finally, the collected data were classified, interpreted, and analyzed to answer the research questions.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with familiarization of the data through repeated reading of Instagram captions, comments, and interview transcripts. The researcher then identified and classified instances of code-mixing based on Muysken's (2000) typology, namely insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization. Afterward, the researcher generated themes related to the reasons for using code-mixing and its contribution to informal English learning. The identified themes were reviewed and interpreted by connecting the findings with relevant sociolinguistic and language learning theories. The final analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how code-mixing functions as a communication strategy and an informal English learning practice on Instagram.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Code-Mixing

The first research question aimed to identify the types of code-mixing used by English language learners in Instagram captions and comments. Based on the analysis of the collected data, three types of code-mixing proposed by Muysken were identified, namely insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization.

Table 1. Types of Code-Mixing Found in Instagram Captions and Comments

No	Example of Code-Mixing	Type
1	High school ternyata udah 4 tahun yang lalu ya	Insertion
2	Hunting kuliner berkedok skripsian	Insertion
3	Reminder buat aku, kamu dan semuanya	Insertion
4	Gaya manyun emang best seller siih	Insertion
5	Sekali kali no filter lah yaa	Insertion
6	Thanks a lot @bigbanfest.id, pecah bangetttt	Alternation

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7	So happy for them... ga expect bakal ngeliat osiku nikah	Alternation
8	This fine shyt boy berani juga yaa	Alternation
9	Today, I sangat happy	Congruent
		Lexicalization
10	Tim hangout with parents kayaknya kita	Congruent
		Lexicalization
11	Ini mah always, kemarin aku out of nowhere mimpi nikah sama dia	Congruent
		Lexicalization

The findings revealed that insertion was the most frequently used type of code-mixing, followed by alternation and congruent lexicalization. The dominance of insertion indicates that participants tended to insert English lexical items into Indonesian sentence structures without changing the grammatical framework of the utterance. This pattern suggests that English vocabulary has become familiar enough to be integrated naturally into everyday communication among English language learners.

Insertion appeared in expressions such as “high school,” “hunting,” “reminder,” “best seller,” and “no filter.” In these examples, Indonesian remained the dominant language while English words or phrases functioned as lexical insertions. According to Muysken, insertion occurs when elements from one language are embedded within the grammatical structure of another language (Muysken, 1997). The findings demonstrate that participants frequently employed English lexical items to express ideas more efficiently and to adapt to common expressions widely used in social media communication.

Alternation was identified in utterances containing longer English expressions or clauses combined with Indonesian structures. Examples such as “Thanks a lot @bigbanfest.id, pecah bangetttt” and “So happy for them... ga expect bakal ngeliat osiku nikah” indicate a shift between two linguistic systems within a single discourse. These findings support Muysken’s (2000) description of alternation as the use of larger linguistic units from different languages within the same utterance (Backus & Demirçay, 2021). The participants appeared to use alternation to express emotions and reactions more naturally through English expressions that are commonly encountered in digital communication.

The third type found in this study was congruent lexicalization. Expressions such as “Today, I sangat happy” and “Tim hangout with parents kayaknya kita” illustrate the integration of English and Indonesian lexical elements within a shared grammatical framework. In this type, speakers freely combine elements from both languages because the sentence structure allows linguistic flexibility. The findings suggest that participants possessed sufficient familiarity with both languages to combine them creatively within a single communicative context.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that reported the occurrence of insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization in social media communication. (Puspa & Alamsari, 2021; Rahmawati et al., 2022; Tarihoran et al., 2022) similarly found that code-mixing frequently appears in informal digital interactions. The present study strengthens previous findings by demonstrating that Instagram remains an active platform where bilingual speakers employ various forms of code-mixing as part of their everyday communication practices.

Overall, the findings indicate that code-mixing is not merely a linguistic deviation but a communicative strategy that enables users to express meanings, emotions, and social identities more effectively. The frequent occurrence of insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization reflects the dynamic nature of bilingual communication in contemporary social media environments.

Reasons for Using Code-Mixing

The second research question aimed to investigate the reasons behind the use of code-mixing in Instagram captions and comments. Based on the interview data, three major reasons were identified: expressing feelings, global prestige, and identity construction. The findings indicate that participants used code-mixing not only for linguistic purposes but also for social and personal expression.

Table 2. Reasons for Using Code-Mixing

Reason	Number of Participants	Percentage
Identity	2	40%
Global Prestige	3	60%
Expressing Feelings	5	100%

The findings show that expressing feelings was the most dominant reason for using code-mixing. All participants stated that English expressions helped them communicate emotions more naturally and effectively. Participants reported that certain English words and phrases sounded more appropriate when expressing happiness, excitement, admiration, disappointment, or other personal feelings on social media. Expressions such as “so happy,” “thanks a lot,” and similar phrases were frequently used because they were perceived as more expressive than their Indonesian equivalents. This finding suggests that code-mixing functions as a communicative strategy that allows users to convey emotions in a more meaningful and relatable way.

This result supports (Nordin, 2023), who argues that code-mixing is often used to express feelings, emotions, and personal experiences. The participants viewed English expressions as emotionally appealing and suitable for the informal nature of social media communication. Consequently, the use of English elements became an effective way to strengthen emotional messages shared with followers and online communities.

The second reason identified was global prestige. Three participants stated that English was associated with modernity, global culture, and contemporary communication trends. The use of English expressions in Instagram captions and comments enabled participants to feel connected to a broader international community. English was perceived not only as a language but also as a symbol of global participation and digital literacy.

This finding is consistent with (Bourdieu, 1991) concept of linguistic capital, which explains that certain languages carry symbolic value within society. English is widely recognized as an international language that represents educational achievement, social mobility, and access to global communication networks. Therefore, the incorporation of English into social media interactions may provide users with a sense of prestige and modern identity.

The third reason was identity construction. Two participants reported that code-mixing reflected their background as English language learners. Through the use of English expressions, they were able to present themselves as individuals who actively engage with English in their daily lives. Code-mixing became part of their self-representation in digital spaces, allowing them to communicate personal interests, educational experiences, and linguistic competence.

This finding supports (Myers-Scotton, 2020) Markedness Model, which proposes that language choices are often used to construct social identity and achieve specific communicative goals. By incorporating English expressions into Indonesian utterances, participants were able to position themselves as members of a bilingual community while simultaneously expressing their affiliation with English language learning.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that code-mixing on Instagram serves multiple functions beyond communication efficiency. The practice allows users to express emotions, construct identities, and participate in global digital culture. These functions highlight the complex relationship between language choice and social interaction in contemporary social media environments.

Code-Mixing as Informal English Learning

The third research question aimed to explore how code-mixing contributes to informal English learning through social media. Based on the interview findings, participants generally perceived code-mixing as a positive practice that supported their English language development. Two major themes emerged from the data: vocabulary acquisition and confidence in using English.

Table 3. Code-Mixing as Informal English Learning

Participant	Theme
P1	Confidence in Using English
P2	Confidence in Using English
P3	Vocabulary Acquisition Through Social Media Exposure
P4	Increased Vocabulary
P5	Increased Vocabulary

The findings indicate that vocabulary acquisition was the most prominent contribution of code-mixing to informal English learning. Most participants reported that frequent exposure to English words and expressions on Instagram helped them learn new vocabulary and remember previously encountered words. Through captions, comments, stories, and interactions with other users, participants continuously encountered English expressions that became familiar over time. This repeated exposure enabled them to understand meanings, recognize usage patterns, and gradually incorporate new vocabulary into their own communication.

Several participants explained that they often searched for unfamiliar English words before using them in captions or comments. As a result, the process of code-mixing encouraged independent vocabulary learning. Participants also stated that commonly repeated expressions on social media were easier to remember because they appeared in authentic and meaningful contexts. These findings suggest that social media provides opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition, where learning occurs naturally during everyday communication activities.

In addition to vocabulary development, participants reported increased confidence in using English. The use of code-mixing allowed them to practice English gradually without the pressure of producing entirely English sentences. By combining Indonesian and English within the same utterance, participants felt more comfortable expressing ideas while simultaneously improving their English proficiency. This gradual exposure reduced anxiety and encouraged more active participation in English-related communication.

The findings support the concept of informal learning proposed by Coombs and Ahmed (1974), which describes learning as a lifelong process occurring through everyday experiences outside formal educational settings. Unlike classroom instruction, informal learning takes place naturally through social interaction, personal interests, and daily activities. Instagram provides an environment where users are continuously exposed to English content, allowing language learning to occur alongside routine social media engagement.

The findings are also consistent with Vygotsky's perspective that learning develops through social interaction and meaningful communication (Vygotsky, 1978). Through interactions on Instagram, participants were exposed to authentic language use and opportunities to apply English in real communicative situations. Rather than learning isolated vocabulary items, participants encountered English in contexts that reflected genuine communication purposes. This process contributed to language development through repeated observation, interpretation, and use.

Furthermore, the findings support previous studies that highlight the educational potential of social media. Exposure to bilingual content encourages learners to engage with English outside the classroom and provides opportunities for continuous language practice. In this study, code-mixing functioned as a linguistic bridge that connected participants' first language with the target language, enabling them to communicate effectively while simultaneously developing English proficiency.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that code-mixing contributes positively to informal English learning through vocabulary development and increased confidence in using English. The practice enables learners to engage with English in authentic digital environments and supports language learning beyond formal educational contexts. Therefore, code-mixing should not be viewed solely as a bilingual communication phenomenon but also as a meaningful resource for informal English language learning in the digital era.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the use of code-mixing in Instagram captions and comments among English Education students and explored its contribution to informal English learning. The findings revealed that participants employed three types of code-mixing proposed by Muysken: insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization, with insertion being the most frequently used type. Participants primarily used code-mixing to express emotions, construct personal identity, and project a sense of global prestige, with emotional expression emerging as the dominant motivation. The study also found that code-mixing positively supported informal English learning by expanding learners' vocabulary, increasing their confidence, and providing continuous exposure to authentic English expressions through everyday social media interactions. These findings demonstrate that Instagram serves not only as a platform for social communication but also as a meaningful environment for language practice beyond the classroom. Although limited to a small group of participants, this study highlights the pedagogical value of code-mixing and social media in promoting autonomous and authentic English language learning.

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