

Evaluation and Reflection on the Implementation of English-only Policy in an EFL context for Young Learners

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Abstract

In China, English Only Policy (EOP) is a requirement made in some English training institutions, where both teachers and students are required to speak only English in the classroom in order to create an immersive environment for EFL learners' acquisition. This paper discusses the implementation of the policy in one international education company in that specializes in language training in China, and some suggestions were given to solve the problems existing in English teaching process based on the policy.

Keywords

English Only Policy; English teaching; language proficiency.

1. Introduction

In view of the importance of English as a communicative tool in current society, the necessity to grasp English speaking skill has been highlighted. With the hope of winning at the starting line, many parents send their kids to language training school to cultivate an interest in English. Having been asked for reasons, most parents say that regular school could not give children an immersion environment or opportunities to speak due to several factors such as big-sized class, Chinese-medium teaching method. Therefore, training schools characterized by English-only policy have been popular in recent years.

1.1. Context of the school

1.1.1. Basic information of EF and its English-only policy

Education First (abbreviated as EF) is an international education company that specializes in language training, educational travel, academic degree programs, and cultural exchange. The English-only policy at EF is an unofficial rule under which teachers and students are not allowed to use Chinese in the classroom. The idea of this policy is supported by Krashen and Terrell (1996)'s argument that the one's acquisition is based on what he hears and understands, which concurs with Ellis (2008) statement that the exposure is very important as the determining factor for learning.

1.1.2. Basic information of teachers

The academic group of EF constitutes foreign teachers from English-speaking countries and Chinese local teachers. Some recruited local teachers just graduate from university without any teaching experience, while others have been working for several years, but all of them did not have abroad experience or took any English-medium class before. Normally, new employees are supposed to be trained intensively, mainly in forms of observation. After one or two weeks, they start teaching. The company provides follow-up teacher training program once a month regarding teaching approach.

In regarding to teaching target, foreign teachers mainly teach 13- to 14- year-old students while local teachers are responsible for students aged from 6 to 11.

1.1.3. Basic information of students

Students taking course at EF are teenagers aged from 6 to 14, most of whom are taught English in their mother tongue while some have foreign tutors at home. Before EF courses starting, every student needs to take an oral placement test according to which he/she will be assigned into corresponding level.

The oral placement test (OPT) is conducted in form of conversation between EF teacher and student for around 10 minutes, during which student needs to answer teacher's questions with the prompts in designated OPT book.

1.2. Challenges in the implementation process

The following challenges are what both teachers and students confronting in class according to my experience and observation.

From teacher's perspective

1.2.1. Unable to explain some aspects of language and problem of pronunciation

For local teacher, it is hard to explain some words, phrases, sentences and grammatical rule in English. When student makes some grammatical mistakes or asks meaning of some words, teacher has no idea how to explain, even they try, student still could not understand because there are more unfamiliar words coming out.

Besides, most local teachers speak English with accent, and sometimes pronounce words in a wrong way.

1.2.2. Unable to give task instruction in English

In English class, teacher usually gives students a task, requiring them cooperate with classmates. Undoubtedly, demonstration is needed before task. From what I observed in some new local teachers' class, they gave instruction either with only few words or long sentences. However, most of time, students were not able to understand what they were going to do after teacher's instruction in English. In this situation, students who got confused become nervous asking for help. Eventually, new teachers, overwhelmed by such circumstance have to use in Chinese to manage class.

From student's perspective

1.2.3. Inevitable L1 use

CLT is a mostly common used method in EFL class where exclusive use of target language is required for communicating with both teachers and their peers. However, when engaging activities, students cannot help using their mother tongue.

1.2.4. Student's unwillingness to speak

The purpose of English-only policy is to encourage student and teacher to speak English class in an immersion environment. Disappointedly, students who have not taken this kind of course refuse to say anything.

1.2.5. Ineffective communication

Another serious issue that I found in my class was that the English-only rule decrease student's motivation to ask question. For example, I have some students who love to talk and ask questions about vocabulary or grammar, but usually I encourage them try to use English for inquiry, but they don't know how to express themselves, if I insisted, they gave up with disappointment.

2. Literature

To figure out factors that affects implementation of English-only policy, related literature reviews are given as followed:

2.1. Language proficiency

2.1.1. Definition of language proficiency

In regarding to the definition of language competence and language proficiency, many theoretical statements have been made. Oller (1976, 1979, 1983) early proposed what he termed as general language proficiency for conceptualizing one's language proficiency, while Cummins opposed that it was impossible to integrate all aspects of language into one unitary (Tang, 2007). In 1980, the ACTFL provisional proficiency guidelines were published by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL), describing four basic language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. Apart from these four formal linguistic aspects of English language proficiency, Canale & Swain's and Canale's (1983) established a conceptual scheme consisted of four language skills: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Although there is no consensus on language proficiency, the conception could be related to a specific context of use (Cummins, 2001). In this study, teacher's language proficiency relates to areas of pronunciation, vocabulary, speaking and teaching strategy.

2.1.2. Teacher's language proficiency

Since there is no favorable environment for students to acquire English, EFL class is one of the best choice. Undoubtedly, teacher, as the only person whom students receive information from, has direct impact on student's language learning. (Tang, 2007)

Freeman, Katz, Garcia, G. & Burns (2015) attributed teachers' lack of proficiency to being unable to have English-only policy implemented successfully in classroom. Evidence shown in many researches indicates a mismatch between teachers' self-assessed language proficiency and the level they are expected to be necessary for teaching.

Likewise, Tang (2007) and Littlewood (2007) point out teachers' problem in terms of language proficiency. In Tang' (2007) research, one of English teachers interviewed said that not only him but also his colleagues felt like their language proficiency returned to junior high school student's when they taught junior high and their vocabulary was the area hindered them the most. For further explanation, Robers (1998) alludes to teacher's unwell-grounded language ability and restricted discourse used in classroom teaching which leads to excessive L1 use. Furthermore, conclusion is given by many researches (Carless, 2009; Reesor, 2002; Sato, 2002 & Stewart, 2009), attributing teachers' lack of communicative ability, lack of teacher training etc. to the obstacles which exist in the implementation of English-only policy.

In area of speaking, some participants explained that the reason of speaking less target language consciously or unconsciously was because of his/her weakness in oral English. One participant recalled his English learning experience at school and admitted his ignorance towards standard pronunciation and oral ability which caused his accent.

In addition to what mentioned above, according to Littlewood (2007), a few teachers have no confidence in conducting communicative activities in English because of their insufficient proficiency to deal with unforeseen needs.

2.2. Foreign language anxiety

'Foreign language anxiety' is defined as a specific type of anxiety that is uniquely aroused in situations of learning a foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), and classroom-related is included as one of causes of language learning anxiety. (Zhang & Zhong, 2012)

The study also found that social factors significantly influence anxiety levels. For example, speakers felt less anxious when using their given language for socializing. (Brown & White, 2010). Considering this, Auerbach (1993) suggested L1 use in class, serving its function as reducing anxiety.

According to Hashemi and Abbasi (2013), the more strict and formal in classroom, the more anxiety occurs. They state that it is strict rules of using correct and clearer target language in classroom setting that triggers stress and anxiety. Therefore, when EFL students are exposed to English, their anxiety emerges (Yim, 2012).

2.3. Stress from peers

As far as Wei (2013) is concerned, student's stress and tension from peers is inevitable in the English-only class, which prevents them from speaking English. This happens mostly on beginners. To prove this, Shvikdko, Elena, Evans, Norman W., & Hartshorn, K. James (2015) investigated the factors of language use, proposing that what hinders students' interaction with interlocutors could be many factors including peer pressure.

To illustrate, some participants interviewed in the research said that they were hesitant to speak English with their friends because they are afraid of being judged and looked down upon. In line with this, Young (1991) and Jones (2004)'s findings indicate that the existence of learner's anxiety correlates with fear of being looked down by peers matches.

2.4. Lack of confidence

Lack of confidence is closely related to self-esteem, which is identified as "a psychological and social phenomenon in which an individual evaluates his/her competence and own self according to a set of values" (Rubio, 2007, p. 5).

Many researchers (Shvikdko, Elena, Evans, Norman W., & Hartshorn, K. James, 2015; Tsui, 1996) argued that factors such as lack of confidence or fear of making mistakes, peer pressure could result in students' unwillingness to talk in English.

2.5. Lower beginners' proficiency

As for lower beginners, communicating with peers or teachers with exclusive use of target language is difficult because of insufficient proficiency (Bao, 2012). Opinions of teachers from China's mainland support the argument evidently that students' low English proficiency is regarded as the factor stacking against them speaking English in communicative activities. (Littlewood, 2007). Also, one English teacher in Hongkong interviewed by Carless (2008) expressed her opinion that students' excessive L1 use for discussion might be due to lack of vocabulary. Not only in China, teachers in Korean in Li (1998)'s research hold the same views as well.

3. Analysis

After reviewing the literature above, the section analyses the factors that challenge implementation of the English-only policy. Although many researches insisted on the view that the best way to acquiring language is to place students in an English-only classroom setting.

3.1. Teacher's lack of language proficiency

English-only policy aims to maximize the amount of target language in the classroom, therefore, an adequate grasp of language knowledge is necessary as being an English teacher.

However, English teachers interviewed by Tang (2007) stated their insufficient repertoire especially in terms of vocabulary and communicative ability. Having been influenced by the same school education system, local teachers at EF also meet the same problems of explaining words, giving instruction in English, or having an accent. Because teachers are focused too much on written assignment rather than practicing their speaking skills, so it makes sense why they try not to speak too much English in the class.

In regarding to pronunciation, Tang (2007) quoted one teacher's words in his study highlighting the importance of teacher's pronunciation which could either affect student

positively or negatively. Teacher might be the only person whom student could imitate pronunciation from in classroom. Thus, it is possibly that local teacher's incorrect pronunciation was influenced by his/her former English teacher.

3.2. Insufficient training for teachers

Different from teaching method of regular school, EF requires teachers explain everything in English. Apart from limitation of their own language knowledge mentioned above, a lack of teacher training is also the reason for hindrance. As teachers in Tang (2007) research stated, school's continuing support is very important, but the opportunity of professional development is rather limited. Similar views were shared by local teachers. With a short-term training, teachers at EF, especially new teachers, it is impossible for them to fully take charge of such an English course immediately. What they are familiar with is still a traditional method for English teaching in Chinese, which results in a failure of implementation of English-only policy. Making sure beginners who can understand teacher's meaning, the command of language proficiency is not the only requisite, but competence of instructing as well.

Take myself as an example, I had no any experience when I got the job. Having had obtained 2-week training, I was asked to take over one teacher's class. Although I majored in English in the university, it is unexpectedly tough to give instruction in English. In my point of view, the way that how teacher gives instruction decides how successful a task could be done by students, and meanwhile, it also requires sufficient teaching proficiency for support. Thus, without professional training, teachers cannot give instruction appropriately.

3.3. Student's low proficiency level

It is difficult for low level students to express themselves well in a foreign language due to lack of language proficiency. From student's opinion, the English-only rule deprives their needs to communicate with others. (Shvidko, et. al, 2015). To illustrate, one Portuguese-speaking participant emotionally expressed her stressfulness of being unable to communicate just because of her limited vocabulary. Similar experience was shared by another Brazilian student reflecting that once she couldn't express herself in English, she chose to stop speaking it. Considering the case in my classroom, it might be the same experience we local teachers have been through. As mentioned before, most of students at EF are teenagers who just start learning English, which means there are not much input for them to understand all that teacher say in class. Therefore, students' lack of language proficiency could also be one of factors that hinders implementation of English only policy.

According to research, the excessive use of L1 in class is another problem caused by student's lack of proficiency. As mentioned before, when students engage in communicative task, L1 use is inevitable, local teachers sometimes felt frustrated that it is difficult to control the situation. They have to remind students of "No Chinese" repeatedly.

The case in our school is not in the exception. A similar problem was dictated in Carless (2008) research too. One teacher he interviewed expressed her overwhelmed feeling that she felt helpless to monitor performance of language use adequately. In discuss session, she found that students only spoke English when she passed them rather than the whole class time, she further commented that this could be attributed to students' lack of vocabulary.

Additionally, that students find difficult to keep conversation in English with teacher might probably has something to do with language proficiency. Although they are trying to, but with limitation, they don't know how to express, eventually end up with silence. This could explain the ineffective communication between student and teacher.

3.4. Affective filter

3.4.1. lack of confidence and stress from peers

Lack of confidence is closely related to self-esteem, which is identified as “a psychological and social phenomenon in which an individual evaluates his/her competence and own self according to a set of values” (Rubio, 2007, p. 5). According to Tsui (1996)’s research, it is argued that many factors including lack of confidence kept student from speaking in English. As far as Wei (2013) is concerned, student’s stress and tension from peers is inevitable in the English-only class. One case exemplified in Shvikdko’s research is a student named Natalie, who tried to speak English with other Brazilian students, who made fun of her when she made mistakes. She felt very uncomfortable and began to avoid speaking English with them.

From what I observed, similar situation took place in my classroom where consist of students. Though they were assigned into a same level according to OPT, other aspects of language proficiency that students have are quite different. When every student is forced to use English, student with comparatively high level skills might have tendency to judge their peers, imposing stress on their compatriots.

In a class with “No Chinese” rule, it is understandable that young learners with insufficient knowledge make mistakes at the very beginning, however, under the influence of Chinese traditional culture of Confucianism, they try to avoid this embarrassment. Once they are asked to use English, they refuse to do so. What’s worse, teacher’s further encouragement could possible turn into a negative compel to some degree.

3.4.2. Social anxiety

It is said that students feel less anxious when acquainting with a person who speaks same language. Having not being in an English-immersion class, students feel anxious when they start taking this English-only class.

Since oral presentation is the most anxiety-provoking classroom activity (Koch and Terrell, 1991), learners felt uncomfortable in this environment with stress. (Elaldi, 2016). Therefore, students who were asked to do presentation in class feel stressful and be reluctant to speak.

4. Recommendation

In regarding to the above challenges which hinder the implementation of English-only policy, some practical suggestions are given as follows:

4.1. Development of language proficiency

4.1.1. Training program

As what mentioned in the analysis section, teacher struggled with explaining and instructing in English because of their lack of language proficiency, which has been confirmed by many researchers. Therefore, teacher’s training program is necessary before they start teaching in such a special context and the training time should be extended until the teacher is ready for the class.

4.1.2. Peer observation

Peer observation is recommended for teacher’s development. It is suggested that teachers be given opportunities to observe their colleagues’ class so that they could learn from experienced teachers, improving their own teaching skills. This might not develop new teachers in areas of language, but is significantly helpful to their future teaching.

4.1.3. self-development

Apart from insufficient teaching experience, a lack of vocabulary and oral practice is also a factor that results in teacher’s concerns of teaching in English. The suggestion is that in office,

local teachers could try to have more conversation with foreign teachers and pay attention on their pronunciation more consciously, afterwards, they could utilize extra materials for enlarging vocabulary by self-learning.

4.2. Judicious use of L1 in class

Despite that challenges exist, teachers should make students appreciate English class through various techniques. Accordingly, Hossein & Sediqe (2015)'s research found that teachers, in the classroom, use L1 as a facilitator to keep conversation going with English beginners, an aid to express meaning and eliminate vague concepts. Accordingly, judicious use of L1 is suggested by researches (Al-Jadidi & Sanguinetti, 201; Shabir, 2017) This suggestion aligns with "English-mainly" (McMillan & Rivers, 2009; Rivers. 2011a, 2011b) rule with which students could be allowed to choose using L1 in some phases of the lesson depending on their needs.

4.2.1. L1 use for facilitating communication

As McMillan, Brian, & Rivers, Damian (2011) stated, L1 has a positive impact on both L2 teaching and learning for it facilitates communication as a "conversational lubricant". When students meet trouble with expressing themselves due to their limited language proficiency such as a lack of vocabulary, L1 use should be permitted. For example, when correcting student's writing assignment in class, teachers could give some words in L1 as prompts for students to remind them of mistakes rather than using grammar terms which would confuse them.

4.2.2. L1 use for reducing student's anxiety

Given that most EF students do not have such class in which teacher use English to teach, a relaxing atmosphere is the precondition for them to learn effectively. As Auerbach (1993) argued that L1 use reduces anxiety, thus teacher could make the best of it for building rapport with students in the class, explaining in Chinese to comfort them at the very beginning and have them know the rule, otherwise, students would feel overwhelmed.

4.2.3. L1 use for instruction of class activities

Regarding challenge stated by teachers about giving instruction in English, both Al-Jadidi, & Sanguinetti and Shabir (2017)'s research mentioned that students tend to demand teachers use L1 for instruction of

5. Conclusion

This article accounts for the major challenges that teacher and students encounter when English-only policy is implemented and gives suggestions to solve the problem. Challenges are pointed out from teacher and student's perspective.

In conclusion, English-only might sound pedagogically favorable for English learner, however, given that both teachers and students are stakeholders in this situation, their voice should be taken into consideration. In terms of teacher's proficiency, efforts should be made to improve their level. As for English beginners, it is suggested L1 is acceptable if it is used judiciously. According to many researches, under some circumstances, L1 could facilitate language acquisition. Only if when English-only policy is contextualized, teacher and students could benefit with it otherwise they will be off the track.

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