

English-Only Policy in the Classroom: Benefits and Drawbacks in Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the benefits and drawbacks of the English-only policy in students' language acquisition and how it aids teachers in teaching the English language. This study used a qualitative descriptive research design, wherein observation, interview, and focus group discussion were administered face-to-face to the 15 participants, who were teachers and students. The study revealed that the English-only policy improved communication skills, enhanced English knowledge, developed Students' language proficiency, and increased confidence in speaking. Meanwhile, the drawbacks found in the study that students usually encountered were difficulty in communication, in Limited classroom interaction, violation of the policy, and decreased self-confidence. Also, the policy aids teachers in using teacher instructional clarity, classroom engagement, and teaching enhancement. Lastly, the study concluded that the English-only policy has more benefits than drawbacks for students acquiring the English language.

Keywords: English-Only policy, Benefits, Drawbacks, Aid

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning a language remains a complex and enduring process that demands consistent effort, motivation, and active engagement from learners. Particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, students often struggle with acquiring fluency due to limited exposure and opportunities for authentic use of the language (Matsuda, 2017; Alghasab, 2020). A widely adopted approach to address this is the English-only policy, which mandates English as the sole medium of communication in the classroom. This immersion method is designed to improve students' communicative

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competence and confidence (Maxwell et al., 2010). However, while it aims to create an environment conducive to language acquisition, it also introduces challenges – especially in contexts where students' proficiency levels vary significantly (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

In many Southeast Asian classrooms, including the Philippines, the English-only policy is imposed with the goal of enhancing language proficiency, yet its implementation often lacks sensitivity to students' socio-cultural and linguistic realities. Studies reveal that rigid enforcement may lead to anxiety, disengagement, or even ridicule for those who struggle to conform (Danping, 2015; Garcia & Flores, 2021). Moreover, penalties associated with violations risk reinforcing power imbalances rather than fostering a supportive learning environment. There is a critical need to examine how such policies are perceived by students, and whether they truly support learning or inadvertently marginalize certain groups. This study aims to explore these perceptions, identifying both the opportunities and limitations of the English-only policy in localized classroom settings to inform more inclusive and effective pedagogical strategies.

II. METHODS

A qualitative-descriptive research design was employed to explore the benefits and challenges of implementing the English-only policy in language acquisition and how it supports teaching practices. Participants included students and faculty members from the Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies and the Bachelor of Secondary Education programs at Isabela State University – Cauayan City Campus. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and focused group discussions, all conducted in person to allow for deeper engagement and contextual understanding. The researchers adopted a purposive sampling technique to select participants who were directly involved in the English-only policy implementation. Triangulation of data sources and methods ensured the credibility and dependability of the findings, while validation was enhanced by peer debriefing and member checking. To minimize bias, the researchers maintained reflexivity through journaling and audit trails, and all data were collected and analyzed with strict adherence to confidentiality and informed consent protocols approved by the university ethics board.

Thematic analysis was conducted using the six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows for rich, detailed, and complex interpretations of qualitative data. The process began with familiarization – transcribing interviews and reading through the data multiple times – followed by generating initial codes to highlight recurring ideas. These codes were then collated into potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and

distinctiveness. The researchers defined and named each theme clearly to encapsulate its core meaning and relevance to the research questions. Finally, the themes were interpreted in light of the research objectives to draw meaningful insights. This systematic approach not only ensured methodological rigor but also enabled the analysis to reflect participants' authentic voices while accounting for contextually grounded nuances in language use and classroom dynamics.

III. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

A. Benefits of English-Only Policy

1. Improved oral communication skills.

The findings of the study reveal that the implementation of an English-only policy significantly enhances students' oral communication skills. Participants noted that regular exposure to the target language helped them express their ideas more fluently, improved their ability to articulate thoughts clearly, and increased their comfort in engaging in spontaneous discussions. Classroom observations supported these claims, showing students actively participating by responding in English, using gestures, and collaborating during activities.

The immersion promoted by this policy aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which asserts that consistent exposure to comprehensible input in the target language fosters acquisition. However, participants also reported that the rejection of Tagalog in classroom discussions occasionally discouraged them from participating, especially when they lacked the vocabulary to express complex ideas. This reflects Garcia and Wei's (2014) concept of translanguaging, which suggests that allowing learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire can foster deeper understanding and reduce language anxiety.

Despite these tensions, students acknowledged that teachers' encouragement to "try and speak" even when unsure contributed to building their fluency. This approach creates a safe and supportive environment, crucial for lowering affective filters and enhancing willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 2016). Overall, while strict enforcement had its challenges, the policy was perceived as a powerful tool in developing oral communication.

2. Expansion of English language knowledge.

Participants emphasized that the English-only policy increased their exposure to academic vocabulary and grammatical structures. Through regular practice, they became more proficient in constructing sentences, using appropriate tenses, and incorporating

new vocabulary into both written and spoken outputs. They linked these improvements to their increased confidence in class presentations and written tasks. Additionally, they noted that retelling materials in their own words helped reinforce their understanding and retention of content.

The policy's emphasis on active language use is consistent with Nation's (2013) principle that meaningful language output supports the internalization of new linguistic forms. Further, the findings support Swain's Output Hypothesis (2005), which argues that producing language forces learners to process syntax and meaning more deeply. Classroom observations validated students' claims—many were seen paraphrasing materials, rewording teacher questions, and responding to follow-up prompts in extended English discourse.

However, some students acknowledged that while they were gaining vocabulary, they sometimes misused terms due to a lack of contextual understanding. This indicates the need for scaffolded instruction, where teachers provide modeling and corrective feedback, aligned with Lightbown and Spada's (2021) call for form-focused instruction within communicative tasks. Overall, students valued the policy for its role in deepening their command of English, even while recognizing the need for balanced linguistic support.

3. Fostered peer support.

Students reported that the English-only classroom environment encouraged a cooperative atmosphere where they supported each other in constructing sentences, correcting grammar, and building confidence. Peer support emerged as a key mechanism for overcoming language anxiety. Students described instances where classmates assisted in expressing thoughts or clarifying vocabulary during classroom discussions. Observations affirmed that collaborative dialogue often emerged when students were challenged to articulate ideas in English.

This aligns with sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes that social interaction is essential in language learning. By engaging in scaffolded dialogue, learners co-construct knowledge and negotiate meaning. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) further support this, noting that language development is enhanced when learners feel part of a community. In this context, peer interaction was not only encouraged but became a crucial support system for linguistic development.

4. Improved linguistic areas.

Participants highlighted notable improvements in their vocabulary acquisition and grammar usage. Through repeated exposure and forced practice in English, they

reported being more confident in constructing complete sentences and understanding syntactic patterns. Observations showed that students were actively using transition words, subject-verb agreement, and self-correcting when prompted.

These outcomes resonate with form-focused instruction principles (Lightbown & Spada, 2021), which suggest that when learners are engaged in communicative practice while also paying attention to linguistic form, they are more likely to internalize accurate language use. Furthermore, this aligns with Burden's (2020) findings that students believe communicative activities help them develop more natural fluency. While some participants admitted struggling initially, the continuous use of English gradually helped them overcome difficulties, especially when paired with reflective feedback from instructors.

5. Motivation to learn English for future profession.

Participants frequently linked the English-only policy to their career goals, particularly those pursuing education-related degrees. They believed that mastering English was essential not just for academic success but for professional readiness. Several saw the policy as an opportunity to simulate the language demands of their future roles as teachers, presenters, or communicators in English-speaking contexts.

Dörnyei's (2019) L2 motivational self-system supports this connection, suggesting that learners who envision themselves in future English-using roles show greater motivation and persistence. The classroom, then, becomes a space for identity development, not merely skill acquisition. Additionally, Rahman and Pandian (2018) emphasize the growing demand for English proficiency in global career markets, which further validates students' forward-looking motivations.

6. Developed students' English language proficiency.

Participants affirmed that being immersed in an English-only environment enhanced their fluency and accuracy. Students were observed using English 75–90% of the time in class activities, suggesting increasing comfort with the target language. Teachers noted improvements in pronunciation, sentence flow, and reduced reliance on translation from the mother tongue.

These observations are consistent with language immersion models (Genesee, 2015), which show that language use in authentic contexts increases acquisition rates and proficiency. Azhar and Gopal (2021) also support the idea that consistent practice in an immersive setting leads to measurable improvements in speaking proficiency and vocabulary recall. The absence of code-switching, while initially limiting, pushed students to develop automaticity in English use.

7. Increased students' confidence in speaking English.

Students reported developing greater confidence in using English, both inside and outside the classroom. At the beginning of the implementation, they expressed hesitation, but over time, they became more willing to participate and speak during lessons. Teachers also observed students initiating conversations, presenting in English, and volunteering for activities.

These changes can be interpreted using MacIntyre et al.'s (2016) Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model, which connects language confidence with social context and self-perception. As students experienced success in using English, their WTC increased, reducing their communication apprehension. Syamsurizal (2008) highlighted the importance of authentic oral use, and this was evident in how students transitioned from silent observers to active contributors in English-only classes.

8. Students' language growth.

Students described their growth in both fluency and accuracy, attributing this development to consistent practice, teacher support, and peer feedback. They reported an expanded vocabulary, improved sentence complexity, and a growing ability to express nuanced thoughts in English. Observations confirmed that responses became longer and more precise over time.

According to Brown (2001), language development is reinforced by both quantity and quality of input and output. This is also consistent with interlanguage theory, which proposes that students gradually refine their target language performance through feedback, self-monitoring, and continuous practice. The classroom functioned as a dynamic learning space where students experimented with and internalized the English language.

B. Drawbacks of the English-Only Policy

1. Difficulty in communication.

Participants commonly reported difficulties in expressing themselves, especially during spontaneous speaking tasks. Struggles with pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and unfamiliar sentence structures often disrupted communication and led to frustration. Observations reflected that many students hesitated or paused frequently when responding in English, particularly during questioning.

These findings reflect Cummins' (2000) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) – where students may be conversationally fluent but struggle with academic or formal

registers. Moreover, Lane and Wright (2011) found that learners often experience cognitive overload when required to speak in a second language without sufficient scaffolding. Thus, strict English-only enforcement without flexible accommodations can impede real communication and undermine student confidence.

2. Language anxiety and limited participation.

Several students expressed heightened anxiety due to fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers and teachers. This pressure sometimes resulted in silence, avoidance of tasks, or mechanical repetition rather than genuine engagement. Observations showed that some students remained quiet even when prompted, indicating discomfort in high-stakes, English-only settings.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety can significantly hinder second language performance and participation. The expectation to use only English without alternatives can activate a high affective filter, as per Krashen's (1982) theory, thereby impeding language acquisition. Therefore, while the policy aims to enhance language use, it can paradoxically suppress it when learners feel emotionally unsafe.

3. Unequal impact on learners.

The findings suggest that the English-only policy disproportionately affects lower-proficiency students, who often resorted to silence or minimal responses. In contrast, higher-proficiency students thrived, using the opportunity to speak extensively. Such imbalance was observed across classes, with some students actively engaging and others withdrawing or relying heavily on memorized phrases.

This dynamic highlights the importance of differentiated instruction and equitable learning opportunities, as proposed by Tomlinson (2014). Enforcing a one-size-fits-all English-only rule fails to accommodate learners at varying developmental stages and may widen the proficiency gap within classrooms.

4. Code-switching and communicative efficiency.

Participants admitted to code-switching to Tagalog during moments of confusion, explanation, or peer clarification. They emphasized that doing so helped them understand tasks more effectively and made classroom interactions smoother. Observations showed occasional Tagalog usage, particularly in group work and when expressing complex ideas.

Bautista (2004) and Garcia and Wei (2014) argue that code-switching can be a strategic tool for communicative efficiency and should not always be viewed as a breakdown of language learning. In multilingual contexts, switching between languages

can serve pedagogical functions, helping students process content more meaningfully and efficiently.

5. High expectations and performance pressure.

Students expressed that being expected to speak fluently at all times, especially as English majors, created additional stress. Some described feeling scrutinized and pressured to “sound perfect,” which hindered their spontaneity. One participant noted that expectations sometimes felt unrealistic, especially during oral presentations.

These findings relate to Ur’s (2002) assertion that speaking is often the most anxiety-inducing skill for learners. While the policy intends to encourage fluency, overemphasis on performance can result in anxiety and inauthentic communication. A more balanced approach that focuses on process, not perfection, may support better learning outcomes.

6. Decreased student engagement.

Some participants admitted to disengaging from discussions due to fear of making mistakes or being penalized. In some observed cases, teachers assigned demerits or withheld participation grades for violations of the policy, reinforcing negative associations with English use.

This reflects Dewaele and MacIntyre’s (2014) findings that enjoyment and engagement in language learning are significantly shaped by emotional experiences. If students associate English use with punishment or embarrassment, they are less likely to participate voluntarily or take creative risks, which are essential for language growth.

7. Challenges for teachers.

Teachers reported challenges in enforcing the English-only rule without compromising clarity or support. They often struggled with how much to scaffold explanations and when to intervene. When students became quiet or confused, teachers had to choose between sticking to the policy or momentarily reverting to Tagalog for clarification.

This tension highlights what Khasbani (2018) terms the “pedagogical dilemma” in second-language classrooms: teachers must balance immersion with accessibility. While the English-only policy can enhance teacher authority and set clear expectations, it also limits flexibility, particularly when addressing complex topics or responding to diverse learner needs.

C. English-Only Policy as an Aid for Instruction

1. Instructional clarity and classroom engagement.

Teachers reported that the English-only policy helped streamline classroom communication and created a more immersive and goal-oriented learning environment. By maintaining English as the sole medium, classroom routines became more structured, and students gradually adapted to listening and responding in the target language. Observations confirmed that both students and teachers maintained consistent use of English during discussions, instructions, and student responses.

This finding reflects Auerbach's (1993) view that the language of instruction shapes classroom dynamics and communicative authenticity. When students and teachers share a clear linguistic expectation, instructional delivery becomes more efficient. Additionally, Richards (2017) argues that increased input in the target language builds students' listening comprehension and helps them decode classroom tasks more effectively. In this context, the policy aided teachers in reinforcing instructional objectives through consistent language exposure.

However, teachers acknowledged the challenge of balancing clarity and policy enforcement—particularly when addressing abstract concepts. To manage this, some teachers employed paraphrasing, visual aids, and simplified language to maintain understanding without reverting to the mother tongue. This strategic use of teacher talk reflects practices supported by Lightbown & Spada (2021), who advocate for modified input as a tool for comprehension.

2. Teaching enhancement.

Teachers stated that implementing the English-only policy led them to be more intentional in planning lessons, selecting vocabulary, and modeling communicative behaviors. Because students were expected to respond in English, teachers became more aware of how they structured prompts and scaffolded student output. This proactive approach contributed to more purposeful classroom discourse and encouraged reciprocal language learning between students and teachers.

Findings support Rahayu and Margana's (2018) research, which shows that teachers who actively engage with learners in English promote higher levels of interest and interaction. When students perceive their instructors as role models who embody effective communication in English, they are more likely to emulate those behaviors. Additionally, the policy encouraged teachers to monitor language use more closely and provide timely corrective feedback, which aligns with form-focused interaction models in communicative language teaching (Spada & Lightbown, 2008).

Teachers also noted that while the policy enhanced classroom focus, it required them to be sensitive to students' affective needs. Encouraging student expression without

judgment and praising effort over perfection became key strategies in promoting sustained engagement. These practices reflect MacIntyre et al. (2016) who emphasized the role of affective variables in learner participation and instructional success.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study explored the benefits and drawbacks of implementing an English-only policy in language classrooms from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Findings revealed that while the policy positively contributes to the development of oral communication, vocabulary, fluency, and student confidence—especially among English majors—it also presents significant challenges. Students frequently experience communication difficulties, anxiety, and a fear of judgment, which in turn affects classroom participation. Teachers also encounter instructional challenges when student engagement decreases due to the rigid enforcement of the policy.

In light of these findings, the study recommends a more flexible approach to English language instruction. Rather than a strictly enforced English-only rule, educators should consider an *English-plus* model, where the mother tongue is used strategically for scaffolding and clarification when necessary. Differentiated expectations based on students' proficiency levels and greater emphasis on confidence-building rather than penalization are also advised. Additionally, teacher training should include strategies for managing multilingual classrooms and promoting inclusive participation.

The implications of this study align with current debates on language education policy in multilingual societies. It highlights the need for institutions to revisit English-only policies and prioritize inclusivity, student well-being, and pedagogical effectiveness. By adopting a more balanced and context-sensitive approach, educational institutions can create a language learning environment that not only upholds English proficiency goals but also respects students' linguistic diversity and promotes equitable learning outcomes.

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