

# Imposing "English Only" Rules in the EFL Classroom

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*"Mr. Suzuki, English only, remember?"*

*"Maria, Antonio, why aren't you using English?"*

*"Every time you speak Japanese, you have to put ¥10 into the class party fund."*

Depending on your language teaching/learning experiences and pedagogical beliefs, you may find yourself saying these things to your EFL students. Your success in imposing English-only rules in the EFL classroom depends on several factors: what size class you are teaching, what type class you are teaching, how conscious and deliberate your decision is to impose English-only rules, and whether or not your English-only rules are objectively and consistently applied.

## Class Size and Type

Common sense tells us that smaller groups containing less than twenty students are easier to control, in terms of imposing English-only rules, than larger groups containing twenty or more students. Teachers dealing with large classes may have to give up the expectation of students using English during the entirety of class, and instead impose English-only rules in connection with specific class tasks. For a class of twenty to thirty students, for example, discussion groups of five students each could be formed by placing five chairs in a circle for each group, and designating the interior of the circle as an English-only area. Or, a specific period of English-only

time, say, ten minutes, can be established in connection with a pair work activity class members are working on.

"Intensive" type classes, and classes where the students have expectations of using English in the future for homestays, business, etc., are better English-only class candidates than EFL classes where students have no particular use for English, other than getting college credit, or making the boss happy. You can always make use of students' expected future use of English in getting them to increase their motivation to use only English during class. In classes where this is not possible, you may once again have to give up the expectation of students using only English and concentrate on specific classroom tasks in which the use of English can be required, and enforced with a minimum of headache.

## A Conscious or Unconscious Decision?

Thoroughly examine your feelings and experiences about imposing English-only rules in your EFL classes, and make a conscious decision through this self examination.

Do you feel irritation or loss of control when students chatter in their native language ignoring your explanations, directions, and entreaties to listen? While there's nothing wrong with feeling frustration, frustrated teachers are more likely to make snap decisions about imposing English-only rules in their

classrooms, and are more likely to be inconsistent in following through with whatever decision they've made. You will not only be short-circuiting an effective route to treating your own frustration in a positive manner, you will probably drive your students crazy, because they won't know what you expect from them.

The next time you're feeling irritated in class because students are conversing in their native language, pay attention to how long the emotion lasts. Note what you are tempted to say, or do, in response to the students' behavior. After class, think back about the emotion. Would it have been worth it, in terms of the students, their feelings for you, their learning, and your feelings for them, to have acted out on your feelings of frustration and loss of control? Probably not. You can defuse these negative emotions by making across-the-board, conscious decisions about the use of English-only rules in class: to use or not to use them, and when to use them. Once you have decided what the rules are, impose them, and most importantly, stick to them.

Examine your language teaching experiences in order to help you reach a conscious decision about English-only rules. Do students really learn more in an English-only class? How do you know? Are their test scores higher? Do students say they note more improvement during feedback sessions? If you have the opportunity, conduct your own classroom research by focusing on two classes—one where only English is allowed and the other where native language use is allowed—over a period of two weeks, or whatever you decide. Choose some objective measure such as a test, or a

verbal interview, apply it to students in both classes, and see what differences, if any, exist. While such research is crude, you will at least be able to objectively apply it to your situation, and your decision.

Your own language learning experiences can be gleaned for insights which can be used to determine what English-only rules should be imposed in your EFL classes and when. If you had a positive learning experience in an Italian-only class, for example, think back about the elements of that class that made it a positive one, in terms of your learning. How did the teacher enforce the L2-only rules? With a humorous remark? With a "√" next to your name and after ten of them, you had to sing an Italian aria? Were you given time to "blow off steam" in your mother tongue in a native-language "corner" of the room? Did the teacher offer feedback sessions at the end of class in your first language? Conversely, if you had a negative language learning experience in an target language-only class, note precisely what was negative about it. Did the teacher yell at you some days, and not at all on others, when you used your native tongue? Were you shamed in front of the other students? Even from your negative experiences, you can learn what to avoid, or how to change negative strategies of enforcing use of the target language.

### **Being Objective and Consistent**

When you decide to impose English-only rules in your classes, create a model for the rules. This will help you maintain an objectivity and consistency that will greatly enhance your success in enforcing the rules. The model should

include, of course, what rules you intend to impose (one EFL teacher I know of in Japan not only forbids the use of Japanese, but also of *katakana* English, which is English pronounced according to one of the Japanese scripts), when you intend to impose them (for the entirety of the class, or only during certain times or activities), and how you intend to impose them.

Creating a self-proposal of how you intend to impose English-only rules (and later, records of what strategies worked and other strategies you can try in the future), should always include planning the use of classroom structures that will allow students to understand clearly what is expected of them. One good place to begin is a syllabus that clearly states what your policy is, in terms of use of L1 and L2. Hand it out to the students at the beginning of the school term, and quiz

students on it, or review it periodically throughout the term. If you don't have "terms" *per se* in your teaching situations, create terms of four or more weeks, and inform the students what you are doing.

Also let students know what you expect of them through consistent enforcement of whatever English-only rules you have chosen for the class. When enforcing the rules, use a neutral tone of voice, and refer to the rule itself, not what the students are doing to break it.

#### About the Author

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