Teacher and Student Perceptions of Using English Only in the Classroom Among EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study investigates teachers' and students' perceptions of using English only in the classroom at Al-Farah Basic School. The study aims to explore the perceived benefits and challenges of English-only instruction in an EFL learning environment. A mixed-methods approach is employed, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as research instruments. The participants include EFL teachers and students at the primary level. Data are analyzed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings are expected to show that while English-only instruction is perceived as beneficial for improving students' speaking fluency and confidence, it may also cause comprehension difficulties and anxiety, particularly among lower-level learners. The study concludes that a balanced approach, allowing limited use of the learners' first language when necessary, create a more supportive and effective learning environment.
Keywords: English-only instruction; EFL classrooms; Teachers' perceptions; Students' perceptions; and Language learning environment.

تصورات المعلمين والطلاب حول استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية فقط في الفصل الدراسي
في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء تصوّرات المعلّمين والطالبات حول استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية فقط داخل الصف الدراسي في **مدرسة الفرح الأساسية للبنات**. وتسعى الدراسة إلى التعرف على الفوائد والتحديات المتصوَّرة لاعتماد التعليم باللغة الإنجليزية فقط في بيئة تعلّم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج المختلط، حيث استُخدمت الاستبانات والمقابلات شبه المنظَّمة كأدوات لجمع البيانات. وتكوّنت عيّنة الدراسة من معلّمي اللغة الإنجليزية والطالبات في المرحلة الأساسية. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام الإحصاء الوصفي والتحليل الموضوعي. ومن المتوقّع أن تُظهِر نتائج الدراسة أن استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية فقط داخل الصف يُعدّ مفيدًا في تحسين طلاقة التحدث وزيادة ثقة الطالبات بأنفسهن، إلا أنه قد يسبّب في الوقت نفسه صعوبات في الفهم وشعورًا بالقلق، ولا سيما لدى المتعلّمات ذوات المستوى اللغوي المنخفض. وتخلص

الدراسة إلى أن اعتماد أسلوب متوازن يسمح باستخدام محدود للغة الأم عند الضرورة قد يوفّر بيئة تعليمية أكثر دعمًا وفاعلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس باللغة الإنجليزية فقط؛ صفوف اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ تصوّرات المعلّمين؛ تصوّرات الطالبات؛ بيئة تعلّم اللغة.

Introduction

English has become an essential global language used in education, communication, and international interaction. As a result, improving English language teaching methods has become a major concern in EFL contexts. One widely discussed issue in English language teaching is the use of English only in the classroom, where teachers minimize or completely avoid the use of the students' first language during instruction. In many EFL classrooms, including those in Iraq, teachers often face challenges in deciding whether to use English exclusively or to allow some use of the learners' mother tongue. While English-only instruction is believed to increase exposure to the target language and improve speaking fluency, it may also lead to misunderstanding, frustration, and anxiety among learners, especially at the primary level.

This study focuses on Al-Farah Basic School as a case study to examine how both teachers and students perceive the use of English-only instruction in their classrooms. Primary school learners represent an important stage in language development, as early exposure to English can strongly influence future language proficiency. Understanding their experiences and attitudes, as well as teachers' perspectives, is therefore crucial.

The study aims to explore the benefits and challenges of using English only in the classroom and to determine whether this approach supports or hinders effective learning. By investigating teachers' and students' perceptions at Al-Farah Basic School, the research seeks to provide insights that can help educators adopt more effective and flexible teaching strategies that promote communication while reducing learners' anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of English-only Policy and Its Objectives

The English-only policy refers to the instructional approach in which English is used as the sole medium of communication inside the classroom. This policy aims to maximize learners' exposure to the target language and reduce dependence on the mother tongue. It is grounded in second language acquisition theories that emphasize immersion and meaningful input. By surrounding learners with English, the policy seeks to simulate natural language environments (Smith, 2008: 12).

One of the primary objectives of the English-only policy is to enhance students' communicative competence. When learners are required to use English consistently, they become more confident in expressing ideas and negotiating meaning. This continuous practice helps learners internalize grammatical structures

and vocabulary. The policy also promotes automatic language processing. As a result, students rely less on translation and more on direct thinking in English. Another important objective is to develop learners' listening and speaking skills. Constant exposure to spoken English improves pronunciation, intonation, and listening comprehension. Learners gradually adapt to different accents and speech patterns. This exposure is particularly valuable in EFL contexts where English input is limited. The English-only classroom provides a rich linguistic environment (Richards, 2011: 44).

The English-only policy also aims to foster learner autonomy. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own language learning. They learn to use context, gestures, and paraphrasing to overcome communication difficulties. This process strengthens strategic competence. Learners become active participants rather than passive recipients. Autonomy contributes to long-term language success (Harmer, 2015: 63).

However, the use of English only in the classroom seeks to create a positive attitude toward English learning. Regular use of English reduces anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Learners begin to view English as a practical communication tool rather than a school subject. This shift in perception increases motivation and engagement. A supportive English-only environment can enhance classroom interaction. Motivation plays a key role in language achievement (Gardner, 2009: 81).

2.2 Techniques of Applying English Only in the Classroom

Harmer (2015: 94-95) states that there are certain techniques of applying English Only in the Classroom, as the following:

1. Using Simple and Clear Instructions

Teachers should give instructions in clear and carefully simplified English in order to ensure that learners can easily understand classroom tasks and activities. This technique helps students follow lesson procedures without resorting to their native language, which supports continuous exposure to English. Repetition, modeling, and rephrasing play a significant role in reinforcing meaning and minimizing confusion. Additionally, the use of short, well-structured sentences allows learners to process instructions more effectively.

2. Employing Visual Aids and Body Language

Visual aids such as pictures, charts, flashcards, real objects, and videos play a crucial role in conveying meaning in the English-only classroom. Body language, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact further support learners' understanding of abstract or difficult concepts. These techniques significantly reduce students' reliance on translation and the use of the mother tongue. As a result, learners begin to associate meaning directly with English words and

expressions. Visual and physical support enhances comprehension and sustains communication in English (Ur, 2012: 108).

3. Encouraging Pair and Group Work

Pair and group work activities provide learners with increased opportunities to use English in meaningful and interactive ways. Many students feel less anxious and more confident when speaking with peers rather than addressing the teacher or the whole class. Interaction during collaborative tasks promotes authentic communicative practice and spontaneous language use. Learners negotiate meaning, clarify ideas, and support each other through discussion. This technique plays a vital role in developing fluency and communicative competence (Richards, 2011: 121).

4. Using Classroom English Routines

The use of regular classroom English routines, such as greetings, asking questions, giving feedback, and managing classroom behavior, helps familiarize learners with functional and everyday English expressions. Continuous repetition of these routines builds confidence and enables learners to internalize useful language naturally. Students gradually memorize expressions without conscious effort or memorization. As a result, classroom English becomes automatic and effortless. Routine language supports consistency and sustained use of English throughout lessons (Scrivener, 2013: 137).

5. Providing Language Support and Scaffolding

Providing language support through sentence starters, key vocabulary, guided questions, and structured responses is essential in an English-only classroom. Scaffolding enables learners to express their ideas more effectively while reducing frustration and anxiety. Gradual withdrawal of teacher support encourages learners to become more independent and confident in their language use. Students feel guided rather than pressured during communication. This technique successfully balances linguistic challenge with appropriate assistance (Dewoll, 1978: 156).

2.2 Role of the Teacher in Applying English Only in the Classroom

The teacher plays a central role in implementing the English-only policy successfully. Teachers serve as language models for learners. Their consistent use of English sets expectations. Clear pronunciation and appropriate language level are essential. Teachers guide interaction carefully. Effective modeling supports language acquisition. Teachers are responsible for creating a supportive classroom atmosphere. Students must feel safe to make mistakes. Encouragement reduces anxiety and fear. A positive environment increases participation. Teachers should praise effort rather than accuracy alone. Emotional support enhances learning. (Brown, 2010: 189)

Another role of the teacher is adapting language input to learners' proficiency levels. Teachers simplify language without oversimplifying content. Adjusted

input ensures comprehension. Teachers repeat and rephrase when necessary. This strategy maintains English use. Comprehensible input is crucial. Teachers must also monitor and guide student interaction. They ensure that English remains the main medium of communication. Gentle reminders encourage English use. Teachers avoid excessive correction. Balance between fluency and accuracy is important. Monitoring supports consistent practice (Richards, 2011: 217)

In addition to that, teachers act as facilitators rather than controllers. They encourage learner initiative and communication. Teachers design tasks that require English use. Meaningful activities promote engagement. Facilitation empowers learners. Student-centered classrooms support policy success. However, teachers evaluate learners' progress and adjust strategies accordingly. Reflection helps identify difficulties. Teachers modify techniques to meet learners' needs. Continuous assessment supports improvement. Flexibility strengthens implementation. Effective teachers adapt their approach. (Ur, 2012: 246)

2.3 Role of Learners in the Classroom

Learners play an active role in the success of the English-only classroom. They are expected to participate actively in English communication. Willingness to speak is essential. Learners must take risks. Active participation accelerates learning. Responsibility lies with learners. Learners should develop positive attitudes toward using English. Confidence grows through practice. Fear of mistakes should be minimized. Learners support each other emotionally. Positive attitudes encourage persistence. Motivation enhances performance (Dörnyei, 2005: 273).

Another role of learners is using communication strategies. Paraphrasing helps convey meaning. Gestures support expression. Asking for clarification maintains English interaction. Strategies reduce reliance on the native language. Strategic competence is essential. Learners are also responsible for cooperative learning. Group work requires collaboration in English. Peer interaction increases exposure. Learners learn from each other. Cooperation strengthens social skills. Shared responsibility enhances learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999: 302).

However, self monitoring is another important learner role. Learners reflect on their language use. Awareness improves accuracy. Learners notice errors naturally. Reflection promotes autonomy. Self monitoring leads to progress. Moreover, learners should practice English beyond the classroom. Exposure through media supports learning. Independent practice reinforces classroom input. Learners take ownership of learning. Extended exposure improves fluency. Lifelong learning habits develop. (Benson, 2011: 331)

2.4 Advantages (Benefits) of Using English Only in the Classroom

Cook (2001: 100-105) clarifies that there are certain advantages or benefits of using English Only in the classroom, as the following:

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1.Constant use of English in the classroom significantly improves learners' fluency by providing continuous opportunities for speaking practice. As students engage regularly in oral communication, they gradually gain confidence in expressing their ideas and opinions.

2. Learners in English-only classrooms are exposed to continuous and varied English input throughout the lesson. This sustained exposure enhances listening comprehension and helps students become familiar with different pronunciation patterns and speech rhythms.

3. English-only classrooms reduce learners' reliance on translation from their mother tongue. Students begin to process meaning directly in English, which improves cognitive efficiency in language use. This direct processing allows language to become more automatic and fluent. However, learners develop the ability to think in English without conscious effort.

4. Active and continuous use of English increases learners' engagement in classroom activities. As students successfully communicate in English, they experience a sense of achievement and progress. This success leads to higher levels of motivation and positive attitudes toward language learning. Participation becomes more enjoyable and less stressful.

5. English-only classrooms simulate real-life communication situations in which English is naturally used. Learners engage in authentic interaction that reflects real-world language use. This exposure helps students experience English as a practical means of communication rather than an academic subject. Continuous interaction increases linguistic competence and confidence.

2.5 Disadvantages (Challenges) of Using English Only in the Classroom

Brown (1999: 17-20) asserts that there are certain disadvantages or challenges of using English only in the classroom, as the following:

1.Some learners experience high levels of stress and anxiety when they are required to use English exclusively in the classroom. Fear of making mistakes often limits their willingness to participate in speaking activities. This anxiety can negatively affect learners' overall performance and confidence.

2. Low-level learners may struggle to understand classroom instructions and explanations when only English is used. Limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. As a result, learners may feel frustrated and disconnected from the lesson. Teachers must adjust the level of language input and use supportive techniques.

3. In an attempt to make English comprehensible, teachers may rely excessively on simplified language. This over-simplification can reduce learners' exposure to rich and varied language input. Language development requires a balance between simplicity and complexity.

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4. Maintaining consistent use of English throughout classroom activities can be challenging for teachers. Learners often revert to their mother tongue, especially during group work or informal interaction. Continuous monitoring requires considerable effort from the teacher. Ensuring consistency in English use may become difficult over time.

5. The learners' mother tongue can play a supportive role in second language learning. Completely excluding it from the classroom may be unrealistic and impractical. Strategic use of the first language can facilitate comprehension and clarify complex concepts. A balanced approach allows learners to benefit from both languages.

3. Methodology

This study explains the research design and procedures used to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions of using English only in the classroom. It describes the participants, research instruments, data collection procedures, and methods of data analysis in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach allows the researcher to collect numerical data through questionnaires and in-depth insights through semi-structured interviews. Using both methods provides a more comprehensive understanding of participants' attitudes and experiences regarding the English-only classroom policy.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study consist of EFL teachers and students at the secondary school and university levels. Teachers are selected based on their experience in teaching English, while students represent different proficiency levels. This diversity helps capture varied perspectives on the effectiveness and challenges of using English exclusively during classroom instruction.

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires are designed for both teachers and students to gather quantitative data about their perceptions of English-only instruction. The questionnaires include close-ended questions using Likert-scale items to measure agreement or disagreement, as well as a few open-ended questions to allow participants to express their opinions freely.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a selected group of teachers and students. These interviews allow participants to elaborate on their experiences, challenges, and preferences regarding the use of English only in the classroom. The flexible nature of the interviews enables the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data are collected in two stages. First, questionnaires are distributed to the participants and collected after completion. Second, semi-structured interviews are conducted either face-to-face or online. All participants are informed about the purpose of the study, and ethical considerations such as confidentiality and voluntary participation are strictly maintained.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data are analyzed using descriptive analysis for questionnaire responses, including frequencies and percentages. Interview data are analyzed using thematic analysis, where responses are categorized into common themes such as perceived benefits, challenges, and suggested improvements. This combined analysis helps provide a clear interpretation of the findings.

4. Results

This study presents the results obtained from the questionnaires distributed to EFL teachers and students regarding their perceptions of using English only in the classroom. The results are analyzed using percentages to show the level of agreement or disagreement with each questionnaire item.

4.1 Questionnaire Results: Students̛ Responses

Item 1: Using English only in the classroom improves my speaking fluency.

Strongly Agree: 35%

Agree: 40%

Neutral: 15%

Disagree: 10%

A total of 75% of students agree that using English only helps improve their speaking fluency. This indicates that most students believe constant exposure to English enhances their ability to speak more smoothly and confidently.

Item 2: English-only instruction increases my confidence in speaking English.

Strongly Agree: 30%

Agree: 42%

Neutral: 18%

Disagree: 10%

About 72% of the students feel more confident when English is used exclusively in the classroom, suggesting that frequent practice reduces fear and hesitation.

Item 3: I understand the teacher's instructions clearly when only English is used.

Strongly Agree: 20%

Agree: 33%

Neutral: 22%

Disagree: 25%

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Only 53% of students report clear understanding of instructions, while 25% disagree. This shows that English-only instruction may cause comprehension problems for some learners, especially at lower proficiency levels.

Item 4: Using English only makes learning difficult for me.

Strongly Agree: 28%

Agree: 30%

Neutral: 17%

Disagree: 25%

A total of 58% of students agree that English-only instruction can be difficult. This suggests that while beneficial, the approach may also create challenges related to vocabulary and grammar comprehension.

Item 5: I prefer limited use of my first language when explanations are difficult.

Strongly Agree: 40%

Agree: 38%

Neutral: 12%

Disagree: 10%

An overwhelming 78% of students prefer a balanced approach. This indicates strong support for limited use of the first language to aid understanding without reducing exposure to English.

4.2 Questionnaire Results: Teachers' Responses

Item 1: English-only instruction improves students' speaking skills.

Strongly Agree: 45%

Agree: 40%

Neutral: 10%

Disagree: 5%

A high percentage (85%) of teachers believe that English-only classrooms significantly improve students' speaking skills.

Item 2: Using English only helps students think in English.

Strongly Agree: 50%

Agree: 35%

Neutral: 10%

Disagree: 5%

About 85% of teachers agree that exclusive use of English encourages students to think directly in the target language rather than translating.

Item 3: English-only instruction causes anxiety for low-level students.

Strongly Agree: 38%

Agree: 42%

Neutral: 10%

Disagree: 10%

A total of 80% of teachers acknowledge that English-only instruction may increase anxiety among lower-level learners.

Item 4: Limited use of the first language is sometimes necessary.

Strongly Agree: 55%

Agree: 30%

Neutral: 10%

Disagree: 5%

Most teachers (85%) support the use of the first language when necessary, particularly for explaining difficult concepts or instructions.

4.3 Findings

The questionnaire results reveal that both teachers and students generally view English-only classrooms as beneficial for improving fluency and confidence. However, the findings also show that comprehension difficulties and learner anxiety remain significant challenges. Both groups strongly support a balanced approach, where English is the main language of instruction but limited use of the first language is allowed when necessary.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study aims to explore teachers' and students' perceptions of using English only in the classroom and to examine its perceived benefits and challenges. By understanding these perceptions, educators can make informed decisions about classroom language policies. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to EFL teaching practices by highlighting the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that encourages communication without increasing learners' anxiety. The study suggests that while English-only instruction can be beneficial, flexibility in language use may better address learners' needs, especially at lower proficiency levels. Ultimately, the research seeks to support effective English teaching strategies that promote confidence, comprehension, and active participation.

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