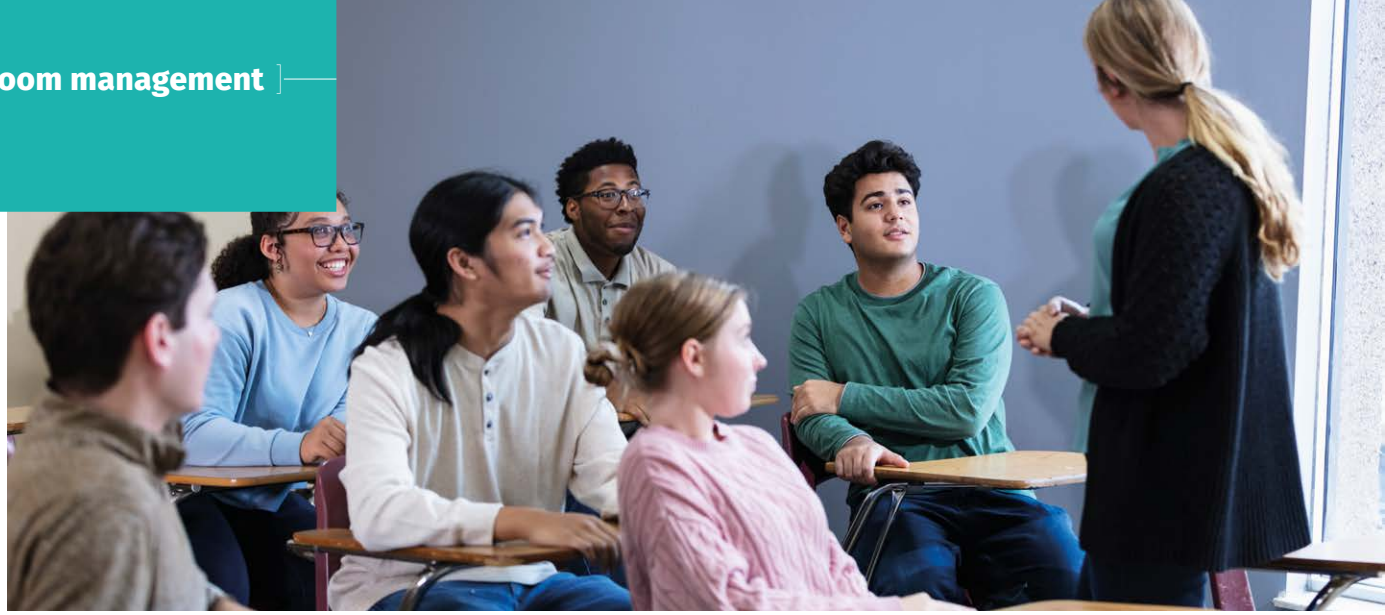


Using L1 or 'English only!'

Tim Edwards
explores language policies.

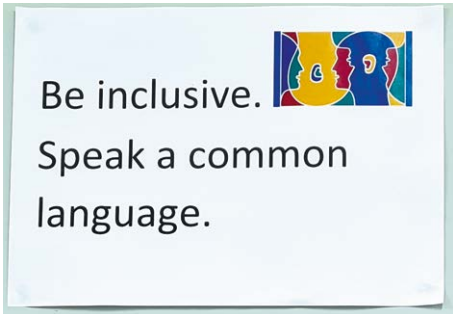
'*Speak only English!*' . . . '*Let's be inclusive and use our common language*'. Signs or policies such as these in language schools or classrooms are well known to many readers. The two examples give different impressions but have similar background reasons. This article looks at some reasons for, effects of and considerations about such policies.

In general, such policies or signs come from an intent to optimise language learning and exposure to the target language (TL), especially in EFL* contexts where the classroom or language school environs might be the only place students are exposed to the language. Use of a student's first language (L1) can be seen as a great danger in language classrooms, threatening the use or primacy of TLs, or excluding some students in a class where the majority (but not all) share an L1.

Client (parent) or external funder expectations and marketing reasons might also lead to such policies, and so might aim to 'save face' for a foreign teacher who doesn't speak the local language in an EFL context. Professional-focused blogs exist, extolling the virtues of such policies (I refrain from specifically linking any here).

In all of the above, the intent of the policy is generally good. But what can be the effects, and are the policies actually helpful?

To clarify, none of what follows denies the benefit of learners using and being exposed to the TL as much as possible. What follows is concerned with absolutist policies, and it might be worth noting that *policy* and *police* have the same word origin and that modern policing often takes into account the perspectives and needs of those it seeks to protect – in this case, language learners.



'English-only' policies essentially suggest the use of any other language is a deficit. But L1 use by students and/or teachers can be a useful scaffold, helping relationship-building and efficiency, helping to bridge conceptual gaps and helping clarity of instructions and language points, for example (East & Wang, 2024; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). This applies at all levels of language learning, although is more prevalent with lower proficiency classes if teachers and all students share the same L1.

In fact, in everyday life it is common to use more than just written or spoken language to communicate. This applies in any communication but especially in difficult contexts, such as with vocabulary, pronunciation or clarity difficulties, or on the edge of someone's Zone of Proximal Development. The full communicative repertoire includes body language, the use of technology and, in many cases, elements of other languages. Switching codes and languages, mixing for communicative purposes is the reality for most bilingual and multilingual speakers. Further, people do not learn a second language (L2) with the aim of becoming monolingual in it, but to add it to their communicative repertoire (Bui & Tai, 2022).

Restrictive policies can sometimes have the effect of reducing the positive atmosphere and effective communication that help learning. Bonding, peer assistance and communicative efficiency, exhaustion, motivation and sometimes cultural expectations all influence the learning atmosphere and may require L1 use in some cases. An example of cultural reasons is that English lacks an honorific for Korean students to use instead of 'you' when speaking to a noticeably older Korean on campus (Shvidko *et al.*, 2015).

The overall effect, then, of English-only policies may be that appearance, or business needs with a face-value facade,

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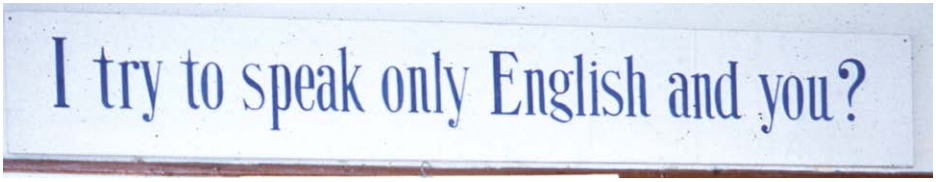
may have taken priority over student needs and voice and pedagogical needs or research findings.

So what do people who look into this academically or systematically say?



It is common to find that use of L1 in a language classroom, despite acknowledged usefulness, is still seen as a danger or deficit; people can feel shame or shamed for using it both in language classrooms and within wider contexts with a dominant language (Bui & Tai, 2022; Dovchin & Wang, 2024; Hopkyns & Dovchin, 2024; Littlewood & Yu, 2011).

Yet L1 and L2 actually scaffold each other both in the brain (Molway *et al.*, 2022) and in ways described earlier; in most language classrooms teachers and students share L1 as an available resource or great ally (East & Wang, 2024; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). However, caution is needed when individuals not sharing an L1 can feel excluded, and to ensure students are scaffolded and stretched as well as supported (Bui & Tai, 2022).

Codeswitching, language-switching, multilingualism, use of full communicative repertories or translanguaging (all overlapping but distinct terms) do exist in the reality of many people both in everyday life and in language classrooms (Bui & Tai, 2022; Hopkyns & Dovchin, 2024). Recent recommendations are to adjust policy and practice to student needs and abilities (Bui & Tai, 2022) and give students themselves some agency and voice in policy and practice decisions and monitoring (Shvidko *et al.*, 2015).

An example of a practical classroom methodology debate on this topic is the use of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) and of translanguaging. Both are described in detail elsewhere.

In essence, TBLT uses the 'task' as the core of language learning, as something achieved using the TL but with various stages to get there and to follow up. It is the preferred language teaching methodology in some jurisdictions. A task (such as finding a solution to a problem) needs to be meaning oriented, related to the real world and require linguistic resources to bridge a communicative gap (Bui & Tai, 2022). TBLT has often advocated using the TL exclusively for all stages.

Meanwhile, translanguaging, a burgeoning area of research, advocates using all available communicative resources, including multiple languages, to maximise student success in real-world contexts that are rarely monolingual (Dovchin & Wang, 2024; Seals, 2020). Recent work suggests translanguaging is suitable for TBLT usage as both reflective of reality (Bui & Tai, 2022; Seals *et al.*, 2020) and very useful in the pre-task and post-task stages of TBLT (East & Wang, 2024) – useful in ways already described.

So, are English-only policies helpful? Encouraging maximum reasonable use of TL or L2 is barely contested. But absolute policies (with punishments), slowing learning, excluding some people and reducing learning-conducive atmospheres may not be helpful. If your school has such a policy by default, maybe you want to keep it, maybe you need to keep it for appearances or marketing, but maybe it is worth considering this article and student voice to at least reflect on the policy periodically.

*Students learning English as a *foreign* language in their own country, as distinct from learning English as a *second* language while living in a country where that is the main language. Note this is a very general distinction; it is for other articles to look at overlap and lines between ESL, EFL, EAL, ESOL and ELT.

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