

Bilingual English Teachers' Perspectives on "English-only" Policies in an EFL Setting

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Abstract

Various language policies are implemented for foreign language teaching in educational institutions. One of these language policies is the monolingual approach called "English-only", which requires only the target language to be used in the classroom. This policy is largely implemented in private institutions in Turkey. Studies about teachers' perspectives on the English-only policy are relatively less. Hence, this research aimed to explore what the perspectives of bilingual EFL teachers working in schools where the English only policy is implemented are and what the effects of such practices are on their teaching methods and professional identities. A case study research design under a qualitative approach was adopted to explore eight bilingual EFL teachers' perspectives on language policies implemented in kindergarten and primary school of the private education institution where they worked. The results varied according to the professional background of the teachers and the department they worked. While language teachers who worked in kindergarten favoured the policy despite reacting negatively to the strict policies implemented by the school, primary school language teachers showed explicit resistance to the implementation of the English-only policy. Moreover, all the teachers expressed their uneasiness about being assigned fake English names and associated this with the impact of neoliberalism and other ideologies prevailing in the linguistic market on private institutions in Turkey.

Keywords: Bilingual teachers, EFL, the English-only policy, native speakerism, private institutions

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Introduction

Language policies in foreign language education are affected mainly by three major language ideologies: “standard language, monolingualism, and native-speakerism” (Holliday, 2005; The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Monolingualism was long acknowledged as the best and ideal practice of ideology in the field of English Language Teaching (Holliday, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Macaro, 2001; Phillipson, 1992, 2013). The historical roots of “English-only” policy as the implementation of monolingualism date back to Direct Method that emerged against Grammar-Translation Method, and this policy encourages the use of the target language only (Sampson, 2012).

There is an ongoing debate about whether L1 should be used or not in foreign language teaching, and it has not reached an agreed conclusion (Debreli, 2016). According to the recent pedagogical approaches, an average use of the first language can support target language learning alongside with leading to a multicultural and multilingual identity formation of language learners (Rivers, 2011a). However, as McMillan and Rivers (2011) argue, “despite the preponderance of evidence clearly favouring judicious L1 use, ‘English only’ continues to enjoy hegemonic status in some teaching contexts, with students and teachers being prevented or dissuaded from using the students’ L1 in ways that are, in fact, pedagogically principled” (p. 1).

Yaqubi and Poromoid (2013) state that even though the benefits of optimal first language use in L2 learning are suggested in theoretical research studies, these findings do not apply to real language learning contexts. Similarly, Cummins (2007) points out the inconsistency between monolingual instructional policies and current empirical evidence for “both of how people learn (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000) and the functioning of the bilingual and multilingual mind (e.g. Herdina and Jessner, 2002; Cook, 2007)” (p. 222). There are also “external factors” that affect language choices of teachers. One of them is expectations of the institutions (Nagy, & Robertson, 2009). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of bilingual EFL teachers about language policies implemented in their institutions. As Debreli (2016) points out, there are a number of research studies about the advantages and disadvantages of L1 use, while relatively less research has been conducted on the perceptions of bilingual EFL teachers who are obliged to following monolingual policies of institutions.

The present study investigates the perspectives of EFL teachers who work in a private school located in Turkey. Language education starts at second grade in public schools, while it starts in kindergarten in private schools, and the quality and quantity of language education differ to a large extent in Turkey. The number of English hours per week is 2 in public schools, whereas it can be up to 18 hours in private schools. The teaching materials are selected, and language teachers are hired according to the private institutions’ own criteria. Therefore, one of the most important reasons of parents to send their children to private schools is their belief to get qualified language education

(Tatar, 2019). Some private institutions implement monolingual approach and hire “native speakers” to answer parents’ needs. Interestingly, in some of the private institutions implementing an English-only approach, there is also a policy that requires “non-native language teachers” to use “pseudo-native” identities and introduce themselves as “native speakers” to students (Tezgiden-Cakcak, 2019). As students recognise their teachers as “natives”, the institutions prohibit the usage of L1 in and out of school environment if students are around. Therefore, this study aims to find out the perceptions of bilingual EFL teachers on the monolingual and native speakerist policies implemented by the institutions and their effects on their teaching methods and professional identities.

Literature Review

The “English-only” policy is defined as the attempt of institutions to identify English as the only mediator of promoting interaction in the classroom and of giving instructions (Auerbach, 1993). This policy has been popular in language teaching because it is believed that “the more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it and begin to think in English; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it” as a pedagogical framework (Auerbach 1993: 14-15). However, Auerbach (1993) states that the logic behind the English-only policy was not found pedagogical or conclusive as the evidence from research studies shows. Many scholars (Phillipson, 1992; Auerbach, 1993; Cummin, 2000; Rivers, 2011a, 2011b) argued that English language teaching, specifically in EFL (English as foreign language) contexts, is a political commitment as well as a linguistic one. Teachers are left powerless, dealing with the restrictions and imposed policies of institutions, while they are in search of the best strategy to serve better to their students (Rivers, 2011a). Fairclough (1989: 33) clarifies the issue as follows: “Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimize existing power relations. Practices can often be shown to originate in the dominant class or the dominant bloc, and to have become naturalized”. Rivers (2011a) points out the professional identity of teachers and argues that either accepting the institutional policies, or not having a desire to put additional efforts means that language teachers are missing the opportunity of forming a professional identity that is under their own control.

There are numerous studies about language policies (e.g., McMillan & Rivers, 2011; Debreli, 2016; Rivers, 2011a; Yang & Jang, 2020). One of them is conducted by McMillan and Rivers (2011) to investigate teacher attitudes toward language policy of English-only. Participants were 29 native speakers who were working in a private Japanese university where the monolingual language approach was adopted as the ideal language policy. Through the questionnaires, the results showed that despite the strict language policy of the institution, a significant number of teachers believed that there is a positive role of students’ use of L1 in language learning and teaching. Moreover, the

researcher suggested that to what extent L1 would be used should be decided by the teachers and students due to the unpredicted context of classrooms.

Another research study was conducted by Hall and Cook (2013) to investigate the perceptions of language teachers about L1 use and to explore under which circumstances they deploy it in their classrooms. The researchers adopted a mixed-methods approach to depict a broad picture of a large sample of participants who were 2,785 teachers working in 111 countries. The results of study indicated that there is a widespread use of L1 in ELT due to the factors that affect L1 use and that teachers' attitudes towards using it are more complex than recognised.

Similarly, Rivers (2011a) inquired into learner autonomy in language choice and into its benefits for learners. To this end, 21 Japanese English learners participated in the study at a Japanese university, where a politically driven monolingual language policy was adopted. During the study, "English-only" policy was set aside, and students were encouraged to see how the use of their own language may be beneficial in the language learning process. The results were in line with the researcher's belief that when given linguistic autonomy and supported in making language choices, students own the responsibility of the afforded position.

Debreli (2016) investigated "non-native" EFL teachers' perceptions of the "English-only" language policy adopted by their institutions. Another focus of the study was the perceptions of teachers about the inclusion or exclusion of L1 in English classrooms. 54 "non-native" EFL teachers who worked in preparatory schools of 4 universities in Northern Cyprus participated in the study. According to results, all the participants were likely to use first language for various reasons. Moreover, it was found that being obliged to following strict English-only policies adopted by their institutions affected teachers in a negative way and caused restrictions in certain issues. The study suggested the development of the programs in institutions in favour of a wide variety of opportunities arising from code-switching and bilingual instruction.

Another study by Rivers (2011b) focused on the contradiction between institutions' promotion of learner autonomy and their restrictive language policies. 43 mixed-ability English language learners studying at a Japanese university participated in the study, and they were taught two reflective strategies to raise their awareness for being able to make language choices when they are faced with English-only demands in their language learning environment. The results indicated that for most of the learners the policy of English only was not a realistic target and that it might have caused many negative consequences.

There are also studies about professional identities of bilingual teachers. In a study conducted by Kim (2011), drawing on critical and identity theories, the perceptions of "non-native" English teachers about themselves as EFL teachers were investigated. Under a critical theoretical framework,

they examined how identities of “non-native” speakers were affected by the ideology of native-speakerism. The qualitative case studies provided evidence for the existing influence of the ideology of native speakerism, which led to a low professional self-esteem for “non-native” English teachers.

Tajeddin and Adeh (2016) focused on perceptions of “native” and “non-native” English teachers about their “native/non-native status” and the advantages/disadvantages of having these statuses. Through the collection of data through a mixed-method research design, 200 “native” and “non-native” English language teachers from countries which are in inner, outer and expanding circles participated in the study. The findings showed that a great majority of “non-native” teachers were not aware of their status when compared to “native” teachers and that they lacked self-confidence. They believed that “native speaker” English teachers had better pronunciation, better speaking proficiency, and greater self-confidence. On the contrary, “native speaker” teachers did not agree on having a superiority on “non-native” teachers. The study suggests the expanding-circle countries should integrate resources into their teacher education programs to raise awareness of teachers about their professional role and status and to inform them about native speaker fallacy.

In another study, Butler (2007) investigated perceptual factors that underlie the belief that “native English speakers are the ideal teachers”, which has been adopted by a significant number of “non-native” English teachers in East Asia. 112 Japanese elementary school teachers participated in the study, and they were asked to conduct English activities in their classes. Several factors were framed based on the teachers’ perceptions and beliefs through a detailed questionnaire. Most of the teachers conducting the activities accepted the idea that English is best taught by native speakers in elementary school. The study associated this belief with “their self-assessed English proficiency levels, their attitudes towards nonstandard forms of English, and their sense of pride in their own language and cultural heritage” (*ibid.*: 25-26).

Yang and Jang (2020) conducted a study with the premise that aggressive adaptations of the policy of English-only in EFL classrooms are ideologically driven. The study pointed out the interpretation, valorisation and challenges of the English-only policy in and out of classroom by Korean bilingual teachers who worked in a private school. The bilingual teachers showed different reactions to the policy of the school which required them to stick to English-only in terms of students’ usage of their L1, implementing the policy beyond the classroom. The study revealed that “the teachers’ everyday practice of the English-only policy is a complex process of negotiating interconnected ideologies and identities related to native-speakerism, gendered nationalism, and professionalism” (*ibid.*: 1).

A similar study by Yaqubi and Poromid (2013) displayed the language choice of English language teachers at a private institution through surveys and interviews with both teachers and parents. It was found that they had negative attitudes towards the usage of L1. Moreover, parents were

dissatisfied with the usage of L1, and they threatened the institution with sending their children to another one and affected the language policy of the institution.

Drawing on Yang and Jang's (2020) and Yaqubi and Poromid's (2013) studies, in the present study we aim to critically investigate bilingual EFL teachers' perspectives on the native speakerist English-only policy adopted by the private school they work. In the literature review, to the best of our knowledge and as observed by Selvi (2014), there is no research about private institutions' language policies and teachers' perspectives on it in the Turkish EFL context. To fill this gap in the literature, this study attempts to find out bilingual EFL teachers' perspectives on the English-only policy that was implemented strictly in a private school.

Methodology

A case study research design under a qualitative approach was adopted in this study to explore bilingual EFL teachers' perspectives of language policies implemented in the private school they worked. As Bryman (2004) suggests, qualitative methodologies are better to collect data about opinions, thoughts and perspectives from participants in a study. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology was selected to conduct this study.

Research Questions

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of bilingual EFL teachers about the English-only policy adopted by their institutions?
2. What are the effects of the English-only policy on bilingual EFL teachers' professional identity?

Participants

The demographic information regarding participants is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Participants' demographic information

Participants	Gender	Age	Background	Experience Period	Department
T1	Female	26	German Language Teaching	2	Kindergarten
T2	Male	24	ELT	3	Primary School
T3	Female	22	ELT	1	Primary School

T4	Female	30	German Language Teaching	6	Kindergarten
T5	Female	25	ELT	3	Primary School
T6	Female	27	German Language Teaching	5	Kindergarten
T7	Female	26	English Language and Literature	2	Kindergarten
T8	Female	27	ELT	4	Primary School

Eight bilingual EFL teachers working in a private school in Eastern Turkey participated in the study. Four of them were working in kindergarten, while four of them were working in primary school. The school also had middle and high schools in its campus, but since the language policy was strictly implemented in kindergarten and primary school, the teachers who worked there were selected to serve the purpose of the study best. Seven of them were female, and one of them was male. Their age range was between 22 and 30. There were novice teachers as well as more experienced teachers (with a maximum of six years of experience) among the participants. Informed about the purpose of the study and the ethical procedures such as keeping their anonymity and using the interview data just for the research purposes, they gave their consents to participate in the study. The acronyms such as “T1, T2...” for teachers are used for ensuring their confidentiality throughout the paper.

Data Collection

The present study was designed through a qualitative research methodology. In order to collect detailed data, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection instrument. Through semi-structured interviews, the perspectives, views and thoughts of participants are investigated better since there is an oral interaction that occurs in a meaningful context (Bryman, 2004). Semi-structured interviews are also flexible and give researchers the possibility of asking follow-up questions to obtain detailed data (Kvale, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews audio-recorded and transcribed through an online transcription tool were analysed via thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is defined as “a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description” (Glesne, 2006: 147). To collect detailed interview data in a more natural and comfortable atmosphere, the questions were asked in the participants’ first language. Therefore, the transcribed data were translated into English, and the extracts were examined for several times to clarify certain themes and patterns.

Findings

In this section, the findings obtained from the thematic analysis of interviews with eight bilingual EFL teachers are presented. Bilingual EFL teachers' perspectives on the native speakerist "English-only" policy reflected a blend of supporting and critiquing views, revealing some implications of the strictly implemented policy including advantages and disadvantages. Secondly, the effects of the English-only policy on bilingual EFL teachers' professional identity were evident in their accounts of the classroom practices shaped by the policies forcing them to adopt a "native speaker" identity.

Bilingual EFL Teachers' Perspectives on the "English-only" Policy

Two different views about the English-only policy were outstanding in the findings from the interviews. The teachers who worked in kindergarten advocated the policy and stated that they found it useful, while the teachers who worked in primary school made a critique of it and made it clear that this policy had both positive and negative sides. To represent the majority, two teachers' (1 from kindergarten- T1, 1 from primary school- T2) views were given below:

I definitely find it useful. It is my second year here. In the beginning, we thought we would have a hard time last year. Actually, we had a lot of trouble in communication, but towards the end of the semester, when I realised that the children understood me well, of course, I thought it was useful and decided to go further. Now, we can see their development very clearly. In fact, the language is learned by exposure, and I think this system is extremely useful. (T1)

It depends. Regarding in-class activities, it's good to have just the target language, but concerning student-teacher relations, the application lacks many things. I think it is not useful all the time. Because your students' background can be different, when you speak only English to students, you can have communication problems. In our institution, we are speaking only English, and because of that we have some problems. For example, students sometimes misunderstand us or they may not want to speak because they cannot speak. (T2)

When the teachers were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of the English-only policy in terms of classroom implications, kindergarten teachers focused on only advantages, while primary school teachers concentrated on both. T4 stated the advantage of the policy as follows:

Because the teacher is a role model and because we expose the child to the language constantly throughout the day, somewhere the child is inevitably and automatically becoming the receptive of the target language, and this brings a great advantage to him/her.

T3 pinpointed that the implementation of the policy has both advantages and disadvantages:

Of course, as an advantage of the English-only policy, I taught my children many new words in the classroom. Because we use some word patterns, children can pick it up. Due to their age, their minds are very clear. Apart from that, they try to speak English- this is a fact. You know, even if the grammar is wrong, they try to speak because they think you only know English. In this respect, it has good sides, but in my opinion, the disadvantages are a bit more than advantages because, as I just mentioned, the child is afraid to communicate as they think that they cannot communicate with me, so the disadvantages cause more problems for me in terms of building rapport with students and classroom management.

The results showed that the biggest advantage was the exposure to the target language, where having difficulty to teach difficult topics and building rapport with students were among the disadvantages according to the participants.

The teachers were asked about to what extent the English-only policy was implemented in their institution and whether any strict rules existed. It was stated that the institution had very strict rules and that the teachers were not allowed to speak L1 inside the school and outside the school if they came across with a student. Moreover, the institution introduced language teachers as “native” teachers to students in order to ensure speaking only the target language. The extracts below show how strict the language policy is:

We have to speak only English with the students. Once, one of my students' parents came to visit me. I had to use a Turkish word for the parent. I was warned that we need to speak English even with the parents. This is a bit of a wrong attitude in my opinion. I had to postpone my meeting with the parents since students were around, which could damage the parent-teacher relationship. (T2)

Yes, the rules are so strict that I am most of the time afraid of one of the administrators or even of the other teachers who would hear me speaking in Turkish. They even want us to speak English when we see our students outside the school. (T8)

When teachers were asked whether they would use this monolingual approach if it was not imposed by the institution, kindergarten teachers responded positively. However, primary school teachers stated that they would mostly use target language but benefit from L1 too whenever necessary.

The Effects of the English-only Policy on Bilingual EFL Teachers' Identity

The emerging data from the interviews showed how the teachers' professional identities were affected by the strict policy of their institution. In line with their preference of (not) having a monolingual approach, kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers showed different ways of

positioning themselves in relation to their personal and professional identities. For kindergarten teachers, the policy was the ideal one, and they did not feel like under pressure.

The situation is like this; in fact, we have a group of English language teachers. We have monthly meetings. If we have a request, a complaint or a situation we want to change, we talk about it with our coordinator, then we talk with our manager, so we try to find a common point. (T1)

However, primary school teachers stated that they were affected negatively by the policy:

Most of the time I don't even feel like a teacher. I am an English machine. I don't feel free to do what I think is true, which makes me uncomfortable about what I do. (T5)

Yes, I feel like I am under pressure, and it affects my teaching too. I cannot apply my techniques and strategies, so it is not good for me. (T8)

The teachers had different views regarding the monolingual approach to language teaching. Nevertheless, when it comes to adopting a “native speaker” identity, all of them stated that they did not find the usage of native speaker identity useful. T5’ s views about this identity policy represent a common point for all teachers:

It is like I am doing somebody else's job. It makes me unhappy about my job because my students don't call me by my name. I don't feel I belong to and fit in here. Once, one of my students called me by my real name, and it was a great happiness for me. Also, I love sharing memories with my students, but this identity-hiding restricts me in this respect. They are highly curious about my life outside the school, but I can't share like 85% of my normal life with them, and this creates distance between us, thus affecting the rapport building process.

Moreover, T2 focused on how this policy affected the building of trust between teachers and students:

Well, I think this is a bit of a distrust because think of a closed environment, school environment, we are human beings, and we can make mistakes at any time- we are not robots. For example, I can say something in Turkish to someone in the corridor and may not notice a student at that moment. It happened to me once, and the student started to say: “Brad Teacher speaks Turkish, but we were not told that. He is not a foreigner. He is Turkish. This was a distrustful thing for the student, so I went through the trouble of this, and it put me in a difficult situation. I think acting like a native is not necessary. There is no need to make such a claim to children and provoke them because they are constantly chasing us and waiting to catch us speaking Turkish.

Most of the teachers believed that the ideology behind the policy of the institution was related to marketing purposes. They stated that it was normal for private institutions to adopt this kind of policies since they need to attract parents, claiming that they had good language education system. When parents' attitudes towards this policy asked, the teachers stated that they were quite satisfied with the policy, and this policy was an important factor for them to choose this school.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, bilingual EFL teachers' perspectives on the English-only policy were explored through semi-structured interviews. The participants were eight bilingual EFL teachers who worked in a private school where the policy of English-only was adopted. The school implemented the language policy strictly, in that the teachers had to use "pseudo-native" identities and speak only English with everyone even with the parents when they came to the school. Half of the participants were language teachers who worked in kindergarten, while the other half were the teachers who worked in primary school. The findings were interesting because there was a distinction between the perspectives of both groups.

In general, the language teachers of kindergarten favoured the policy and had positive attitudes towards it. Moreover, they merely criticised the strict policies implemented by the school. Similarly, in Yaqubi and Poromid' s (2013) study in Indonesia, it was suggested that the teachers who were in favour of the language policy were mostly inexperienced novice teachers, lacking sufficient inner criteria for teaching and being more vulnerable to external factors. On the other hand, primary school language teachers criticised the policy more than the former group. They mostly focused on the negative aspects of the strict policy. This distinction may be because of the professional background of the teachers. The kindergarten language teachers had German Language Teaching as their bachelor's degree and worked with an English certificate which enabled them to work in private institutions, while primary school language teachers were graduates of English Language Teaching. This difference regarding their professional background may affect their views, in that primary school teachers had more professional independency and approached more pedagogically to the implemented policy than the other group. As Yang and Jang (2020: 11) point out, "individual teachers negotiate English-only policy according to their linguistic and professional identities". Rivers (2011a) sees accepting the norms and policies of institutions as the ideal practice without questioning them as a threat for sustainability of the profession of language teaching.

The implementation of the English-only policy revealed that primary school teachers in the present study did not find it useful to speak only L2 in case they need to clarify difficult topics and build rapport with students. This result is in line with the findings of Debreli's (2016) study, in which teachers needed L1 to teach difficult topics and socialise with students in the classroom. Similarly, studies conducted at state universities or schools in the Turkish EFL context (Kayaoğlu, 2012;

Kılavuz, 2014; Kuru and Tekin, 2019; Şavlı and Kalafat, 2014; Şener and Korkut, 2017; Şevik, 2007; Timuçin and Baytar, 2014; Yıldız and Su-Bergil, 2021) and international studies conducted in China (Tang (2002), Czech Republic (Koucká, 2007), Puerto Rico (Schweers, 1999), and Saudi Arabia (Alshammari (2011) reported on the support given to the use of L1 in language classrooms by EFL teachers, teacher trainees, and students. However, in the present study, the language teachers who worked in kindergarten supported the policy strongly as it meant more exposure to the target language, and this result also correlated with the findings of the studies by Manara (2007) and Yaqubi and Poromid (2013). As Auerbach (1993) states, the ideology behind this policy was the monolingual approach that favours the use of L2 over L1, while she argued that this policy was not pedagogical. In another recent study (Yuvayapan, 2019) in the Turkish EFL context, EFL teachers at state and private schools did not resort to translanguaging which is the systematic use of L1 and L2 together in language teaching activities frequently though they had positive beliefs about this pedagogy in some situations. The gap between their perceptions and practices were attributed to the institutional and parental expectations in favour of monolingual practices (*ibid.*).

With regards to adopting a personal and professional language speaker identity, all the teachers reacted negatively to hiding their identity as a bilingual teacher of English as Turkish citizens. They stated that it had no benefits for language teaching and learning. They had a common point that this was for marketing purposes since the private institutions needed to attract parents. As Rivers (2011a) states, institutions which possess power have control over the political aspects of language teaching by using employment contracts and political imposes. Teachers are pressurised by the restrictions and imposed policies of institutions. These restrictions affected professional identities of teachers negatively as they did not actively participate in decision making process and since their pedagogical backgrounds were not taken into account.

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of bilingual EFL teachers towards English-only policy. The results varied according to the professional background of the teachers and the department they worked. For further studies, the focus can be on only one group of teachers who work with similar age groups. Moreover, obtaining data from parents can contribute to understanding different dimensions that affect private institutions' language policies at the macro level.

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