Details Make a Difference

Thinking back on my teaching days, I realize that children and adult students alike really desire and appreciate an authentic and creative learning environment. This not only refers to an interactive atmosphere and interesting learning material, but also stability and order based on a simple and effective discipline system. This discipline system is usually constructed according the rules of a school or institution. For instance, many English academies in Korea have a very strict “English Only” policy. How can a teacher enforce this rule effectively while also firmly enforcing important student issues such as tardiness or frequent absences, and helping students prepare for any lesson presentations that they are required to do throughout the school year? A few major ways to achieve this are implementing reinforcers, maximizing student interaction, and modeling.

Using positive and negative reinforcers in creative and non-stressful ways can easily enable students to speak English in class. To implement a positive reinforcer, the teacher can give his class a point at the end of a full week of successful English speaking without any Korean. When those points add up to say, 10, the teacher can award students with a prize or reward. An example of a negative reinforcer can be something like a three-strike rule. If the teacher tallies three strikes that indicate three instances of hearing his students speak Korean, then the teacher can add an extra vocabulary word to the weekly word list the students have to study. Then, the score is reset and the tallying resumes every time Korean is heard. This reinforcer strategy can also be implemented to enforce tardy and absence issues. Writing out the rules very clearly on the board where it is easy to see can get the students’ attention and motivate them. For example, “3 tardies = 1 absence / 3 absences = 10pts deduction in participation grade.”

There are many ways to help students speak English more confidently and encourage them to learn new and practical expressions. One way is to provide simple, neat, and effective visual aids. Colorful language posters that display everyday expressions such as, “I have a question,” “Can I borrow this?” “Do you know what time it is?” and “Have a good weekend” can help students absorb the correct usage of the language easily. The teacher can point to an expression when it fits the situation at hand and encourage the student to use it. In this way, the student can slowly acquire the expression as his or her own by understanding its context and usage.

To enforce the “English Only” policy, students need to continuously learn English and *use* it often. One way to ensure that this happens is to manage your class so that it maximizes student interaction. This provides opportunities to speak English to one other, thereby making the language more natural and comfortable for them to use. Activities such as ice breakers and warmers and group-work extension activities provides plenty of English speaking while building comprehension and rapport. The latter is as equally as important because students will feel more comfortable to speak freely if they know that their fellow classmates are supportive and understanding.

Students become braver in tackling class projects and presentations when they know that their teacher is intentional in guiding them through every step of the way. This intention must be made known from the beginning, when the project is assigned. An example of this can be to announce that one class of the week would be devoted to addressing concerns that students have about the project. Students can save all their questions for that designated day and also learn from each other as the teacher provides solutions and suggestions. The teacher can also show students model samples using projects and presentation material from previous classes. By examining these, students can better understand the concrete expectations of the project and develop their work with greater ease.

The same material or tasks in an English-learning environment can either be very exciting or frustrating and intimidating depending on how a teacher presents it to students. Substantial benefits can be reaped by just being even a little attuned to the students’ needs and tendencies when enforcing rules or teaching a new lesson. Strategies such as implementing reinforcers, maximizing student interaction, and modeling can be utilized to enforce the classroom rules that have been established by the school. With the right strategies that best suit the classroom’s needs, it *is* possible to achieve an “English Only” environment with rare tardiness and absences.