

**Title Page:****Teaching English to young learners: supporting the case for the bilingual native English speaker teacher**

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## Abstract

The growing number of young children around the world learning English has resulted in an increase in research in the field. Many of the studies have investigated approaches to learning and teaching, with a particular emphasis on effective pedagogies (e.g. Harley, 1998; Shak and Gardner, 2008). Other studies have focused on the linguistic gains of children (e.g. Smojver, 2015) and on the complexities researching children entails (see Pinter 2011 for an excellent overview). However, despite calls in the literature, few studies, have examined in detail the effects on young children (five to ten years) of the teacher using different languages in the classroom, that is, L1 and L2 . The study reported here addresses this issue. Drawing on interactional data from two NEST (native English speaker teacher) classrooms, interviews with NESTs and homeroom teachers (HTs), and from the NESTs' diaries, it examines the effects of languages used by two NESTs on young children's learning. One NEST understands and can use the children's L1; the other only understands and uses L2. We will show that in the context of the young learner classroom, teachers who know the children's L1 have a greater repertoire of teaching skills and so can provide more language learning opportunities for language learning. This reality, we believe, supports the case for employing bilingual teachers wherever possible for the young learner classroom.

## Key words:

L1 and L2; young learners; NESTs; classroom discourse; bilingual teachers

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the teachers who took part in the study for their time

and commitment. They would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose careful reading of earlier versions of the paper and insightful comments have contributed to its development.

## Introduction

The young learner classroom has become a focus of interest in the last twenty years (Copland et al., 2014), although research on young learners dates back to at least the 1970s in Europe (for example, Vilke, 1976). Interest is the result of the growing numbers of children learning languages worldwide at increasingly young ages (Garton et al., 2010). Many of the recent research studies have investigated approaches to learning and teaching, with a particular emphasis on effective pedagogies (e.g. Harley, 1998; Shak and Gardner, 2008). Other studies have focused on the linguistic gains of children (e.g. Smojver, 2015) and on the complexities of researching children (see Pinter 2011 for an excellent overview). Few studies, however, have examined in detail the effects on young children (five to ten years) of the teacher using different languages in the classroom, that is, first language (L1) and second language (L2)<sup>1</sup>. This is despite Stern's (1992) call for more research into classroom language use and learning, recently reiterated by Ellis and Shintani (2013):

There is a conspicuous lack of research that has investigated what effect (facilitative or debilitating) use of L1 had on actual learning.  
(p.245)

The study discussed here aims to address this issue. Drawing on interactional data from two native English speaker teacher (from here, NEST) classrooms and from interviews with NESTs and homeroom teachers (from here, HTs), it examines the effects of languages used by two NESTs on young children's learning. One NEST understands

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that the term L1 is contentious for a variety of reasons. We use it here as it is the term commonly used in the literature on this area. Furthermore, the children in this study were homogenous in that they all had Japanese as an L1.

and can use the children's L1; the other only understands and uses the L2. We will show that in the context of this young learner classroom, the NEST who knows the children's L1 has a greater repertoire of teaching skills and so can provide more opportunities for language learning. This reality, we believe, supports the case for employing bilingual NEST teachers wherever possible for the young learner classroom.

We begin by reviewing the literature on classroom language with a view to uncovering the main debates in the area, which we then relate to the young learner classroom.

### **Languages in the language classroom**

In a discussion at the recent 2015 IATEFL Conference<sup>2</sup>, Scott Thornbury suggested that in today's ELT classrooms, whatever the age of the learners, there is little or no room for monolingual English teachers. He made this claim from three perspectives, the psycholinguistic, the sociolinguistic and the pedagogic (see too Hall and Cook, 2012). From the psycholinguistic perspective, he argued that the notion that the two language systems, L1 and L2, are and should be kept separate is neither accurate nor desirable as, 'each language affects the other' (Birdsong, 2006:22). V. Cook (2001), cited in Hall and Cook (2012), concurs and states that learning a new language necessarily entails the languages being 'interwoven in the L2 user's mind' (p. 281). Ellis and Shintani (2013), in their review of the second language acquisition literature and its relation to pedagogy, go further when they argue, 'linguistic differences between the L1 and the target language do not necessarily result in negative transfer...similarities can facilitate learning' (p.245). L1 in class, therefore, will not disrupt learning the L2.

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<sup>2</sup> The Cambridge Signature Event: The Language Debate

In the second, sociolinguistic, strand of his argument, Thornbury drew on the work of Canagarajah (2013) to illustrate the point that multilingualism is the norm for most people globally, who move between two or more languages as a matter of course in their daily lives. Separating languages in the classroom, therefore, is neither natural nor desirable and does not mirror the reality of the outside world. This point has been made consistently and effectively in the literature on bilingual education, which focuses on ‘the complex language practices that enable the education of children with plurilingual abilities’ (Wei and García, 2015:5). For example, Creese and Blackledge (2010), in their study of bilingual classes in complementary schools in the UK, suggest that a flexible approach to using both the first and target language (‘translanguaging’) should be adopted in language learning classrooms. In a translanguaging classroom, learners and teachers draw on all their linguistic resources: all languages are valued and are regarded as making different but equal contributions to language learning and meaning making.

In the ‘ELT’ world, the notion that multilingualism is the everyday reality for most people globally has been less well made, perhaps because a good deal of the research in teaching English as a foreign language focuses on countries where monolingualism is considered more ‘normal’, such as Japan. Gottlieb (2005) states: ‘Japanese today is spoken by most of the 126.5 million people’ (p.6). This is not to say that other languages are not native to the country (for example, Ainu, spoken in the north) or that there are no non-Japanese residents in Japan (as Kubota (2001) points out, in 1999, about 1.2% of the Japanese population were non-Japanese). However, in comparison to

many countries, bilingualism is not as prevalent. It may also be because the ELT industry is for the most part predicated on a communicative language teaching model, where a target only classroom is believed to be the ideal environment for language learning. Nevertheless, other sociolinguistic aspects of classroom languages have been discussed. For example, Brooks-Lewis (2009) introduces the notion of scaffolding (Bruner, 1975) into her discussion of teaching English to beginner students in the Mexican university sector. Drawing on her own (negative) experiences of learning Spanish in an L2 only classroom, she designed a programme of study which began in the learners' L1 and only gradually moved to the L2. Learners' perceptions of this approach were generally positive and they commented on how learning English was made easier through use of Spanish medium and through comparing English to Spanish throughout the programme. Brooks-Lewis cites Auerbach (1993) in claiming that the use of L1 'reduces anxiety, enhances the affective environment for learning, takes into account sociocultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences, and allows for learner centred curriculum development' (Brooks-Lewis, 2009:233).

Creese et al. (2014) also draw on sociolinguistic data to develop their theoretical position. They argue that all language teachers should pay attention to the 'social context, power relations, and ideologies in play' (p. 947) in classrooms and the broader institution. From the perspective of language use in the classroom, it important therefore to ensure that what happens in class is appropriate to the socio-educational environment (see Kumaravadivelu 2001; Holliday, 1994).

In discussing his third perspective – pedagogy - Thornbury argued that the learners' L1

can be a valuable resource in the classroom for learning. He explained how, for example, a bilingual teacher can contrast shared and new sounds in L1 and L2 in order to help learners identify areas of difficulty, an approach not available to the monolingual teacher. Such an approach reminds us of Batstone's observation that 'we use what we already know to throw light on what we do not yet know', an idea, which, he suggests 'is, of course, well established and has a long and distinguished history' (Batstone 2002: 221, cited in Brooks-Lewis, 2009: 228)

The pedagogic value of L1 has been highlighted by a number of other researchers. For example, Copland and Neokleous (2011), in their study of private after-school provision for teenagers in Cyprus, focus on the 'complexities and contradictions inherent in making decisions about L1 use' (p.270) from the teachers' perspectives as they struggle to engage learners who often lack motivation after a day at school. Likewise, Carless (2008: 334) notes that 'in order to maintain students' attention, interest or involvement, contributions in the MT [mother tongue] needed to be permitted'.

A number of researchers have reiterated the value of using L1 to reduce learner anxiety (Littlewood and Yu, 2011), to engage with students (Copland and Neokleous, 2011; Edstrom, 2006) and to develop motivation (Brooks-Lewis, 2009), amongst other things (for a full overview, see Hall and Cook, 2012). In terms of practical teaching activities, it is interesting that translation as a tool for language learning has recently re-emerged as a pedagogic tool with Cook (2010) and Kelly and Bruen (2015) calling for re-instigating translation work in the classroom.



Thornbury, therefore, is not alone in believing that knowing the students' L1 is an advantage for teachers. Yet his beliefs are not yet mainstream in the ELT world (indeed, other speakers at 'The Language Debate' were much more in favour of a more sustained approach to target language use). As Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain point out as recently as 2005, a single tenet 'has persisted throughout the Western language pedagogy revolutions of the 20th century and beyond . . . that the use of L1 is to be avoided in the FL classroom' (p.235). There are many reasons why 'entrenched monolingualism in ELT' (Hall and Cook, 2012:297) is pervasive. One prevalent view, supported by the psycholinguistic literature, is that maximum use of L2 ensures exposure to and therefore uptake of language (see for example, Turnbull, 2001). Talking in L1, therefore, reduces the amount of time available to talk in L2 and therefore reduces language learning opportunities. Indeed, despite seeming to evaluate L1 use in a positive light, Ellis and Shintani (2013) maintain that teachers should:

maximise the use of L2 inside the classroom. Ideally this means that L2 needs to become the medium as well as the object of instruction, especially in a foreign language setting (p, 24).

Another belief is that native English speaker teachers (NESTs) are somehow more effective than local English teachers, as they are able to maintain a L2 only classroom. A whole industry has grown up around the NEST, from course books that teach 'natural' English (for example, the *Natural English* series, Gairns and Redman, 2006) to pedagogic approaches such as communicative language teaching and task-based learning that champion target language use and learning language through using

language. Despite well-established unease in the academic literature on the seeming advantages enjoyed by NESTs (see for example Mahboob, 2010; Pennycook, 1994), NEST schemes continue to thrive and with them classes delivered solely in the target language (see Copland et al. 2016).

Even those who do not oppose L1 in the classroom tend to focus on what Copland and Neokleous (2011) call ‘judicious’ language use (p. 270). In this perspective, the how, why and when aspects of using L1 are examined and debated, with the view to developing ‘guidelines’ for L1 use in the classroom (e.g. Turnbull and Dailey-O’Cain 2009; Macaro, 2009). Interestingly, these debates are of more concern to those investigating the traditional foreign language classroom than those researching bilingual contexts such as complementary schools, where translanguaging practices seem to be accepted as socio-culturally appropriate and pedagogically effective, rather than something to be regulated.

In terms of young learners, the focus on L2 only classrooms can be attributed to slightly different beliefs. The first is that children somehow absorb language easily and more quickly than adults (Singleton et al. 1995). This view, particularly prevalent outside academic circles, results in stakeholders such as parents and school authorities putting pressure on teachers to use L2 only in class (see Copland et al. 2016). For example, in South Korea, the introduction of the policy of ‘Teaching English Through English’ has recommended that non-native primary teachers use English as a medium of instruction in the classroom (see Heo, 2016), despite local teachers’ lack of confidence in their own language skills.

The second is that children are easily motivated and will not find a target only classroom uncomfortable, a view recently investigated by Macaro and Lee (2013) who found that in South Korea, young learners were less comfortable in a target language only classroom than adult learners. Recent research by Copland et al. (2014) suggests that in fact motivating young learners is one of the greatest challenges teachers face (see Djigunovic (2009; 2012) for detailed examinations of motivation from the learners' perspectives).

In contrast, the argument that L1 is of value in supporting young learners in the early stages of language learning has been made with some force (by, for example, Inbar-Lourie 2010). Enever (2011) cites evidence that target only classrooms are uncommon in seven European countries, perhaps because, as Weshler (1997) puts it:

There comes a point beyond which abstract concepts simply cannot be conveyed through obvious gestures, pictures and commands (p.5).

Pre-literate learners, in particular, have little recourse to means of expressing themselves other than their L1 when do not know how to say what they want in the target language (Fisher 2005). They cannot look up a word in a dictionary, their narrow range of vocabulary makes it difficult for them to give an example sentence to clarify their meaning, and even their ability to use gestures is immature. Often their first language is their only means of communication with the teacher. For these reasons, they are particularly affected by classroom language use, so the decision about using L1 or L2 becomes especially salient. However, with the exception of work cited here, there is very little research that focuses on the effects of language use in when teaching children,

from either the teachers' or the students' perspective, and thus the debates tend to focus on the adult rather than on the young learner classroom.

### **Setting and Participants**

The research for this paper was conducted at a private elementary school in Japan that has English in its core curriculum for all grades. Children have one 45 minute lesson of English a week. However, as English is not part of the official early education curriculum in Japan, there is no standard system for teaching English at this level and Japanese elementary school teachers are generally not prepared to teach English to children. Therefore, the elementary school in this study outsourced their English lessons to a large commercial conversation school.

While the elementary school itself does not stipulate that the English teachers may not use Japanese in the lessons, the conversation school has a target language only policy and, in order to meet this requirement, hires NESTs directly from overseas. This approach chimes with current thinking in Japan, where the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Culture (MEXT) is currently actively embracing the direct method (Stewart, 2009) partly through recruiting NESTs in large numbers. Indeed, according to MEXT's most recent report<sup>3</sup>, 'the government aims to secure ALTs<sup>4</sup> for all elementary schools by 2019'. Furthermore, according to the government website that

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<sup>3</sup> <http://mext.go.jp/english/topics/1356541.htm>

<sup>4</sup> ALTs are 'assistant language teachers' the acronym afforded to NESTs in Japan

recruits NESTs for public schools<sup>5</sup> “formal teaching qualifications are not required” and “many successful candidates apply with little or no knowledge of Japanese”. This is also the case at the conversation school.

The participants were two NESTs, two first grade (6 year old) classes of 64 learners in total, and two homeroom teachers. NEST1 was in her 40s. She lived and worked in Japan as an English teacher for 21 years. For most of those 21 years her main focus was teaching adults, but for the 7 years previous to the study she had worked part time at this elementary school. She had near-fluent level Japanese language skills. NEST2 was in her 30s and had previously worked full time at a kindergarten in Japan for 1 year and at this elementary school for 6 months. She had some teaching experience therefore but almost no Japanese. Both teachers received basic language teacher training from the commercial language school which employed them but neither NEST had any formal training in teaching young learners.

The homeroom teachers were the main classroom teachers of the six year old children. HTs in Japan have a very special relationship with the children in their classes. They teach the majority of the lessons, guide the children academically, look after the children’s pastoral needs and support their interpersonal development (Ito, 2011). When NESTs are in class, the HTs mostly remain in the classroom. In this study, the HTs had no part in teaching the classes but were present in the classroom, usually marking papers, and were available to support the students if the need arose.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.jet-uk.org/contact/faq\\_criteria.php](http://www.jet-uk.org/contact/faq_criteria.php)

## **Research Methods**

This was a qualitative comparative study comprising classroom recordings, interviews and teacher diaries carried out over a 7-week school term. The lessons of the two NESTs were recorded (a total of fourteen 45-minute lessons), and both teachers kept a diary over the term. Individual interviews were conducted with both NESTs at the end of the term: they were asked to expand upon or explain the comments in their diaries and to comment on specific extracts that the researchers had picked out from the recordings. The HTs were also interviewed: they were asked for their observations of the lessons and about their feelings about having to teach English themselves in the future if and when English becomes an official part of the curriculum.

As the purpose of this study was to compare the interactions of the NESTs with a view to focusing on the children's learning, steps were taken to ensure that the classes were as similar as possible. To do this, only the first grade classes were involved as the focus was on revising what the children had learnt at kindergarten rather than on introducing new words, which we also felt would put the monolingual NEST (NEST2) at a disadvantage. The majority of kindergartens in Japan include some English instruction and the most common method is to use flashcards to teach basic nouns, songs to teach the alphabet and repetition to introduce some very simple phrases. It is usual to teach this basic language in the target language. Therefore, in all classes, the focus was on revising and practising language rather than on introducing new language.

As explained above, NEST1 had much more teaching experience than NEST2, so steps were also taken to limit the effect of this and to ensure that the structure of the classes in

both lessons was broadly similar. First of all, each week there was a detailed lesson plan for the two NESTs to follow, with the language to be taught and the timings for each activity clearly laid out. In total there were three first grade classes. Class A was always taught as a whole group by NEST1 who was supported by NEST2. There was a twenty minute morning recess between Class A and Class B, and this time was used by both NESTs to discuss the lesson plan and for NEST2 to ask questions. Class A then served as a model for teaching classes B and C which were split in half and taught by the two NESTs. We recorded the half of Class B that was taught by NEST1 and the half of Class C that was taught by NEST2. This meant that NEST2 had observed one class and taught one class before her lessons used in this study were recorded.

Ethical approval to carry out the research was given by a British university's ethics approval panel, which ensured that the research was carried out according to ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice. The school principal acted in *loco parentis* in providing consent for the research to take place. No student received treatment that was different from normal in classes B and C, the focus of the research.

### Data Analysis

The classroom recordings were transcribed by one of the researchers who is bilingual in English and Japanese. She also made the translations. The overall focus was the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom and so instances in which L1 was used by the students in class were identified, transcribed and extracted. In addition, sections of talk in which NEST1 used Japanese, or where NESTs had some difficulties communicating with the students were also transcribed and extracted. In the interviews, data which focused on

using L1 in the classroom or on a perceived misunderstanding between teachers and children, were identified, transcribed, translated into English (in the case of HTs) and extracted. Likewise, data which described misunderstandings or language use were extracted from the NESTs' diaries.

The extracted data sections were then studied and coded on an Excel spreadsheet. Because both teachers taught the same lesson and co-taught the lesson on one occasion, the classroom data followed a similar trajectory. This meant that sections of talk were similar across the data sets and differences therefore easily identified. There were some one-off instances of L1 use, for example in Week 6 when NEST2 was told by one of the students that there would be a fire drill during the lesson but she did not understand. However, these were occasional and very soon into the transcription process, three main codes emerged into which most instances could be categorized. These were:

- Language practice
- Pronunciation
- Opportunities to learn.

## **Findings**

### ***Language practice***

On occasions NEST2's inability to understand Japanese also led to incorrect items being taught, as in the following extract, where one of the children had gone to the nurse's office and was going to be late. NEST2 was taking the roll:



Extract 1:

NEST2: (calling out the child's name during the roll call) Nagomu

Ss: 後れ[*He will be late*]

NEST2: Oh, he's absent. Say absent...absent

Ss: ((*repeating*)) Absent

NEST2 cannot understand Japanese and presumes that Nogumu is absent. She then asks students to repeat the word 'absent', which suggests to the class that absent means 'he will be late'. When the child arrives 5 minutes into the lesson, NEST2 does not stop the class to explain that 後れ does not mean absent, but instead continues with the class. Of course, there are many reasons why NEST2 made this pedagogical choice. She may for example have decided not to interrupt the flow of the lesson or considered the incident too minor to revisit (indeed in her interview, when asked about this incident, NEST2 was unable to recall it). Nevertheless, it is also true that NEST2's inability to understand Japanese meant students were taught an incorrect meaning. Furthermore, NEST2 was not able to make a simple repair as any correction would have entailed quite a complex explanation, which the children were not capable of understanding in English and which the NEST was not capable of giving in Japanese.

In contrast, NEST1 often took advantage of her Japanese language skills to check concepts with learners. After practising new language using the target language, NEST1 would often ask one of the students to translate before moving onto the practice stage of the lesson. An example of this comes when she is teaching "How old are you?" (Extract 2). After modeling the question-answer pattern several times with some of the stronger students, she elicited a translation before moving on to ask the remaining

students, whose English was weaker:

Extract 2:

- NEST1:           Okay, so “How old are you?” は。。。 [is....?]
- Ss:               何歳ですか     [How old are you?]
- NEST1:           Excellent, very good. One more time “How old are you?”
- Ss:               How old are you?
- NEST1:           And “I’m six” は。。。 [is....]
- Ss:               六歳です     [I’m six]
- NEST1:           Good, again “I’m six”
- Ss:               I’m six
- NEST1:           How about “I’m 7”?
- Ss:               七歳です[I’m seven]

In this extract, apart from giving the cue ‘は’ (‘wa’ which translates here as ‘is’ or ‘means’ and is used to elicit a translation from the students), NEST1 does not speak Japanese, but allows the students to do so in order to display understanding. Asked about the use of translation in her interview NEST1 explained:

I like to make sure that everyone is on the same page before we get into a lot of practice. I know we are not supposed to use Japanese when we teach but I think there is no point having them parroting something that they don’t actually understand.

This is a view held by many language teachers who balance input in L2 with explanation in L1 (see for example, Copland et al. 2016). Understanding the L1 also allows NEST2 to provide opportunities to the children to display their learning and so develop their confidence.

NEST2's lack of Japanese again plays a part in the following extract. As in NEST1's class, the children are required to give their age:

### **Extract 3**

NEST2: How old are you?

S4: I am seven

NEST2: Very good

S5: え？違うよ six だよ。誕生日二月だからまだ二月じゃないからまだ six だよ [Eh? That's wrong, you're six. Your birthday is February and it's not February yet so you are six]

NEST2: Six? *((holding up six fingers))* Seven? *((holding up seven fingers))*

S4: *((holds up six fingers))*

NEST2: Oh well, never mind.

The majority of students in this class had already turned seven and it may have been that S4 was simply repeating the answer that he/she had heard most frequently. NEST2 attempts to clarify the age of the child by holding up fingers to represent the correct number, a common way for language teachers to check concepts. However, the approach does not seem to work in this case. Despite S4 holding up 6 fingers, the

NEST appears to give up when she closes the discussion with ‘oh well, never mind’.

Not understanding the children’s L1 meant that NEST2 was unable to understand S5’s explanation and then not able to tell S4 his/her age in English. A more skilled teacher may have been able to pursue the finger counting technique to a more satisfactory conclusion ensuring that all children in the class could give their age. However, in this case S4 may have left the class not knowing if his age was six or seven in English, not a desirable learning outcome given the topic of the class.

It could be argued that the students in NEST2’s class learn an important lesson about language learning from this incident: that uncertainty is common. In contrast, perhaps NEST1 over-scaffolds her students, using the L1 as a crutch to ensure that there is no ambiguity. However, it may also be true, as Butzkamm (2003) notes, that, “studies in which informal meaning checks were used at the end of a lesson have repeatedly shown that pupils misunderstand more than their teachers realize” (p.31). With young learners in particular, using the children’s L1 is one way in which informal meaning checks can be made and in this case the NEST2’s lack of Japanese hinders her ability to support students’ learning. Further studies are clearly needed to assess the value of translation in the classroom with young learners.

### ***Pronunciation***

The benefits of starting foreign language education with very young learners is the subject of some discussion, but there seems to be some agreement that pronunciation in particular benefits from an early start (Cameron, 2003; Lecumberri and Gallardo 2003;

Long 1990). Both teachers in this study spent time on improving their students' pronunciation, but in different ways. Before we discuss these, we introduce some features of Japanese pronunciation to facilitate the discussion.

Japanese has a syllabary rather than an alphabet, which means each character is made up of a consonant followed by a vowel; the only consonant that can appear on its own word-final is 'n'. Words that finish in consonants other than 'n' in English are either given an extra vowel sound at the end ('It is a book' becomes 'Ito izu a booku') or the final consonant is just not voiced ('car' becomes 'ca', 'your' becomes 'you').

A common and well-known difficulty is with the pronunciation of /r/ and /l/. The Japanese sound (ら り る れ ろ) which is usually transcribed as /ræ/ri/ru/rɛ/roʊ/ is actually made with the tongue half way between the position native English speakers would use to make the sounds /r/ and /l/. For this reason, when Japanese speakers use their sound ら to say the letter /r/ their tongue is too far forward so it sounds to us like an /l/. Similarly, when they use their sound ろ to say /l/ the tongue is too far backwards so it sounds like an /r/.

When introducing a new word, NEST1 first of all modeled the correct pronunciation but then modeled a version using familiar Japanese syllables. After students repeated this, she moved towards a more natural pronunciation. This process can be seen when one student asked the class to close their eyes before playing a game of "What's missing?"

**Extract 4:**

- NEST1: Close your eyes. CUROZU YUA AIZU
- S6: Curozu yua aizu
- NEST1: Good. One more time 舌出して [*stick your tongue out*] Close your eyes ((*making a sharp stop on the consonant*))
- S6: Clozu yua eyes.

As can be seen, in his/her second turn, S6 produces a more accurate version of the pronunciation than in the first turn. It is not perfect but the number of extra vowel sounds has been reduced and progress is made towards an intelligible version through the teacher ‘scaffolding’ the learners (Bruner, 1975).

When asked about this approach to teaching pronunciation in her interview, NEST1 said:

“I find that when you introduce a brand new word, especially one with difficult sounds for Japanese students like /l/, /r/, /b/, /v/ and /ð/, it is just easier for them to start from what they know and then work towards a more natural sound. If you only say it naturally it’s like they just can’t ‘hear’ it and there is no retention”.

The HT A concurred that this approach to teaching English was effective:

“I think that NEST1’s way of doing it in katakana first was helpful because that’s what the students know”.

‘Phonological interference’ (Crystal 1987:372) is often viewed in terms of correction,

but the fact is that “when we encounter a foreign language, our natural tendency is to hear it in terms of the sounds of our own language. We actually perceive it differently from the way native speakers do” (Wells, 2000:9). NEST1’s knowledge of Japanese, and more particularly her understanding of which English sounds present a problem physiologically for Japanese speakers, seems in this case to positively affect the children’s pronunciation of English.

NEST2 also wanted the students in her class to close their eyes for the “What’s missing?” game. However, she was unable to reference the children’s mother tongue and relied solely on repetition to improve pronunciation, with uneven results.

**Extract 5:**

NEST2: Okay, say “Close your eyes”

S7: Cro yero

NEST2: Close your eyes

S7: Curo yooeh

NEST2: Close

S7: Cro

NEST2: Your

S7: Yoo

NEST2: Eyes

S7: Eye

NEST2: Close your eyes.

S7: Curo yoo eye?

The version of close your eyes that students eventually produce after six turns is less recognizable than that produced by the students in NEST2's class after only two turns. However, this result is not necessarily a direct result of NEST2 not knowing Japanese. Had she had advanced pronunciation training, in addition to the training she received from her employer, she might have approached the task in a different way, for example, by breaking the sounds down more effectively and focusing on the production of the vowels, which may have led to the children producing a more accurate version. Nevertheless, NEST1's knowledge of the children's L1 means she understands what the children find difficult about English pronunciation and this enables her to build from their weaknesses in an efficient and helpful way. This approach is not available to NEST2 because she lacks knowledge of the children's L1.

### ***Opportunities to learn***

Having an understanding of the L1 allowed NEST1 to create learning opportunities for all her students. The following exchange shows how she acknowledges an attempt at an answer from a student with weaker English skills and then guides her to the English word and its pronunciation:

#### **Extract 6:**

NEST1: What color is this? (holding the purple flash card)

S8: 紫 [purple]

NEST1: Yes, that's right. Can you say 紫 [purple] in English?....It starts with

は [PA]



Ss :                パプル[pa pu ru]  
 NEST1:            Can you say that Ayano? Purple PA PU RU purple  
 S8:                Pa pu ru  
 NEST1:            Good girl. Purple  
 S8:                Purpre

In NEST2's class, however, a similar opportunity to support a weaker student was missed because she did not understand what the student had said.

**Extract 7:**

NEST2:            What color is this? (holding up a red flashcard)  
 S9:                赤 [red]  
 NEST2:            What COLOR is this?  
 S9:                赤 [red]  
 NEST2:            Anyone? What COLOR?  
 S10:              Red

Asked about this specific incident in the interview, NEST2 said she thought S5 was saying "I don't know" and that she wanted to elicit the language rather than providing the answer, so she moved to another student. This approach is quite common in communicative classrooms as teachers are keen to give students opportunities to produce the target language. However, in this case, and in others in our data, the contribution from student 9, whose level of English is quite low, was not taken up and valued. Instead, a contribution from student 10, whose English was more advanced,

was elicited. In her interview, homeroom Teacher B said

“There were a couple of slower students in my class who really were not able to follow what was happening in the [NEST2] class and they didn’t really take part in the lessons”.

As this extract shows, even a basic understanding of the child’s L1 would have provided the NEST with a greater repertoire of techniques for supporting the learning of all children in the class.

The amount of student to teacher interaction varied greatly in NEST1 and NEST2’s classrooms, particularly in the later weeks of the term when the students became more aware how little Japanese NEST2 could speak. This was particularly true for conversations that did not explicitly use the target language but were relevant to it. In the first two lessons, students tried to engage NEST2 in conversations relevant to the language point in 8 instances, but these interactions soon dropped off as students realized she was unable to respond. In the final 3 lessons, there were no instances of conversation with NEST2 initiated by the students. As HR C explained in the interview:

“I never noticed a wall between the students and NEST2 but the atmosphere in the class is a little different. They don’t include her in their conversations....they know she doesn’t speak Japanese so they know it is impossible to include her.”

Nevertheless, these conversations had the potential to support language development. In week 4, the students were looking in their picture dictionaries at a page of insects in order to get an example to practise the language point of the lesson, which was

responding to the question, “What animal do you like?”, with the response: “I like/don’t like (animal + s)”. During this activity, over eighteen separate interactions with NEST1 were initiated by the students. All conversations were carried out in Japanese, but each ended with the teacher eliciting a full English sentence, as in the following extract:

**Extract 8:**

- S1: 先生、毛虫嫌い [Teacher, I don’t like hairy caterpillars].
- NEST1: 本当!何で?可愛いじゃない? [Really! Why? They are cute].
- S1: いや!年中のとき刺された、痛かった [No way! I was bitten by a hairy caterpillar when I was in kindergarten. It was sore].
- NEST1: それはそうだよ、じゃあ [I can understand that. In that case] I don’t like caterpillars.
- S1: I don’t like caterpillars.

NEST1 was able to follow the conversation in Japanese and then find a way to bring it back to the target structure of that lesson “I like/don’t like (animal + s)”. While this utterance might not be considered particularly advanced or the amount of English spoken abundant, we would argue that for these young, low-level children producing full sentence utterances with a personal meaning fulfils an appropriate learning outcome. In contrast, in the same section in NEST2’s lesson, children spoke only to each other, and in total there were only 4 utterances using “I like/don’t like (animal + s)” produced compared to 9 utterances produced in the same section in NEST1’s classroom.

The homeroom teacher in NEST2’s class believed that NEST2’s inability to understand

Japanese meant that she gave mixed signals to the students that left them confused. For example, NEST2 would occasionally scold children for talking, when in fact they were discussing the language point, and at other times she would allow students to be quite disruptive because she thought, mistakenly, that they were on task. NEST2 noted this issue herself in her diary:

“I notice a big difference in classroom management without Japanese. Understanding what the kids are talking about - are they discussing the question or being cheeky? - would make a big difference in terms of knowing when to encourage and when to discipline.”

In Extract 11 from Week 4, NEST2 was also teaching the question, ‘What animal do you like?’ and appropriate responses (I like/don’t like (animal + s)), using a picture dictionary. She walked around the desks of the students at the front of the desk asking them to name some of the animals on the page, but at the back of the class the following conversation was taking place:

**Extract 9:**

- NEST2: Okay, please turn to page 114. What animal do you like?
- S9: (Looking at page 120)ほら宇宙だ [*Look, it is outer space*]
- S10: 火星に行きたい [*I want to go to Mars*]
- S11: 宇宙飛行士かっこいいぜ [*That astronaut is so cool*]
- S10: 僕は宇宙飛行士になるぞ [*I am going to be an astronaut when I grow up*].

Ss: *((students at the back of the class talk about space for almost two minutes, getting louder and louder))*

NEST2: Listening...listening....quiet please...listening. Can anyone see an elephant? Can anyone see an elephant?

When asked about this exchange in the interview, NEST2 said she presumed the children were talking about the animals and she wanted to give them some time to consider their favorite animal so she let the chat continue. Of course such off-task behavior is common in young learner classrooms, as is the use of the L1 between the children, as HR B noted:

“My class often misbehaves or talks about off-topic things, so whether or not the teacher is speaking English or Japanese, the children who misbehave will misbehave.”

However, had NEST2 shared her learners' L1, she might have been able to persuade the children to get back on task through providing them with the kind of personalized and appropriate language input her colleague uses.

## **Discussion**

Although these qualitative data have limited application from a psycholinguistic perspective, they are helpful in developing both the sociolinguistic and pedagogic case for employing bilingual NESTs to teach English to young learners. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the data show NEST1 providing a model of the bilingual

speaker to children as she moves effortlessly between Japanese and English. As with many bilinguals, using two languages is an everyday reality for this teacher (Canagarajah, 2012) and she uses her language resources to scaffold learners through checking understanding and working with what the children already know. Furthermore, using both English and Japanese in class demonstrates that both languages are valued and that the teacher empathises with the learners, a point discussed at length by Brooks-Lewis (2009). In contrast, using the target language only, which is NEST2's only resource, has been shown in these data to provide fewer affordances to scaffold language learning. At various points NEST2 misunderstood the learners (extract 1), gave up on trying to understand the learners (extract 3) and disregarded a learner's contribution (extract 7).

Using two languages seems even more appropriate given the 'social context' (Creese et al. 2014) and educational reality of one 45 minute class of English per week. What is achievable in this time with such young students is clearly limited, particularly in the Japanese school context where English is not considered part of the academic curriculum (Yanase, 2016). NEST2 was not even able to use the L1 in a 'judicious' way (Copland and Neokleos, 2011) to engage the children or enhance learning, which Macaro identifies as the 'optimal position' for L1 use (Macaro, 2009: 3).

From a pedagogic perspective, the data suggest that the bilingual teacher (NEST1) is able to harness more resources than NEST2 to support learning. Her translanguaging practices (Creese and Blackledge, 2010) mean she can be drawn into conversation by the children and respond to their personalized linguistic needs (extract 8). Furthermore, knowing the children's L1 means she can draw on their phonological knowledge and

understanding of Japanese to support their English pronunciation (extract 4), in the same way as Thornbury described in ‘The Language Debate’. In doing so, she is able to use what the students know support them in knowing what they do not yet know (Batstone, 2002), a central tenet of cognitive theories of learning.

NEST1 is also able to elicit translations in Japanese to check understanding and develop motivation (extract 2) so that she can be sure that the learners are following the class. Furthermore, she is able to use Japanese to provide children with weaker English skills the opportunity to get involved in the class (extract 6). NEST2, on the other hand, cannot understand the students when they use Japanese. This means that she cannot support weaker learners as effectively (extract 3). Furthermore, she is not able to draw on the sounds of Japanese to teach the sounds of English (extract 5) and she is unaware when learners are off task (extract 9).

Taken together, we believe these data extracts and their analyses demonstrate the opportunities for learning that accrue from the teacher sharing the young learners’ L1. While we do not deny the importance of training for young learner teachers, these data demonstrate that a common language provides affordances which can support NESTs in teaching English effectively.

Furthermore, these data demonstrate the importance of considering sociolinguistic and pedagogic factors in discussing L1 classroom practices with respect to young learners. While we have some sympathy for Ellis and Shintani’s (2013) position that from a psycholinguistic perspective teachers should ‘maximise the use of L2 inside the

classroom...especially in a foreign language setting' (p. 24), in the young learner classroom, the focus must always be on meeting the child's social and learning needs and developing his/her affinity for and confidence with the L2. In order for this to happen, it is beneficial if teachers can speak the children's language(s).

### **Limitations**

The extracts presented here provide an insight into the young language learner classroom taught by NESTs. However, the NESTs are very different: NEST2 knows little or no Japanese and has limited classroom teaching experience: NEST1 is fluent in Japanese and has more classroom experience. L1 skills, training in teaching young learners and experience of teaching young learners are clearly relevant to the success that teachers have in the classroom and a research study which investigated these variables over an extended period could produce useful findings, developing our understanding of effective ways to teach this group of learners.

It would also be useful to investigate the effect of translation in the foreign language classroom. While studies of translanguaging seem to suggest positive benefits of the approach (e.g. Creese and Blackledge, 2010), the studies focus mainly on bilingual classrooms rather than foreign language ones. Furthermore, studies on the benefits of translation tend to involve adults not children, despite evidence that children are less comfortable in target only classrooms than adults (Macaro and Lee, 2013). Translation, therefore, is another variable that could be usefully investigated

### **Conclusion**

Globally the age at which children are learning a language is dropping (Garton et al.



2011). In Japan, as in some other Asian countries, this has led to a demand for NESTs to teach English classes (Copland et al. 2016; MEXT<sup>6</sup>). However, as we point out earlier in this article, in most cases in Japan NESTs are not required to know the local language or to have teaching experience. The data we present here suggest that both these conditions are potentially problematic and although the lack of language education training is bound to have serious negative consequences, not knowing the language of young learners can have create particular difficulties for effective language teaching. We concur, therefore, with Thornbury, who concluded his talk in The Language Debate by suggesting that NESTs should actively learn the language of their students in order to provide a learning experience that is psycholinguistically, sociolinguistically and pedagogically sound. As Chapman (1958, cited by Thornbury 2015) recognised:

The influence of the mother tongue must always be strong and the language teacher recognizing this, should search for ways to make this influence help, not hinder, the learning of a foreign language (p.58).

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<sup>6</sup> <http://mext.go.jp/english/topics/1356541.htm>

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