

# Contributing Elements of Preschool Bilingualism

— An inquiry into creating a genuine second language learning environment  
for young children —

## 幼児バイリンガルの要素を貢献

— 幼い子供のための本物の第二言語学習環境を作成するイントゥ問い合わせ —

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要約：本稿では，日本の幼児のためのバイリンガリズム上の概観を提供している。人生の早い段階で，英語でコミュニケーションできることは，すべての若者にとって利点であることは疑問の余地がない。したがって，言語発達に適した環境を提供することは非常に重要である。家庭と学校のどちらにおいても，親や教師は，両方の言語でのコミュニケーションを高めるために，協力して，英語と日本語を話す場を作る必要がある。両親が学校の教師にのみ語学学習を任せただけの場合，あるいは，その逆に教師が家庭にのみ任せただけの場合，我々是对話を創造するための生の機会を失う危険性がある。バイリンガリズムに対する態度は，過去一世紀にわたって変更されており，それに応じて，コミュニティだけでなく，両親と学校が日本社会に英語の印象を構築することが必要である。

### 1. Introduction

Despite the many factors which necessitate the need for obtaining the ability to speak in two or more languages, it is clear that in Japan parents and education practices should undergo the process of providing effective language acquisition environments at the earliest possible stage of life. In the case of children in this country, there is without doubt a push to learn English above any other language. This national compulsion can be seen through advertising on billboards or on trains, as well as on television commercials seen throughout the day. This inquiry addresses the concerns bilinguals are face with in nurturing proficiency of the two codes (Japanese / English). Even though, Japan is not a bilingual country, English classes can also be seen in the curriculum of school education systems

right through kindergarten to university. Therefore, the direction of education practice could be seen as an immerging bilingual nation. So, it would be without trepidation, all youngsters are pushed to become bilingual to some degree at the earliest onset. The author of this piece will draw on experience of living and working in Japan to detail effective learning practices. This will be accompanied by a historical view that will disregard negative beliefs which prevented past generations appreciating the benefits of bilingualism. This skepticism was towards the neuropsychological implication of code switching between systematical forms of communicating. Following that, social factors of where and when young people can utilize their dual speaking ability will be explored. Unquestionably, in the situation a child does not find themselves in an environment where they can use their second language (L2)

skills then naturally they are at risk of losing this ability. Finally, optimal conditions of how to facilitate effective communication will be explored. Both in the familiar living areas in the family home as well as at school are locations to consider language needs. For current and future teachers, it is essential to possess L2 skills along with effective teaching methods so as to make learning practical and enjoyable for all involved.

## 2. Causes of Trepidation

Historical perspectives have been critical of the effects using two codes of language has on the brain. For example, a quote from a professor at one of the world's most prestigious educational domains, Cambridge University identified the following cognitive processes in a negative light:

*'If it were possible for a child to live in two languages at once equally well, so much the worse. His intellectual and spiritual growth would not thereby be doubled, but halved. Unity of mind and character would have great difficulty in asserting itself in such circumstances'.* (Laurie, 1890, p.15)

This view written above has been contradicted in current times with research pointing to the activity of the brain is not being over worked upon functioning in two language domains. This has been squashed to make way for the two codes to be in operation through a hierarchical order of language working in unison together. This indicates both languages are using the same part of the brain, rather than dividing the space up to lessen the room for language input in the mind. According to comprehensive research, the views have changed to having a far more positive outlook towards bilingual effects (Paivio and Begg, 1981; Green, 1986; McWhinney, 1987; Hamers and Blanc, 1989; Kroll and Sholl, 1992).

Despite modern opinion dismisses the theory second language learning over taxes the brain, there are areas of concern. This includes the need to learn to speak authentically. Specifically, language needs to

concern itself with understanding practical usage. For example, if teachers apply some practice drills in the classroom such as, showing children animal cards while getting them to repeat after the teacher 'duck', 'dog' and 'cat', it will assist them in learning vocabulary. However, the learner may not be able to use those vocabularies in a practical situation. And so accordingly, forethought of pedagogy is imperative to insure language is attained to be applied in applicable situations. More on this point will be addressed in the next paragraph.

## 3. Facilitating Bilingual Education

In the preschool classroom, where the second language may be used effectively as part of a structured play space, students will intermingle in L2 to which place development will occur through learning in a group setting. Likewise, Wong Fillmore (1982) recognized there is an advantage to language progression in young children when the classroom is from mixed L1 and L2 backgrounds. Nonetheless, in the situation that all the children spoke the same L1 then they would always communicate in that language only, even though they had the ability to speak a second language. Unfortunately for developing bilingualism, this is the current situation in Japan. Therefore, the teacher needs to structure language activities in L2 due to this monoculture environment that is present in today's society. The author has two young children living in Japan. Both of these offspring were born in Japan and have a Japanese mother. Their first language is Japanese with English isolated and only used in class twice a week. By all means, English is the prominent language at home after school by the author. The problem they are faced with at Kindergarten is English is never used outside of the structured lesson held twice weekly. A way to combat the lack of English exposure is for the teacher to set up exercise throughout the day to incorporate English into daily routines. For example, when the students need to clean up, the teacher may say "OK, everybody let's clean up, it's clean up time, come on, who wants to help me?" and at the time they can encourage the

students in English too, for example, “nice job, well done or Everything is getting clean”. After a few times, students will start to repeat the message too. Another activity may include children washing their hands. The teacher may say “come on, let’s scrub your hands and get them clean”. In these cases where repetitive language is used then the teacher should be encouraged to speak in English. As a percentage, it would be favorable for the caretaker to facilitate language close to fifty percent in English and fifty percent in Japanese. In this immersion program the likelihood of learning language will more likely prosper. In addition, the school can provide training or instruction for parents to apply these language arrangements for families to practice in their living space at home. Likewise, before eating lunch or having snacks, teachers can also say prayers in both languages. For example, thank you for the yummy food, Itadakimasu, let’s eat!

According to analysis from a leading researcher in language acquisition, Krashin (1981, 1982 and 1985) identified ideal learning conditions take place when there was comprehensible communication along with language just above learner’s level. In these conditions, youngsters were able to construct the meaning by being able to follow conversations, even if they’d never heard a particular vocabulary or phrase beforehand. This theory suggests language is acquired by being surrounded by people conversing in a particular code. In addition, learning is present when the child is relaxed and feels comfortable, free from anything which may trigger anxiety. Naturally, if the teacher provides encouragement in warm surroundings then positive results would most likely occur. A further avenue children are likely to acquire language, is by engaging in fun games which capture their attention or by listening to music that is suitable and catchy. While listening to appropriate rhythms that hook them in, the child dances or moves around. Asher and National Federation of Modern Language Teachers (1966) introduced the concept of “Total Physical Response”, (TPR) a method of language training supported by over expressed body language. For example, when the teacher says

‘hello’, they would also wave their hand. Using TPR to learn verbs is very common with students saying and making the action for example run (running on the spot), wash (rubbing hands together), jump (hoping like a kangaroo), eat (pretending to eat) and so forth. Although, like all methods, there is a limit to how much TPR should be employed. When the student is forced to memorize the movements which correspond with the language then it could cause memory overload. Additionally, they may concentrate on the movements and not pay any attention to the target language.



Photograph taken of children walking to St. Bernadette kindergarten in Joto Town, Okayama

In immersion programs where code switching between L1 and L2 is facilitated, long explanations are understandably counterproductive. The young mind is eager to get into motion and will most likely become distracted easily. Therein, the teacher may blend phrases to grab the attention of the young mind that is eager for new information. Otherwise another way of keeping attention, the instructor may use L1 for the student experiencing semantic confusion, so as to relieve stress while maintaining focus. Jacobson (1990) identifies signals for the students to realize code switching is about to take place. In the Japanese classroom, the teacher may say catch phrases in Japanese, “Eigo jikan desuyo, mina hon to penceru dashite”, “It’s English time, so please take out your English Books and pencils”. Using Japanese to let students know they are about to begin their English lesson. The teacher may also, ask questions in Japanese to help review previous

grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation or whatever language targets were taught in previous lessons. Using L1 can also gain affinity with the student and or students to begin the lesson. Furthermore, if during the class the students feel tired then the teacher may use L1 to ease the burden of learning and to get the students back on task. Additionally, the amount of time spent on each language code is important. Balancing the time allocated to each language will affect the L1 and L2 ability. Naturally, if one language was used more than the other then this imbalance could be impeding and preventing development. Input and output communication skills should also be observed. Williams (1994) implies establishing a curriculum that builds skills in both L1 and L2 for deeper understanding is imperative. In looking at issues through two different language perspectives provides alternative expression, at which point provide diverse perspectives. Having another way to describe situations can inspire creativity.

#### 4. Celebrating Cultural Diversity through L2.

Going beyond the classroom and into the public, Cummings (2000b) recognizes the curriculum should be supported by a 'transformational pedagogy, which includes, developing social awareness in society. This process galvanizes learning outside into the local community through celebrating foreign culture. At St. Bernadette kindergarten in Okayama both Easter and Christmas are celebrated in Christian traditional manner as well as in non religious modern fashion. A Christian would appreciate Easter being the time Jesus died and was resurrected and Christmas was a time he was born. A modern commercial view of these events would be a time for Easter eggs (chocolates) passed out by a person wearing a bunny rabbit suit and Christmas presents delivered by Santa Claus. Additionally, the program should promote academic prowess through participating in challenging activities, which may include reenacting the birth of Jesus in a dramatic play while learning English songs. The shows are performed in front of parents and guardians in public

halls or at school. Also, songs should be taught with the traditional meaning behind it. Other celebrated days include Father's Day. Below are drawings from a Father's Day display at the local department store:



Father's Day drawings from St. Bernadette Kindergarten. Photograph taken at You Me Town Department Store in Seto Town, Okayama

For the bilingual individual, they have the option to either assimilate into the given community or live in a plural culture within their network. Edwards (1985) stipulates the bilingual can flourish in most societies through appreciating both sides of their cultures. In essence, they do not have to conform to one or the other rigidly. A case where there is conformity between languages is when the young person uses English at home and Japanese at school, as the case of the author. Keeping in mind, there will be times at school where classes will be in English and vice versa, times at home they can use Japanese. This compromise is a way of allowing the bilingual to use their skill effectively in familiar surroundings, without threat of vigorous rules. Installing regulations which govern them to act in accordance to environment may lead to suppressing their linguistic ability. For the author there are no language rules in the house, yet it is desirable to speak as much as possible in English when the family is together. At the preschool they attend, many other children's families also try to adopt as much English at home, even though, in most occasions both parents are Japanese with limited L2 ability.

#### 5. Conclusion

To recap on the issues of bilingual livelihood for

young people, historical criticisms of learning a second language have been replaced with L2 having no cognitive ill effects. Current research points out the positive aspects of bilingualism can enrich experiences and encourage creativity. This has been reflected in the current curriculum at St. Bernadette kindergarten in Okayama by celebrating national and international events in both English and Japanese. Possessing dual language ability provides the young person with a creative tool they can use to express themselves. Within education realms, it is important to use language effectively by using it in the correct context. Students ought to practice English in everyday routine events in life so they can have more chance to learn through repetition. Reinforcing authentic use of expressions can be remembered in the same way L1 is recalled. All of those daily interactions which may go unnoticed can be made into an opportunity for teachers to change codes and speak English. Aforementioned in this paper, it may be through cleaning up toys, washing hands or saying a pray before eating. The teacher can change mundane activity and turn any action into a chance to bolster English. Singing a song "let's clean up" can make chores enjoyable and a practical at the same time. In addition, TPR activities can be incorporated into routine drills. In the traditional English class, a lot of time is taken up with long explanations in L1, instead of reinforcing natural communication. Therein, classroom style English has many disadvantages to optimal learning conditions at the preschool age. On top of that, if kindergartens can continue to conduct English events, while celebrating the traditional meanings behind those occasions then positive steps towards creating a bilingual society is realistic and an achievable goal in Japan.

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