Evidence-based support for effective classroom interaction and language use in primary English instruction

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Abstract

Teachers' use of the target language (TL) is a crucial aspect of instructed language learning, especially in the case of English teaching in primary school, where the aim is to foster motivation, confidence, and oral engagement among young learners with limited TL proficiency. Since language learning is a cognitive, but also a social and emotional endeavor, teachers' language choices need to be considered beyond the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of language input. In the Scandinavian context, the amount of TL use has been found to differ dramatically across classrooms. Despite the pervasive exclusive-TL ideal, it seems many teachers have not found the approach pragmatic. Nevertheless, the professional discourse has lacked an evidence-based model of systematizing and considering effective language use. However, the Teaching through Interactions framework (Hamre et al., 2013) illustrates three qualitative dimensions of primary classroom interaction: the socioemotional, the organizational, and the instructional. Across school subjects, substantial theoretical and empirical evidence links these dimensions to teacher effectiveness and learner development. This article argues that the framework is applicable to foreign language instruction and can facilitate our understanding of the various considerations at play, and the close connection between quality and language use in the primary classroom. The framework may therefore be useful for teachers, teacher educators, and student teachers to identify, systematize, and share their deliberations about language choice, which may advance the professional discourse at all levels of education.

Introduction

In any school subject, classroom interaction is a qualitative aspect of teaching that impacts how activities are organized and carried out, as well as the social and academic development of learners (Hamre et al., 2013). In language instruction, such interaction is dependent on the language choices of the teacher, which are inextricably related to everything that goes on in the language classroom (Levine, 2003). While teachers' use of the target language (TL) is an important element of foreign language education for any age group, it is of paramount

importance in early English instruction, that most often prioritizes the development of listening and speaking skills. In addition, primary teachers of English generally perceive three major challenges in their work, namely making their students speak the TL, maintaining motivation, and dealing with mixed-ability groups (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014). Although all of these aspects may be linked to the teachers' communicative choices, language use in primary settings is under-researched (Copland & Ni, 2019).

In Scandinavia, as in other contexts, young language learners (YLLs) are taught in classrooms where TL use varies greatly (Cadierno et al., 2020; Krulatz, Neokleous & Henningsen, 2016; Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2016), despite the monolingual ideal that has permeated language instruction. This suggests that teachers either do not feel comfortable or proficient enough to speak English or that they do not find a TL-only approach to be a pragmatic strategy in their classrooms. Levine (2003) concluded that language choice may be influenced by teacher education, language teaching literature, steering documents, and personal experiences, "yet often it appears to be based primarily on classroom experience and intuitions about what feels right" (p. 343). Arguably, in terms of teacher education and the professional discourse in the field of language instruction, this leaves much to be desired.

At present, monolingual instruction for YLLs is no longer endorsed (Copland & Ni, 2019; Lightbown & Spada, 2020). Instead, integrating some L1 in language teaching may enhance TL interaction (Butzkamm & Lynch, 2018; Macaro & Lee, 2013). In recent years, many scholars in the field of early language instruction have underscored the need to further develop teaching approaches with this specific age group in mind (Copland & Ni, 2019; Enever, 2018; Garton & Copland, 2019). Hence, teacher education must address the crucial aspect of language choice, on part of both the teacher and the learners, and support teachers in approaching the matter of judicious language use (Hall & Cook, 2012) in a professional way that is underpinned by rigid and evidence-based research. The current paper argues that a model not previously referred to in foreign language education literature, *Teaching through Interactions* (TTI; Hamre et al., 2013), may prove to be valuable in this regard. It outlines dimensions of classroom interaction linked to effective teaching and learner development and can serve as a comprehensive model to help advance our understanding of the many complex considerations at play as teachers decide how to use linguistic resources in the classroom. This validated and substantiated framework, building on extensive research in primary classrooms, will be employed to illuminate these deliberations from socioemotional, organizational, and instructional perspectives provided in the model. The TTI may enrich the

professional discourse of early language instruction and advance our understanding of teachers' effective language choices. Moreover, the model can potentially help make the issue of language choice slightly more concrete, and evidence-based, for pre-service and in-service teacher training in Scandinavia, and elsewhere, in our strive for more equal and effective language education for YLLs.

The following sections will offer a background into the issue of language use, the assumptions guiding foreign language instruction, challenges in relation to primary English teaching in Scandinavia, and the concept of quality in early instruction, before moving on to discuss the possible contributions of the TTI.

Language use in theory

For over a century, the question of whether to banish or exploit the L1 in language instruction has been debated, inspired by pedagogical and ideological beliefs and assumptions, and theoretical positions from varying academic fields, for example, psychology, linguistics, and cognition (for overviews, see Copland & Ni, 2019; Hall & Cook, 2012). With the complete rejection of the L1 in the *direct method* and the *audiolingual approach* (Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Kerr, 2016) in the twentieth century, negative attitudes towards L1 inclusion were established. In addition, the expansion of English teaching into a global industry, where native speakers taught the foreign language with TL-only textbooks, helped promote the monolingual English teaching approach (Hall & Cook, 2012; Kerr, 2016). The idea of exclusive TL use became a central feature of the *communicative language teaching* paradigm, initially developed to promote communicative competence and native-like proficiency in adult learners, and where the L1 should be suppressed in the classroom (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016). In the case of YLLs, no specific pedagogy was developed (Rixon, 2019) but the exclusive TL ideals paralleled assumptions that children absorb languages with ease, are uninhibited and motivated and feel comfortable in monolingual classrooms (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016).

During the last decades, the TL-only approach has been increasingly contested. This dogma finds little or no support in contemporary academic publications (Copland & Ni, 2019; Lightbown & Spada, 2020; Shin, Dixon & Choi, 2020). In fact, no long-term advantages of monolingual language instruction have been established (Lightbown & Spada, 2020). Moreover, in the context of foreign language instruction, previous assumptions about children as language learners have been questioned. Indeed, TL-only approaches have been found to

ignite anxiety among YLLs (Macaro & Lee, 2013; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Nilsson, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Butzkamm and Lynch (2018) claim that the monolingual approach, that looked to L1 acquisition in natural settings to inspire instructed language learning in primary school, is actually "absurd" and "impossible" (p. 3).

Instead, balanced L1 use is promoted in the field of early foreign language instruction (Copland & Ni, 2019; Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014). Butzkamm and Lynch (2018) suggest advancing foreign language teaching by considering the strategies used by naturally developing bilingual children, as they ask for translations, contrast, and alternate between languages. In the case of beginner learners, the authors conclude, comprehension is always bilingual. As for communicative language teaching, Rixon (2019) argues that this is a relevant approach in primary school only if it is understood as a strive to make teaching engaging, meaningful, and child-friendly. However, orchestrating such interactions, rather than traditional language study, puts a high demand on teachers (Copland & Ni, 2019).

Language use in practice

Despite the growing academic consensus that confirms the important role of the L1 in foreign language instruction, exclusive use of the TL is still regarded as good practice and a common-sense approach by many teacher educators and policymakers (Butzkamm & Lynch, 2018; Kerr, 2016; Neokleous & Ofte, 2020). Furthermore, actual language use has been found to vary greatly across classrooms in different educational contexts, even in settings where exclusive TL use is prescribed (Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Rabbidge & Chappell, 2014; Shin et al., 2020). Such findings lend support to the claim by Hall and Cook (2012) that teachers' language choices have always had practical rather than theoretical origins; models have been developed in relation to the teacher, the learners, the setting, and how the goals of instruction are perceived.

Primary English teachers report using the L1 to, for example, facilitate comprehension, scaffold, deal with matters of discipline, avoid frustration and maintain motivation and confidence (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014; Rabbidge & Chappell, 2014). Although most of these functions are echoed in numerous studies, it seems that the rationales for language choices and the amount of TL used are quite personal and subjective, reflecting the beliefs and assumptions nurtured by

individual teachers (Inbar-Lourie, 2010). There is, however, a lack of studies focusing on language use in primary English education, and although there are several review studies (Hall & Cook, 2012; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Shin et al., 2020), none of these address the factor of learner age.

What we do know is that YLLs themselves favor approaches with some L1 support. In the case of beginner or low proficiency learners especially, not allowing them any backing or access to their L1 may cause demotivation and frustration (Copland & Ni, 2019; Lee & Macaro, 2013; Nilsson, 2020; Song & Lee, 2019). Hence, as pointed out by Macaro and Lee (2013), monolingual English instruction may, ironically, reduce rather than promote TL interaction.

English in Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, primary classrooms have become increasingly diverse with respect to learner proficiency, due to out-of-school exposure and migration. With the challenges that these conditions present in early English instruction, and the dramatic differences in teachers' language use, the situation is not unique, but interesting as a backdrop to the discussion about qualitative aspects of TL use in English for YLLs.

The Scandinavian countries, comprising Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, share a common history, and are linguistically and socioculturally rather similar (Hultgren, Gregersen & Thøgersen, 2014). The English proficiency among the populations is high; the three countries were placed among the top eight in a recent global survey (EF Education First, 2021). There is a strong presence of English in Scandinavian workplaces, media, and society at large. Children are exposed to English in their everyday lives and most Scandinavian learners engage with social media, mostly mediated in English, daily (Hannibal Jensen, 2019; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016) and above the European average (Smahel et al., 2022). Consequently, school teachers are not the main source of input for these learners, and many YLLs come to school with some familiarity, or even basic skills, at the onset of English instruction (Cadierno et al., 2020; Fenyvesi, 2018).

Scandinavian compulsory education comprises ten years, ages 6-16. English is a mandatory subject from grade 1 in Norway and Denmark. In Sweden, English is introduced by year 3 at the latest, but most often earlier. No grades are awarded before the age of 12/13. Hardly any children attend out-of-school English instruction (Enever, 2018).

The national steering documents in Scandinavia, underpinned by the CEFR, all define overall goals and put a strong emphasis on communicative skills, but do not regulate language use. How to achieve the goals is therefore up to the teachers. As most Scandinavian primary teachers of English are generalists and share an L1 with their learners, they are at a strategic and pedagogical advantage, as this increases their repertoire of skills and tools for teaching (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016). Monolingual classrooms are uncommon and as in other contexts, language use has been found to vary greatly across classrooms, in all three countries (Cadierno et al., 2020; Krulatz et al., 2016; Neokleous & Ofte, 2020; Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2016). In Norway, Krulatz et al. (2016) found that a majority of primary teachers reported TL use of between 15% and 75%. From interviews and observations in Sweden, Schröter and Molander Danielsson (2016) concluded that "far more Swedish than English" was used.

Language practices appear to cause a certain frustration among many Scandinavian primary teachers. In several studies, they express positive attitudes toward using a lot of TL, although many voice discontent with their own practices, feeling that their TL use should increase (Krulatz et al., 2016; Neokleous & Ofte, 2020; Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2016). This is certainly understandable, considering the English-only imperative where 'good' teaching implies excluding and ignoring the L1. There may be several reasons for the variance of TL use in Scandinavian classrooms. It appears teachers have not found it possible or pragmatic to implement monolingual English instruction. Considering the high proficiency of English among many of their learners, it is not surprising that teachers express dissatisfaction about not living up to their own ideals about communicating in English. They may also experience a lack of confidence in the TL (Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2016). Teachers are often rather vague as they describe their approaches to language choice, and report, for example, using the L1 "when they felt the need" (Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2016, p. 63), in line with the previous quote by Levine (2003) and the personal maxims mentioned by Inbar-Lourie (2010).

In general, motivation to learn and engage with English is high among Scandinavian children (Fenyvesi, 2018; Hannibal Jensen, 2019). In Fenyvesi (2018), YLLs expressed a preference for activities that connect to life outside school and situations where they imagine using English, on holidays, or social media. Unfortunately, however, their attitudes towards English lessons became less positive throughout the first years of primary school. The

researcher therefore concludes that teaching English as a foreign language to children who have constant exposure to English in their free time, is a challenge that demands differentiation. Furthermore, Schröter and Molander Danielsson (2016) observed very little oral interaction and negotiation of meaning among the YLLs in grades 1-3, and learners' language choices appeared to follow that of their teacher. Such a lack of communicative activities is problematic for two reasons. It may be detrimental to learners' motivation, but the absence of communicative strategies apart from translation, for example, re-formulations, repetitions, and visual aids, also deprives YLLs of the opportunities to develop an all-round communicative competence (Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2016).

Primary teachers of English across the world are facing similar complex challenges, of engaging diverse groups of YLLs in TL speech and maintaining their motivation (Copland et al., 2014). As Scandinavian generalist teacher education programs targeting primary school include limited time for English (for example, 15 HCP, for grades 1-3 in Sweden), it is crucial that this precious time is spent wisely and prepares teachers to make informed and deliberate language choices. At present, Scandinavian YLLs receive English instruction of very varying quality, as far as content and language approach. To address this problem, teachers and student teachers would benefit from a solid evidence-based framework structuring the consequences of language choice in their classrooms.

Quality in primary education

Interestingly, another shift in the field of English for YLLs relates to goals and the definition of quality in primary language education, and aligns with the concerns voiced by teachers in studies from around the world, as they justify their L1 use. In the last decade, scholars have underscored the importance of sustaining motivation and creating positive classroom experiences for learners, with teaching that counteracts foreign language anxiety and fosters learners' confidence in using the TL (Copland & Ni, 2019; Enever, 2018; Fenyvesi, 2018; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2014) define quality in terms of scaffolded teaching with clear instructions in a warm, supportive and orderly classroom. Similarly, according to Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2019), high quality English instruction is dependent on the ability of the teacher to establish a positive and supportive atmosphere, formulate explicit goals, plan lessons where the TL is used extensively, and where learners are encouraged and supported to interact and communicate.

The issue, however, is not about whether or how much L1 to include, but rather about the purpose and considerations that underpin such language choices (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). How classroom interaction is orchestrated is up to each individual teacher and needs to be considered in relation to the learners and the classroom (Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2020; Shin et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the lack of models accounting for teachers' professional language choices may add to the assumption that these deliberations are uninformed and vaguely intuitive. Littlewood and Yu (2011) concluded that teachers have had to rely on their own intuitions as they try to make sense of recommendations like 'judicious' language use, but hoped that future research would aid teachers to make such interpretations. They themselves presented a framework with two sets of distinctions, considering language use in terms of working with *core* or *framework goals*, and using language for *strategic* or *compensatory purposes*, which may result in pedagogical but also affective and pragmatic rationales (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Grounded in sociolinguistic theory, Lee (2012) suggested a model of effective language use building on four factors: 1) learner's age and proficiency, 2) their attitudes towards the teacher's code-switching, 3) the content addressed, and 4) contextual variables such as the teacher's mastery of the two languages, time, learners' individual differences and class size. Wu (2018) viewed language use through a sociocultural lens where language choice can be regarded as a *cognitive, interactional* or *affective* mediator. These frameworks all stem from an Asian context and do not focus on any specific learner age group. In the case of YLLs, Inbar-Louri (2010) found *cognitive*, *managerial* and *affective* motives for teacher's language choices.

The reviewed papers all contribute with interesting perspectives to the field of language instruction, offering insight into teachers' perspectives and practices. What lacks, however, is a model that is able to account for language choices in primary classrooms in a way that has validated and evidence-based underpinnings that link such considerations to effective teaching and learner development. The TTI (Hamre et al., 2013) may suit this purpose.

The TTI framework

Aiming to describe qualitative dimensions of classroom interaction that support both social and academic development in learners across school subjects in primary education, Hamre et al. (2013) conducted a large study in the United States, with data from over 4,000 classrooms.

The study departed from documented evidence from educational and psychological research positing that it is the daily interactions between teachers and learners that have the most salient effect on learner development and achievement. In other words, it is the oral back-and-forth exchanges between the teacher and the learners that lie at the heart of qualitative teaching for this age group. Trained observers assessed qualitative classroom behaviors and actions that find extensive support in research (for example, Kane & Staiger, 2012) such as classroom climate, concept development, encouragement, language modelling, richness of instructional methods, quality of feedback, and regard for student perspectives, to mention a few. Factor analysis was then conducted to arrive at a model, the TTI, that fit the realities of the primary classroom and that best describes how these qualitative features are mirrored and realized in classroom interaction.

The TTI defines three subdomains of qualitative classroom instruction from which teacher behavior can be observed, namely the teachers' ability to offer emotional support, manage classroom organization, and deliver instructional support (Hamre et al., 2013). All three domains have been linked to academic and socioemotional development in learners (Wiens, Hessberg, LoCasale-Crouch, & DeCoster, 2020), and according to Hamre et al. (2013), there is strong evidence that the framework can be used to predict achievement; learners in classrooms where the teacher has good command in the three domains of interaction perform better. Needless to say, in the foreign language classroom, such interactions are greatly impacted by language choice. Hence, the TTI implies that qualitative English teaching hinges not only on the cognitive and linguistic elements of language instruction, but also the social, emotional and psychological considerations that are of paramount importance in primary education.

Against this background, this paper aims to foreground language choice as a pedagogical tool and a fundamental qualitative factor of early English instruction, conducive to both social and academic development. In what follows, functions and consequences of language choice, on part of the teacher but also the learners, will be examined through each subdomain defined in the TTI, to illustrate the potential benefits of flexible language use in the primary classroom.

The emotional domain

The most fundamental subdomain of instructional quality, according to Hamre et al. (2013), refers to emotional and relational aspects of classroom interaction and the way in which the teacher manages to establish and maintain a positive and supportive atmosphere, that fosters self-reliance and confidence in learners. As argued by Copland and Ni (2019), primary education must first and foremost consider the holistic growth of children. Learners' social and emotional needs must be met, and teachers thus have to be aware of the role of emotion and ensure that learners feel safe and listened to. In the language classroom, the linguistic means of communication have direct impact on these relational concerns, and making thoughtful use of the L1 is one way of fostering secure and non-threatening learning contexts (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019).

According to the TTI, emotions exert a pervasive influence on learning. Butler (2017) asserts that the interconnected nature of emotions, thoughts and actions, especially in the case of YLLs, must be acknowledged in order to understand learner behavior and motivation. A teacher who is responsive to learners' emotional states and reactions can make use of both languages to respond to their utterances, questions, guesses, misunderstandings, and thoughts voiced in the L1, using either language, and recast what children would like to say, in English. Whereas negative emotion hinders linguistic processing and strategy use (Butler, 2017; MacIntyre, 2017), learning and performance are supported and enhanced in favorable conditions where children are encouraged to explore, engage and guess (Hamre et al., 2013).

Learners should also be encouraged to reflect on their own progress. Moreover, in accordance with the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, their opinions and reflections should be considered in matters that concern them. In addition, they need for their interests and their identities to be regarded and respected (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). If such thoughts, reflections, and experiences are to be taken seriously, learners need teachers to initiate and conduct such conversations without restricting language use to the TL.

Both the TL and the L1 are therefore useful resources in the emotional subdomain of qualitative teaching, to create a classroom environment that caters to learners' affective and relational needs, and where the atmosphere is conducive to language learning.

The organizational domain

The second qualitative subdomain in TTI, relates to the way in which the teacher manages and organizes classroom work, and ensures that lesson time is used efficiently. Using the TL not only for content but also as the means of classroom communication is undoubtedly a challenge with YLLs. However, flexible language use may increase learner engagement, as it allows the teacher to use the L1 as a pedagogical asset to share the goals and the outline of a lesson with learners, and make sure that the lesson can keep a certain pace in order to maintain learners' focus (Creese & Blackledge 2010; Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014).

According to primary learners of English themselves, failing to grasp instructions is a source of frustration, and it is not surprising that they pinpoint this is a situation where they most value L1 support (Nilsson, 2020). Oftentimes, simple instructions are part of the learning content, and activities such as TPR *(total physical response),* are useful to teach, for example, actions and body parts, allowing learners to move, practice and engage physically in language learning. By showing learners, and using objects and other visual support, the teacher can easily establish phrases for classroom items and routines using only the TL, which serves the dual purpose of teaching useful content and managing lessons. Nevertheless, offering more abstract procedural instructions in English only, such as the rules for playing a game, may arguably be counterproductive, as these are often more advanced than the language required for the actual activity (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Some L1 support may instead be regarded a wise shortcut in order to make certain all learners are up to speed. As task complexity increases with age, L1 may need to be included in instructions also for older primary learners (Rabbidge & Chappell, 2014). A worse alternative would be to choose activities depending on the complexity of the necessary instructions, rather than learners' ability to perform the task.

Another way of counteracting anxiety in the primary language classroom is to pay close attention to how to introduce activities and convey reasonable expectations to YLLs. For example, introducing a storybook to beginners, the teacher can allow learners to voice predictions based on pictures and titles, in their L1, and clarify that they are not expected to understand every single word and that they will be allowed to share their thoughts or experiences in their L1 afterwards. Such a brief introduction in the L1 may significantly

reduce negative emotion, and thus increase learners' tolerance for incomprehensible TL input, while encouraging them to make use of their guessing competence.

Needless to say, the learner's own use of the TL is a fundamental aspect of language learning, which requires ample practice of communicative skills in meaningful and engaging interaction. Including pair or group work is the only way to significantly increase talk time for all learners in the classroom. However, plenty of comprehensible scaffolding, guidance, and modelling is necessary for YLLs to successfully complete oral tasks and negotiate meaning. While qualitative and extensive TL input is valuable, another plausible ambition is to prioritize learner interaction and meaningful activities by reducing time spent on procedural instructions and classroom management. Allowing for L1 support when needed is thus a constructive way of focusing on appropriate TL input and enough time on learner output.

In classrooms with heterogeneous proficiency levels, one can expect to find some learners who experience frustration while more proficient learners are bored (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Providing safe conditions for learners to practice their oral TL skills, and experience successful interaction at their level, are qualitative aspects that strongly impact learners' attitudes and motivation, which may otherwise be short-lived (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Moreover, pair work easily opens up for the possibility to differentiate tasks and allows for elements of choice according to learners' proficiency and interests.

Alternating between teacher-led work in full-class mode and pair or groupwork activities with primary learners demands orderly classrooms and organizational skills on part of the teacher. The L1 is a valuable tool to achieve and manage lessons with plenty of learner interaction, to make sure learners grasp instructions, understand the goals and expectations of the activities, and receive scaffolding. This way, lesson time can then be spent on the actual activity, with learners who feel prepared and able to stay on task. In the organizational subdomain of TTI, the L1 may in fact help optimize learners' TL use and maximize engagement.

The instructional domain

The third subdomain of high quality teaching focuses on the educational content and concerns the teacher's readiness to provide learners with instructional support that enhances their learning and their engagement, by facilitating, modelling, providing feedback, and adapting teaching focused on formative and ongoing assessment (Hamre et al., 2013). In the case of

primary English, the teachers' ability to present and use the new language, the subject matter, is of course a paramount qualitative dimension and requires considerations on a number of levels. Not only does the teacher need to offer plenty of TL input and have good command of English, but also thorough knowledge of how to model and scaffold language use, draw on multimodal and contextualized materials and features, and build on learners' TL proficiency and their background knowledge (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019).

Both teachers and learners can make use of the L1 as a strategic aid in all stages of language learning. The L1 constitutes our primary cognitive tool (Vygotsky, 1978), that we use to use to focus our attention, process information and structure our thinking (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). According to scholars, the role of the L1 for meaning-making and learning in a foreign language is indisputable (Butzkamm & Lynch, 2018; Hall & Cook, 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2020; Wu, 2018). From a sociocultural perspective, TL use is most effective within the learner's zone of proximal development, slightly outside their current level of proficiency. In teacher-led interactions within this zone, even small amounts of L1 can significantly improve teaching and learning (Wu, 2018). For example, lexical scaffolding can be offered using the 'sandwiching' technique, where a TL word is translated into the L1 and then repeated in the TL in mid speech (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009). For YLLs, studies suggest that lexical L1 support is conducive to language learning, with positive effects on, for example, TL vocabulary retention and retrieval (Codina Camó & Pladevall Ballester, 2015; Lee & Macaro, 2013; Song & Lee, 2019). Hence, strategic L1 use may serve as a catalyst rather than a hindrance to learning.

The question of language use does, however, not just revolve around the output of the teacher. YLLs are motivated by activities that they find authentic, such as role play, games and discussions. These are, however, often the least common in primary classrooms (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019), possibly because they are challenging to implement in a TL-only classroom. Involved in communicative pair-work activities, YLLs often resort to the L1 and make use of their multilingual competence, to solve problems, negotiate meaning, and help each other with, for instance, vocabulary (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2017; Pinter, 2007; Shintani, 2014). This way, however, learners scaffold each other and are more likely to manage to complete tasks within their zone of proximal development (Wu, 2018). Furthermore, engaging activities afford great opportunities for recycling and repetition. Tasks that are perceived as communicative and involve authentic language use can motivate learners to repeat them, with the same or another partner, or with slightly modified or expanded

material. In such task repetition, L1 use has been found to decrease (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2016).

In addition, learners' use of the L1 may serve the purpose of providing valuable information for both teachers and classmates. In order to assess comprehension, teachers can allow learners to express themselves in their L1, which may in turn offer helpful support, or confirmation, for peers. Evaluating YLLs' level of understanding based on TL output, is arguably not a valid method of assessment, as learners are likely to understand far more than they are able to verbalize in another language. Furthermore, listening to language use in pair interactions, teachers receive useful information as to their learners' current proficiency level (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016), and allows them to plan teaching accordingly.

Although many children are exposed to extensive English input in their free time, the teacher and the lessons are still of pivotal importance to many YLLs. The teacher is able to adapt the amount and level of difficulty of the linguistic input in their classrooms, repeat and recap, make use of gestures and contextual features, while also keeping track of progression, individual needs, and emotional responses of the children they have in front of them. Furthermore, most learners practice their receptive skills in their free time far more than they do their own productive skills. Therefore, devoting plenty of time to oral practice where learners are encouraged, scaffolded, and empowered to advance their speaking skills, is of the essence.

To promote learning, other more indirect areas of language instruction are also important, such as developing learners' metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness and their strategy use (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). Addressing these aspects often requires language that is too abstract or even incomprehensible to YLLs if offered in the TL. Conceivably, even more so for those learners who already feel less competent than their peers and who would benefit most from such support. Making use of the L1 in discussions on metacognitive and metalinguistic aspects of language learning thus seems sensible.

The purpose of language education is increasingly understood as the promotion of multilingualism and multilingual identities (European Council, 2019; Kerr, 2016; Wu, 2018). In this regard, the teacher can serve as an important bilingual role model and stimulate metalinguistic awareness by making inferences and encourage comparisons between languages. Acknowledging and showing an interest in languages beyond one's own repertoire, teachers can encourage learners with varying L1s to think of their respective language competencies as important resources. Moreover, a central aspect of teaching

involves connecting to and building on what learners already know. Whereas the TL-only approach centers on a deficit narrative, where beginner learners lack all skills in the foreign language, teachers must acknowledge the bilingual identities and the wide range of competencies, experiences, and insights that YLLs bring to the classroom, and which are encoded in their L1 (Paterson, 2020; Wu, 2018).

In sum, flexible language use is a professional approach that contributes in different ways to children's learning of a new language. Teachers' language choices are interrelated with deliberations on how to promote a safe learning atmosphere, organize activities, make the best use of time, and support effective learning. The TTI can be used to examine and anchor these professional choices.

Providing evidence-based support for teachers' effective TL use

For primary learners, language use is interrelated with learning and cognition, but also with contextual and affective aspects that are crucial in order for learning to take place (Hamre et al., 2013). The TTI was developed to highlight dimensions of quality in classroom interaction that are conducive to the holistic goals of primary education. Furthermore, these goals resonate well with an increased scholarly understanding that the aims for the English subject should revolve more around positive attitudes, confidence, and agency among learners, rather than specific linguistic outcomes (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). However, these emotional and cognitive dimensions are not conflicting priorities. On the contrary, the findings by Hamre et al. (2013) reveal that the effects of teaching on both learning outcomes and social development depend on emotional, organizational, and instructional aspects of classroom interaction.

Interestingly, the three dimensions in the TTI confirm the categories presented by Inbar-Louri (2010) to systematize primary teachers' L1 use, called the *instructional*, *managerial* and *affective* functions. This further supports for the claim that the TTI is applicable to foreign language teaching. Moreover, what the TTI brings to the field of early English instruction is evidence that links these aspects to YLLs' social and academic development. In fact, it may be a benefit that the framework was not developed with foreign language instruction in mind. It cannot be used to determine a specific amount of ideal TL use and it is not grounded in any particular language ideology, but simply structures dimensions to consider, based on empirical evidence.

Although primary teachers' language choices appear to be grounded in similar concerns, their actual language use varies drastically. At the same time, the ideal amount of TL, and how terms such as 'judicious' or 'optimal' (Hall & Cook, 2013; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014) language use should be interpreted, is up to primary teachers within their different contexts. So far, teachers have had to rely on their own intuition and develop pragmatic approaches to maintain learners' motivation and focus, and strive to avoid frustration in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. The wide differences in English use across classrooms, in Scandinavia and elsewhere, where the TL is less prevalent than the L1 in many cases, and where teachers feel guilty about their L1 use (Neokleous & Ofte, 2020; Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2016) should be of concern to anyone involved in language education. To support teachers to make professional choices, without clear guidelines, the TTI offers a supportive structure. Framing and considering language choice in relation to the three dimensions of qualitative interaction may help teachers determine when the L1 would be a wise choice, while also underscoring the need to make extensive use of the TL. Equipping teachers with concepts to articulate their rationales in relation to language use could be one way of reducing shame, making them feel resourceful and professional, and empower them to counteract the monolingual ideals that still prevail among many stakeholders, parents, and colleagues.

To advance language pedagogy, pre-service and in-service teacher education must direct attention to issues related to interactional skills and language use and encourage teachers to make informed and deliberate choices. The diversity of TL use across Scandinavian primary classrooms suggests that the topic has been addressed differently, or not enough, across institutions responsible for teacher education. As pointed out by Kerr (2016), the issue of language choice has often not even been addressed in literature for language teachers. Arguably, although teacher education cannot fully prepare teachers for how to deal with language choice in their future classrooms, the purpose of their training is to direct attention to common misconceptions, and present relevant and evidence-based models that will function as platforms for further development in contexts where they teach. The TTI provides a model to systematize and discuss strategies, functions, and possible consequences of language choice in relation to qualitative aspects of interaction, while acknowledging the challenges of the multifaceted nature of teaching. In fact, awareness of the three qualitative domains has been found to improve not only student teachers' ability to notice and identify qualitative interaction during classroom observations, but also their skills in implementing

such interactional support in their own teaching (Jamil, Sabol, Hamre, & Pianta, 2015; Wiens et al., 2013).

As underscored by Hamre et al. (2013), there are other aspects of the teaching profession that are important for teaching and learning, beyond observable interactions, such as choosing activities, aligning goals and assessment, and offering written feedback. However, the framework centers on interaction, as this is posited as the most paramount aspect of quality in primary school. According to the authors, there is strong evidence that teacher actions in the three domains predict learner achievement. Furthermore, the model has been found to apply in other educational contexts and with older learners (Hamre et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In the field of English for YLLs, the multitude of personal, social, and contextual components of language learning have received increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Butler, 2017; Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Nilsson, 2020). These realizations are accompanied by a growing understanding of the cumulative and long-lasting impact of the classroom experiences that children take with them, and that often exert a strong influence on their language learner identities throughout their education. These aspects, related to both social and academic development in learners, find support in the TTI, developed by Hamre et al. (2013), which provides an evidence-based framework of relational, organizational, and instructional aspects of classroom interaction in primary school linked to effective teaching (Hamre et al., 2013; Wiens et al., 2020). This paper therefore argues that the TTI can be used to highlight and examine the effects and possible purposes of language choice in the classroom, conducive to the academic and holistic goals of early English instruction.

At the heart of teaching YLLs a new language lies the fundamental aspect of TL use. Scandinavian primary teachers are free to decide for themselves how best to achieve the goals of the respective national steering documents. However, the great diversity in TL use points to the need for pre-service and in-service training to support teachers in the complex task of making informed language choices in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. To ensure equal education, teachers must be equipped with strategies to increase TL use while feeling professional about including the L1 in ways that contribute to effective teaching, in response to the group they are teaching. The TTI has the potential to function as a comprehensive guide

to disentangle the rationales and considerations that may underpin the crucial question of language choice. It is hoped that the framework will receive more scholarly attention in the field of language education, to explore its to support more purposeful approaches to language use in classrooms across contexts, and inform the professional discourse.

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