Sociocultural Understandings of the Silent Period: Young Bilingual Learners in Early Years Settings

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Abstract

This briefing draws from longitudinal Doctoral research (Bligh, 2011) to re-examine the emergent stage of English language acquisition, *the silent period,* through the experiences of two early years bilingual learners.

Historical understandings of Vygotsky (1986) provide the platform through which sociocultural learning theory is applied in relation to the silent period. Legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), is examined as a workable concept through which to explore the initial learning trajectory of an emergent bilingual learner whilst negotiating participation within, through and beyond an early years community of practice.

The initial research employed multi-method ethnographic approach to data gathering, including participant observations, unstructured interviews with monolingual participants, participant narratives and significant auto-ethnographic accounts. In this briefing the researcher focuses upon '*gaze following' (*Flewitt, 2005) as an adjunct to participant observations.

The findings are revealed through a two stage analytic process. Data is initially funnelled through thematic analysis, (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and tested out against sociocultural theorising. The deductive process highlights nine vignettes which present the silent period as a crucial time for learning. One professional narrative account and one significant vignette are examined in this briefing.

Examining the silent period through a sociocultural lens reveals the initial stage of language acquisition as a significant, but lesser acknowledged contribution to learning in the early years community of practice.

Key words: bilingual; silent period; legitimate peripheral participation; sociocultural; ethnographic; participation.

Introduction

This briefing provides insight into the experiences of two emergent bilingual learners on admission to an Early Years setting in England. In attempting to unravel the complexity of the silent period, the researcher draws upon participant observations of Adyta (Punjabi heritage) within an English speaking preschool playgroup (Bligh) and a narrative account of Suki (Japanese heritage) who attended my former reception class.

Most teachers in England and Early years practitioners are monolingual, English speakers. The children (regardless of their mother tongue) are taught through the medium of spoken and written English in and through all curriculum areas. Bilingual learning through the mother tongue is not only disregarded in most schools in

England but may be actively discouraged. The preschool and reception class where the research was conducted are both based in England and uses spoken English as the language of instruction.

However in Wales and Scotland there is less emphasis on integration into spoken English as they their own indigenous languages (Welsh and Gaelic).
This briefing not only examines the experiences of two emergent bilingual learners during the initial stage of language acquisition, but also challenges current understandings of the 'silent period'. For the purposes of this briefing the terms 'silent, young bilingual learner' and 'emergent bilingual learner' are employed when referring to a young child between the ages of three and six years of age who is in the first (non-verbal) stage of learning English as a new and additional spoken language within and beyond an early years educational setting in England.
The key questions for this briefing are:

How does a young bilingual learner make meaning during the silent period?
What are the pedagogical implications of the findings?

The Silent Period
Not every young bilingual learner encounters a silent period because not every child invests many of their hours, days, weeks and years in an environment where their mother tongue may be disregarded (Bligh, 2011). The silent period (in this research) refers to a specific time when, on entering an early years setting in England, the language of discourse and instruction (English) is not understood. It is the initial stage in the acquisition of English as an additional language.

Although there is much conflicting information regarding the acceptable length of time within which a young bilingual learner will experience the 'silent period' or 'silent phase', many researchers (Clarke, 1996; Tabors, 1997) view the experiences of passing through the silent period as a normal stage in additional language acquisition. It is suggested by Tabors (1997) that silence is chosen because the bilingual learner prefers to communicate non-verbally. Saville-Troike's study into private speech described this period as 'linguistic development that has gone underground' (1988, p.568) or, if using private speech (speaking only to themselves), 'social speech that has turned inward' (Saville-Troike, 1988, p.570).

Many factors may or may not have an effect upon the speed at which a child passes through the silent period, including the consequences of psychological withdrawal or an interruption in the child's expected 'language acquisition processes' (Parke and Drury, 2001). Kagan (1989) suggests that children who are temperamentally inhibited will be more cautious, less sociable and perhaps less willing to try; they may be fearful (with no one to share their mother tongue) of making a mistake, therefore prolonging the transition through the silent period.

Suki's silent period: a professional narrative account
Recalling a professional experience from teaching a reception class in 2005 emphasises the important contribution that sociocultural theorising may add to current understandings and misconceptions of the silent period.
'Suki' was a five-year-old girl of Japanese heritage for whom English was her additional language. Not only did she not speak at all in my class (nor had she in her

previous nursery class) but she presented with a 'fixed' facial expression which remained unsmiling at all times. Although initially concerned that her prolonged silence (two years) was restricting her learning (I could not assess her reading) I was particularly worried about her lack of participation with others. I therefore referred her to the Speech and Language therapist in an attempt to articulate her 'condition'.

The Speech and Language therapist (adopting a linguistic lens) interpreted the silence as a complex expressive communication disorder 'selective mutism' (Cline and Baldwin, 2004) and swiftly referred her to an educational psychologist. The educational psychologist (adopting a psychological lens) focused upon the individual, developmental and cognitive processes of Suki and whether she was, or was not, functioning cognitively in the 'correct' sequential order. I was relieved when a medical diagnosis had been achieved as I assumed 'her problem' would now be solved. Following from Suki's diagnosis as a 'selective mute', a 'stimulus fading' programme of 'treatment' (Bergman, 2013) was prescribed by the educational psychologist.

However, over time, my initial relief was soon superseded by an increasing concern that in the pathologising of Suki she had become a 'condition'. Initial assessments of Suki had disregarded the social factors affecting her whole person (Engel, 1980) and in doing so, labelled her...as a deficit medical model (McConkey and Bhurgri, 2003). Reflecting upon this episode in Suki's life-world, had I unwittingly treated her with benign neglect, because I was accepting the 'medicalisation' of Suki's silence? Did the medical labelling provide a 'quick fix' solution and a 'just' reason for accepting Suki's 'condition'?

There are increasing numbers of bilingual learners being referred to speech and language therapists and subsequently being diagnosed with speech and language disorders. The diagnosis of selective mutism is sometimes confirmed after as little as *one month* into the silent period. In fact some Education Authority Ethnic Minority Achievement Services may advise teachers (Hampshire EMA Service, 2003, p.2) that, 'it is crucial children are diagnosed and treated as early as possible'.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation
Lave and Wenger, (1991) present 'Legitimate Peripheral Participation' as both a concept and context through which to examine the learning of a young bilingual child within an early years setting. Lave and Wenger, (1991, p.31) suggest that learning is located in a social context, moving from that of apprenticeship to situated learning and, ultimately, to peripheral participation. From a sociocultural perspective, learning through legitimate peripheral participation involves *fractional* participation that is, 'a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities' (Wenger 1999, p.4).

Within legitimate peripheral participation taking part is a means of 'becoming' and gaining new ways of knowing – learning. Thus, Lave and Wenger (1991) consider legitimate peripheral participation as a means to enable newcomers (over time) to move toward fuller participation in the practices of a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.29). Through legitimate peripheral participation newcomers can observe the 'what and how' of participation as they move fractionally forward.

There is also a duality of meaning to legitimate peripheral participation. Whilst the young bilingual learner 'settles' into the new learning environment without fearing the consequences of errors, she/he can also legitimately risk take, test the water and trial the practices whilst silently participating from the safe keeping of the 'look-out post' (legitimate peripheral participation). She/he contributes to and distributes meaning making through the participating members.

Methodology
Ethnography was the methodological means through which to both observe participant behaviours and to make *meaning* of those behaviours. Ethnography not only facilitated the unfolding of meaning making (Silverman, 2005) within the silent period but also aided in conceptualising the sociocultural framework. Ethnography enabled naturalistic investigations of behaviours rather than focusing narrowly on specific linguistic features of second language acquisition. As close working relationships were established with the preschool playgroup, there ease of access was granted to the children's family members with whom ethical issues were discussed, permissions granted and University level ethical approval granted to undertake the research.

In attempting to make meaning of Adyta's non-verbal communication during the silent period, methodological interest was drawn towards comprehending 'eye movements', 'gesture' and 'facial expressions' and the child as a 'spectator' (Saville-Troike, 1988). Tabors (1997) discussed the use of facial expressions by a bilingual learner who was participating in a 'spectator' role – that of quiet observation within legitimate peripheral participation..

Building upon Flewitt (2005) and Lancaster's (2001) studies which identify 'gaze following' as an expression of communication; Bligh also utilised gaze following as a complimentary participant observational tool to capture the more diverse and multimodal means that children choose to express meaning. This technique is made evident in the vignette, 'Adyta's learning'.

The playgroup which Adyta attended was found to be both welcoming and willing to share information and the nature of the research was well supported and accepted by the gate-keeper (Nicole, the graduate pre-school leader). The field notes were gathered through participant observations over a three year period within the playgroup, reception class and year 1 of primary school.

Adyta
Adyta remained almost silent in the pre-school setting. It was initially presumed that Adyta would communicate in spoken English because both he and his parents were articulate Punjabi/English speakers. However, as is customary in many South Asian communities, the paternal Grandmother, 'Jasmit' lived with Adyta's parents. According to Adyta's mother, her mother-in-law kept the Punjabi alive and active within the family. Out of respect to Adyta's Grandmother, family members spoke Punjabi in Jasmit's presence. As both of Adyta's parents worked full-time Adyta's Grandmother was his main carer and educator.
The vignette below is drawn from field-notes which demonstrate the complexities involved in Adyta's attempts at participatory learning - learning which is additional and complimentary to his English language acquisition.

Adyta's learning

...Thunder, lightning and torrential rain has started, and the children run inside. Nicole decides to suspend the outside activities and tells the children that she is going to put the television on. When the children have 'settled down' in the carpet area, Nicole and her two assistants move away from the carpet area as they start to tidy the morning's activities away.

Adyta is sat on the carpet with all the other children watching a humorous children's DVD. Some of the other children have started to move into smaller groupings on the carpet and are chatting informally....Adyta's eyes circle the television monitor....

There is loud laughter from the other children as a humorous incident occurs on the screen... Adyta opens his eyes wide and stares in surprise at the rest of the children, turning his head around in both directions. There is a pause and then Adyta copies the other children laughing and he laughs really loudly... Adyta doesn't realise at first when the rest of the children have stopped laughing.

Adyta suddenly turns his head and looks in all directions; he lowers his head a little, looks at his fingers and stops laughing. This same pattern of attempting to 'join in' with the other children's behaviour patterns continues throughout the fifteen minute episode shown on the television... (Adyta observed in pre-school, 19 February 2008.)

Analysis of Adyta's learning

The sample vignette articulates how, in the absence of others being able to share Adyta's mother tongue, Adyta's learning is dependent upon making connections between what he already knows (children laughing) and what he is capable of understanding (something amusing on the television had caused this reaction).

There is no intent by others to facilitate Adyta's learning. Adyta learns through incidental mediation by others. Others provide him with 'clues' on how he should participate. An example of this is where Adyta 'learns' to stop laughing when the other children have ceased their laughter.

Adyta endeavours to follow the story-line on the television whilst also observing and copying the practices of the other children on the carpet area. As Adyta endeavours to, 'observe and listen with intent concentration and initiative...' (Rogoff, 2003, p.176) he is learning. The pause (before Adyta laughs) represents Adyta's realisation (through hearing laughter) that something amusing had happened. Adyta does not join in with the laughter until he can see and hear that all the children around him are laughing. He then copies the laughter and contributes to this shared endeavour by laughing really loudly, until he observes that the laughing had ceased. Adyta then stops laughing. His participation was both peripheral and fractional.
Legitimate peripheral participation provided the ideal conditions for Adyta to listen intently to the conversations of children and adults alike through silent participation. Like Samia (Drury, 2007), Adyta absorbed, 'the everyday language... [and the] routines and expectations' within the early years setting.

In applying a sociocultural lens to Adyta's learning, he was attempting to connect on an interpersonal level with the other children through the practice of laughing. Adyta built upon his repertoire of known and unfamiliar cultural tools (English), signs (laughing) and symbols (the television) to transform his learning to a new level of participation (laughing), resulting in engagement in shared practices (enjoying the amusing incident).

In order to negotiate his participation more centrally within the early years setting Adyta used his mother tongue (turned inward as thought) to learn. There was no active mediation apparent from the practitioners in either guiding his transformation as he moved through one language and cultural experience to the next, nor in assisting negotiation through his levels of participation.

Findings

The findings reveal self-mediated learning throughout the silent period contextualised within legitimate peripheral participation. Legitimate peripheral participation acts as a safe location through which Adyta can mediate their learning and make meaning of the practices around them.

Applying a sociocultural lens upon this research is 'less about revealing the external child and more about uncovering the historical child' (Fleer et al., 2004, p.175). Sociocultural understandings make evident the complexity of learning that takes place within and throughout the silent period.

During the silent period mother tongue (thought) acts as a self-mediating tool through which young bilingual learners learn. The findings also reveal that for this small number of children, there is a preferred location for the emergent bilingual learner within the early years; on the periphery of practice. This location (legitimate, peripheral participation) facilitates fractionally increasing participation and offers the emergent bilingual learner a 'safe' location (on the periphery of practice) through which to observe, listen and copy the practices within the early years setting.

Pedagogical implications

The findings raise several interesting issues in relation to current early years pedagogy. Notably absent in the findings is evidence of the early years teachers/practitioners *knowingly* meditating learning during the silent period, and yet this mediatory role is considered as crucial (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003) for learning. Although not specifically designed to focus upon the silent period, Magraw and Dimmock's (2006) 'Merridale' nursery project revealed the important role of teachers in mediating children's peripheral participation through silence spaces.

> We became aware of the length of silences during a session, when we listened to the audio recordings. On reflection we realised the inevitability of silences... and that good relationships are based on the acceptance of them. We came to realise that presence is the other side of silence, and allows for the child to continue comfortably doing their self-allotted task, knowing that support and assistance is available if wanted, but it is not forced. (Magraw and Dimmock, 2006, p.4.)

The teachers on the Merridale project guided the children's participation whilst allowing them to negotiate their own levels of participation through their silence. Each child's peripheral participation was legitimised by the teacher who modelled practices which could be observed and copied without an expectation of dialogue. Early years teachers/practitioners are inevitably bound to government policy and practice through nationally introduced 'curriculums' such as the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012). The nature of such frameworks is predominantly based upon developmental and cognitively based models of learning. Worthy initiatives such as the Coram Family project 'Listening to Young Children' (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003) have aided in redefining the portrait of a child from that of passive to autonomous (Clark and Moss, 2001). However, such initiatives have been quickly superseded by government supported 'top down' attempts to raise the status of 'speaking and listening' ('Every Child a Talker' [ECAT] DCSF, 2008). However, in the process of attempting to raise the status of the spoken word, has the significance of the *unspoken* word been overlooked, both as a crucial cultural tool for bilingual learning?

The findings of this sociocultural exploration into the initial stage in English additional language acquisition tentatively reveal that for emergent young bilingual learners, the silent period presents as a phase of intense learning, through fractionally increasing participation.

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