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Re-assessing the place of the “silent period” in the development of English as an Additional Language among children in Early Years settings

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Abstract

This paper explores the acceptance of a “silent period” as a stage in second language development for children acquiring English as an Additional Language in Early Years settings. Current views suggest that it is normal for children to very quickly stop using their mother tongue and enter a period of silence. A positive perspective on this is that children may be using this time to observe and grow in understanding of the second language. However, there may also be negative effects, as children may become withdrawn and miss out on opportunities to develop relationships and language. It is the argument of this paper that if this silent period is normalised, there is potential for ambivalence around the well-being of the child which may run counter to best Early Years practice. This study consisted of a qualitative content analysis which drew on twenty case studies collected by Early Years Educators documenting children’s progress over the initial weeks and months in Early Years settings. The main findings were that some children did indeed enter a silent period and shyness was a risk factor for this being prolonged. Non-verbal communication was used positively by some children to develop relationships with other children, but negatively by others, in the form of aggression and frustration, until they developed enough language to communicate. The children who did best continued to use their home language and non-verbal communication which enabled them to form relationships. Over time this became a bridge into the second language. Strategies used by educators included supporting children in small groups and bringing the home language into the setting in keeping with recommendations of policy documents in Ireland. Ultimately, this paper argues that the normalisation of a silent period may infringe on children’s rights to be active participants in their own learning. Moreover, it

may limit the extent to which they are meaningfully valued, respected, empowered, cared for and included in Early Years settings.

Keywords: *silent period; second language acquisition; early years education*

1. Introduction

This paper explores the acceptance of a silent period as a stage in second language development for children acquiring English as an Additional Language (EAL)¹ in Early Years settings. Initially it will examine how a silent period is defined and described in the literature relating to Second Language Acquisition by theorists and by experts who have carried out empirical research. Current policy documents in the Irish education system will also be considered. The paper will then present findings from case studies of EAL children carried out by Early Years educators studying for a BA in Early Childhood Care and Education. Issues emerging from the data collected will be discussed with reference to the literature on the silent period and current guidelines in Early Years publications in Ireland.

1.1. The silent period in stages of second language development

Empirical research has allowed for the description of behaviours typical of young children acquiring a second language, and these have been proposed as frameworks or stages of second language acquisition. Tabors and Snow (1994) put forward a 4 stage model and Clarke (1996) puts forward a 6 stage model. For comparison purposes these are reproduced below:

4 Stage Model (Tabors & Snow, 1994)	6 Stage Model (Clarke, 1996)
1. Continued use of the home language	1. Continued use of the home language
2. The non-verbal period (silent / mute)	2. Non-verbal communication 3. A Period of silence
	4. Repetition and language play
3. Telegraphic and formulaic speech	5. Single words, formulae and routine language
4. Productive language use	6. Development of more complex English

Table 1: Stages of second language development in young children

Authors of both of these models make the point that these are not necessarily discrete stages and not all children go through all stages. However, the basic contention is that, on arrival

into an Early Years setting, a young child may initially continue to use their home language, either not realising that there are other languages, or hoping that they may be understood. This is ascribed the first stage in the developmental sequence (Tabors & Snow 1994; Clarke 1996; Tabors 1998; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke 2000). Older children are deemed less likely to go through this stage, as they have more awareness of language and the existence of different languages.

Once the child realises that s/he is not being understood, s/he may move on to using non-verbal communication and /or enter a period of silence. While Tabors and Snow (1994) describe this second stage as “the non-verbal period (silent / mute)”, Clarke (1996) sees this as being two stages and describes stage 2 as a stage of “non-verbal communication” which is distinct from stage 3 which is a period of silence”. This suggests that, in this third stage, there is no communication at all in the first language, in the new language, or even non-verbal communication. There are various views on what may be happening for the child in this period of silence. Some positive hypotheses in the literature propose that in this period “children are absorbing the new language and building up their comprehension” (Clarke 1996), or “children start collecting information by watching and listening intently – spectating and talking to themselves – rehearsing – in preparation for going public with their new language” (Tabors 1998, p. 22). Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke (2000, p. 49) put forward the view that “remaining silent is normal behaviour for some children ... this period can last for a few weeks or it can last for months.”

Recent research by Bligh (2014, p. 23) looks at the silent period from a sociocultural perspective, and suggests that the EAL child is learning how to participate in the new “community of practice” (Wenger 1998 cited in Bligh 2014, p.19) through fractional participation, gradually increasing his/her engagement with the other children in the setting, and in the process constructing a new identity. However, further study suggests that the EAL child is at risk of isolation if the other children are frustrated at his/her low level of participation and resent this ‘lurking’ (MacDonald et al. 2003 cited in Bligh 2014, p. 21). She highlights the role of “mother tongue thinking” as a means of making sense of their new “community of practice”, and that in this regard the child is not silent but making sense of the world internally through the mother tongue. The “practitioner’s role in mediation and provision of alternative discourses for learning” (Bligh 2014, p. 41) is an essential element in supporting children through this stage of development.

1.2. Risks associated with the Silent Period

As eluded to in the previous section, the literature also highlights some of the potentially negative effects of the silent period. In particular, Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke (2000) make the following predictions of negative outcomes emerging from the silent period: significant withdrawal on the part of the child from both staff and other children; absence of non-verbal communication, even basic gestures or eye-contact; and reluctance to speak even in their first language and general difficulties settling into the setting. Most importantly, they warn that children in these circumstances “are in danger of becoming isolated from the main opportunities for English interaction” (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke 2000, p. 49).

Tabors (1998, pp. 21–22) sees this combination of social isolation and linguistic constraints coming together as what she terms the “double bind of second language learning,” where “to learn a new language, you have to be socially accepted by those who speak the language; but to be socially accepted, you have to be able to speak the language”. She remarks that without the language, EAL children may feel invisible in the eyes of the other children. She highlights how along with age, motivation and exposure, personality may be a factor in second language acquisition where “more out-going socially oriented ... risk-taking children” (Tabors 1997, p. 81) are more inclined to throw themselves into the task of acquiring English for the social reward of gaining friends. In a study of *Shyness as a risk factor for second language acquisition of immigrant pre-schoolers* it was found that by the age of three-and-a-half, shy children lag behind non-shy children in second language competence (both receptive and expressive skills) by 7.3 months. While on the one hand shy children may avoid interactions with others, “on the other hand their reserved behaviour evokes fewer linguistic overtures from peers and educators” (Keller, Troesch & Grob 2013, p. 328). Shyness has also been identified as a risk factor for first language acquisition (Evans 2010), however first language children who are shy will acquire language primarily in the home where they are less inhibited. For the shy EAL child, however, their only opportunity to acquire English is in an unfamiliar situation, which heightens inhibition. The pre-school setting has multiple layers of unfamiliarity where the challenge of dealing with unknown adults and children outside of a family setting, a new language, and new cultural norms may be particularly overwhelming for a young child.

In acknowledging that the a pre-school setting may be particularly difficult for an EAL child who is not very out-going, some insights may be gained from looking at an alternative context for a young child arriving into a second language setting which is that of international adoptions. Research on these children shows that when they arrive into a new language environment they tend to begin to speak the new language almost immediately or within one to two weeks (Glennen 2002). The situation is different on a linguistic level as the child's first language is no longer of any significance and the child will begin to lose it quickly. Research indicates that expressive skills are lost within three months and receptive skills are lost within six months (Price, Pollock & Kimbrough 2006). The situation is different from a social and psychological perspective as the child arrives into a context where the adults are going to love and care and interact with this child as parents, with the child getting a lot of individual attention and over time developing an intimate secure attachment to the new parents.

This would suggest that a silent period appears to have a particular association with educational settings, and to have sociological and psychological, rather than purely linguistic dimensions. This may tie in with research from the U.S., which notes that Selective Mutism (SM) is at least three times higher in immigrant minority children. SM may be suspected when a period of silence is “prolonged, disproportionate to second language knowledge and exposure, present in both languages, and/or concurrent with shy/anxious or inhibited behaviour” (Toppelberg, Tabors, Coggins, Lum, & Burger 2013, p. 294). However, Bligh (2014, p. 5) notes that in the UK, EAL children may be diagnosed with SM after just a month in a silent period, and such medicalisation can lead to “benign neglect” on the part of educators.

1.3. The ‘Normalisation’ of the Silent Period

This normalisation of the silent period has become common in the literature and more recently in policy documents. One of its detractors (Roberts 2014) would claim that this view dates back to research from the 1980's on Second Language Acquisition, which took a Chomskian, Innatist perspective and focused on the internal processes of language acquisition rather than external observable features as would be the case with the previously popular theory of Behaviourism. In North America, Stephen Krashen was particularly influential at that time, putting forward the belief that a second language is acquired primarily by understanding meaningful messages through ‘comprehensible input’. Consequently, listening

and understanding came first and speech would follow later: “Children acquiring a second language in a natural, informal linguistic environment, may say very little for several months following their first exposure to the second language” (Krashen 1987, p. 26).

This strong focus on the importance and sufficiency of ‘comprehensible input’ for language acquisition was questioned over time by researchers such as Swain (1985), who argued that there was also a need for ‘comprehensible output’. Hatch (1978) and Long (1981) made a strong case for the importance of “negotiation of meaning” between the Native Speaker (NS) and Non-Native Speaker (NNS) which created significant opportunities for interaction which helped the learner to acquire new language. However Krashen’s influence persisted, in particular in the field of education in the U.S. at a time when the school system was grappling with increasing numbers of immigrant children. His contribution to understanding and supporting the development of language and literacy among children from migrant backgrounds meant his views had lasting impact and this may have led to “the normalization of instructional practice and teacher expectations that treat children’s lack of L2 oral usage as expected, accepted and benefitting language learning” (Roberts 2014, p. 30). An early detractor with regard to a view that a silent period was essential to second language acquisition was Gibbons (1985), who carried out research into the silent period among immigrant children in early primary school in Australia. She found a variation in duration of the period of silence ranging from 0–18 weeks, and because of this variation cautioned against accepting it as a necessary stage. She summarizes her view as follows:

- 1) The initial silent period probably begins as a period of silent incomprehension
- 2) If the silent period is prolonged this may be a result of psychological withdrawal rather than language acquisition processes
- 3) Consequently, initial silence in the language curriculum is not necessarily desirable (Gibbons 1985, p. 255).

1.4. The Silent Period in policy documents in Ireland

Many policy documents in the Irish educational context make reference to a silent period. One of the earliest documents, the *Toolkit for Diversity*, advises teachers and Early Years educators: “**Don’t** – Panic! Many children remain silent for six months or more. Listening comes first” (IILT 2006, p. 37). The document *EAL in Irish Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers* reassures teachers that:

The silent period is a natural part of the language learning process. During this period of learning, the child takes time to become familiar with the words and rules of the new language, and to observe and take in information about the new environment (NCCA 2007, p. 8).

More recently the ‘Tipsheet for supporting children to become bilingual’ attached to the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* advises:

When children attend an early childhood setting and are exposed to English for the first time, it is normal for them to go through a ‘silent’ period, which may last for several months. During this time, children will be learning to understand English and will continue to interact and play using their first language. (NCCA 2015, p. 2)

This paints a different picture of the silent period as the silence relates only to the lack of English but accepts and appears to promote the use of the child’s mother tongue as a means of interaction. This is also evident in the *Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter*, which notes:

Children may mix the new language and their home language in one sentence. This is a normal part of bilingual development. Some children go through a ‘silent period’ – they may understand some of the language in the early childhood service but may not use it (DCYA 2016, p. 56).

Another document of interest in this regard is research commissioned by the NCCA, *Oral Language in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)* (Sheil, Cregan, McGough & Archer 2012). This document has informed the new language curriculum at primary level and reflects the Vygotskian socio-cultural view of language acquisition, which became dominant towards the end of the twentieth century. It sees an Emergentist view as put forward by MacWhinney (1999) replacing Chomsky’s Innatist view. The child is seen very much as a partner in communication:

Language pedagogy is grounded in a social-interactionist view of language acquisition and development. In this view, language emerges through adult-child interaction in contexts of mutual attention and intention in which each participant influences the nature and quality of the communicative exchange (Snow 1999; Clark 2003; Hoff 2004; Warren, Yoder & Leew 2002, Tomasello 1992, 2003, 2009) (Shiel et al. 2012, p. 126).

Such a view of language pedagogy would appear to be diametrically opposed to views previously discussed which normalise the child being silent for a period of six months or more.

1.5. Children’s Rights and the Silent Period

While on a linguistic level there may be some understanding of the function of a silent period, the risks associated with it in terms of social and psychological withdrawal for a child at a very young age need to be taken into consideration. Roberts cautions that the normalization of the silent period “permits a laissez-faire approach to the language development needs of DLLS” and “the popularization and embracing of the idea of silence as a ubiquitous and beneficial stage of childhood second language acquisition” (Roberts 2014, p. 36). The belief that it may not only be normal but also beneficial may lead to neglect of the needs of the EAL child. A silent period lasting up to six months as mentioned in policy documents is a very significant period of time for a child at three years of age, particularly as the period of 2-4 years may be seen as the “optimal peak” (Meisel 2004, p. 110) of the critical period for acquiring language, and for acquiring native-like competence in a second language.

The notion of a child in a silent period may be seen to run contrary to the philosophy of Ireland’s key Early Years document *Aistear: Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) which is underpinned by core values in its themes ‘Well-being’, ‘Identity and Belonging’, ‘Communicating’, and ‘Exploring and Thinking’. At a very basic level “Children need to feel valued, respected, empowered, cared for, and included” (NCCA 2009, p. 16). Ambivalence towards a child in a silent period may impact on their well-being, deny their identity and impede their sense of belonging, closing down opportunities for communicating and learning through exploring and thinking. At a fundamental level the needs of this child are unlikely to be met. Another key document *Siolta, The National Quality Framework for*

Early Childhood Education (CECDE 2006, p. 13) has as its first standard “Ensuring that each child’s rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning”. Such a statement makes it incumbent on Early Years educators to find ways of empowering EAL children to participate fully despite the obstacle of limited language competence in English.

More recently the *Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education*, states:

The early childhood care and education sector will provide opportunities for all children to thrive in early education through the promotion of positive identities and abilities, the celebration of diversity and difference, and the provision of an inclusive, participative culture and environment (DCYA 2016, p. 4).

From the perspective of children’s rights therefore, it is essential that Early Years settings develop an understanding of EAL children’s needs in those first few months and develop strategies for supporting children and facilitating their full participation.

2. Methodology

In order to investigate the notion of a ‘silent period’ this study aims firstly to consider factors which may contribute to a child entering into a silent period, in particular when it is prolonged. It aims to explore how children who do not go through a silent period negotiate their environment in those early weeks and months. Finally, it aims to identify effective strategies for facilitating a child’s linguistic and social development. This piece of research was a qualitative content analysis using documentary methods (Bryman 2016, p. 563) as essays written by Early Years educators as case studies were subjected to secondary analysis for themes selected by myself as researcher.

2.1. Data collection

The data consisted of twenty case studies carried out by year 3 students on a work-based level 7 programme in ECCE in 2015 and 2016. All of these students were educators employed in Early Years settings and had been introduced to the literature on stages of second language development before selecting a child in their setting for study. The case studies were selected from over forty case studies according to a number of criteria in order to ensure a set of case

studies with common characteristics. Each case study told the story of a child aged between three years and four months and four years and four months entering a pre-school setting with no English, and the educator was in a position to describe the child’s language development over an extended period so that there was some longitudinal element to their observations of the child.

Each student tracked a child’s progress and included a language sample and submitted this in essay format and also presented it to the class group for further discussion and clarification. Permission was requested from each educator to have their case study included in this piece of research and parental permission was obtained by each educator prior to carrying out the case study. Case studies were numbered CS1 – CS20. The data was considered from a qualitative perspective as it was drawing on the experiences of the educators in working with EAL children and this rich data would allow for analysing how the complex interplay of various factors might contribute to an understanding of the silent period. As the sample of children in the case study had been purposefully selected by students and the case studies provided had been purposefully selected by myself as researcher, it would not be suited to quantitative analysis as it would not be representative of EAL children’s experiences in general, however it could shed light on general themes around the silent period.

2.2. Data analysis

Each case study was coded firstly with a view to identifying linguistic elements i.e. if the first three stages of Clarke’s framework were apparent in the child’s language development: continued use of the home language; non-verbal communication; a period of silence. In keeping with a social interactionist view of language acquisition the second level of coding focused on the child’s interactions and relationships with the educators and with other children in the settings, and strategies used by the child to build relationships and communicate. The child’s personality was rated on a continuum of shy to outgoing with a view to considering how this might impact on relationship building and language development. Finally the child’s well-being was evaluated keeping in mind the negative impact of becoming withdrawn highlighted by Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000, p. 49) and Gibbons’ contention that “If the silent period is prolonged this may be a result of psychological withdrawal rather than language acquisition processes” (1985, p. 255).

3. Findings

The case studies observed the children’s linguistic and social / emotional development over a period of three to nine months. Initially findings provided a range of insights into how children deal with the early months of acquiring a second language. There was evidence of children going through one or more of the three stages but not necessarily in order. Of particular interest was the fact that a small number of children i.e. just four of twenty children entered completely silent periods of one, three, four and eight months respectively where they were reluctant to interact with educators or other children. Some children continued to use their first language and non-verbal communication with the educators but were not willing to interact with other children. A number of children had difficulties getting on with other children and had behavioural problems and negative interactions with them, however these were resolved over time. Interestingly a considerable number of the children did very well using a combination of non-verbal communication and their mother tongue with educators and peers, and developed a range of strategies to avoid being isolated due to a lack of language competence. The numbers of children in each category cannot be taken to be representative in any way of EAL children as a whole as the educators may have chosen these children specifically because they had displayed successful approaches more worthy of a case study than children who had been less successful or less visible in their settings.

A number of findings emerged which shed light on the early months of EAL children in Early Years settings. Initially in terms of negative aspects, the role of personality is considered with evidence of shyness being a risk factor for a child entering a silent period; for less shy children the risk may be not so much entering a silent period but developing negative behaviours and poor relationships with other children. However, there was considerable evidence with regard to positive aspects as well, in particular regarding the usefulness of continued use of the home language which appears to act as a bridge into communication in English. Finding ways of integrating the home language into the setting with the help of parents enhanced this. Finally there was evidence that educators could play a part in helping the child with peer relationships which in turn could help the child both socially and linguistically.

3.1. Shyness as a risk factor for entering a silent period

Two children who were identified as shy by their educators went through long silent periods of 4 and 8 months respectively. One educator (CS 11) reported “*A. showed no facial expression and wandered aimlessly around the room but was quite happy to remain alone in*

solitary play” and that she was “*reluctant to enter into social interaction*” and “*daunted by a group of girls*”. She also appeared to be “*Isolated by the other children*” and in one case where the educator was trying to coax the child to answer a question, another child in the group answered the question for her saying “*she doesn’t speak, don’t ask her, it’s a dog*”. In the case of another child who was silent for 8 months between September and April the educator comments: “*Even after April E uses very little language. Most of the day she plays on her own*” (CS 20).

On the other hand, children with outgoing personalities appear to work around the obstacle of not having language and examples of children who did not go into silent periods demonstrated this. One child from the very start wanted contact with other children “*She chose to work with other children rather than independently when given a choice*” (CS 9), another child was “*very popular with peers due to sunny personality*” (CS 16). Outgoing children had strategies which helped them find other ways of communicating and engaging “*She used to play chasing with the other children and she would be laughing lots – the other children thought it was great fun*” (CS 1) and “*when he is outside he’ll bring the football to the other children as an invitation to play. They will readily include him in their activities*” (CS 18).

3.2. Negative behaviours

In some cases children were not so much withdrawn as frustrated and this prevented them from establishing positive relationships. “*She would get frustrated and behave physically towards some of the other children – although M was settling into the setting she was finding it hard to make friends*” (CS 17). The educator in another case had to help a child to learn how to deal with other children. “*Over time L learned to be assertive rather than aggressive... Responding appropriately to his peers gained L friends, respect and inclusion*” (CS 14). Language may be key to establishing these relationships, as pointed out by another educator: “*He was an annoyance to the other children – trying to take things from them or hit them – after learning more words he began to make friends*” (CS 5).

Another issue for consideration raised by these examples is that of the attitude of the native speaker children. While physical aggression may be difficult for them, in some cases their reactions may be negative based on very little “*She tries to speak with children in the garden but they walk away and continue with their activity*” (CS 15). In another example: “*She*

began to try to play with other children but unfortunately they did not reciprocate due to lack of understanding and began to ignore her or become confused by her” (CS 4).

3.3. Continued use of the L1 with English speakers

It was noted in the literature (Tabors 1998) that children will generally stop using their home language once they realise that they are not being understood and that older children may never use their own language at all in the new setting. Some of the case studies in this research show that continuing to speak the mother tongue may serve an important function in terms of keeping the channels of communication open and avoiding going into a silent period.

One case study described how this worked with the educator: *“When J requires an educator’s attention he will tug at her clothing then speak to her in Polish. If the carer acknowledges that J spoke, he then smiles and returns to his activities” (CS 18).* However it can also help the child to communicate with other children: *“He will converse with them in Polish most of the time, from time to time he will use one or two words of English. He is able to build social competence with minimal use of English” (CS 16).* In the case of another child the NS children accept the child’s efforts at communicating in her mother tongue: *“When she is engrossed in play she talks to other children in her mother tongue and they talk back to her in English and their play continues to flow” (CS 10).*

While there may be divergent views regarding the potentially detrimental effects of children being allowed to remain with other children who speak the same mother tongue, the benefit may be in terms of the bridge that this builds between the comfort of the child’s first language environment and that second language environment which may be frightening and unfamiliar: *“She initially only interacted with the teacher, not other children. She became friendly with another Polish child who had English from the previous year. At first they only spoke Polish but then she began to imitate her when she spoke English” (CS 12).* Having an ‘ally’ in another second language child can provide a social support which over time develops into something more: *“She is Latvian and her best friend is Italian. During play they communicate quite well in broken English and signs – they developed their own means of communication which is gradually being supplemented by English words and sentences” (CS 7).*

3.4. Integrating the child’s mother tongue with the help of parents

Some of the settings demonstrated good practice (NCCA 2015; DCYA 2016) in integrating the child’s language into the setting; *“I sent home a list of key words and numbers 1-10 for the parents to translate – we promote a new language each week”* (CS 6). The value of this is recognized not only at a linguistic level but also as a means of re-enforcing the child’s identity and self-worth: *“I learned some Romanian words and would say the words in Romanian followed by English – it built on her confidence and she began to settle into the service”* (CS 17). This also proves to be an effective strategy for encouraging learning of new vocabulary for key concepts: *“I began to use flash cards with Russian words for animals and colours. I believe this made him feel comfortable and soon he started to use the English words too”* (CS 13).

3.5. Helping the child with peer relationships

Building relationships emerges as a key factor in developing social and linguistic competence and educators who recognised this and actively sought to promote relationship building report success. While a Vygostkian approach might see one-to-one adult-child interactions as the optimal way of promoting language acquisition, the downside of this may be the way it excludes the child from her peers: *“I started to do one-to-one sessions with her but she kept looking away at the other children in group activities. So I started to work with her in a small group instead”* (CS 15). Taking a differentiated approach in group activities was also seen to be effective: *“By having other children participate in a flash card activity, I can just gain the basic word such as a tree, other children might describe the colours of the tree or that birds live in trees”* (CS 18). Ultimately the child’s well-being may be closely connected to a sense of feeling valued in the group and the educator may be able to play a role in drawing the other children’s attention to the competence of the child in a domain that is respected by them: *“He was very imaginative with construction materials which resulted in praise and admiration from his peers”* (CS14).

4. Discussion

The findings provide insights into the complex area of second language development in young children, in particular in relation to the stages put forward in various frameworks, the interdependence of language and social development, and the potential value of the child’s mother tongue.

4.1. Stages of Second Language Development

There does indeed appear to be a rationale for Clarke (1996) choosing to have a silent period separate from a stage of non-verbal communication. In the data there was evidence of each of Clarke’s first three stages of second language development, not so much as linear stages, but as a range of possible behaviours manifested by children entering an Early Years setting with no English. In particular, there was evidence that continuing to use the home language may be very positive for the child’s social and linguistic development. Similarly, non-verbal communication can play a significant role in enabling the child to communicate needs but also develop relationships. Laughter, smiles and invitations to play football traverse language barriers. Negative non-verbal communication in the form of aggressive behaviour may be symptomatic of the child’s frustration at having insufficient language, however if this can be harnessed it may be a motivator for developing language. There was evidence that using a combination of the mother tongue and non-verbal communication kept the child engaged and active in the setting and over time English words emerged, gradually replacing first language words.

4.2. The Interdependence of Language and Social Development

The silent period appears to correlate closely with the double bind put forward by Tabors (1997). The inter-relationship between social acceptance and language development comes through very clearly in the data. Shy children were seen to be particularly at risk, having fewer strategies for building relationships and opportunities for interactions. Keller et al. (2013) noted that not only are shy children less likely to seek interactions, but peers and educators are also less likely to interact with them. In this study, it was apparent that often the NS children showed little interest in or were dismissive of EAL children. This echoes Tabors’ (1998, p. 2) contention that EAL children may feel “invisible” in the wider group. The data showed instances of educators’ efforts at helping the EAL child within a group. This is an area which could be explored more, for example in a study by Hirschler (1994), NS pre-school children were trained in strategies such as repeating words, re-initiating conversations and clarifying responses to communicate more successfully with EAL children.

4.3. The Importance of the Mother Tongue

The importance of the child’s first language comes across very strongly in this study. Where it is used spontaneously by the child, it allows for some albeit imperfect communication, but

perhaps more importantly a sense of connection with peers and educators. The *Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* recommends:

Acknowledge and show appreciation for the variety of languages the children in the pre-school speak.... Provide as many ‘language bridges’ as possible for the child acquiring a second language; for example ask parents for some key words in their child’s home language ... The child should feel comfortable speaking in their own language to other children or staff in the setting who speak the same language (DCYA 2016, p. 55).

The data provided evidence of the value of these recommendations; acknowledgement of children’s mother tongues provided comfort in the new and unfamiliar environment and provided a bridge into English language use. Where a child had a friend who spoke the same language, there were opportunities for them to scaffold each other’s learning of English as well as the social dimension of having a friend from the same language and culture. There was also an opportunity for the educators to develop a partnership approach with the parents of EAL children as they collected words from parents and showed them that they are interested in and valued the child’s mother tongue. In fact continued use of the home language in the setting rather than being seen as an initial stage which may then disappear, should be supported, and where children do not bring their mother tongue into the setting, perhaps educators could in fact encourage the children to do so.

Finally, while the findings from this study suggest that children may indeed enter a silent period in the early weeks and months in an Early Years setting, but the normalisation of such a period would not be appropriate. The opportunities for supporting children and helping to avoid a prolonged silent period relate back to children’s rights, and to best practice in child development and language pedagogy. As the Early Years sector in Ireland comes to terms with the fact that there will always be children from migrant backgrounds in our settings let’s ensure that their voices – in whatever language - are heard, and that our educators develop strategies for actively supporting these children to become bilingual.

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¹ EAL English as an Additional Language is the term preferred by the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland as it suggests English is added to the child's competence in their home language(s). Other terms used in other contexts are ESL (English as a second language) or L2 (second language). In the US the terms ELL (English language learner) and DLL (dual language learner) are common.