



Review

Not so silent after all: Examination and analysis of the silent stage in childhood second language acquisition



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ABSTRACT

A period of silence has been advanced as a characteristic feature of childhood second language acquisition. Evidence is presented to document that the presumption of silence as the second of four typical stages of second language acquisition has influenced policy and practice in preschool classrooms. A narrative review examines the extent and quality of the evidence for a silent stage in second language acquisition in young children. Twelve studies meeting inclusion criteria were reviewed and evaluated. Evidence of a silent, non-verbal, pre-production, or receptive language stage was limited. Significant conceptual and methodological limitations within the largely qualitative studies were found. Four major issues raised by the studies are elaborated upon: the theoretical clarity and operational definitions of *silence* and *stage*, *phase*, or *period*; the psychological meaning and consequences of silence; the cross-context consistency of individual patterns of silence; and how adult language elicitation and support techniques may modulate silence. Recommendations based on contemporary evidence of language acquisition processes are made for the future study of (1) second language acquisition in preschool children and (2) pedagogical practice within preschool settings to promote second language acquisition. Finally, historical, theoretical, empirical, and contextual influences likely to have given rise to the appeal and ready endorsement of silence as a consistent and typical characteristic of childhood second language acquisition are presented.

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The percentage of preschool children who are learning English as a second language in the United States continues to increase. Recent estimates are that about one third of preschool children come from families where a language other than English is the primary language used to communicate in their homes (United States Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, 2008, 2011). These children are referred to as English language learners (ELLs) or dual language learners (DLLs). Speaking a first language other than English, along with low family income and minority status, are established risk factors for academic achievement and particularly for reading achievement in the United States (August & Shanahan, 2008; Kindler, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). These risk factors are reflected in the consistently reported achievement gap between dual language learner (DLL) and English only (EO) children on both school-based tests and research measurements of language, reading, and academic content knowledge (August & Hakuta, 1997; National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2007, 2009).

Ensuring that children learning English as a second language develop high levels of L2 competence is important on its own merits and is an important foundation for second language literacy and broader school achievement. Recent volumes synthesizing the evidence on the educational achievement of dual language learners in K-12 concluded that language ability in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) are strongly related to school achievement in English (August & Shanahan, 2008; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Relationships among measures of broad language ability, specific language abilities such as vocabulary and phonemic awareness, and achievement outcomes are the main basis for these conclusions. These volumes along with similar earlier reports (August & Hakuta, 1997) noted the dearth of research specific to young DLLs on language development, literacy development, and the instructional practices that promote both.

The importance of the preschool years for language development and later academic success has been documented for English only and dual language learner children (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006; Duncan et al., 2007; Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Childcare Network, 2005; Scarborough, 2001; for review see Snow et al., 1998). Advancing oral language competence in preschool children has proven to be a challenging task (Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research (PCER) Consortium, 2008) and perhaps particularly so for DLLs in part because achieving proficiency in a second language is a lengthy process estimated to typically take three to seven years (Hakuta, 2011; MacSwan & Pray, 2005; Saunders & O'Brien, 2006). Additional evidence suggests that preschool DLLs who enter kindergarten proficient in English can keep pace with English only children in kindergarten and beyond (Halle, Hair, Wandner, McNamara, & Chien, 2012) and that DLL children benefit more from Head Start intervention than their non-DLL peers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2010).

For these and other reasons, the preschool period is increasingly capturing the attention of researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners as fertile ground for advancing language and other foundations for academic achievement dependent upon it (Brown, 2007; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Roberts, 2011b). Calls for change in preschool practice based on this burgeoning evidence have been sounded. The 2003 Head Start Reauthorization Act moved language and literacy and other school readiness skills to center stage in the Head Start national agenda by specifying school readiness as its main purpose (Head Start Reauthorization Act, 2003). Early Reading First, a federally funded, competitive grant program established in the No Child

Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 explicitly targeted enhancement of preschoolers' language, cognitive, and early literacy development as its purpose and funding priority. In 2009 the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) released a new position statement on developmentally appropriate practice that endorsed the importance of literacy skills and the role of teacher-led intentional pedagogies in their development. Previous NAEYC official position statements, particularly the 1987 statement that was the genesis of the term *developmentally appropriate practice* (Bredenkamp, 1987), eschewed academic readiness skills and teacher-directed learning. Piaget-based (1972) and Vygotsky-based (1978, 1986) orientations to development and classroom practice were favored. This view of developmental appropriateness has pervasively shaped early childhood practice in the United States for the last twenty-five years; as of 1994 more than 300,000 copies of the position statement had been sold. This current and historical context highlights the importance of high-quality research that accurately characterizes the development of childhood second language acquisition (SLA) and research building on this knowledge that establishes sound instructional practice to promote it.

1. Silence in second language acquisition

The idea that a *silent stage, period, or phase* is characteristic of childhood second language acquisition is prominent in early childhood contexts in the United States and is purported to have been established by research evidence. The term *silent stage* refers to a period of time following introduction to a second language during which children do not orally produce the second language. Additional descriptors used to refer to this period of time include *nonverbal, receptive, or preproduction* and *period or phase*. In this paper, the term *silent stage* will be favored because this descriptor was the first to be used although *period* and *phase* are used as appropriate.

Silence as a stage of childhood second language acquisition has been explicitly articulated by scholars, represented in contemporary frameworks and position statements of organizations and agencies serving young children, and endorsed by early childhood practitioners (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013; Goldstein, 2002; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1995; Paradis, 2007; Roseberry-McKibbin, 1995; Samway & McKeon, 2002; Toppelberg, Tabors, Coggins, & Lum, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), 2005).

As one illustrative example, Head Start Bulletin #78. *English Language Learners* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, 2005) contains this explanation:

For example, during the nonverbal period, staff and parents, too, may be very worried about the child's language development. Roseberry-McKibbin (1995) suggests that children typically go through the silent period for about 3-6 months, which may cause great concerns for professionals when children do not seem to be talking. In fact, at this stage, the child is working actively to gather information about how to communicate with peers and adults in the new language. During this non-verbal phase, researchers also note that children may isolate themselves as they take on the role of spectator or observer (Brice, 2002; Tabors, 1997). In "safe" environments (such as solitary play), they may rehearse new words they have heard. Although a teacher might interpret this tendency to keep to themselves as problematic, the English language learners are often watching classmates and adults and attempting to figure out how to communicate. (p. 56)

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