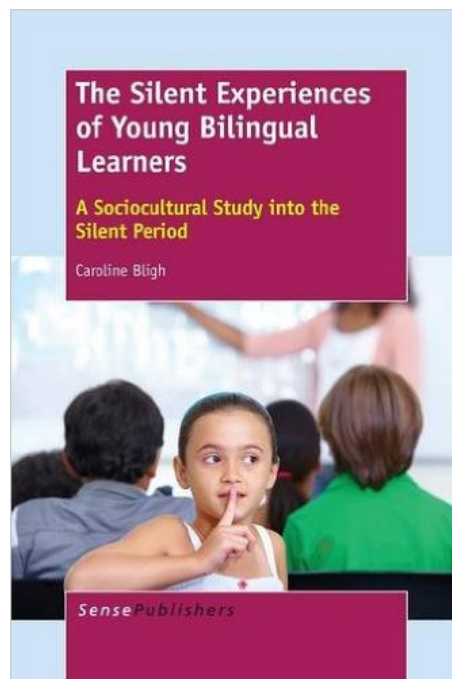


**Review of *The Silent Experiences of
Young Bilingual Learners:
A Sociocultural Study into the Silent Period***

Reviewer: Lourdes Cardozo-Gaibisso
The University of Georgia, Athens, GA



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What is the silent period? How can educators unveil the complex relationships between thought, language, and the spoken word? Is the silent period different than selective mutism? Which language-related behaviors are normal, and when do young bilingual learners really need intervention if they remain silent in their target language? These are some of the major questions that the author addresses throughout *The silent experiences of young bilingual learners: A sociocultural study into the silent period*.

This book is mostly geared towards educators and students, more specifically early childhood educators, and it is written in a non-standard, tales-of-the-field style which might be viewed as appealing and useful for a wide audience, regardless of their linguistics background. Theoretically, the book offers an ample, yet not very detailed overview, which sometimes fails to articulate different theories properly. Nevertheless, the book proposes a good first approach to the field of linguistics, especially for those not familiar with the subject.

Bligh offers an alternative view of the silent period and social meaning-making construction of bilingual children. Narrated in first person by the author, who uses her own personal experience as inspiration for writing this book, the author engages the reader through participatory research. The writer, a former nurse and primary school teacher, offers accessible language for researchers and teachers equally. She additionally provides a recount of the most important concepts and scholars in each chapter, drawing particularly on sociocultural research in second language acquisition (SLA). Throughout the book, as narrowly defined for the sole purpose of her research, Bligh uses the term “silent bilingual learner” and “emergent bilingual learner” to “refer 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” (p. 2).

Drawing from Stephen Krashen’s (1985) notion, the author defines the silent period as “the pre-production stage of SLA when a second language learner (SLL) is unable or unwilling to speak in her/his developing second language” (p. 3). Nevertheless, it is essential to clarify that merely the fact that a child is going through a period of silence does not necessarily mean that language learning/acquisition is not occurring.

The book is divided into seven chapters following the Bligh’s doctoral thesis structure. Those chapters are linearly aligned with the research timeline designed and executed by the author. Chapter One provides the reader with an introductory view of the silent period and bilingualism. Told from the perspective of a monolingual, white teacher (the author herself) and the bilingual young children in her classroom, she tries to bring understanding into the children’s new linguistic experiences while addressing the silent period through the means of sociocultural theory, and giving the reader a linguistic overview of the silent period. In this chapter, the author begins introducing some of the focal subjects of her study.

The first, a 5-year old girl named Suki of Japanese heritage, was markedly silent, and was later diagnosed with selective mutism by the speech and language pathologist at her school. The therapist defined selective mutism as “an expressive language or communication disorder” (p. 8). The school psychologist, on the other hand, referred to it as a “psychiatric anxiety based condition” (p. 8). Similarly, Adyjta, a Punjabi-speaking boy, was trapped between two linguistic worlds: one, in the privacy of his home where his grandmother kept their home language alive, and the other, the school he attended where English was the dominant language. Bligh provides vignettes describing how these children, after being visited at home by the teacher/author/researcher, came “alive” when surrounded, and mediated, by their culturally significant and familiar environments.

Chapter Two offers an overview of the central concepts articulated by sociocultural theorists, making connections between language and culture, and emphasizing the impact of culturally mediated language learning. The author explores the notion of second language acquisition (SLA) and how it is influenced by the sociocultural standpoint (Duranti, 2001, 2004; Chomsky, 1977; Krashen, 1987; Conteh, et. al, 2007, Coyle & Vancarcel, 2002). In this sense, “early years pedagogy (...) has begun to acknowledge not only that social and cultural factors influence language learning, but also the sociocultural theorising of bilingual learning” (p. 28). In addition, Bligh also highlights the role of the mother tongue in shaping both identity and agency in young children.

Chapters Three and Four can be demarcated as the methods section of the book. In this section the author shares her struggles and challenges when crafting her conceptual and methodological design. The author also justifies her choice for an ethnographic research and acknowledges the limitations she faced. The reader is also presented with the ample and varied instruments of data collection and subsequent means of coding and analysis.

Chapter Five offers an abundant recount of the data collected, analyzed from a sociocultural theory perspective, through the means of vignettes, and with the aim “to promote reflective thought and discussion of critical incidents and dilemmas” (p. 56). The data analysis presented in this chapter shows the intricate connection between language, thought and the spoken word.

Chapters Six and Seven explore additional cultural factors that affect emergent bilingual learners and how these issues can become boundaries to this study. The author also invites teachers to explore a wider range of perspectives in order to understand, help and respect the silent period of bilingual learners with not only a cognitive theory approach, but with a sociocultural one. The author also mentions the pedagogical implications of this kind of study which help view emergent bilingual learners as empowered researchers themselves.

Overall, one of the most outstanding characteristics of this book is that it sails away from the deficit model and instead explores how children live amidst their silent experiences. They experience them not as something that needs to be reverted or labelled (eg. selective mutism), but as a phenomena that needs to be studied and which is still significantly underexplored. The silent period can be better understood then, as a process and a natural progression on the path to bilingualism and biculturalism in linguistic and pedagogical research. It is crucial to recognize that in *The Silent Experiences of Young Bilingual Learners*, children are not mere subjects of research, or a problematic school population that needs remediation. Children are rather positioned as contributors in aiding the understanding of the dynamics of the process of second language acquisition. Despite being a book which brings a wide array of theoretical background to the table, it provides a fresh and unpretentious critical eye into the young bilingual mind, and therefore becomes an essential reading for parents, educators, and researchers.

As a bilingual doctoral student and bilingual/bicultural teacher myself, who struggles with the highs and lows of making meaning in two languages, I would expect this book to provide some specific suggestions or advice on how to address the silent period in young bilingual learners. Although the author claims she does not want to offer “top-down solutions” (p. 106), a section in which concrete strategies to assist students and inform the school community in general about second language acquisition in immigrant children would certainly be valued by teachers. In addition to this, Bligh tends to place all accountability for the experiences of young bilingual learners with educators, when she asks: “is it not a responsibility of early year teachers/practitioners to build upon this culturally situated knowledge-and not ignore it” (p. 37).

Bligh could strengthen her ideas about the silent period by addressing psychological aspects such as adjustment trauma. The author could mention and analyze transitioning into a new culture, context, community, rules, ways of life, and habits that young children go through when they start their

new lives in a foreign country. By addressing these issues, the silent period becomes a component of adjustment trauma for which lack of speech is just one sign.

In short, *The Silent Experiences of Bilingual Learners* brings a wide array of theoretical background to the table, but sometimes navigates

linguistic theories slightly superficially. However, it undoubtedly provides a fresh and unpretentious critical eye into the young bilingual mind. For that reason, and in a world that is becoming more and more multilingual, *The Silent Experiences of Bilingual Learners* becomes a good starting point for teachers, pre-service teachers, and parents who want to learn and understand the silent period.