

SELECTIVE MUTISM IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOL

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Selective mutism: specific features

- ❖ Selective mutism: children fail to speak in specific social situations, while speaking adequately at home. The most common theory relates the symptoms to a high level of anxiety (Muris & Ollendick 2015).
- ✓ It appears in the ages between 2 and 4 (Viana et al. 2009);
- ✓ It affects one in 50 school-aged children (Kumpulainen et al. 1998);
- ✓ It impacts children's functioning leading to academic underperformance.
- ❖ The role of school > poor understanding > delay in professional support.
- ❖ Risk criteria:
 - ✓ Marital problems of parents (Viana et al. 2009);
 - ✓ Comorbidity with other disorders such as anxiety and social phobia (Nowakowski et al. 2012);
 - ✓ Individual characteristics, such as shyness (Joseph 1999);
 - ✓ Migration status and bilingualism (Slobodin 2023).

Selective mutism: treatment

- ❖ Three types of treatment:
 - ✓ Cognitive
 - ✓ Medical
 - ✓ Behavioral: the most evidence-based for children under the age of 12

School plays a crucial role!

- ❖ One year treatment: joint effort by the psychotherapist, educators and parents (Wippo & Güldner 2003).
 - a psychotherapist (1 hour per week) and teachers (15 min. sessions) at school; bilingual parents > switch to the dominant language at home;
 - a combination of 'shaping' and 'fading'.

Selective mutism protocol (Wippo & Güldner 2003)

- ✓ *Shaping* suggest that the child must learn to speak clearly in certain situations.
 - ✓ *Fading* is meant to reinforce this verbal behavior in any other situation.
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- Step 1: Blowing out a candle or a match
 - Step 2: Blowing out and making sounds
 - Step 3: Making sounds without blowing
 - Step 4: Mixing sounds and words
 - Step 5: Parroting words
 - Step 6: Naming pictures and numbers
 - Step 7: Playing a card game and asking a child about the cards, for instance
 - Step 8: Asking a child about the pictures stimulating to give multiple-word answers
 - Step 9: Guessing what is being drawn by asking questions

Selective mutism: what about recovery?

- ❖ No clear-cut picture concerning recovery:
 - ✓ Oerbeck et al. (2018) 5-year follow-up study: 70% of the children were anxiety-free, 17% - in partial remission, 13% - no improvement.
 - ✓ Lang et al. (2016) 2,9 year follow-up study: 20/24 subjects recovered.
- ✓ Anxiety hampers language production and hinders individual's absorption of relevant language knowledge (Krashen's Affective Filtering Hypothesis).
- ✓ Mute period > reduced practice in language (Swain's Output Hypothesis).

What's about language proficiency?

Selective mutism: impact on language proficiency

- ✓ Manassis et al. (2007): lower phonetic discrimination and vocabulary knowledge.
- ✓ McInnes et al. (2004): shorter sentences and less detailed narratives.
- ✓ Language competences: between 20% and 50% children are diagnosed with speech and language disorders.

Points to a certain language deficit!

Questionable: to what extent the results are due to lower language proficiency only, or children's inhibition and anxiety?

Selective mutism in culturally and linguistically diverse children

Age, gender, temperament, shyness, anxiety... But!

- ✓ Acculturation difficulties of parents
- ✓ Parents' depression
- ✓ Perceived discrimination
- ✓ Sudden immersion in L2
- ✓ Stressful school surroundings
- ✓ No class support, no recognition of the problem

- ✓ The influence of SM on bilingual proficiency is unclear: one language or both; vocabulary or morphosyntax?
- ✓ Long-term effects of SM on bilingual proficiency are unclear.
- ✓ The role of parental strategies is unclear:
 - the impact of switching to the community language (with foreign accent, limited vocabulary, etc.) in home practices?
 - the impact of diminished HL input?

Selective mutism and school

- ✓ Insufficient knowledge among elementary school teachers about the nature of SM ► no recognition, no understanding of how to approach these children.
- ✓ In many countries, SM is not on the list of speech disorders financially facilitated by the authorities.
- ✓ No additional staff to provide the necessary support.
- ✓ Though instructed, teachers receive insufficient training in how to work with SM children: violate the protocol prescriptions, unaware of the consequences, miscommunication with psychotherapists, etc.

PhD project: Long-term effects of SM on bilingual proficiency

Prospective results

- ✓ will deepen our understanding of which aspects of linguistic knowledge are most affected by the mute period and length of treatment.
- ✓ will learn whether parental input in the community language really helps children in overcoming anxiety and improving their proficiency in this language; and whether this does not happen at expense of their heritage language proficiency.
- ✓ has potential clinical implications aiding speech therapists to fine-tune their treatment protocol by paying more attention to language development of children with SM during treatment and adjusting linguistic behavior recommendations towards the bilinguals' parents.
- ✓ has societal implications by attracting the attention of the authorities to the status of SM which must be included in the disorder list that is financially facilitated by the state.

Thank you!

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