

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language Learning through Private Speech: Exploring Refugee Preschoolers' Translanguaging and Identity EnactmentsMichail Pappas ^{a*}, Lida Amaryllis Stergiou ^a^a University of Ioannina* Contact Info: University Campus of Ioannina, P.O. Box 1186, Ioannina, 45110, Greece, m.pappas@uoi.gr**Article Info**Received: July 14, 2025
Accepted: December 15, 2025
Published: June 30, 2026**Abstract**

This study examines the role of private speech in the linguistic and social development of multilingual preschool children with refugee backgrounds in a Greek early childhood education setting. Drawing on sociocultural and translanguaging theory, it explores how children use private speech to mediate learning, internalize new linguistic elements, and construct emerging student identities. Ethnographic observations and qualitative analysis revealed frequent use of private speech for rehearsal, recall, and self-regulation, often involving vocabulary within children's Zone of Proximal Development. Children's private speech also reflected translanguaging practices, where Greek, English, and home languages were integrated seamlessly. These findings suggest that children do not compartmentalize languages but draw on their full linguistic repertoires as integrated cognitive and communicative resources. Additionally, private speech functioned as a site of identity formation, as children adopted classroom language norms and teacher-modeled strategies, reinforcing a sense of belonging—an important factor in refugee resilience. The findings support sociocultural theory by highlighting private speech as a mechanism of internalization and validate translanguaging theory as a framework for understanding flexible language use. Practically, the study recommends that educators recognize private speech as a developmental tool and use it to support language learning, identity development, and resilience.

Keywords

identity; private speech; refugee education; resilience; sociocultural theory; translanguaging

INTRODUCTION

The study of children's private speech, defined as an individual's overt self-directed utterances produced either alone or in the presence of others (Daneshfar et al., 2022), holds significant developmental value, as it could provide practitioners with vital insights regarding the unfolding of the children's full potential (Sawyer, 2016). Private speech typically peaks during the preschool period and is often observed when children are engaged in play, exploring their surroundings, or attempting to complete tasks (White & Daugherty, 2009). This developmental peak is particularly relevant in multilingual contexts, where private speech may function as a cognitive and linguistic tool through which preschool children mediate meaning and navigate multiple languages.

While private speech has traditionally been examined primarily through the lens of cognitive development in areas such as executive function (Alarcón-Rubio et al., 2014), problem-solving (Mulvihill et al., 2023), and general cognitive abilities (Aro et al., 2015), its potential to provide insights into children's language use, identity negotiation, and meaning-making practices remains an important and relatively underexplored area of research. Nevertheless, some studies have addressed these social and communicative dimensions of private speech, examining its relation to communicative development and social speech (Martínez et al., 2011), its role in the facilitation of social dialogue (Saville-Troike, 1988), its contribution to the emergence of a sense of self (Fernyhough & Russell, 1997), and its function as a form of social action that supports participation and meaning-making (Hauser, 2015; Nelson, 2015). Building on this broader understanding, the present study investigates the private speech of multilingual preschool-aged children, focusing on how they incorporate elements of the school's language (Greek) into their utterances. Drawing on sociocultural and translanguaging theories, the study explores how private speech reflects the children's engagement with their full linguistic repertoires and their efforts to construct meaning and express themselves in a multilingual learning environment.

PRIVATE SPEECH IN SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

Within his sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1962) argued that private speech plays a significant role in children's cognitive and linguistic development. He contended that one of the most important dimensions of private speech is its contribution to the development of inner speech. In the early stages of children's development, their speech is exclusively social, as it arises within the social context and serves interaction and social connection. Social speech is gradually internalized, leading to the development of inner speech—the silent, internalized discourse used to mediate and regulate higher mental functions.

In a parallel process, social forms of interaction are internalized and become part of the realm of individual cognitive functions. This process initially involves the development of private speech through the abbreviation of social speech and its subsequent transformation into inner speech. Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1962) observations revealed that children engaged in private speech more frequently when others were present and less when alone, and that this speech was generally clear and intelligible rather than whispered. Considering these patterns alongside the established connection between social and private speech, he concluded that private speech is not egocentric in nature but maintains social characteristics. Supporting this

view, Winsler (2009) synthesized evidence demonstrating that children's private speech is shaped by the nature of social interactions with caregivers, including the content and structure of social speech, parenting styles, and broader sociocultural child-rearing practices.

Another noteworthy dimension of private speech, according to Vygotsky (1962), is its use by preschool children as a cognitive tool. In his view, the connection between language and thought in the form of private speech is one of the most significant milestones in children's cognitive development. The use of private speech signifies the gradual adoption by the children themselves of the guiding role typically undertaken by adults within the Zone of Proximal Development. Through private speech, children begin to apply independently the cognitive strategies that their caregivers previously provided during joint problem-solving.

MULTILINGUAL PRIVATE SPEECH AND TRANSLANGUAGING

Lantolf and Yáñez (2003) argued that the private speech of children in a new language learning environment serves the function of internalizing specific elements of that language. According to the assumptions of sociocultural theory, children in these cases focus on the elements of the new language that are within their Zone of Proximal Development. Consequently, the private speech of children in new language learning environments consists primarily of these elements, either in their original form or modified.

Lantolf and Yáñez also expressed the view that the frequency and quality of children's private speech in foreign language environments is likely to be related to the success of new language learning. Discussing the pedagogical implications of the above, they conclude that the analysis of children's private speech could become a useful tool in the hands of educators. As a result of analyzing children's private speech, educators will have a more complete picture of the impact of the educational process on children's new language learning, as they will be able to identify the linguistic elements of the educational environment on which children focus, and the way they process these linguistic elements.

Summarizing a significant body of research on bilingual individuals' private speech, Sawyer (2016) draws the following conclusions: First, the private speech of bilingual individuals follows a developmental trajectory similar to that of monolinguals and serves the same general functions. Second, bilinguals' private speech reflects its social origins in multiple ways, such as the proportion of private speech in each language mirroring daily language use, and language choice being influenced by prior conversational context or the presence of speakers of that language in the immediate environment. Third, individuals with more balanced

bilingualism exhibit a wider variety of private speech categories and more developed private speech compared to those with less balanced bilingualism.

While Sawyer's interpretation of bilingualism is grounded in a separate-systems view of languages, in the present study we adopt a translanguaging perspective, which understands children's linguistic resources as part of a single, dynamic repertoire rather than as distinct languages. This distinction is important for interpreting the multilingual children's private speech observed in our study. Adopting a translanguaging lens allows for a more nuanced exploration of the fluid ways these children draw upon their full linguistic repertoire.

García (2009) defines translanguaging as “multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds” (p. 45), emphasizing a shift away from named languages toward the dynamic, observable practices of multilingual speakers. Within this framework, multilingual children are seen as active language users who engage in translanguaging to construct meaning, support their language learning, and express their linguistic identities (Kirsch & Mortini, 2023). Central to translanguaging theory is the assumption of a unitary linguistic repertoire—a holistic view of language resources available to speakers (Sato & García, 2023). As García (2019, p. 636) explains, an individual's linguistic repertoire is shaped through social interaction and comprises the lexical and structural features that constitute their idiolect. The prominent role of the concept of a unitary linguistic repertoire within translanguaging theory is clearly reflected in the way translanguaging is defined by Otheguy et al. (2015) as “the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages.” (p. 283).

Taking a theoretical approach, Smith and Robertson (2019) investigated the relationship between sociocultural theory and translanguaging, aiming to integrate these frameworks to enhance understanding of language and learning in multilingual contexts. They argue that private speech—viewed in sociocultural theory as a window into inner speech—can offer insight into translanguaging as a cognitive process. In this light, translanguaging within private speech reveals learners' thinking and language development processes (Smith & Robertson, 2019). While multilingual children's private speech has been extensively studied within sociocultural theory, it has not been similarly explored through the lens of translanguaging. In one of the few studies examining private speech from a translanguaging perspective, García et al. (2011) observed that bilingual preschool students employed translanguaging practices in their private speech to construct meaning and support language learning.

Drawing on the research and theoretical perspectives outlined above, this study examines the private speech of multilingual preschool-aged children, utilizing insights from both sociocultural and translanguaging theories. Through this lens, private speech is understood as a discursive practice through which multilingual children mediate cognitive and linguistic development, while simultaneously negotiating and expressing their identities within diverse social and linguistic contexts. In doing so, they draw on their full linguistic repertoires to construct meaning.

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

To capture the everyday linguistic practices of multilingual preschool children in the complex linguistic ecologies characteristic of refugee education settings, this paper draws from a larger ethnographic study conducted during the 2021–2022 school year. The study was carried out in a preschool Reception Facility for Refugee Education (RFRE) in Greece and aimed to understand the linguistic practices of students in this setting. RFREs were established by the Greek state in 2016 to address the educational needs of students residing in Open Accommodation Sites. Preschool RFREs operate within refugee camps and follow the timetable and curriculum of public preschools.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 11 preschool students—5 boys and 6 girls—aged 4 to 5 years, whose countries of origin were Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, and Iraq (see Table 1). According to our ethnographic data, the children came from diverse multilingual backgrounds and had no prior exposure to the Greek language. In addition, their proficiency in English ranged from none to basic.

Table 1. Linguistic and Background Information of the Focal Participants

pseudonyms	countries of origin	linguistic backgrounds
Arash	Afghanistan	Afghan Farsi spoken in the family environment, Basic English knowledge
Salma	Iraq	Arabic and Sorani spoken in family environment, Basic English and Farsi knowledge

Elizabeth	Democratic Republic of the Congo	French and Lingala spoken in the family environment, basic English knowledge, minimal knowledge of Farsi and Portuguese
Farhad	Afghanistan	Afghan Farsi spoken in the family environment, Basic English knowledge
Asadi	Afghanistan	Afghan Farsi spoken in the family environment
Imani	Syria	Arabic spoken in the family environment, Basic knowledge of English and Farsi
Pazir	Afghanistan	Afghan Farsi spoken in the family environment

Methodological Approach

For this part of the study, we adopted a linguistic ethnographic approach to examine the naturally occurring private speech of children with a refugee background in a multilingual preschool environment. Linguistic ethnography is an interpretive approach that studies how individuals use language in specific social settings, seeking to understand these linguistic practices from the participants' own perspective and to relate them to broader social contexts and structures (Copland & Creese, 2015). According to Rampton et al. (2015), linguistic ethnography serves as a robust methodological framework capable of illuminating the intricate social, cultural, and historical dimensions that underpin children's Zones of Proximal Development (ZPDs). Furthermore, this approach enables a nuanced examination of how these contextual factors influence children's engagement in the linguistic practices prevalent within educational settings. In addition, linguistic ethnography (LE) is widely regarded as a valuable research framework for exploring the dynamics of translanguaging in both everyday interactions and educational contexts (Tai, 2021).

Conducting linguistic ethnography in educational settings involves the thorough linguistic analysis of interactions that take place within them, combined with ethnographic data related to factors of both the immediate and broader context (Lefstein & Snell, 2019). Acknowledging the inherently social nature of private speech, our investigation systematically employed the tenets and methodological framework of LE to analyze children's self-directed utterances. Furthermore, we focused on children's private speech utterances that included linguistic elements of the school's language—namely, Greek. As discussed above, analyzing this type of private speech can provide valuable insights into how young children acquire a new language—one that, in this case, is the language of the school. Participant observation, along with systematic field notes, served as the principal methods for data collection in this study. The

children's private speech utterances were transcribed in situ by the field researcher during observation sessions.

Researcher Positionality

Given the ethnographic nature of this study, it is important to acknowledge the researchers' positionality and its potential influence on the research process. The field researcher, a Greek educator belonging to the host society's majority cultural and linguistic group, held a dual role as both teacher and researcher within the RFRE classroom. This dual position provided valuable insider access to the children's daily linguistic practices and supported the development of a trusting and familiar learning environment, essential for the naturalistic observation of private speech.

The fact that the field researcher simultaneously occupied the role of the classroom teacher aligns with a well-established practice within educational research (Alexakos, 2015; Craig, 2009; Kennedy-Lewis, 2012). As Alexakos (2015, p. 5) argues, studies in which the teacher also serves as the researcher possess the conditions to be regarded as "authentic inquiries," as they emerge organically from the lived realities of educational practice. At the same time, this dual role required an ongoing awareness of how the field researcher's institutional position and sociocultural standpoint could shape both the data and its interpretation.

The study formed part of a doctoral research project and was guided by a commitment to inclusive and equitable education for children with refugee backgrounds. The researchers' interest extended beyond language learning processes to the broader social context in which these unfolded. The RFRE, situated within a refugee camp and attended exclusively by refugee children, constituted a unique educational microcosm—an enclosed social and linguistic system largely isolated from the surrounding community. This context offered an opportunity to study how children navigated language, learning, and identity formation within a self-contained environment shaped by displacement and limited social contact with the host society.

Grounded in sociocultural and translanguaging theory, the researchers approached the classroom as a multilingual and intercultural space, viewing children as competent meaning-makers who actively used their full linguistic repertoires to construct understanding. Throughout the study, reflexivity was maintained through systematic field notes, which included observations on both the children's linguistic behavior and the field researcher's own pedagogical stance and responses.

Data Collection

The data corpus was derived from daily, full-time ethnographic engagement spanning the entire academic year (October 2021 through June 2022). The overwhelming majority of the data were collected during free play and recess, when children's language use was spontaneous and self-initiated rather than shaped by instructional demands. Focusing on these school-based contexts provided valuable insights into children's natural linguistic choices, offering a richer understanding of language use beyond the constraints of formal classroom activities. Furthermore, Krafft and Berk (1998) found that when children had abundant opportunities to engage in non-teacher-directed, open-ended activities—especially make-believe play—their use of private speech increased.

Throughout the study, the field researcher, in his dual capacity as teacher-researcher, maintained a participant-observer role, engaging minimally in children's play to avoid influencing their natural speech, while remaining present and attentive. In addition to documenting children's language practices, the ethnographic record included notes on the teacher's pedagogical approach and instructional strategies. Particular attention was paid to how the teacher modeled language use, employed gesture, and incorporated multilingual scaffolding practices during classroom interaction. While these observations are general rather than concrete examples, they provide a contextual frame for considering the children's private speech and suggest that teacher-mediated strategies may have influenced children's self-directed utterances.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data followed an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in the principles of LE. Each utterance was examined in relation to the immediate interactional context, as recorded in field notes, and the broader sociocultural environment of the RFRE setting. Through an iterative coding process, three primary interactional categories emerged: (1) peer-to-peer interactions, (2) teacher-student interactions, and (3) private speech.

Once private speech was identified as a salient and distinct category, a systematic secondary review of the entire year-long corpus was conducted. This phase involved transcribing all identified segments of private speech for micro-level analysis. To categorize the variety of speech acts within this subset, these utterances were analyzed through a secondary round of inductive coding, with patterns emerging from repeated engagement with the data. These patterns were then organized into the following analytically distinct categories,

informed by both the empirical material and established classifications from prior studies on private speech.

First, “contextually unrelated utterances” refers to utterances that are not connected to any activity or the play context and cannot be associated with the immediate situational context. Such words and phrases appear to be produced by children without any discernible purpose. This category corresponds to the “Word Play and Repetition” category used by Krafft and Berk (1998) and Clark (2005), as well as the “Egocentric Communication” category employed by White and Daugherty (2009). Second, “descriptions and commentaries” encompasses utterances related to the description and commentary of objects, as well as descriptions of activities in which the child is engaged or intends to engage. It parallels the “Describing One’s Own Activity and Self-Guidance” category identified by Krafft and Berk (1998), and the “Descriptions of the Self” and “Descriptions of the Environment/Task” categories outlined by Davis et al. (2013). Third, “naming utterances” involves naming objects and were observed during children’s initial interaction with or engagement in activities involving those objects, including their symbolic representations. Notably, this category is not found in the aforementioned studies.

Table 2. Overview of Private Speech Categories and Examples

categories	number of utterances	examples
contextually unrelated utterances	11	E164 (Asadi – 7/12/2021) As: <i>Μεγάαααλο</i> [me'ɣa:lo] (Biiiiig)
descriptions and commentaries	27	E428 (Arash – 2/2/2022) Ar: <i>Μπαλόι is καλό! Very καλό! Πολύ καλό!</i> [ba'loni ɪz ka'lo 'veri ka'lo po'li ka'lo] (Balloon is good! Very good! Very good!)
naming utterances	27	B27 (Farhad – 16/11/2021) F: <i>Αεροπλάνο</i> [a.e.ro'pla.no] (Airplane)
fantasy play utterances	17	B749 (Pazir – 26/5/2022) P: <i>Γεια σου! Γεια σου!</i> [ja su 'ja su] (Hello! Hello!)
self-rewarding and self-correcting utterances	6	K85 (Salma – 25/11/2021) S: <i>Οοοοχι</i> ['o:çi] (Noooo)

Fourth, “fantasy play utterances” includes utterances produced during symbolic play with objects, role-playing, and the enactment of activities such as book reading. This category corresponds to the “Fantasy Play Speech” category in Krafft and Berk (1998), the “Fantasy Play” and “Reading Aloud” categories in White and Daugherty (2009), the “Fantasy-Related/Dialogue” category in Davis et al. (2013), and the “Playful Private Speech” category identified by Sawyer and Brooks (2021). Lastly, “Self-rewarding and Self-correcting Utterances” consists of utterances related to the child’s performance in an activity, which may be either approving or critical in nature. It corresponds to the “Coping/Reinforcing Speech” category used by Daugherty et al. (1994), the “Evaluative or Motivational Statements” category in Davis et al. (2013), the “Motivational Private Speech” category from Sawyer and Brooks (2021), and the “Self-Judgement” and “Self-Reaction” categories in Mulvihill et al. (2023).

Drawing on the framework of linguistic ethnography, the analysis considered not only the linguistic form of the utterances but also their situated meaning within the children’s lived experiences. Throughout the analytic process, utterances were interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the ZPD, to explore how private speech may function as a mediational tool for learning and self-regulation. In parallel, translanguaging theory provided a lens through which to examine how children mobilized their full linguistic repertoires—not only to facilitate language learning, but also to construct meaning and express their evolving linguistic identities. Throughout the analysis, field notes and contextual information were used to support interpretation and ensure a holistic understanding of the children’s language use.

Limitation

A key limitation of this study concerns the exclusion of participants’ home languages from the analysis. Due to the absence of funding, data collection relied on field notes and the research team did not share the children’s linguistic backgrounds, making it impossible to document or interpret instances where other home languages may have been used. The analysis did, however, capture frequent use of English—and, in a few cases, French—which the researchers could understand. Importantly, despite this limitation, the study still investigates children’s multilingual practices, focusing on how they draw on multiple languages in classroom interaction. Nonetheless, the primary focus was on Greek, the school’s language of instruction, which the researchers could observe and analyze directly. Consequently, the findings represent children’s observable processes of internalization and emerging use of Greek, while

acknowledging that a fuller understanding of their translanguaging would require attention to all the languages they bring to the classroom.

FINDINGS

Language Learning

The analysis of the research data revealed that the multilingual children's language use largely aligns with sociocultural theoretical perspectives on private speech as a tool for language internalization in preschool-aged children. These perspectives support the function of private speech as a mechanism for learning a new language, through the internalization of linguistic elements located within the children's ZPDs. This role appears to be confirmed by a significant portion of our research data.

The characteristics of nearly all utterances categorized as naming utterances and contextually unrelated utterances point to the process of internalizing language through the strategy of "recall and practice," as described in relevant studies (De Guerrero, 2018; Lantolf, 2012). The linguistic elements of the school's language observed in these utterances had been taught to the children at an earlier time, and the fact that the children understood the correct meaning (semantics) of the words was verified either through direct questioning or by observing their accurate use of the linguistic item in other contexts. In both categories, children appeared to be engaging in this internalization strategy—either in the presence of external stimuli related to their utterances or in the complete absence of such stimuli, as demonstrated in the following examples.

B27 (Farhad – 16/11/2021)

F: *Αεροπλάνο* [a.e.ro'pla.no]

(Airplane) [Excerpt 1]

This utterance was classified under the category naming utterances, along with 26 others that displayed similar characteristics. In this particular instance, Farhad uttered the Greek word for airplane (*αεροπλάνο*) at the moment he picked up a plastic airplane toy, while playing alone on the classroom carpet during recess.

H176 (Elizabeth - 8/12/2021)

E: *Καμηλοπάρδαλη* [ka.mi.lo'par.ða.li]

(Giraffe) [Excerpt 2]

This utterance was classified under contextually unrelated utterances, a category that included 11 examples. It occurred during recess, specifically at breakfast time. At the moment

of observation, Elizabeth was sitting at the table eating, with no visible image or object that could be linked to a giraffe. This utterance stood out when cross-referenced with the study's ethnographic data. As it turns out, Elizabeth had chosen the giraffe as her personal animal symbol—each child had been assigned an animal symbol for various classroom purposes (e.g., identifying their drawers, representation in the calendar, etc.). Additionally, she had previously been observed on several occasions asking the teacher to remind her of the Greek word for giraffe. Later in the study, she was also noted using the word in social interactions. This pattern suggests that Elizabeth had a particular interest in learning this word and a personal motivation to acquire it. Taken together, these observations strongly indicate that Elizabeth's repetition of the word in private speech functioned as a strategic tool for internalizing the new linguistic element.

Among these types of utterances, we highlighted some—such as the following example—that exhibited particular characteristics further indicating the function of private speech as a process of internalizing linguistic elements situated within the children's ZPDs.

N328 (Arash - 19/1/2022)

Ar: *Εγώ θέλω καρότο!* [e'yo 'θe.lo ka'ro.to]

(I want (a) carrot!) [Excerpt 3]

This utterance occurred while Arash was playing with toy cars on the carpet during free play, with no environmental stimuli related to the meaning of the phrase. What is particularly noteworthy about this utterance is that Arash used the exact same phrase the following day during an interaction with the teacher, asking him for a plastic toy carrot during a pretend play activity related to fruits and vegetables:

B338 (Arash - 20/1/2022)

Ar: Teacher *εγώ θέλω καρότο!* ['ti.tʃer e'yo 'θe.lo ka'ro.to]

(Teacher I want (a) carrot!) [Excerpt 4]

It is therefore likely that, in the situation under examination, Arash's private speech functioned as a form of linguistic rehearsal intended for future use in social interaction. This function was first described by Saville-Troike (1988) and later supported by other researchers (e.g., Lantolf, 2012). In her study, Saville-Troike presents examples of private speech in children learning a second language, illustrating how such speech can serve as practice for future communication. Arash's utterance seems to have served precisely this purpose—helping him prepare a specific phrase for use in a real-world interaction, in this case during a recurring classroom pretend play activity centered on food.

Holistic Repertoires

The children's private speech reflected a holistic approach to their linguistic repertoires, aligning with a translanguaging understanding of language use. Notably, both their private and social speech involved a fluid and dynamic selection of linguistic resources to construct meaning. These empirical observations, as illustrated in the following examples, resonate with core ideas of translanguaging theory. The following utterance was classified under the fantasy play utterances category and refers to a reenactment of the book *Little White Fish*, which took place in the classroom as part of an organized activity. The utterance was observed while Salma was flipping through the part of the story where the little fish, in search of his mother, encounters various sea animals.

H85 (Salma - 25/11/2021)

S (Repeatedly): *Is this mama?* 'Οχι! [ɪz ðɪs 'mɑ.mə 'o.çi]

(Is this mama? No!). [Excerpt 5]

This instance illustrates a type of language use consistent with the translanguaging framework. Even within the same question-and-answer sequence, Salma does not restrict herself to a single linguistic code. Instead, she seamlessly integrates elements from her broader linguistic repertoire to construct meaning, reflecting the same flexible language practices seen in her social interactions documented elsewhere in the study. The following observation exhibits similar characteristics and also falls under the fantasy play utterances category, specifically involving symbolic play. In this instance, Elizabeth was playing alone, physically separated from the other children, and took on the role of a chef preparing a meal. As part of her play, she used food-related toy props available in the classroom, naming various ingredients she was “using” and describing the dishes she was preparing.

B256 (Elizabeth – 22/12/2021)

E: *Σαλάτα, σούπα, πατάτα, chicken, σοκολάτα, aubergine, croissant, τυρί, γάλα, καρότα, μπανάνα, πορτοκάλι*

[sa'lata' supa pa'tata 'tʃɪkən soko'lata 'əʊbəʒi:n 'kwa:sɒ~ ti'ri 'ɣala ka'rota ba'nana porto'kali]

(*Salad, soup, potato, chicken, chocolate, eggplant, croissant, cheese, milk, carrots, banana, orange*)

[Excerpt 6]

Notably, Elizabeth incorporated linguistic elements from Greek, English, and French. While *croissant* and *aubergine* also exist in English, in this instance both were articulated with distinctly French pronunciation, suggesting that Elizabeth was drawing on her familiarity with French—a language spoken in her family environment (see Table 2). Her language use thus illustrates a holistic approach to her linguistic resources, disregarding the boundaries of named

languages and instead selecting expressions from her integrated repertoire to support her symbolic play. This reflects the kind of fluid, adaptive language behavior described in translanguaging theory. Another example of translanguaging in children's private speech comes from the category of descriptions and commentaries. This utterance was observed during break time, as Arash sat on the classroom carpet holding a balloon with both hands, after having played with it alone for quite some time.

E428 (Arash – 2/2/2022)

Ar: *Μπαλόني is καλό! Very καλό! Πολύ καλό!*

[ba'loni ɪz ka'lo 'veri ka'lo po'li ka'lo]

(**Balloon** is good! Very good! Very good!) [Excerpt 7]

The ease with which he shifts between languages in this moment supports the view that multilingual speakers draw on a unified linguistic repertoire. According to Otheguy et al. (2015), such speakers select lexical and structural features freely, unbounded by socially or politically defined language categories. In this context, Arash does not seem to be distinguishing between “English” and “Greek,” but rather utilizes whichever linguistic resources best serve his expressive needs. This fluidity reinforces the study's conceptualization of language as a unitary, integrated system rather than a collection of discrete structures.

Moreover, the final part of Arash's utterance offers compelling evidence for a sociocultural understanding of private speech, particularly the idea that children gradually take on the role of guiding their own learning using strategies initially modeled by adults. According to Vygotsky (1962), private speech marks this developmental shift, as children begin to regulate their own thinking using tools previously provided by more capable others. In this case, Arash seems to partially adopt a technique regularly used by his teacher: saying a phrase first in English—the language the children already understand—and then immediately repeating it in Greek, the target language. This approach is intended to support the internalization of new forms by reinforcing both meaning and usage. This strategy surfaces again in the following utterance, observed during free play in the fantasy play utterances category, as Elizabeth played alone with toy cars on the classroom carpet:

K818 (Elizabeth – 10/6/2022)

E: Here comes the bus! *Λεωφορείο!* [hiər kʌmz ðə bʌs leofori'o]

(Here comes the bus! **Bus!**) [Excerpt 8]

Another strategy consistently modeled by the teacher and mirrored in the children's private speech was the use of gesture alongside speech, as illustrated in the next example. Falling under

the contextually unrelated utterances category, this utterance occurred at the end of free play as the children were putting away toys before circle time. Asadi, having finished tidying up early, was already seated and waiting for the others when he produced this utterance. It was accompanied by a characteristic gesture indicating large size—one the teacher frequently used to reinforce word meaning and support children’s comprehension.

E164 (Asadi – 7/12/2021)

As: *Μεγάαααλο* [meˈɣaːlo]

(**Biiiiig**) [Excerpt 9]

McCafferty (2004), in his study on gesture and second language acquisition, argues that gestures facilitate the internalization of language through embodiment. Similarly, Sato (2020) notes that gesture-speech combinations serve both internal and external functions: they support the speaker’s cognitive processing while simultaneously aiding listener comprehension. In light of these insights, Asadi’s private speech—like all private speech instances observed in the study, which were accompanied by gesture—reflects a range of internal functions: organizing thought, constructing meaning, and facilitating the internalization of linguistic forms. Here, he appears to focus on a form within his ZPD, temporarily detaching it from communicative intent in order to process and internalize it. This effort is reinforced by the combined use of speech and gesture, which together support his gradual mastery of the word.

Identity Development

Another significant dimension of the children’s private speech involves the potential negotiation and expression of their identities through their language use and choices, as illustrated in the following examples both from the fantasy play utterances category. This utterance was observed at the moment when Iman completed a construction made of building blocks, which resembled a building and which she had been quietly assembling on her own for quite some time. Based on contextual cues, it is highly likely that the structure symbolized a school.

B163 (Iman – 7/12/2021)

I: *Σχολείο!* [sxoˈlio]

(**School!**) [Excerpt 10]

Notably, this was the first documented occasion on which Iman spontaneously used this specific word in Greek. Our analysis focused on her choice to use the Greek term rather than the English word she typically used—or the Arabic word, given that Arabic was the language

spoken at home. This linguistic choice may signify the gradual adoption of a student identity and, by extension, the development of a sense of belonging within the school community (Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021). The emergence of this sense of belonging is particularly significant, as it has been identified as a critical school factor contributing to the resilience of children with a refugee background (OECD, 2018). Iman’s use of the school’s language at this meaningful moment can thus be interpreted as the linguistic culmination of a symbolic act—constructing a model of the school itself—reflecting her growing connection to and identification with the educational environment.

A comparable instance, which similarly illustrates the emerging development of a sense of belonging within the school community, involved Elizabeth. Elizabeth was positioned in front of the classroom attendance board and independently enacted the daily routine of recording attendance. Specifically, she moved the card bearing her name into the column of present students while verbalizing the following utterance.

E136 (Elizabeth–2/12/2021)

E: Elizabeth go to *σχολείο*! [iˈlizabɛθ ɡoʊ tu sxoˈlio]

(Elizabeth go to *school*!) [Excerpt 11]

Elizabeth’s inclusion of the school’s language in this symbolic play represents not merely the reproduction of a daily practice, but a semiotic performance of her personal inclusion and active participation in the school community. Research with preschool-aged children has identified different dimensions of the sense of belonging, the most significant of which involve relationships with people—both peers and educators—as well as connection to the school as a physical and social space (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). In both instances, the children symbolically express their connection to the school environment—and, by extension, their developing sense of belonging within the school community—through both symbolic play and the combined use of the school’s language to refer to the school itself.

The following utterance was observed immediately after the presentation of a new puppet theatre to the children, which had been donated to the school. The introduction of a new puppet theatre excited all the children, as it was much larger and more impressive than the one previously available in the classroom. At the moment of observation, Pazir was playing alone with it, holding two puppets that were “conversing” with each other.

B749 (Pazir – 26/5/2022)

P: *Γεια σου! Γεια σου!* [ja su ˈja su]

(*Hello! Hello!*) [Excerpt 12]

After these initial phrases in Greek, Pazir continued his “performance” in Farsi. The spontaneous use of this specific greeting in Greek had not been observed in any other context involving Pazir throughout the school year, even though it was part of his everyday linguistic environment at school. The utterance occurred near the end of the school year and represents one of the few recorded instances of spoken communication of this kind, which is likely related to the hearing and speech difficulties he faced. Pazir’s initial use of the Greek greeting in the puppet interaction, though brief, is significant in light of his broader communicative profile. Despite his limited verbal output and the dominance of Farsi in his expressive repertoire, this moment of Greek usage—embedded within a playful and imaginative context—may represent an emerging engagement with the school’s linguistic and social norms. Similar to Iman’s and Elizabeth’s cases, the use of Greek here can be viewed as a subtle but meaningful act of identity negotiation. It suggests a growing awareness of and affiliation with the school environment, where the use of Greek marks not just linguistic participation, but the affirmation of a student identity in the shared life of the classroom. Even more so given his communication challenges, Pazir’s utterance may reflect an important step in his developing sense of belonging as a “subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences” (Allen et al., 2021, p.87).

Further findings indicating the expression of a developing student identity through the children’s private speech come from the self-rewarding and self-correcting utterances category. In this category, we observed children using the school’s language to give themselves reinforcing and corrective feedback, in a manner similar to that of their teacher. These utterances occurred both during free play and in organized activities, as seen in the following examples:

K85 (Salma – 25/11/2021)

S: *Οοοοχι* [‘o:çi]

(**Noooo**) [Excerpt 13]

E288 (Arash – 12/1/2022)

Ar: *Καλό!* [ka’lo]

(**Good!**) [Excerpt 14]

Excerpt 13 was observed while Salma was engaged in a shape-sorting game during free play, at the moment she selected an incorrect shape. Excerpt 14 occurred when Arash completed a worksheet during an organized activity. Notably, in these instances the children used the school’s language as a medium for self-directed feedback. Given that feedback is a

central element of the educational process, their choice to use the school’s language—rather than their home languages or English—reflects not only the internalization of classroom practices but also an emerging alignment with their roles as students. This suggests that these forms of private speech can be seen as a subtle but meaningful expression of student identity. Moments of self-correction or affirmation in the school’s linguistic code may therefore indicate a growing sense of belonging and participation in the school environment.

DISCUSSION

The data analyzed in this study reveal the depth and complexity of preschool children’s private speech. Drawing on sociocultural and translanguaging theory, the findings offer nuanced insights into how young multilingual learners actively construct meaning, rehearse linguistic forms, and negotiate their social and academic identities through private speech.

One of the most consistent findings in the data is the role of private speech in facilitating the internalization of new linguistic elements. Rather than being random occurrences, these moments represent deliberate cognitive exercises that advance the child’s grasp of the school’s language through private engagement. This is clearly observed in utterances categorized under naming utterances and contextually unrelated utterances. These utterances align with the function of “recall and practice,” as discussed by Lantolf (2012) and De Guerrero (2018), and highlight the importance of internal speech as a tool for language consolidation.

In these utterances, we see how children revisit previously taught vocabulary, often outside explicit instructional contexts. Such instances reflect a process of self-initiated rehearsal that suggests these learners are actively working within their ZPDs to internalize linguistic forms. This internalization process is further illustrated in utterances, which were later mirrored in a real-life classroom interaction. The transition from private to social speech serves as strong evidence that private speech functions as a kind of linguistic scaffolding—an internal rehearsal ground where children prepare for eventual communicative use. In this sense, private speech supports not only linguistic but also social development, providing children with a space to rehearse and prepare for meaningful social interaction — the very foundation of their social growth. Importantly, this internalization process also appears to carry a significant motivational component. The fact that children voluntarily rehearsed and reused words from the school’s language—even in the absence of communicative demand—suggests a personal drive to acquire the language of their educational environment. This motive to learn the school’s

language is critical, as it directly links to academic success and to the development of resilience in children with refugee backgrounds (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2020; OECD, 2018).

In addition to the function of internalization, the study uncovered rich examples of translanguaging within children’s private speech — a finding that aligns with one of the six metafunctions of preschoolers’ translanguaging outlined by García and Li (2014), namely, constructing meaning within themselves. These instances demonstrate that multilingual children do not compartmentalize their linguistic knowledge according to traditional language boundaries. Rather, they draw fluidly from their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning, often combining elements from different linguistic codes within the same utterance. These examples show that the children’s linguistic choices are governed not by formal language categories but by communicative needs and context-driven associations. This finding resonates with Otheguy et al.’s (2015) assertion that translanguaging reflects a speaker’s dynamic use of an integrated linguistic system.

The more complex utterances are striking examples of how private speech reflects not only translanguaging but also emerging metalinguistic awareness. The blending of elements from different codes not only constructs meaning but suggests a playful, confident engagement with language. Importantly, these fluid practices appear consistent with the types of strategies modeled by the teacher, suggesting that translanguaging may be supported by the classroom environment rather than occurring entirely spontaneously (Garcia et al., 2011). Although the data do not provide detailed examples of teacher translanguaging, the general patterns observed align with theoretical perspectives on scaffolded multilingual language use. Such findings challenge deficit-based views of multilingualism and instead present these children as competent, resourceful language users capable of navigating and combining multiple codes to express themselves effectively.

Observing translanguaging practices within the context of private speech further underscores their significance, as it provides a rare internal lens into children’s linguistic and cognitive processes. Unlike social interaction, private speech provides direct insight into how children approach language when external pressures or expectations are absent. This internal perspective offers empirical support for translanguaging theory’s central claim: that multilingual speakers operate with a single, integrated linguistic repertoire rather than switching between separate, compartmentalized languages. Nevertheless, because the dataset did not capture the full content of the children’s home-language utterances—although their use of languages such as Farsi or Arabic was occasionally documented ethnographically—this

interpretation remains necessarily limited to the observable aspects of their multilingual practice. Within these observable contexts, the fluid blending of linguistic features in children's private speech suggests that they flexibly and strategically drew on their linguistic repertoires to construct meaning, solve problems, and engage with their environment.

Beyond its cognitive and linguistic dimensions, private speech emerged as a space where children negotiated and expressed evolving aspects of their identities. The connection between language use and identity formation is critical since “every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space” (Norton, 2010, p. 350). This insight also resonates with the concept of private speech, where individuals use language, not to communicate with others, but to reflect, regulate their thoughts, and construct a sense of self, demonstrating that identity work occurs even in speech that is self-directed. Accordingly, the children's use of the school's language in their private speech reflects more than linguistic competence. It signals a developing sense of belonging and affiliation with the school environment, as well as the ongoing negotiation of their identities as students and as multilingual speakers.

As stressed by Aleksić and García (2024), language plays a central role in shaping students' sense of belonging, as it mediates interactions and the building of relationships both with people and with place. In this light, we argue that the recorded private speech reflects the development of two interrelated components of a sense of belonging: competencies, referring to the skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging, and perceptions, referring to the subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experiences (Allen et al., 2021). Consequently, private speech emerges as a key site in which these competencies and perceptions are both manifested and advanced, thereby functioning as a medium of identity expression and a pathway to social and emotional integration within the school.

Some of the examples presented in this paper are linguistic performances that align the children with the roles and routines of student life. This theme is further reinforced by utterances in the self-rewarding and self-correcting utterances category, where children use Greek to monitor and guide their actions. Such private feedback mirrors the language of the teacher and the pedagogical culture of the classroom. In using these forms, children not only adopt linguistic patterns, but also position themselves within the discursive practices of the classroom. They become students in action, employing the language of education to self-regulate and validate their own learning processes. The development of a student identity is intrinsically linked to the emergence of a sense of belonging within the school community

(Legette & Kurtz-Costes, 2021). This is not merely a social outcome but a critical developmental factor. A sense of school belonging has been identified as a major protective factor that fosters resilience in refugee children, buffering them against the challenges of displacement, trauma, and adjustment (OECD, 2018). Thus, the emergence of this identity in the children's private speech indicates more than linguistic progress—it signals emotional integration and psychosocial adaptation within the educational environment.

Moreover, the children's translanguaging practices themselves played a key role in identity formation, allowing them to assert agency and express multifaceted aspects of who they are. According to García and Li (2014), translanguaging allows students to construct and continually reshape their sociocultural identities as they critically and creatively respond to their historical and present circumstances. Throughout our study, we documented a creative blending, during the children's private speech, of newly acquired linguistic elements from the school's language (Greek) with one of the Open Accommodation Sites' lingua francas (English) and, in fewer cases, with languages spoken in the family environment. These self-directed linguistic choices align with Baker's (2011) notion that individuals express identity by purposefully incorporating elements of a new language in their speech to "indicate a desire to identify and affiliate" (p. 103). Considering the inherently social nature of private speech, we contend that this desire is likewise manifested in the self-directed utterances produced by the children in our study.

Furthermore, the use of such practices, especially during moments of symbolic or emotional significance, contributes to the shaping of the students' multilingual identities, as described by Forbes et al. (2021). By fluidly drawing from their full linguistic repertoire, children constructed their identities not only as language learners but as socially and culturally situated individuals navigating multiple worlds. Thus, these flexible language practices not only reflected linguistic competence but also allowed them to position themselves within a multilingual learning community. An important complementary finding involves the integration of gesture in children's private speech. Consistently across the data, children paired spoken utterances with physical gestures, particularly when engaging with new vocabulary or emphasizing semantic content. Such combinations echo the multimodal strategies used by the teacher, who frequently supported spoken input with gestures to reinforce meaning and aid comprehension. They enable embodied learning and help children internalize language by physically enacting meaning (McCafferty, 2004; Sato, 2020). In the case of private speech, gestures appear to enhance the cognitive function of self-directed language, supporting

memory, reinforcing vocabulary acquisition, and facilitating the rehearsal of socially meaningful forms. This embodiment of language, seen through synchronized gesture-speech sequences, suggests that private speech is not only a cognitive tool but also a deeply sensory and embodied one. It underscores how young learners engage multiple modalities to make sense of language and prepare themselves for interaction in their multilingual worlds.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study offer several important implications for early childhood educators working in multilingual, refugee-inclusive classrooms. First, the repeated naming of objects and lexical items in private speech suggests that children benefit from educational materials that are physically present, accessible, and directly linked to the vocabulary introduced during instruction. The presence of manipulatives, visual aids, and tangible learning resources appears to support recall, rehearsal, and the internalization of language forms within the child's ZPD. Second, private speech offers educators a valuable diagnostic window into each child's developmental stage. The content and structure of children's self-directed speech can indicate which linguistic elements lie within their ZPD, as suggested by Lantolf and Yáñez (2003). Teachers can leverage these insights to tailor instruction and scaffolding strategies more effectively to individual learning needs. In particular, language forms that appear frequently in private speech may serve as ideal targets for reinforcement, collaborative activities, or expanded use in guided interactions.

Moreover, the observation that children often mirror in their private speech teachers' instructional strategies emphasizes the importance of intentional modeling. Teachers should feel encouraged to use multimodal, multilingual scaffolding not only to support comprehension but also to promote internalization strategies that children may adopt in their independent speech. Recognizing and supporting the translanguaging practices of multilingual children further empowers them to take ownership of their learning using all available linguistic resources. Finally, educators and school leaders must recognize that the development of language and the development of identity are deeply interconnected processes. Private speech, while often overlooked, can serve as a powerful indicator of how children see themselves within the school setting—whether as competent learners, legitimate participants, or valued community members. Creating a classroom environment that affirms all aspects of a child's identity—including their home language and culture—supports the dual goals of academic learning and emotional resilience.

Private speech, as demonstrated in this study, is far more than idle talk—it is a powerful developmental tool through which multilingual children learn, think, and become. Private speech functions as a bridge between social interaction and internal cognitive activity, between external language input and internalized linguistic competence. In multilingual contexts, this bridge is not confined to a single language but is built through *translanguaging*—the fluid and dynamic use of multiple linguistic resources that allows children to draw on their full repertoires as they make sense of the world. Through private speech, children weave together elements from their holistic semiotic repertoires to mediate thought, construct meaning, and support language learning, revealing how multilingual learners negotiate identity and engage with the sociocultural worlds of their classrooms.

In sum, private speech serves as a bridge between cognitive development, language acquisition, and psychosocial adaptation. For children with refugee backgrounds, these processes are not only academic but also vital for integration and growth. The ability to internalize the school's language, to feel a sense of belonging, and to express oneself within a new educational and cultural context are all tied to resilience and long-term well-being. By paying closer attention to private speech, educators can gain vital insights into the minds and hearts of the children they teach—and, in doing so, help shape environments that support both linguistic growth and human flourishing.

Future research should incorporate multilingual teams who are familiar with a wider range of students' languages to facilitate close analysis of all of the ways that young multilingual children use language in their private speech. Such approaches would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how children draw on their entire semiotic resources during private speech and interaction. Longitudinal studies could also shed light on how these translanguaging practices evolve over time and contribute to language acquisition, identity formation, and psychosocial adaptation.

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