Putting Arendt, Bakhtin and atmosphere to work: Exploring different paths concerning the language development of multilingual children

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to illustrate the potential of ‘atmosphere’ in order to consider more inventive ways of developing the language of young Norwegian ethnic minority children. The article draws on ethnographic data that emerged from doctoral studies. The analysis of the data draws on aspects of Arendt’s philosophical work and Bakhtin’s theorizations concerning language. It is these theoretical frames, together with theorizations concerning atmosphere, that allow one to ask different questions in relation to language development. It is by attempting to address these questions that different pedagogical paths begin to emerge. However, the article argues that in order to take such paths, there is a need to suspend certain universal principles, including privileging the mind over the body and the logical over the non-logical.

Keywords
Arendt, atmosphere, Bakhtin, ethnic minority, language development, pedagogy

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**Introduction**

Recent political guidelines regarding early childhood education in Norway strongly emphasize the preschool’s role in teaching ethnic minority children the majority language before starting school at the age of six (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015). These guidelines lean on studies that advocate practices driven by standardized assessment and standardized goals for majority language learning among children (Hagtvet et al., 2011). This view of language, where it can be measured against standards, privileges quantitative approaches (Block, 2003: 4), where oral majority language skills are constructed as being superior to other communication skills. Such quantitative approaches not only encourage instrumental approaches in terms of teaching and learning in schooling, but also represent a monolingual notion of language development that is rooted in structuralism, where language is perceived as a predictable system based on specific rules (Bakhtin, 1984; Voloshinov, 1972).

Instrumental approaches also raise troubling questions in relation to acceptance and identification with the standard. As Lane notes:

> when standardising minority languages one risks establishing a standard that the users do not identify with, and thus, standardisation which was supposed to empower minority language speakers may create a new form of stigma for those who feel that they cannot live up to the new codified standard. (Lane, 2015: 263)

Vandenbroeck (2017: 406) notes that homogeneity in relation to language development has historically and internationally been considered as an ideal for teaching. Vandenbroeck (2017) also notes that in order for primary school teachers to execute their duties, they require ‘teachable’ children who do not differ too much from each other in terms of majority language development. Given this theory, practitioners in preschool are required to facilitate a language environment that develops measurable linguistic skills. Such a goal-oriented approach involves a pedagogical relationship marked by expressions of power between practitioners and children. The child, by necessity, has to fit into the school system rather than the school system supporting the child (Jusso and Laine, 2005: 13). As Vandenbroeck (2017) concludes, this strong emphasis on homogeneity ignores the fact that children bring with them diverse cultural repertoires, as well as diverse ways of learning. Within monolingual models of language development, ethnic minority children’s diverse communication skills are made invisible. Moreover, because the learning environment is overshadowed by a very specific view of language development, opportunities for ethnic minority children to interact, speak and communicate are foreshortened. Accessing the curriculum becomes problematic, resulting in an inability to participate fully in the classroom. Troublingly, those children who have insufficient mastery of the majority language are understood as lacking in competence (Vandenbroeck, 2017).

Subsequently, this article will illustrate the potential of ‘atmosphere’ in order to consider more inventive ways of developing the language of young Norwegian ethnic minority children. By drawing on an example of ethnographic data and by undertaking an analysis that is guided by aspects of Arendt’s philosophical work and Bakhtin’s theorizations concerning language, as well as theorizations concerning atmosphere, we are able to ask different questions in relation to language development. It is by attempting to address these questions that different pedagogical paths begin to emerge. However, the article argues that in order
to take such paths, there is a need to suspend certain universal principles, including privileging the mind over the body and the logical over the non-logical.

Second-language development outside of the monolingual canon

In general, challenges to a structuralist view of language have been undertaken by postmodern thinkers, who argue that language is ‘socially constituted’ (Lane, 2015: 266) and that the ‘Eurocentric notion of language as a homogenous limited unit is a constructed object and not suited to a multilingual post-colonial world’ (Lane, 2015: 266; see also Pennycook, 2010; Wright, 2004). Shifts in approaches have been undertaken where, as an example, ecological methods have emerged (Hult, 2010). These go some way in terms of privileging diversity and community engagement (Mühlhäusler, 2000). Jusso and Laine (2005: 1) draw out some of the possibilities between community engagement and communal inquiry, which, they argue, ‘has significant pedagogical value because it encourages multidimensional thinking and this way produces comprehensive educative experiences built through language and thought in children’.

One aspect of ‘multidimensional thinking’ might include critically engaging with the idea of ‘atmospheres’. Such an endeavour necessitates ‘a closer engagement with the interweaving historiographies of the body, the perceptual realm, and philosophical understandings of what it means to be human’ (Gandy, 2017: 354). Vandenbrock (2017: 411) echoes aspects of Gandy’s thinking when he asserts that the educational mission of preschools ‘needs to be complemented with issues of belonging, connecting and social cohesion’ – an aim achieved through ‘bonding and bridging’. Within this perspective, we can begin to see learning, including the development of language, as nesting within relationships, bodily sensations and feelings of acceptance, all of which might be summarized as atmosphere. Working with the idea of atmosphere has implications in terms of pedagogical relationships, where relations between practitioners and children are ‘marked by a general mood that has mutual influence, and thus, all participants in a language environment are simultaneously affecting and affected by the atmosphere’ (Bollonow, 1962: 10). Within such an environment, learning can be approached experimentally, where the physical body is both accepted and appreciated as a conduit for learning (Jusso and Laine, 2005: 10). It is within a ‘non-reflective flow of life’, where there is an atmosphere consisting of equitable relations between children and each another, and children and their teacher, that learning can happen (Jusso and Laine, 2005: 12).

Several researchers working in the area of second-language development suggest that children use new and creative combinations of ‘utterances’ to communicate. Goodwin’s (2000) work, for example, suggests that face-to-face interaction involves semiotic resources, including the body, speech and materials. Nordic scholars, including, for example, Skaremyr (2019: 16), describe how children who are leaning an additional language combine oral speech, body language and materials so as to be understood. Similarly, Björk-Willén (2007: 2133) describes how multilingual children can coordinate non-vocal actions with speech in order to both participate and sustain participation when playing. Thus, learning, including language learning, is accomplished jointly.

Johansson (2004) argues that we should recognize what Merleau-Ponty (1962) terms the ‘life-world’. The life-world concerns a subject who lives in, experiences and acts on the world. In essence, the life-world both precedes and succeeds the subject. The body is central within the life-world because both our way of being in the world and our understanding of
the world come via the body as well as the mind. As Johansson (2004) notes, young children begin to experience meaning as soon as they are born. However, such meanings are not reflected on; rather, they are lived. She continues: ‘the child experiences meaning through bodily communication, interpretations and tacit understandings about what is meaningful in daily life’ (Johansson, 2004: 11). Johansson goes on to suggest that taking the idea of life-world as a point of departure has implications in terms of teaching and learning. She argues that ‘bodily experiences and expressions as well as relating to others constitute the components of the child’s very existence and are as such significant for learning’ (11).

However, recognizing bodily experiences and expressions in terms of learning has implications in terms of research methodology. Following Ricento (2000), it necessitates the researcher having insights into the role of individuals and their agency, and it necessitates having insights into the interplay between macro and micro processes. It also necessitates the researcher having access to tools that can assist when analysing qualitative data. Accordingly, before introducing the data, more details in relation to the methodology and analytical tools are briefly described.

Methodology

Given that the aim of the research was to investigate how dialogue in a multilingual preschool develops, the research was ethnographic in orientation. The study employed ethnographic methods of participant observations and informal interviewing with practitioners and parents. The first author undertook participant observations over a period of six months in three preschools (for children aged between three and six). Thirty different languages were spoken across the three sites. Field notes documenting the observations were recorded in situ, first in Norwegian before then being transcribed into English by the first author.

A key principal of the study involved recognizing that young children are experts in terms of their own social lives (Thorne, 2008). Ethical consent was secured from all adults, including parents and practitioners. Consent from the children was also sought. This was undertaken in an organic fashion where the written field notes became a conduit for explaining what the researcher was doing and why she was doing it. Throughout, the first author tried to adhere to Denzin’s advice that:

> our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us. (Denzin, 1989: 83)

Initially, we followed a number of guidelines concerning data where the researcher is encouraged to generate codes and look for themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 17–20). Whilst we found a degree of security in these practices, we were also conscious that there was a danger that coding and developing themes would close the analysis down and, as such, would short-change us in terms of understanding examples of dialogue. In trying to open up the data, we have turned to two theorists: Bakhtin and Arendt. According to Bakhtin (1986), we author each other, and we need the authorial position of others in order to become and see ourselves as subjects. As Skaftun notes:

> The moment we enter a classroom we are situated in a complex field of discursive relations . . . Teachers have a professional responsibility for authoring the classroom as a learning
environment, whereas students more or less consciously author their own learning or even their future (cf. Matusov, 2011; Matusov et al., 2016) . . . The observing researcher enters this complexity, and responds to it in the moment of ongoing lessons, and also later on, looking back and reflecting over the experience. (Skaftun, 2019: A144)

If Bakhtin provided us with tools to describe the relational dynamics of real-life classroom interactions, Arendt allowed us to perceive dialogue as stories in which the actors reveal who they are. She also allowed us to appreciate how the children were situated in a web of relations (Arendt, 1998), and that their identities were partly constituted by those relations and the (inter)actions which circulated within the preschool classroom.

The third tool used to aid the analysis was theories concerning ‘atmosphere’. Atmospheres have a complex relationship to language-based modes of communication, which in turn impact on pedagogy. Bollnow (1962: 5), for example, explains atmospheres as ‘all those fundamental emotional conditions and sentient human qualities that appear between the practitioner and the child, which form the basis for the pedagogical relationship’. Given this, when analysing the data we had to become ‘sentient to bodies, movements, and ways of being in light, noise, and space’ (Stewart, 2011: 445).

**Theoretical framework**

This section aims to develop further certain salient features of Bakhtin’s and Arendt’s theoretical positions in relation to language, culture and human (inter)action. The significance of pedagogical atmospheres will also be foregrounded. Such an overview will provide a rudimentary map that the reader can then take across to the analysis of the data. Specifically, this section foregrounds Bakhtin’s theories concerning dialogism and Arendt’s theories concerning natality, plurality, visibility and responsibility. This section also considers what ‘atmosphere’ means and what is entailed within the term ‘pedagogical atmosphere’.

Bakhtin’s (1984, 1986) theories are important because they allow for an understanding of language that goes far beyond the idea that language is a method of communication, which uses spoken or written words in a structured and conventional way. For Bakhtin (1986), language does include the spoken word, but it also involves actions, silences and body language. A key theoretical element is dialogue. Dialogue encompasses more than communication between people. Besides recognizing the multiplicity of voices and perspectives, dialogism also includes dialogue with the physical environment. We are, as Robinson (2011) notes, always in dialogue, not only with other people but also with everything in the world. Language is produced and, as such, resists closure and fails to produce a ‘whole’ (Robinson, 2011). According to Bakhtin (1986), consciousness is always a product of responsive interactions. In brief, human life is an open-ended dialogue.

Human interaction appears in what Bakhtin (1986: 77) defines as ‘spheres of communication’, where a shared understanding forms the foundation for interactions between the participants. To take part in the interactions, we need to be familiar with the common understanding that marks the foundation of the communication spheres. Bakhtin (1984, 1986) further notes that emotional expressiveness is an essential aspect of the dialogues formed in spheres of communication.

According to Bakhtin (1986), spheres of communication are constructed from chains of utterances, where every statement appears as an answer to a previous statement – verbal as
well as non-verbal. Dialogism implies an ability to engage in these chains of utterances by listening and responding to a previous statement, rather than proposing a planned or an expected explanation. Bakhtin employs the concept of ‘polyphony’, which simply means ‘multiple voices’. Polyphony represents a pluralistic world that consists of autonomous subjects where no voice is subordinated to another (Bakhtin, 1984: 7). Robinson (2011) offers further clarity when he writes that ‘the idea of language as simply descriptive turns it into a dead, thing-like shell. Any language use is mediated by social ways of seeing. Furthermore, these social ways of seeing are always contested, in dialogue, and hence are always changing’. Subsequently, when analysing an example of data, we try to foreground how dialogism has implications in terms of dialogical rights, where both pedagogues and children have a right to be implicated, involved and invested in processes where perspectives are shaped, fashioned and brought into being. This right comes about when all participants can speak and act autonomously.

In our view, Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism connects with Arendt’s concept of ‘action’. For Arendt, what is special and distinctive about humans is their ‘capacity to begin’ – that is, their capacity for ‘action’. To act or to begin implies leaving behind what is habitual and familiar – the status quo – so as to create something new. Arendt uses the metaphor ‘natality’ to describe this ‘capacity to begin’. Action, however, is in stark contrast to ‘behaviour’. Behaviour is where individuals follow habitual norms, rules and social conventions (Arendt, 1998: 40–43). Arendt is keen to mark out that action can include small as well as big gestures. So, whilst a big action might focus on national or world politics, other engagements can be less grandiose and could include, for example, speaking up at a meeting and thus unsettling a predominant opinion, which in turn could fracture a predictable course of action. What becomes apparent is that action implies ‘freedom’ – that is, the freedom to begin, to start something or to initiate something unexpected. As Arendt states:

> It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings … The fact that man [sic] is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth, something uniquely new comes into the world. (Arendt, 1998: 177–178)

The other feature of action is ‘plurality’. ‘To act’ implies taking the initiative or introducing something different into the world. However, such actions cannot be undertaken in isolation from others – that is, independently of other actors. Action must happen publicly, where words, deeds and other actions are made visible. But consent for such words, deeds and actions can only exist in a context defined by plurality. Bringing new perspectives into the world constitutes plurality, which is revealed whenever and wherever people meet, communicate and negotiate their different perspectives concerning the world (Arendt, 1998). Arendt defines ‘culture’ as a ‘public space’ through which we become ‘visible’ to one another (by bringing our new perspectives into the world) and the world becomes visible to us. Arendt writes:

> In acting and speaking, men [sic] show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. (Arendt, 1998: 179)
Put simply, people reveal themselves through not only their speech and action, but also their unique and individual appearance, involving mimicry, gestures, tone of voice and movements.

Although we have the freedom to bring our perspectives into the world, we must consider this freedom to act in relation to the consequences the actions entail for others (Arendt, 1961: 142). According to Arendt (1961), human authority, understood as stability, is ‘resting on a foundation in the past’ (92). She continues: ‘an established civilization can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers’ (95). Following her philosophy, people need to understand the historical continuum in which they are born in order to affect or change the world through action and speech. Arendt’s perspective is bound to the problems of assuming responsibility for the world – that is, the world of here and now. ‘Our imagination takes its bearings both from others’ perspectives and from previous examples that we wish to emulate or excel in some way’ (Williams, 2015: 44). Our responsibility involves an ability to imagine what the world will look like in the continuation, in the perspective of both how our actions will affect others and what actions and values we bring with us from the past and into the future (Williams, 2015).

Arendt’s theories in relation to natality, plurality, visibility and responsibility will be brought into play when analysing the data. We will try to make clear how the concepts are implicated in pedagogy as well as in the development of language acquisition of young ethnic minority children who are also acquiring a Norwegian identity. Crucial in the analyses is how the practitioners’ responsibility affects children’s ability to bring something new and unexpected into the world of preschool.

Finally, we will briefly outline why ‘atmosphere’ has become of interest within various disciplines before turning more specifically to the idea of ‘pedagogical atmosphere’. Reference to atmospheres in general, but ‘affective atmospheres’ in particular, is becoming more frequent in disciplines such as anthropology, architectural theory and cultural geography. Gandy (2017) draws our attention to an expanded conception of atmospheres, which he believes runs parallel to theoretical reflections on space and subjectivity. Thus, the meaning can oscillate between, for example, the latent atmosphere of a room or the complex interplay between multiple subjects in crowd-like situations. Atmospheres also inhere in the multisensory evocations of memory, both singular and collective, and can evoke a spectral penumbra within the synesthetic spaces of human meaning and habitation. (Gandy, 2017: 354)

The American anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2011: 452) suggests that ‘an atmosphere is not an inert context but a force field in which people find themselves’. Stewart refers to the presence of ‘charged atmospheres’, ‘atmospheric attunements’ and ‘the proliferation of little worlds’, which characterize everyday situations. She also suggests that an atmosphere can be characterized as a multilayered space of latent possibilities or likened to a ‘background hum’ (446).

The data

The following data concerns four Norwegian ethnic minority girls who were all acquiring Norwegian as an additional language. The girls had different levels of confidence and ability
in terms of speaking Norwegian. The data also concerns a practitioner who spoke only
Norwegian. All names have been anonymized.

It is a quiet morning at The Nightingales, as only a few children have arrived. The practitioner,
Helene, and four girls, Mai (4), Norshin (5), Chanti (5) and Shifone (4), are sitting round a table
playing with small colourful beads that they are putting on a board. The room is calm. There are
no sounds that would irritate, disturb or unsettle. The sun is shining through the window.
Chanti tells the others: ‘I am going to the dentist tomorrow’. Mai answers, while pointing
her finger at her mouth: ‘I was bleeding in here, but all day I rather wanted to cut’.
After half a minute of silence, Helene asks: ‘You went to the dentist, but what you wanted
was to go to the hairdresser?’ Mai nods and replies: ‘Yes, mummy said no cutting!’ (Field notes,
21 February 2017)

This event represents both a typical and yet unique morning at The Nightingales. It is
typical in that the group activity was a familiar everyday practice, but unique in that a
dialogue in Norwegian developed. So, how and why did the dialogue develop? Was there
something about the atmosphere – the quiet sounds perhaps? Gandy (2017: 358) notes that
sound can engender a diversity of affective states. Pink and Sumartojo (2019) suggest that a
quiet atmosphere can induce or release serenity amongst groups, whilst Revill (2016: 248)
describes sound as capable of ‘enveloping the body’. Following Stewart (2007: 3), it is
possible to understand the background hum of the classroom as implicated in what she
describes as ‘ordinary affects’, which are significant because of ‘the thoughts and feelings
they make possible’. As Stewart (2007: 3) acknowledges, whilst we cannot make a direct
relationship between, for example, the sounds of the room and the development of the
dialogue, we can nevertheless consider how ordinary affects, including sound, contribute
towards ‘potential ways of knowing’ and ‘relating’.

If we accept that sound is part of the atmosphere of the room, we must also recognize the
light. As noted above, the sun was ‘shining through the window’. As Gettes (2017) fore-
grounds, Norwegians are affected by the ‘winter blues’ caused by ‘the flat, gloomy grayness
of winter [that] seems to penetrate [their] skin and dampen [their] spirits’. However, as the
year moves on towards February, changes in light occur: ‘bright light – particularly when
delivered in the early morning – seems to reverse the symptoms’ (Gettes, 2017). In a similar
vein, the phenomenological philosopher Ullrich Michael Haase (2000) notes that light has
both affective and symbolic power. It can, as Gettes (2017) reminds us, both dampen and
raise our spirits – all of which begs the question of whether the atmosphere of the classroom,
including in this instance the muted sounds and sunlight, contributed towards the overall
mood of the group. Were light and sound implicated in establishing a foundation for lan-
guage? According to Bakhtin (1986), dialogue does not just mean speaking with other
people. It also means ‘communicating with everything in the world’ (Robinson, 2011). In
other words, both the sun and the sounds of the classroom were also implicated in
the dialogue.

Sitting in a group with a practitioner was, for these girls, part of their everyday life when
at preschool. To describe something as ‘everyday’ implies that it is familiar. In general,
everyday practices, including routine activities, are said to engender feelings of safety
amongst young children. As Corsaro (1990: 12) suggests, predictable routines provide the
child with a ‘frame’ within which ‘a wide range of sociocultural knowledge can be produced,
displayed, and interpreted’. Following Pink and Sumartojo (2019), the ‘everydayness’ of
working with the beads produced a shared and stable community, which both Arendt (1961, 1998) and Bakhtin (1986) highlight as being essential in developing interactions and communication.

Chanti’s first utterance – ‘I am going to the dentist tomorrow’ – is interesting for four reasons. First, it is a child who is observed making the initial utterance. Prior to working at a university, the first author, who wrote the field notes, was a preschool practitioner, and she has strong memories of being in such a group situation where she felt it was her role and responsibility to begin conversations, which often would involve her asking the children questions. Here, however, it is a child who has taken on this position. It is a child who speaks/acts (Arendt, 1998) and, in speaking, she fractures the author’s own preconceptions concerning adult–child relations. Second, in speaking, the child reveals a little bit of her life that is going to happen outside of the preschool. In Arendt’s (1998: 179) terms, she makes herself ‘visible’ to the other members of the group. Third, by making her experience of visiting the dentist visible, she is providing the group with something that borders on a sphere of communication, which, in Bakhtin’s (1986) view, is a foundation for interactions between a group. The fourth reason is that, in speaking of dentists, there is, we think, an expectation that the other group members will have the ability to engage with the statement (Bakhtin, 1986). In Norway, dental services are free for all children under seven, and the take-up of the services is high. In all, in speaking, Chanti has acted and, whilst she might not have introduced something new into the world, her action has not been taken in isolation of others (Arendt, 1998).

Mai makes the second verbal utterance when she says: ‘I was bleeding in here, but all day I rather wanted to cut’. Her hand pointing to her mouth accompanies this statement. As one of the youngest members of the group, Mai had had less experience of learning Norwegian at the preschool. However, despite this lack, she nevertheless feels sufficiently comfortable or empowered to speak in the public space of the group. A number of factors, including perhaps the atmosphere that circulates in and around the group, ennoble Mai so that she is able to offer her own perspective to the other people who are assembled. In Arendt’s (1998: 179) terms, this is ‘plurality’. Situated as she is in a web of relations (Arendt, 1998), she uses both words and body language (Bakhtin, 1986) in order to communicate. Following Arendt (in Williams, 2015: 44), it is possible to perceive Mai’s imagination as taking its bearings from Chanti’s utterance.

Interestingly, whilst both the words – ‘I was bleeding in here’ – and the gesture of the hand pointing to the mouth indicate that Mai is following through on aspects of Chanti’s utterance, the second part of Mai’s sentence seems, on the surface, nonsensical: ‘but all day I rather wanted to cut’. This statement is followed by half a minute of silence. This silence is, we think, highly important. It gives time for reflection, so as to allow the other members of the group an opportunity to make sense of Mai’s efforts in trying to develop her own singular contribution to the conversation. So, whilst Mai is demonstrating her ‘capacity to begin’ (natality), where she is initiating something that is unexpected, it is Helene, the practitioner, who makes the effort in unravelling ‘the unexpected’: ‘You went to the dentist, but what you wanted was to go to the hairdresser?’

What we believe is important about Helene’s statement is that whilst it is posed as a question, it avoids positioning Mai as a subordinate (Bakhtin, 1984). It carries affirmation in the sense that it is evident that Mai has understood the proposed visit to the dentist and it also carries affirmation that Helene has understood Mai’s reference to wanting to ‘cut’. Following Arendt, we can understand Helene as taking responsibility, where her statement
is a form of guidance. It is a guidance that Helene can undertake because she has assumed responsibility for Mai by getting to know her. So, whilst Mai’s statement carries degrees of unpredictability, Helene is able to draw together her knowledge of Mai in order to ensure that Mai’s contribution carries equal weight. Following Johansson (2004), Helene engenders an interactive atmosphere based on equality between practitioner and child. She does not designate Mai as immature or incompetent. Finally, she is accepting of Mai’s statement, where she is able to acknowledge Mai’s logic – a logic that, within certain models of language development, would be perceived as irrational.

**Conclusion: different pedagogical paths**

The data and subsequent analysis have, we believe, raised a number of questions which, in turn, might indicate how, as practitioners, we could undertake practices associated with the language development of ethnic minority children a little differently. The first question focuses on whether we can accept atmosphere as a bona fide member of classroom culture. Can we accept something that is non-human as having a significant part to play in terms of learning? What this would require is ‘drawing human attention sideways’ and towards a greater appreciation of the ‘complex entanglements of humans and non-humans’ (Bennett, 2010: 112).

In ways similar to Helene, can we accept the entanglement that Mai has with her hair and her desire to cut it as bodily forms of communication? Can we accept lively matter such as hair, sunshine, beads and gentle background noises as actors that are significant in terms of developing a dialogical community? Can we understand children’s language development as emergent rather than being strung out along a line of predictable development? Can we proactively develop an interactive atmosphere based on equality between adult and child? Might it be possible to understand the children as caught within what Arendt (1998) describes as webs of relations or the flow of life, where we communicate through what we say as well as through our entanglements with non-human matter?

Currently, Mai can and does use words that are enshrined in dictionary meanings, but within the flow of her life, her words are nuanced and entangled with her desires. Through the conduit of Helene, this article has argued for responsibility – a responsibility that is accepting of both standard forms of language and less logical utterances. If we insist on seeing the teaching and learning of language against standardized models, we will miss the unexpected and the indefinable. We will also, in all likelihood, be less patient and perhaps more dismissive of emergent elements of language development. We will fail to see the classroom as a place of vitality where human and non-human matter can potentially make a difference to the language development of ethnic minority children.

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