

the bilingual family newsletter

MULTILINGUAL
MATTERS

news and views for intercultural people

editors: sami grover and marjukka grover

IN THIS ISSUE

- A Summer in Korea
- A Bilingual Father's Thoughts
- Notes from the OPOL Family: Game On
- Adoption and Bilingualism
- Refusing Italian

2009
Volume 26
Number 3

editorial

As the editor of the *Bilingual Family Newsletter*, and as the bilingual son of its founders, I must admit I was a little nervous about sharing my plans for raising my daughter with what I'd call a "bilingualish" approach (see page 4).

After all, haven't my parents worked all these years to promote bilingualism in intercultural families? Doesn't it make me a hypocrite to write and talk about folks working like crazy to encourage balanced bilingualism in their children while deciding to take a somewhat easier route with my own child?

In a word, 'no'. From the beginning, the *Bilingual Family Newsletter* has always been about promoting choice - and supporting parents in doing what is right for their particular circumstances. Just as it is crazy to tell a mother not to speak her 'mother tongue' with her child, so too is it counterproductive to push 'pure' bilingualism at all costs.

Many of the stories and letters in this issue reflect the impossibility of finding the 'perfect' bilingual path. Family circumstances are as infinitely varied as the human race itself - so each of us must find a path that works for us. As a friend of mine likes to say - the world is not perfect, it's much more interesting than that.

So please keep your stories, articles and queries coming - be they positive accounts of successful bilingualism, or stories about the inevitable challenges and compromises we all face. The *BFN* would not be the same without them.

Sami Grover

A Long-term View of Bilingualism: Lessons from a Summer Abroad

Sarah J. Shin

For the past ten years, my husband and I have been struggling to raise our two American-born Korean sons to be bilingual in English and Korean. We have been trying to speak Korean to our sons at home in the U.S. and have sent them to a weekend heritage Korean language school ever since they were in kindergarten. But it has been tremendously difficult for us to



The Shin family in Korea

raise our children bilingually in a mostly monolingual society. Despite our constant efforts to speak and read to them in Korean, our sons (now 8 and 10 years of age) struggle considerably in their heritage language. Being schooled in an American public school, they feel most comfortable interacting in English and at times resisted learning Korean.

In my book, *Developing in two languages: Korean children in America* (Multilingual

Matters, 2005), I discussed various educational, social and economic pressures which hamper intergenerational transmission of heritage languages in immigrant families, and offered suggestions for helping children to grow up bilingual despite these pressures. I presented a case for the value of bilingualism for immigrant children and for treating knowledge of languages other than English as an asset for the individual, the community, and our society. Several years have passed since writing my book, and I feel as though I have consistently been on the losing end of the battle as English has almost taken over our sons' linguistic repertoire. As our boys progressed through preschool and the early elementary grades, it became clear to us that without more significant exposure to Korean and meaningful opportunities to practice the language, the prospects for our sons becoming proficient in Korean in the U.S. were not good. Therefore we took our boys to Korea this past summer (for the first time since they were born), hoping to jumpstart their interest in improving their Korean.

To make the most of our time in Korea, we enrolled our sons in a local elementary school so they could be immersed in Korean (Korean schools start the summer break at the end of July). Although we knew that six weeks of schooling in Korean were hardly adequate for the boys to show significant gains in their language

Continued on page two

A Long-term View...

Continued from page one

proficiency, we nonetheless hoped that they would benefit from realistic opportunities to speak and interact in Korean.

Language and Culture Shock

The first two weeks were very difficult for all of us. When my husband and I decided to enroll our boys in school, we didn't give much thought to how they would adapt to the new setting. Since we both went to elementary school in Korea before emigrating to the U.S. as teenagers, the setting was quite familiar to us and even brought back some fond memories. But we quickly realized that to our boys this was a very foreign place, and although they are 100% Korean biologically, growing up in the U.S. has made them think and act more American than we had thought.

Our boys had trouble getting used to everything ranging from taking off their sneakers and changing to indoor shoes before entering the school building, to cafeteria lunch that was too spicy, and even witnessing corporal punishment in the classroom. On the first day of school, my youngest son came home from school and said, "Mom, I want to become a teacher when I grow up." Since he had never shown interest in teaching before,

his comment made me curious about what had happened in school that day. I was totally shocked when he said, "When I'm a teacher, I can hit kids." He then told me that the teacher had hit a boy who badly misbehaved in the classroom. This is when I realized that this summer wasn't only going to be about language, but also about learning the culture of schools in Korea, the good and the bad.

Everyday my sons complained about why they were being made to go to school in the summer when their friends back in the States were enjoying their vacation.

Quite predictably, my boys had considerable difficulty understanding grade-level content materials in Korean and brought home homework instructions they had copied down which often didn't make sense. When I phoned the teachers, they were very understanding and kindly explained the assignments. However, incoherent homework instructions didn't really matter because by the time the boys came home, they were so exhausted from concentrating so hard on processing Korean all day that they just wanted to be left alone to speak English. My oldest son cried one day about taking tests and said he was frustrated that he didn't understand the questions. Everyday my sons complained about why they were being made to go to school in the summer when their friends back in the States were enjoying their vacation. It also didn't help that it was so unbearably hot and humid and the classrooms were not air-conditioned. I felt terrible that I was making them go through this experience (no matter how good my intentions were) and bought them ice cream twice a day.

Faced with two very strong-willed boys protesting daily about their parents' decision to send them to school in the summer, I couldn't help but wonder whether our high hopes for language immersion (or was it submersion?) were reasonable. As a parent and a language educator, I wanted to push them to draw the maximum benefit out of this summer abroad experience and learn a lot of Korean, but I also knew that a very negative experience could backfire and make them not want to associate with Korean at all. That would have been the worst imaginable outcome. Another

difficulty was that my boys could not play very often with their classmates because virtually every student in Korea goes to after-school programs (e.g., academic programs such as English, computer, and math classes, and/or extracurricular activities such as Tae Kwon Do, swimming, and piano). When school got out in the afternoon, private after-school academy buses lined up at the school entrance to promptly swoosh kids away. None of their friends were available to play after school, and it was only later that I realized that a lot of friendships are built during these after-school programs. But given the many hours a day they were spending in school already, I couldn't possibly enroll them in after-school programs, too.

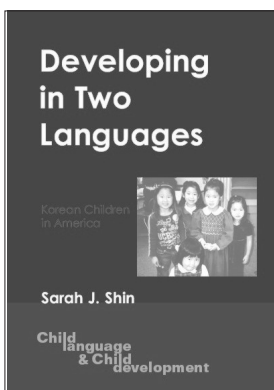
Language Learning through Social Interaction

I did manage to invite some of my sons' friends over to our place to play together during the weekends. When they were in informal play settings with a small group of friends, my boys seemed to become different persons altogether. Since I had never observed them interacting with Korean-speaking kids their age, I had no idea that they could speak Korean so well. They seemed to have no problem understanding their friends and spoke in beautifully constructed Korean sentences. Boy, did I relish every minute of listening to them talk! I felt so happy then about our decision to spend the summer in Korea

Since I had never observed them interacting with Korean-speaking kids their age, I had no idea that they could speak Korean so well.

and thought about how we could make this a regular event. We also visited our relatives whom I had not seen for many years. For my boys, it was their very first time meeting them, and when I introduced them to my many aunts at one family gathering, my youngest son said, "I didn't know I had so many grandmas."

We went sightseeing often, went to amusement parks, and tried to paint as positive a picture of Korea as possible. School seemed to get slightly easier, too, although my oldest son said, "I can still understand only about 30% of what goes on." However, I wasn't worried about the 70% he didn't understand. I wanted to



This book sheds light on some of the common myths around being bilingual and explores the processes of dual language development among Korean American children. It sensibly argues that the bilingualism of linguistic minority children is a resource to be cultivated and treasured, not a problem to be overcome.

ISBN- 9781853597466 (pbk)
£24.95/ US \$44.95
Buy now at 20% discount
www.multilingual-matters.com

celebrate the 30% he did understand! Our efforts in trying to teach them Korean over the years in the U.S. were not futile after all. For the first time in a long time, I saw new possibilities for their heritage language development and renewed my resolve to help them maintain Korean.

Toward the end of the summer, my oldest son surprised me with what I thought was a profound statement, “**Mom, I have this strange feeling that I somehow belong here. I didn’t know any of the kids in my class, but for some reason I felt like I knew them.**” I was thrilled to hear this. Much more than being simply a language immersion experience, our summer in Korea provided my sons with an opportunity to experience their heritage culture firsthand and become aware of their developing Korean and American identity. When I asked them what they liked most about the summer, they said, “playing with friends and eating ice cream twice a day.” I felt happy that the summer turned out alright despite the initial difficulties and my worries.

A Long-term View of Bilingualism

Although our boys happily switched to English upon returning to the U.S. and don’t speak in Korean very much anymore, unless specifically prompted to do so, now I have a more long-term view on their heritage language learning. As a mother, I will continue to support their learning of Korean even if I don’t see immediate results in their language improvement. I am reminded of an analogy to gardening made by Colin Baker in his book, *A Parents’ and Teachers’ Guide to Bilingualism*:

It is not like scattering a few seeds on the ground and expecting swift, strong and simple growth. The tender language shoots need to be nourished, the garden well fertilized in order for later blossoming and color to occur. As the seasons of language development change, the parent has constantly to tend the language garden... Just as the hard work of digging, manuring and weeding in the garden eventually produce beautiful blossoms, so with the language garden.

Parents and teachers need to have a long-term view on children’s language development and believe that their hard work will produce beautiful fruit, even if they do not see the results of their effort right away. And we need to continually strive to promote bilingualism as a resource for children, their families, and the society.

Contact Address: Dr. Sarah J. Shin
Department of Education
University of Maryland Baltimore County
Baltimore, MD 21250, USA
Phone: 410-455-2485/ Fax: 410-455-3986

Notes from the OPOL Family



Game On

Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert

Family games are a traditional way to bring parents and children together. However, games like Monopoly can have two meanings. For me, the cards represent my British childhood (*Park Lane, Trafalger Square*), while Jacques has a more chic version (*Champs Elysées, Rue de la Paix*). The children have played both versions and, frankly, they prefer the French one because their French cousins and friends can play too. Marc and Nina said they got sick of explaining the value and cultural meaning of London sites, and dealing in pounds not euros.

Never agree to play Trivial Pursuit in your second language, unless you have a degree in its history and culture. At a recent village Games Night I naively joined the Trivial Pursuit table, thinking I could score some points for my team. But the only question I could answer was ‘Which three languages are spoken in Luxembourg?’ Otherwise, fifty classic French culture, people, sport and music questions passed straight over my head. It was humiliating. Bingo is a simple game of cards and numbers and is popular in the villages in winter. But what if half the family has problems with French numbers over sixty? (That’s me and Gabriel, by the way). While the others coolly serve themselves drinks, I desperately try to find ‘quatre-vingt-douze’ (20 x 4 + 12, or 92). And when I finally fill in all the gaps do I shout ‘Bingo!’ or ‘Loto!’?

On the early evening television game shows, Nina is quick to fill in the blanks in the French version of ‘Wheel of Fortune’, while I am still working out what the question means. In the French version of ‘Who wants to be a Millionaire?’ I can only answer those trick questions designed to catch the French out, like the name of the famous clock in London a) Big Mac, b) Big John, c) Big Ben or d) Big Boy? ‘Yes!’ I shout ‘I know that one.’ as the children groan and say everyone knows that answer.

A classic drawing game, Pictionary, should be transferable across cultures. A recent game of with a group of French-English bilingual children showed a technical problem with languages. The word was ‘Seal’. One child scribbled a drawing and one team yelled ‘Seal!’ as the others screamed ‘Phoque!’ simultaneously. This particular French word is banned in our house (after Marc once said to my mum while watching a nature programme, ‘Oh, look, a phoque...’). As referee, I disqualified the team who said the bad word. They cried injustice and argued that the rules do not state which language the game must be played in. ‘You have to choose one language,’ I say, ‘It would create total chaos if we all spoke three or four different languages.’ The children disagree and decide to take me to the European Court of Human Rights...

One-Cat-One-Language

Our cat, Caline, is two years old now. As we celebrated her birthday we tried out some IQ tests to see how she was doing. The children set up a timed test. ‘Caline, here’s your dinner!’ (Cat runs across room and eats food one minute later) ‘Caline, vien manger ton dîner!’ (Cat runs across room and eats food two minutes later)

They decide she replies faster to English, probably because four of us speak English to her. It seemed weird to speak my second language to an animal, and the children simply followed suit, even though she joined our household as a six-month-old kitten from a French family. The cat does have a role to play though. She is a shining example of the one-cat-one-language strategy. Marc, Nina and Gabriel all speak English to her and she meows in return. Conversations can go on for quite some time. They even made up special songs for her.

My French friend, Corinne, lives in Scotland and just adopted a kitten from a French family who were moving home. Her two children also follow the one-cat-one-language policy and only talk in French to the cat. Corinne is happy to hear them using more of her language and reports that the kitten loves the kids chatting to her. The OCOL approach may not be high level language use, being rather limited in subject matter, but at least it gives children a chance to use the minority language with a willing and purring listener.

We are an English/French family with three more-or-less bilingual children (Marc, 12, Nina, 10 & Gabriel, 6). We live in France, and try to stick to the one-parent-one-language approach. For more anecdotes and previous ‘Notes from the OPOL Family’ go to my blog:

<http://opol-family.blogspot.com/>

Bilingual or Bilingualish? Thoughts of a Father-to-Be

Sami Grover

By the time this issue is published my wife, Jenni, and I will be only weeks away from the birth of our first child – a daughter. It goes without saying that these are exciting times. I can't wait to meet the child that I will watch grow up, that I will help raise, and teach, and guide, and that will eventually grow into a woman. I can't



Jenni and Sami celebrating a beautiful Finnish summer evening

wait to see the world through her eyes, to introduce her to her global network of family and friends, and to help her make sense of this crazy, complicated, frustrating and astoundingly beautiful world that we live in.

But then comes the age old question that has appeared so often in the pages of the *BFN* - what languages will she speak?

As an English/Finnish bilingual, I had always held an implicit assumption that my children would also speak English and Finnish – yet I'd never thought through the logistics to any great detail. I guess that is a result of how my parents always made bilingualism feel like the most natural thing in the world. We grew up speaking both Finnish and English, and Dad even learned his fair share of Finnish - a considerable feat for an Englishman! We visited Finland regularly, attending school and making friends from a young age. And of course as founders of the *Bilingual Family Newsletter* and *Multilingual Matters*, Mum and Dad were advocates for languages and language rights, and our house was always full of visitors from around the globe – each with their own unique sets of language skills, often complete with a gaggle of polyglot children in tow for us to play with.

Yet now, as an emigrant Englishman in the US, married to a monolingual American, I find Jenni and myself pondering the question of bilingualism – with no easy answers making themselves apparent. Of

course I want my child to feel a connection with all aspects of her cultural heritage - be it English, Finnish, or American. I want her to be able to speak Finnish with her grandmother. I know that Mum would also like to speak her native tongue with her granddaughter. (She already speaks Finnish with my cat!)

Yet as the bilingualism geek that my upbringing has made me, I find it hard to envision a successful strategy to balanced bilingualism unless we adopt a One Parent – One Language approach. And try as I might, I can't imagine speaking purely Finnish with my child.

English is undoubtedly my strongest language. It is also the language I turn to most easily for emotional interactions, with the exception of talking with my mother. Just as Mum felt she had to speak "her language" with me, I can't see myself not speaking one of my languages with my daughter. Add to that the fact that American English and UK English are so decidedly different, both linguistically and culturally, and I can't help but want to maintain English with my daughter too. So where do we go from here? Is it possible to pursue "part-time" bilingualism and still have some success?

Part-Time Bilingualism?

One strategy we are contemplating is to explore Finnish as a "play" language with our daughter – adopting Finnish as a fun activity that I can use with her in certain situations – for example when we are out for a walk, or doing a particular activity like gardening. Maybe we can even declare one day a Finnish day. I have no illusion that this will produce a fully functioning bilingual – but it will at least give her some grounding in the language, familiarize her with the sounds and grammar, and provide her with some building blocks should she wish to pick it up again in the future.

I asked Colin Baker, *BFN* board member and author of *The Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism*, about the viability of such an approach:

"[As long as] a child has one very well developed language ready for schooling, then any additional language input is beneficial - even a passive (understanding some) and not an active (speaking) language. This adds cultural diversity and awareness of languages, even more tolerance of other people and their languages.

If you do introduce Finnish - it must be fun for her. I've seen too many parents, enthusiastic and well intentioned, make second language acquisition unpleasant. The theory is that Finnish should have particular purpose(s) or contexts - so that it is clear that it is a different language - although this is decreasingly believed by the 'big names'. In your shoes, I would use Finnish for some fun purpose e.g. when playing with toys, on trips around the locality. The associations with Finnish will then be very positive."

Community Support

What about outside support of our language efforts? Being surrounded by a community of Finnish speakers is a factor that I know was crucial in my parents' strategy to support my brother and I in our bilingualism. They helped found a Finnish Saturday school, and often sent us on vacations to Finland. I am sure that finding some Finnish speaking families in our area would be a huge boost to the chances of my daughter learning even just a little Finnish – and certainly to her feeling more connected with the culture. I would love for my daughter to know that Finnish exists beyond conversations with Grandma, or the occasional trip over the pond.

American English and UK English are so decidedly different, both linguistically and culturally, and I can't help but want to maintain English with my daughter too.

I do live in a university town with a strong international community. While I've yet to find it, I am almost certain that a Finnish speaking community must exist around here. Yet I haven't reached out to it, which in itself tells me something about my motivations.

While I value my Finnish heritage more than I can say, I've never been one to seek out my fellow countrymen to hang out with purely because they are my countrymen. Sure, when the opportunity arises and I meet an Englishman, I may reminisce about warm beer and cricket, and if I meet a Finn I'm known to get into

Continued on page six

Queries



Adoption and Bilingualism

A couple of years ago I subscribed to receive the Bilingual Family newsletter. I am originally from the Czech Republic, but I have been living in the UK for past

seven years. My husband is English.

I wondered whether there would be somebody who could advise me / guide me through my recent problem. My husband and I have decided to proceed with adoption of a child in the UK. As you can imagine I would like the child to be able to speak both languages (Czech and English) in order to be able to communicate with both sides of the family. Before I get involved in the whole process I would like to establish what should be the maximum age of the child so that he/she is able to learn to speak both of our languages fluently and from the very beginning of the placement.

I would appreciate if you could advise me, possibly refer me to someone with similar experience.

Katerina Ballentine

The following is a write up on bilingualism and adoption from *A Parents' and Teachers Guide to Bilingualism*, by Colin Baker – reprinted with permission.

Language Strategy and Adoption

Choices about bilingualism will be different according to the age of the adopted child (e.g. whether that child already speaks one or more languages) and whether the parents speak the language of that older child.

If an adopted child is very young, (for example, up to the age of two), it seems quite appropriate for parents with different first languages to use both those languages with the child. When a child is very young, there will be some, but not an extensive recognition of a different language being spoken, particularly if the parents present those two languages in a sympathetic, caring and loving way.

However, what needs to be addressed with very young children is whether their 'native' or 'heritage' language should also be introduced, by whatever means are available. An introduction of the child's heritage language (or not) will be based on parental values, such as whether they want the child to become, for example, an American or have dual American-German identity. A decision will also be made on whether language support in German can be offered.

It is important for every child to reach a high level of self-esteem, to be secure in their self-identity and this, for some parents, will mean celebrating the child's ethnic roots as well as their adopted

country. As time goes on, the child will probably express a preference for retaining or rejecting dual (multiple) identity. For some parents, such continuity of identity from birth is a cultural, rather than a linguistic, matter. That is, such parents will wish to celebrate the heritage culture of the adopted child without always being able to provide the linguistic input for heritage language continuity.

If the child's 'native' language is encouraged by the parents, it may not become a fully functioning language, as often there are not the people, or the community contacts, to use that language frequently. Nevertheless, a child who has passive understanding of a heritage language may in the future be able to activate it, if he or she so chooses.

Before language considerations, there are usually more basic considerations in adoption, such as the child feeling a sense of belonging to the adopted family, feeling love and support from parents and others, and growing up to have a strong sense of self-identity and high self-esteem, a belief in oneself and a sense of success in friendships and work. Strategies to retain the child's heritage language may certainly help those basic and fundamental aims. Perhaps on less frequent occasions, there will be times when hard enforcement of the child's heritage language, and an unwanted exaggeration of the child's origins, may work against the child's own wishes. Therefore, it is important for parents to keep an open mind, to be sympathetic and sensitive to the child's development. No two children ever develop linguistically, culturally or in

relationships in exactly the same way, and the child's own preferences can play an influential role.

Next, this answer addresses the case of adoption of an older child, for example, one over the age of two or three. With such a child, a first language will already have become well-established (e.g. a Finnish family adopting a seven-year-old girl from Russia). The question becomes: Should the parents effect a rapid but smooth transition from Russian to Finnish? Or should they attempt to maintain the child's first language, Russian?

Again, the important starting point is probably not language, but engendering a sense of family belonging, support, affection and love. Children are both resilient and fragile; they are optimistic and very adaptable while being sensitive and tender creatures. It is probable that supporting the child's first language is important. Some reasons why such support is valuable now follow.

When an older child is adopted, the child's self-esteem and self-concept will be enhanced when the parents explicitly show they value the child's home language. In the case of the Russian child being adopted in Finland, an acknowledgement of the child's first language is an acknowledgement of the child itself, his or her identity and origins. If parents explicitly value Russian, then they are valuing the child, showing their love and affection. To ignore the first language may send an implicit message that the child's

It is important for every child to reach a high level of self-esteem, to be secure in their self-identity and this, for some parents, will mean celebrating the child's ethnic roots...

origins, first language and culture, and the early years of their life are unimportant, irrelevant and valueless.

How do parents, who have adopted a child and do not speak that child's first language, come to value the adopted child's first language, and support bilingualism or trilingualism in the child? There is no easy or guaranteed method, but here are some ideas worth considering:

Continued on page six

Adoption and Bilingualism...

Continued from page five

1. Before the adopted child arrives, the parents could make an attempt to learn some of the child's first language. Using a few phrases with the child in that language sends a message beyond the words themselves. Using some Russian, in this example, sends the message to the child that 'we value your language, your culture, and therefore you'. While the parent is not going to be a very good language model for the child, simple communication in the child's first language is about care and support, and starting a loving relationship.

2. At the same time, the adopted child needs to learn the language of the country, particularly the language of formal education. Parents will naturally reward and encourage the development of the second language in the child, and will often be delighted at how quickly young children pick up a new language at home, particularly if there are lots of gestures, actions and all kinds of non-verbal communication to accompany the early stages of learning a second language.

It is even better if parents reward and encourage bilingualism and not just the learning of the second language. For example, the parents may comment not only on increasing facility in Finnish, but congratulate the child on being able to speak Finnish and Russian. Taking pride in one's bilingualism can be an important component in developing and retaining high self-esteem.

3. Try to keep the first language of the child going if at all possible. This will usually develop a securer self-identity and help to avoid a demolition of the child's initial identity. Many children and adults find multiple identities an asset and a strength. In this example, celebrating a Finnish and a Russian identity can be a sense of addition rather than diminution.

This leaves the question: How can the first language be retained? The adopting parents may often find it difficult to retain the child's heritage language. It may be difficult even to preserve the child's level of language competence, let alone effect progress. Also, the child's own wishes and wants need to be taken into account.

At the time of adoption and afterwards, parents can, firstly, consider buying books, cassettes, videos, and use of the Internet to give the child the opportunity to use, albeit passively, their first language. Such media will not only provide a limited form of language practice, but will also symbolize that their 'native' language is accepted and valued by the parents.

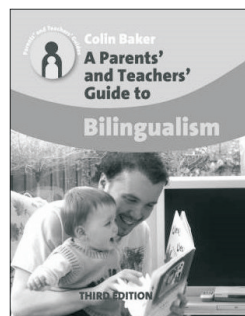
A second ploy is to try and find a person, family or group of people who speak that child's home language. This is more beneficial than the media in many cases as it provides the child with a chance of active speaking rather than just passive listening.

A third way of keeping the language alive is satellite television. An increasing number of countries and an increasing number of languages are going onto satellite, giving the potential, if the child so wishes, of accessing their 'native' language.

4. An important choice by parents is of a sympathetic school for their adopted child. Some schools are more attuned to language diversity, to language development for first and second language speakers, to celebrating the different languages that children bring to school, rather than being on a monolingual campaign. When the adopted child is of primary and secondary school age, the choice of a language-sensitive school will affect the child's achievement and progress in school, and their self-esteem.

To conclude. What adopting parents can do is to provide their children with a wider set of choices with respect to languages and cultures. To give an adopted child the chance of retaining their language, of a bicultural or multicultural heritage, is to give freedom and power to the child. The parent who insists on ignoring and burying the child's linguistic and cultural origins can so easily be restricting and constraining the child.

Parent-centred parents often find monolingualism the most efficient for their needs. Child-centred parents may, in contrast, find bilingualism and biculturalism most appropriate to serve the child's short-term and long-term interests.



ISBN 978-1-84769-000-5
Price £12.95/ US\$19.95
order now at 20% discount
www.multilingual-matters.com

Bilingualism or Bilingualish...

Continued from page four

enthusiastic rants about the films of Aki Kaurismäki or the beauty of a hot sauna. But then I'm also likely to get excited talking to a German about Berlin, or a Dane about rune stones, or a Moroccan about food. I guess while I love how my national heritage(s) contribute to who I am, I don't see them as being who I am – and I have a hard time fitting into a scene where it is the principle thing we have in common. Maybe I just need to find some Finns who share a love for the things I love – be that homebrewed beer, movies or my unhealthy obsession with making compost.

But beyond any wishes for language learning, I hope she grows to be an open-minded, loving and curious individual who can see the beauty in all people...

There is one thing that I am absolutely sure of – languages must be fun. I refuse to enforce Finnish, or English, or any other language on my child if she doesn't show an interest. I want to remain flexible, friendly and open – showing my daughter that languages are just one tool of communication among many, and that no language is superior or inferior to any other. All this is not to say there's no room for some discipline in language learning – in fact discipline is a must, certainly for a more concerted attempt at balanced bilingualism – but it seems to me that discipline can only get so far. A successful language learning strategy has to be primarily focused on motivation – providing the means by which a child can take a language, make it their own, and apply it to their interests and passions as they grow.

Whether or not our daughter grows up monolingual, bilingual English/Finnish, or with any other language skills remains to be seen. I'll certainly be reporting on progress here in the BFN. But beyond any wishes for language learning, I hope she grows to be an open-minded, loving and curious individual who can see the beauty in all people – no matter their language, background, ethnicity, culture, politics or faith. I'll be looking to do my part to make it so.

Queries



Refusing Italian

I am the mother of two little girls, a nearly three-year-old called Elisa and a one-month-old baby called Julia. I am Italian and my husband Neil is English. In the course of the last 13 years since I met Neil my English has definitely improved, and he's now also fluent in Italian, but we've maintained English as our conversation language. I've been living in the UK for 7 years now and since Elisa was born I have been speaking to her in Italian when we are alone or when Neil is around - although she talks back to me in English. But it's always been a struggle to keep up the Italian when we are with non-Italian speaking friends, as somehow it doesn't feel very polite.

I was expecting Elisa to be a bit behind with her language skills, only to find that she was speaking English pretty well for a two-year-old, and she could understand everything I'd say in Italian. Up until February this year, when we'd go visit relatives in Italy, she'd be a full time English girl for the first week or so and then she'd make the switch and

I'd suddenly feel very proud of her Italian roots which she so rarely shows me!

More recently though, she seems to have decided that English is her preferred and only language and although I do try and get her to repeat things in Italian, she now refuses to speak to her Italian family over the phone, while she's still quite happy to speak to her Granny. If I insist that she says something to her *Nonna* (Italian grandma), bringing up some fun activity she's done that she might want to share with her, she simply replies by saying "no, you say it" and that's the end of the story.

Is this normal? What's the best way to encourage her to speak Italian?.

Part of the problem is that my parents, her *Nonna* and *Nonno*, seem to get quite upset by her refusal to speak Italian, which they see as a barrier to the development of their relationship. My mum in particular believes that after our last trip to Italy in February, Elisa has somehow drastically changed her attitude towards her from someone excited to see or speak to her *Nonna*, to someone who gets even irritated at *Nonna*'s lack of understanding of the English language.

Another issue I'd like some advice about is what to do regarding her education. She will attend an English school and learn to read and write.. Should I teach her how to read and write in Italian? And if so, where do I start? Or will it be automatic for her once she can do it in English?

Daniela Corallo

I am almost certain that her language will soon come back when she is surrounded by Italian, and when she gets to interact face-to-face with her grandparents, rather than on the phone (speaking on the phone is usually much harder than face-to-face).

It would also be worthwhile finding an Italian speaking Saturday school where Elisa can learn alongside other bilingual children, and where she can realise that she is not alone in her language situation. She will get to experience Italian in a social setting - not just as "Mummy's language." Many Saturday schools employ experienced teachers that can provide age appropriate literacy education too.

I passed your email on to two members of our editorial board and here are their responses too:

Marjukka's Thoughts

By speaking Italian only within the family setting, you can send a message that Italian is something to be ashamed of. I feel you should speak Italian also when English-speakers are present, but explain to the English speakers what you are saying and why you are speaking Italian. There is no danger that Elisa will not develop English if you live in England. An extended holiday in Italy - the language bath - could establish the mother-daughter language as Italian, and you should then carry on speaking Italian when back in England.

With regards to your question on teaching reading and writing in Italian, some experts say that reading should be taught in the stronger language first as the skill of reading can then very easily be transferred to the second language. I am not so sure if that advice is correct in your case as reading is usually learned in school - and once the child is in school the majority language becomes dominant. Both of our sons learned to read in Finnish first, although it did cause initially some problems for Sami with English spelling. Finnish is a phonetical language; every word is spelled the same way as it is pronounced. I explained to the teachers why Sami spelled some words oddly - and he soon realised that English had different rules for spelling.

Suzanne's Thoughts

Like Sami, I agree that children's interest in languages has times when one language can become more dominant. Often a mother living away from her country and language establishes her language well when the child is at home all day with her. When a child begins to make friends locally or start a playgroup or school in the majority language it becomes more of a challenge to encourage the child to use both languages, simply because they want

the bfn needs you...

The *Bilingual Family Newsletter* is not just for you, it's by you. Every story you read in the *BFN* is written by somebody with a personal interest in and passion for bi/multilingualism, language rights and intercultural living.

So please keep the material coming. Whether it's research-based or from personal experience, whether you have a story to tell or a question to ask, if you have something to share about any aspect of bilingualism, bilingual education or intercultural living, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

And don't forget we need readers too - so get in touch if you know someone who would like a free sample copy:

info@multilingual-matters.com

Sami's Response

At first read through, it sounds like you are going through exactly the type of situations that almost every bilingual family faces - and one that I know my parents did. Children go through phases of being excited about both their languages, and other phases where one takes precedence over the other (with the "majority" language almost always gaining the upper hand).

My first advice would be to not push Italian on Elisa, which may make her resent it all the more, but seek out fun ways to interact and gain her interest. If she's excited about horses, buy her some Italian riding magazines, if she likes comics - look for some Italian comics or videos. And start getting her excited about what you will do when you get to Italy.

The editors, with the help of the International Editorial Board, are happy to answer any queries you may have on bilingualism /biculturalism. We reserve the right to edit any letters published.

Editors: Sami Grover & Marjukka Grover

Editorial Board:

Alatheia Anderssohn, *El Jadida, Morocco.*

Colin Baker, *Bangor, Wales, Great Britain.*

Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert, *Caunay, France.*

Jayson Campeau, *Chatham, Ontario, Canada.*

James Crawford, *Silver Spring, USA.*

Terry Haywood, *Milano, Italy.*

Christine Helot, *Strasbourg, France.*

Corey Heller, *Seattle, USA*

Carolyn Letts, *Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Great Britain.*

Li Wei, *Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Great Britain.*

Iman Makeba-Laversuch, *Zürich, Switzerland*

Anne-Maria de Mejiá, *Cali, Colombia.*

Eugenia Papadaki, *Milano, Italy.*

Michael Rosanova, *Oak Park, Illinois, USA.*

Tracey Tokuhama-Espinoza, *Quito, Ecuador.*

Masayo Yamamoto, *Nara, Japan.*

If you do not already subscribe, use the form below to enter a subscription for the next four issues. If you know of any other families who may be interested in BFN, enter their address on the form and we will send them a free sample of a recent issue.

Multilingual Matters

Channel View Publications Ltd

St Nicholas House

31-34 High Street,

Bristol BS21 2AW,

England

Tel: + 44-(0)117-3158562

Fax: +44-(0)117-3158563

E-mail: info@multilingual-matters.com

<http://www.multilingual-matters.com>

Vol.26, No.3, 2009

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

TOWN.....

COUNTRY.....PostCode.....

Please enter a subscription to BFN £12.50 (US\$22.00)

Please send me the book.....

Remittance enclosed for £/ \$.....

Please make your cheques payable to Channel View Publications Ltd.

PLEASE NOTE you can order all Multilingual Matters books either by sending the order and payment by post, or through our fully searchable, secure web-site. It offers 20% DISCOUNT on books (plus shipping) to any address in the world. The system is fully compliant with the latest security software, so you can order with confidence!

Please send a sample copy of BFN to:

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

.....

.....



If you wish your name and address to be included in the contact section, please send us the following information: Name, address, languages spoken in the family, children's birth dates and specifications of the types of families with whom you wish to get in touch.

Refusing Italian

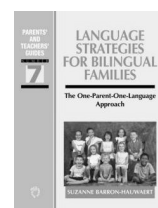
Continued from page seven

to fit in with their monolingual environment. Children are also sensitive to language use - and if Elisa thinks she can get away with speaking English to you, because you are bilingual and understand her, then she will. Try to stick as much to Italian when speaking directly to her. If she is missing vocabulary or words in Italian teach her and help increase her overall vocabulary with reading or DVDs in Italian. You can often buy DVDs with multilingual language settings and change the language so she can watch her favourite films in Italian too.

Many parents I have interviewed for my research found that the grandparents were frustrated at not being able to communicate with their grandchildren. This is an area to work on as the extended family is very important in a child's world and Elisa should not miss out on this. I recommend trying a webcam and Skype, as many bilingual parents do, as a way for Elisa to 'see' her Italian family. If possible, you could visit Italy together in the holidays or ideally leave her alone with your parents for a 'language bath' of two to three weeks where she is totally surrounded by Italian and will have a cultural link to her Italian roots.

I also recommend Saturday schools to support the Italian language development, and if one does not exist you can try to set one up with parents living nearby. Getting together with other Italian speakers with children on a regular basis will also help Elisa understand the value of Italian and give her a reason to practise it. Good luck!

Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert (author of *'Language Strategies for Bilingual Families - the one-parent-one-language approach'*)



"This book provides an excellent framework for parents who are interested in and concerned by raising bilingual children." Dr. Beate Luo, Linguistlist

ISBN: 978-1-85359-714-5 Price £14.95 / US \$27.95

Order now at 20% discount:

www.multilingual-matters.com