The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Editor:
George Saunders **OCTOBER 1984 VOLUME 1 No. 3**

EDITORIAL

Since the first two issues of *The Bilingual Family Newsletter* have appeared, we have received many letters of support and encouragement, which we find very heartening. We sincerely thank all of you who have taken the time to write to us. Excerpts from some of these letters are published in the correspondence section of this issue. It is obvious that there are many families in many countries who, due to a variety of circumstances, wish to raise, or are already raising, their children bilingually. Some of them have problems and/or doubts, others do not. We hope we can help the former with advice and encouragement. But it is also apparent from letters from readers who are *not* at present experiencing difficulties that they, too, appreciate the Newsletter as a maintainer of enthusiasm for family bilingualism and as an easily readable source of information about bilingual matters.

We are always interested in receiving items of interest which might be suitable for inclusion or mention in the Newsletter, e.g. newspaper, magazine articles, etc., or you yourself may feel like contributing a short article, perhaps about your own experiences. All contributions and suggestions for future issues will be most welcome.

Subscriptions to the Newsletter are increasing at a very pleasing rate as more and more people get to hear of us. However, we still have some way to go before the Newsletter is financially self-supporting. We would, therefore, be most grateful if readers could assist us in making the Newsletter better known. If you have acquaintances who you think would be interested, you could use the form on the back page (or a copy) to send us their details. We would then send them a sample copy of the Newsletter. If you belong to a society or organisation which promotes particular cultural interests or activities, you could mention us. You could also send us details of your society and, in particular, a copy of its newsletter, so that we could send a sample copy of *The Bilingual Family Newsletter,* together with some publicity information.

We are pleased to report that we have now received more response from people interested in establishing a register of families wishing to make contacts in their area with other families with bilingual children. See, for example, the excerpt from the letter from Tina Tamman in the correspondence section. If you do feel a bit isolated in raising your children bilingually and feel you could benefit from making contact with other parents in a similar position, please let us know.

On a more personal note: thank you very much to those readers who wrote to wish my family and me a happy stay

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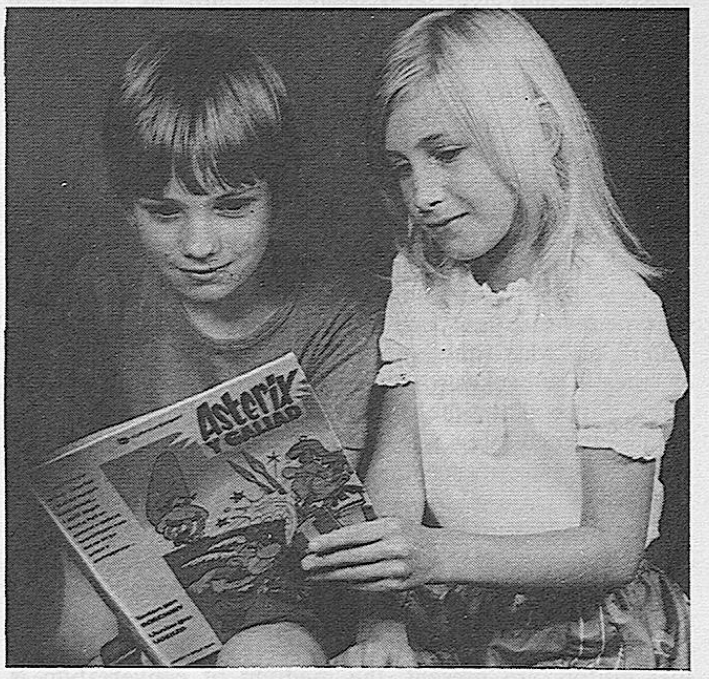
INTRODUCING MEMBERS OF OUR ADVISORY BOARD:
Dai and Siân Hawkins, Wales

Wales, like the Republic of Ireland or Britanny, is a country where the native language has been in decline for generations as a result of great pressures from a powerful neighbour. By now only about a fifth of the population is able to speak Welsh, although among monolingual English-speaking parents there is a slowly growing interest in bilingual education for their children.



Gwydion and Gwenllïan enjoying the adventures of Asterix *in Welsh*

Dai and Siân Hawkins live in the sparsely populated rural county of Powys in the former county of Radnorshire, where they both work as teachers of Welsh as a second language (mercifully, so they say, not in the same school). Born in 1941, Dai was brought up as an English monolingual near Liverpool, but became increasingly aware of his partly Welsh background, and moved to Wales at the age of 25 with the specific aim of learning Welsh and settling in Wales. Like Bruno Di Biase in the last Newsletter he worked for some years in a number of different jobs, and regards his experience in industry as invaluable in his work as a teacher.

Dai's wife Siân was born in Swansea, South Wales, in 1947 and was brought up in a Welsh-speaking family, although the medium of her education was English, apart

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from a few Welsh lessons each week in Secondary School. The main contexts where Welsh was spoken were among family and adult friends, and Welsh-medium Sunday School. At teachers' training college, where she and Dai met, the medium of instruction in her courses was mainly Welsh.

A year after marrying in 1969, the Hawkins's moved to Radnorshire where they lived continually with one conspicuous exception. Their son Gwydion was born in 1972, followed by daughter Gwenllïan in 1975. After a long and welcome 'retirement' as housewife and mother to two lively young children, Siân has recently returned to full-time teaching; but before this, the need to keep the wolf from the door had enabled her to tackle a remarkable variety of part-time teaching jobs, from three-year-old infants to retired adult language learners.

In 1979-80, thanks to a generous offer of a year's leave of absence, Dai was able to spend a year in Lower Bavaria teaching English as an exchange teacher in a *Gymnasium* (grammar school). The whole family spent 13 months in Germany, and their linguistic situation became more complex and interesting.

Since their return from Bavaria, they have settled in an old Welsh farmhouse in the hills where they are all kept busy by a large garden, a variety of interests, and Tiki, their monolingual Welsh-speaking cat!

In the following, they write in some detail in English about their experiences and conclude with a short plea in Welsh for bilinguals everywhere to unite to encourage bilingual education and bilingualism:

'Since Dai became fluent, Welsh has been the language of the family, so that when the children arrived it was natural that they should hear Welsh from both parents all the time. We have always lived in an Anglicised part of Wales, and we felt that the acquisition of English would come just as naturally from outside. In this part of Wales at least, the idea of bilingualism was regarded until recently with very great suspicion, and our greatest fear was that unfavourable attitudes might communicate themselves to the children. Comments such as "one of the languages is bound to suffer", or "what's the point of learning a dying language?" or "they'll be backward at school" were encountered in the shops. Since that time, however, the development of the small but increasing number of bilingual children in the area is demonstrating that such prejudices are without foundation.

'Our own linguistic situation is that Welsh is the language of the family whenever we are alone with the children – they play together naturally and unselfconsciously in Welsh. It must be emphasised that this is *not* a policy imposed by us on the children, but purely spontaneous behaviour. Whenever visitors are present, the medium of conversation is more or less the language spoken by the visitors. The medium of education is English only; Welsh medium primary education is now available in the area but not in the particular communities in which we have lived – bilingualism is only one aspect of a child's development, and we deliberately chose for our children not to be bussed out of their own community for their education. Apart from the social benefits to our own children, the fact that they attend the local village school may persuade monolinguals that bilingual children don't have two heads.

'Gwydion was six and Gwenllïan three when we decided to spend a year in Bavaria. At that time, neither of them could speak any German, although thanks to contacts made through Dai's organising a number of school exchanges with Germany, they were accustomed to hearing German spoken in the house from time to time. Gwydion spent a whole year in the local village school, and Gwenllïan attended kindergarten each day. During that time, we continued to speak Welsh in the home, their only contact with English being occasional visitors from Britain. Gwenllïan's informal contact with the German language enabled her to communicate easily and effectively with her playmates and with adults, but we were particularly pleased with Gwydion's school progress. Despite the initial disadvantage of a strange language, his academic progress over the year, entirely in German, compared extremely favourable with his previous progress in Britain. Four years later, despite lack of contact, their passive knowledge of German still surprises us, and although somewhat shy, they can manage to communicate effectively with German guests, even if the syntax sometimes creaks and the active vocabulary is not too extensive. We try to support their linguistic development by bedtime stories in any of the three languages, English being the most common because more and better books are available to us.

'It has, of course, been noted that language is learnt in specific contexts. A bilingual adult may only feel comfortable when discussing ski-ing in German and bull-fighting in Spanish. This contextuality is quite marked in our family (in the parents too!) – when discussing a subject in one language Gwydion and Gwenllïan may well use a number of nouns and verbs in particular from another language, which may happen in any direction. There is of course a tendency for Welsh speakers to use English words in many contexts because of the sheer paucity of vocabulary, as is no doubt the case in similar minority languages. Even graduates with Honours degrees in Welsh may well know only the English for "fan belt" or "transmission".

'When our children do this, we often take no notice, or occasionally remind them of the correct word in the language they are using at the time, but it is interesting to note that when they are speaking to monolingual friends this "mixing" does not occur – either the correct word mysteriously springs to mind, or they find a way round the problem.

'Two points to conclude: first, our own experience of bringing up bilingual children is teaching us that the language aspect is only part of the general art of parenthood. It is disappointing to see some parents failing to pass on their own mother tongue to their children, partly because they have unrealistically high hopes and expectations which they would never apply to other aspects of parenthood. We feel that speaking two or more languages, to whatever degree of competence or incompetence, is worthwhile, not because it may be the key to a better job and therefore higher status at some time in the future, but because it gives one's life broader dimensions of tolerance and understanding; and it's *fun!*

'And secondly: there is in Wales, and no doubt in other parts of the world, an increasing number of parents who are attempting to bring up their children bilingually, largely by means of education through the medium of the language which they themselves speak poorly or not at all. Many years' experience of bilingual education in Wales shows that children from such homes can become fully bilingual, yet many parents in this situation sometimes have doubts as to whether they are helping or hindering their children's progress. Is there a monolingual reader of the Newsletter who, having seen his children through bilingual education, may like to share his experiences in an article?'

'Os oes rhywum sy'n darllen yr erthygl hon yn credu y dylid hybu addysg Gymraeg yn ei ardal, a gawn ni erfyn arno i ddarllen y BFN yn rheolaidd, fel ei fod mewn sefyllfa i gyfleu'r ffeithiau am ddwyieithrwydd i bobl eraill yn gyffredinol, ond yn arbennig i'r rhieni hynny sy'n amheus ynglŷn â manteision addysg ddwyieithog? Heb os nac onibai, mae sawl dyn bach pwysig ymhob ardal fydd yn gweithredu'n gyson yn erbyn dwyieithrwydd; ffeithiau o brofiad llawer o bobl ledled y byd yw'r arf orau yn erbyn y fath anwybodaeth.'

Dai and Siân Hawkins, Powys, Wales

BILINGUALISM AND SATURDAY SCHOOLS

HANNELE BRANCH

Saturday Schools are one means which immigrant parents in many countries use to help them to pass their language on to their children. Usually formed by concerned parents, such schools face certain difficulties, e.g. finding suitable teachers and facilities, differences in age and knowledge of the language among the children, holding classes at a time or on a day which the children may see as part of their leisure time, and so on. Nevertheless, for many parents Saturday Schools provide useful support and encouragement in their efforts to bring their children up speaking their language. The following remarks adapted slightly from an article written originally by Hannele Branch for the *Finnish Church Guild Newsletter,* refer specifically to Finns marrying abroad and to Finnish Saturday Schools in Great Britain, but they also apply to other nationalities and provide a good rationale for the existence of Saturday Schools in general.

Hannele Branch is a lecturer in Finnish at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London.

When a bi-national couple starts a family each parent has to decide in which language to communicate with the children, i.e. will each parent speak the main language of the country or his or her own mother tongue. Until recently it was not clear what effect learning of two languages at the same time had on the child. It was once thought that a child exposed to two languages concurrently might not learn either language with full native-speaker competence properly. The latest research, however, has produced considerable evidence to show that a correct and consistent approach to bilingualism (i.e. each parent speaking his or her own language to the child) has positive benefits for the child. Normally the main language of the country – the language spoken in school – will eventually become the first and stronger language, while the other home language falls into second position; in mastering of the latter, however, there are great variations depending on the family and the individual. A great and demonstrable advantage of learning two languages concurrently from the earliest years is that the child has an innate understanding of nuances in both languages which at a later stage could only be learnt with immense effort, if at all. Yet another immeasurable advantage is the child's ability to communicate with both pairs of grandparents and other relatives. Thus a bilingual child grows up in two cultures with two different ways of thinking; it goes without saying that the child's horizon is correspondingly broader throughout its formative years.

When a person marries and settles in a foreign country, he or she gives up a great deal, including by and large the opportunity to use the mother tongue in daily life. It does not follow from this, however, that when a man or woman settles abroad, they should not speak to their children in their own language. The opposite is true, and the right to raise children in the native language must be accepted by the partner. Many Finnish parents abroad who have tried to speak their own language to their children have given up for a variety of reasons: these include opposition by spouses, relatives and friends to the use of Finnish, the Finnish parent's command of his or her own language is stale, at some stage the children refuse to answer in Finnish. As a counter argument it could be pointed out to relatives that the command of two languages is a great advantage and nobody can assimilate so totally into a foreign environment that the native language is forgotten. Fluency in the native language will remain more active if one continues to read in Finnish, makes an effort to meet other Finns and visits Finland at regular intervals; even if children refuse to reply in Finnish, it is still worth continuing to speak to them in Finnish, because as long as they *understand* Finnish, a passive knowledge of the language is preserved and will be activated whenever they are in a Finnish-language environment.

The Finnish Church Guild in Great Britain tries for its part to maintain and encourage contacts with Finland and the Finnish language by arranging cheap flights, by supporting and participating in the organisation of Finnish church services and activities, by developing library facilities, and by supporting the work of the Saturday Schools.

The Saturday Schools are an activity, which the Finnish educational authorities call *schools giving supplementary tuition.* Some of the Saturday Schools in Great Britain receive grants from the Finnish Ministry of Education, while the others are supported by the Guild. The aim of the schools is to improve the pupils' command of Finnish and to familiarise them with Finnish life and culture. In other words the Saturday Schools attempt to support those parents who wish their children to learn Finnish. The Schools normally meet for a two-hour session every second Saturday. While the children are in class, their parents have the opportunity to meet and talk (over coffee, of course). Some Saturday Schools also run some adults classes, in which case the School has something to offer for the whole family. Saturday School sessions also provide an excellent occasion for families to get to know each other.

Because the schools normally meet 16–18 times a year, their aim can be no more than *supporting* the study of Finnish. There is no way in which a child that speaks only English can be transformed in a few hours into a fluent Finnish speaker. Every effort is made to help each child to develop the skills that it possesses already. One of the Saturday Schools' most important tasks is the provision of opportunities for the pupils to meet other children of Finnish origin and to give them the chance to hear other people, apart from mother or father, speak Finnish.

There are already several Saturday Schools functioning in the British Isles. The oldest is the *London* Saturday School, which began in September 1972. The School meets 16 times a year at the Finnish Seamen's Mission in London. It comprises a playgroup, two pre-school groups, two Finnish-language and two English-language classes for children and a beginners' and an intermediate group for the adults. Since September 1983, two classes have also been taught in Swedish. The total number of pupils at present is 129. (Further information about the Finnish-language classes can be obtained from Hannele Branch, and about the

Contact details removed

Finnish Saturday Schools also operate in Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Dublin, Edinburgh, Manchester, Newcastle, Stockton-on-Tees and Worthing.

LISTENING TO YOUR CHILDREN READ CAN MAKE THEM BETTER READERS

GEORGE SAUNDERS

A fairly recent report, published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology**, is very encouraging for parents who are wondering whether there is anything they can do to improve their children's reading. Parents often underestimate the influence they can have on their children's learning, and this is perhaps particularly so in the case of parents of bilingual children. Their children more often than not go to a monolingual school which means that reading in the other language becomes the responsibility of the parents. This makes some parents a little fearful, since they are used to thinking of teaching reading as being the province of school teachers. But, however, children are taught the initial stages of reading in the home language (by the parents themselves, at ethnic school, etc.), this report indicates that parents can help them considerably by listening to them read regularly. (This, of course, applies to reading in general, in any language.)

The report is based on an experiment which was carried out in London schools to investigate the findings of a previous survey that, in working class families, children whose parents said they heard them read at home performed considerably better in reading at age seven and eight than children who did not receive this kind of help from their parents. This finding could not be accounted for in terms of IQ, maternal language behaviour, or other aspects of upbringing style which were investigated.

In the experiment to investigate this finding, the parents of the children in two classes in two different schools listened to them read aloud each night at home. These children's reading progress was compared with that of children in two classes in two different schools who were given extra reading tuition in small groups by an experienced and qualified teacher who worked four half-days each week at each school for the two years of the experiment. These two groups of children (i.e. those whose parents heard them read at home and those who received extra reading tuition) were also compared with classes which received no special treatment. All the schools involved were in multi-ethnic areas and thus there were many parents who did not read English or use it at home.

What were the findings of this research? Firstly, it was found to be both feasible and practicable to involve nearly all parents in educational activities such as listening to their children read, even when the parents were non-literate and largely non-English speaking; this did not prevent improvement in their children's reading.

Secondly, children whose parents listened to them read at home made significantly greater progress in reading than those who did not engage in this sort of literacy sharing. Even more interestingly, small-group tuition in reading, given by a highly competent specialist teacher, also did not produce as great an improvement in the children's reading as that obtained from reading to parents at home.

Other benefits were also observed. For instance, most parents expressed great satisfaction at being involved in this way by schools, and teachers reported that the children showed an increased interest in school learning and were better behaved.

So if you wish your children to improve their reading, why not set aside a few minutes each day to listen to them read to you? It's not only beneficial, it's enjoyable, too!

*J. Tizard, W. Schofield & J. Hewison, Collaboration between teachers and parents in assisting children's reading. *British Journal of Educational Psychology,* Vol. 52 (1982), pp.1-15. Summarised in Jim Cummins, *Bilingualism and Special Education,* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters 6, 1984, pp.236-238.

SOME LETTERS FROM READERS

Starting a register of bilingual families seems to me an excellent idea, and I personally would very much like to be included. The languages spoken are not, perhaps, so important as the ages if the object is also mutual support. Somebody with older children is not likely to have similar problems to those I have and may have forgotten certain details. At the moment I do not know any bilingual families, so, of course, anything would be better for me than the status quo.

Mrs Tina Tamman, Essex, England

Thank you so much for the sample copy of BFN! It's a *wonderful* idea and just what many of us need here in Japan . . . our children are not only bilingual but bicultural - a real East meets West situation which is sometimes *impossible.* We need all the encouragement we can get. Thanks again.

Mrs C., Tokyo, Japan

We are a bilingual family with a baby boy aged one. I myself am French speaking and am determined to stick to speaking French to my little son (and to any other additions).

Bilingualism must run in families. I benefited from being brought up with two languages. My mother is Dutch (and very proud of it) and always spoke, and still speaks, Dutch with me (in fact, we did not seem to be able to communicate in the other language - French), whereas my father (who is Italian, by the way) and I speak French together. It becomes trilingualism when we visit my parents (they live in Belgium) because I communicate with my husband in English.

I can honestly say that I only benefited from my bilingualism. English was assimilated with ease at school. They say - and I think it is true - that the more languages you know the more easily you learn another one.

Mrs P., Belfast, N. Ireland

Thank you for sending me a copy of *The Bilingual Family Newsletter* which I read with great interest.

As a health visitor working amongst families of many nationalities, many of whom wished their children to be bilingual, I would have found your service most valuable. Many health visitors rightly become concerned if a child's speech understanding is not progressing, but the majority I am sure will support the family in their wish and will aim to improve the English conversation by suggesting that the child enters a playgroup or nursery. From my experience it is then that problems over continuing bilingualism occur and so I am sure that health visitors will be encouraged by the knowledge of your organisation.

I have placed some information in the June or July edition of the *Health Visitor Journal,* and hope that you get a good response.

Mrs Ros Meek
Assistant Public Relations Officer
Health Visitors' Association, London, England

My father is a Frenchman and my mother English – sadly I only speak English. I married an Italian and we have a three-year-old son and a baby 'on the way'. Because of my own experience I badly want our children to be bilingual.

Ms F., Kent, England

My husband is Venezuelan, I am English, and we are expecting our first child. We would love our children to speak both Spanish and English – it opens so many new doors for them. I think easier said than done, though – and other parents' experiences of 'how they did it' would be invaluable.

Mrs M., Bucks, England

Please send your letters and any "hints" to the editor at the addresses given on page seven.

SOME ANSWERS TO YOUR QUERIES

My children will be brought up speaking English and Arabic, and some information about learning to read in two languages and using two different scripts would be useful.

Mrs Q., Kuwait

We have received a number of enquiries about learning to read in two languages, the main concern being whether children should first learn to read in one language before learning to read in the other, or whether reading could start in both languages at the same time.

Many researchers in the field of bilingualism advise that children should learn to read first in their dominant language, i.e. in their stronger language, and then, once initial reading skills have been established, learning to read in the other language can begin. This procedure would seem to be particularly advisable in cases where one of a child's languages is *very much stronger* than the other. Attempting to learn to read in a very weak language (which, unfortunately, often happens to migrant and minority children) means that one is both learning to read *and* learning the language at the same time.

However, there is some evidence that children who are reasonably proficient in two languages (even though they may be a little more proficient in one of them) can learn to read in both languages at the same time. This causes surprisingly little confusion, the children quickly learning (if both languages use the same alphabet) which letters have different sounds in the two languages, e.g. that a written *j* is used in English to represent the sound in 'jam' etc., whilst the same letter in German, e.g. in '*ja*', represents the sound which is written in English with a *y*.

With regard to learning to read two different scripts, a recent study* of two kindergarten classes in an English/Hebrew bilingual school in Detroit in the United States of America is very encouraging. Hebrew, a Semitic language like Arabic, also has a different script from English and is also written from right to left. In the school in question instruction is given in Hebrew in the morning and in English in the afternoon. At the end of the nine-month programme, the children's ability to read was similar in Hebrew and English, although, understandably, somewhat better in English, their dominant language and that of the general non-school environment. The report concludes with the words: 'This study has demonstrated the success of a beginning bilingual reading programme in kindergarten. The children acquired reading skills in both their dominant and second languages ... Even at kindergarten level, children are capable of learning to read two languages taught concurrently. The results suggest that reading instruction in two languages may be introduced at early ages.'

Of course, not all parents of bilingual children have the opportunity to send their children to a bilingual school. Many have to be content with a monolingual school where in first grade their children will learn to read in the national or official language. This means that other arrangements have to be made if children are to become literate in their other language. This could be attendance at an ethnic school, arranging for some sort of home tutoring, or – last, but certainly not least – by the parents themselves teaching their children to read at home. This last possibility should be given serious consideration, and not only by highly educated parents. In the last issue of the Newsletter, for example, Aysun Türkmen reported how her father, a labourer who left school at the end of grade 5 of primary school, taught her to read and write in Turkish at home in Australia. The task is not as daunting as it may at first appear. If a child is learning to read at school in one of his or her languages, the acquired skill of reading, so research indicates, is readily transferred to the other language. What this means is that only a comparatively small amount of time is needed practising reading in the home language to achieve reasonable results.

Being able to read, and preferably also to write, in not only the language of the school but also in the other language can be a very strong language maintenance factor. Firstly, it makes children aware that this language, too, like the language of the school, has a literature with many interesting books and can be used for writing letters, etc. Reading also exposes children to a wider range of vocabulary and expressions and varieties of language than heard from a parent.

Being literate in the minority language as well enables children to enjoy visits to the country where the language is

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Some answers to your queries *Continued from page five*

spoken much more. They can, for instance attend school without too many difficulties. This has been my experience with my own children. I taught my two sons, Thomas (now almost 11) and Frank (almost nine years old), to read and write in German at home in Australia at the same time as they were learning to read and write in English at school (at age five). We have done regular reading and writing practice together ever since for about 15–20 minutes about five times a week. Two months ago the children saw Germany for the first time and began attending school there one month ago. Whilst their ability to read and write is not quite as good in German as in English, they are coping very well with German school work, including using a different handwriting system. Admittedly, they themselves see the benefits more in being able to take full advantage of the local library and second-hand comic shop.

*Bonnie Z. Kupinsky, Bilingual reading instruction in kindergarten. *The Reading Teacher,* Nov. 1983, pp.132–7.

For the past four years I have been happily married to an Iraqui and we have two daughters aged three years and 20 months. We are eager that they should both learn how to speak Arabic. I have friends who are also married to Arabs who are just as eager as we are to each their children Arabic, but they eventually had to drop it because their children would get the two languages mixed up; consequently they only speak English.

I would be grateful, therefore, if you could advise us how to go about teaching our children Arabic without falling into the same trap as our friends, as we would eventually like to return to Iraq with the children and I believe they would adjust far more easily if they spoke Arabic.

Mrs H., Liverpool, England

It is difficult to know what 'trap' your friends fell into without more details, but it sounds very much like they abandoned the use of Arabic to their children because their children were doing something that all bilingual children do to some extent at various times, i.e. use words from one language while speaking the other. This can be a little disconcerting and cause parents to think that their children are not acquiring either language properly. But it is nothing unusual, particularly in the early stages of speech when a child's total vocabulary may consist of some words from, say, English and some from Arabic, which he or she at first uses indiscriminately to both Arabic and English speakers. But with time the child will keep the two languages more and more separate. (For a helpful discussion of this point, see Carl Dodson's article in Vol. 1, No. 1 of the Newsletter and also the answer to the question from Mrs V. of Melbourne in the same issue.)

Another point worth stressing again here is that parents should not expect perfection in each of a child's languages, particularly not in the language which is mainly spoken only in the home. Some parents I have spoken to have given up trying to raise their children bilingually because 'their German/Arabic etc. grammar wasn't very good.' Perhaps it wasn't, but isn't it better to be able to speak a language *reasonably* fluently and *reasonably* accurately with a good pronunciation than not at all?

In your letter you refer to how to go about 'teaching' your children Arabic. This is a question which is frequently asked. Basically, I think the best answer is the same way you 'teach' them English, that is, by speaking the language to them regularly and consistently. In your own case this means your husband should speak to your daughters as much as possible in Arabic and encourage Arabic speaking friends to do likewise. (It is not clear from your letter, but I assume that he already speaks Arabic to the children.) This is much more effective than setting aside a certain period each day to 'teach' Arabic, i.e. in the sense of formal instruction as given by a teacher to a pupil (which is often implied by the use of the word 'teach'). The language is then acquired by the children naturally through play, conversations, expressing needs, etc. with their father. Speaking the language with him becomes a natural part of their life. This sort of 'teaching' is also much more enjoyable and less demanding for children and parents alike.

I am fluent in French and am anxious to speak in French to our daughter who is eight months old at present – my wife speaks English only. We appreciate that our daughter is probably too young to distinguish complete sentences in either language, but we would greatly welcome advice and views on whether she can cope with two languages from an early age.

Mr C., Belfast, N. Ireland

A number of similar letters have been received from parents in two-language families asking when they should introduce the 'second' language to their children (the parents normally using only one of the two languages with each other). If both parents intend to pass on their respective languages to their children, the best time to start is at the start, i.e. when the baby arrives. Right from birth (and there is evidence that this occurs even before birth!), babies respond to the utterances of those around them, although, of course, it will be some time before they indicate they can understand specific words and even longer before they utter their first words.

If both parents speak their languages to their baby right from the beginning, it helps to establish this pattern of language use in the family well before the child itself begins

to talk. This can be very important as you may at first find it strange or feel self-conscious about speaking French in what was, until now, a monolingual English home. Doing this also helps to get friends, relatives, neighbours, etc., used to the idea that your child is going to be raised bilingually, that a language of one of the parents, previously little heard in the family, will from now on be heard regularly. The longer the use of the 'second' language to the child is delayed, the more difficult the parent who speaks this language may find it to get out of the habit of using the 'first' language to the child.

In your own case, therefore, we would advise that you begin speaking to your daughter in French now, if you have not already started to do so. There is no need to worry that babies or very young children will not be able to cope with being spoken to in one language by their mothers and in another by their fathers. In fact they cope very well. It is important to realise that long before children speak, they *understand* much of what is said to them. They will first glance and a little later even point at people and things when they hear them referred to by name. A child in a bilingual family will respond to words from either language, e.g. English 'dog' and French 'chien', just as a monolingual child may respond to synonyms such as 'dog', 'puppy' and 'Boof' by glancing or pointing at the family pet. The child will also not necessarily begin to understand the word for a particular concept in both languages at the same time. For example, at age ten months, my own daughter would respond to my question 'Wo ist Katrinas Nase?' (WHERE IS KATRINA'S NOSE?) by touching her nose. The same question in English, from my wife and other people, produced no response until about a week later.

Incidentally, little 'tricks' like this can be useful for impressing, and convincing, people who may be sceptical that such a young child can really understand two languages. Moreover, the children are well rewarded by all the praise and admiration they receive for their achievement!

I am Swiss and my mother tongue is Swiss German. I have lived in England for 13 years and speak English all the time with my English husband. Indeed, I believe that my English is more fluent at present and comes more easily to me than Swiss German. I am expecting a child in the near future and would be very tempted to speak to him/her in English only, if it were not for my parents who have no other grandchildren and who do not speak English beyond the very basics. My husband understands my German dialect reasonably well, but I could not imagine us keeping up a conversation in German.

My question is whether the baby can pick up a language – or whether he/she will just get totally confused – if I talk to the baby in German, but speak English in the presence of my husband. I am a little frightened to do more harm than good.

Mrs H., London, England

This is probably the most common question we receive. There is no need to be frightened that you will do your child harm if your husband speaks to him or her in English and you do so in Swiss German whilst continuing to use English with your husband. Such cases where each parent uses a different language to the child are well documented in the literature on family bilingualism and, provided this is done fairly consistently, the chances of success are high. Of course, it will be difficult at times (some of the problems which can arise are discussed in this and previous issues of the Newsletter), but if you go about it with enthusiasm, determination and good humour (most of the time, anyway!), you will gain a lot of pleasure and satisfaction from seeing your child acquire your native language in addition to that of your husband. This will also undoubtedly be very much appreciated by your own parents and make the relationship between grandchild and grandparents so much closer.

The fact that your husband understands Swiss German reasonably well makes the conditions ideal for the use of both languages in your family, since he will not feel left out of any conversations between mother and child – and undoubtedly his understanding of the language will improve too as he listens to his wife and child talking to each other.

As for your child becoming 'totally confused' – there is no danger of that. He or she may occasionally appear a little confused as he or she searches for a word or expression in one of the languages etc., but this happens (less obviously) also to monolinguals in one language. It is important not to expect your child to speak both languages with the same fluency and accuracy, or to know the same number of words in one language as in the other; most bilinguals, adults or children, have one language which is stronger than the other. This is perfectly normal. Indeed, the language which is stronger at one age may, due to various circumstances, become the weaker one at another age. You yourself mention this with regard to your two languages. At the moment you feel more confident in English than in Swiss German, most likely simply due to lack of speaking practice. You may well find that speaking your native language to your child will help to reactivate and 'brush up' your own Swiss German, bringing it more into balance with your English, the more so as your child grows older and mother-child conversations become more complex.

Please send your queries and/or answers to George Saunders at either of the two addresses below:

Contact details removed

Editorial *Continued from page one*

in Germany (where we will be until Christmas). We have settled in well in Hamburg and are enjoying our stay. This is the first time the children have been outside Australia, and it has been very pleasing to see how well they have been able to function in a German speaking environment from the very first day. Frank and Thomas are now attending school (grades 3 and 5 respectively) where they have been accepted well by their German classmates, have made friends, and are coping well with their lessons. They have received quite a number of compliments on their proficiency in German which has given them added confidence. Katrina (age three and a half) found the change to an all-German environment a bit confusing at first and would speak German only to me! She now goes to kindergarten one day a week and, although still very shy of adults, speaks happily enough to other children in German.

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