The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Editor:
George Saunders

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EDITORIAL

For many immigrant parents who have to work full-time it is a difficult task to raise their children as speakers of their own language, since their time with them is limited and the children are, of necessity, often cared for during work hours by people who do not know the parents' language. In this issue we have an article about a child care centre in a suburb of Sydney in Australia which not only cares for young children while their parents are at work, but also has bilingual workers who speak the parents' language to the children. Such bilingual centres serve a very useful language maintenance function, and their establishment is to be encouraged.

George Saunders

BILINGUAL CHILD CARE/ JARDIN DE INFANTES BILINGÜE

Robyn Lister

A common problem facing many parents who are trying to pass on their language to their young children is that their contact with the children is limited because of their work commitments. While the parents are at work, the children are cared for by other people, often by people who do not speak the parents' language. However, some parents are more fortunate, as can be seen in the following report by the director of a child care centre in Canley Vale, a suburb of Sydney, Australia.

Canley Vale Child Care Centre is developing and implementing a programme that supports and promotes bilingualism in an environment outside the home.

The centre at Canley Vale was established in 1989 by Fairfield City Council in response to the needs expressed by a number of those involved with the Canley Vale community. A significant proportion of the Canley Vale residents speak Spanish and this influenced the centre's decision to include Spanish, with English, as the two languages most used throughout the day.

Six workers (five full time and one part time) are employed at the centre – three of these speak Spanish. Approximately half of the 35 children attending each day have Spanish-speaking backgrounds and interact with these workers using Spanish. Spanish is used as naturally as possible and is incorporated into all aspects of the day, e.g. at routine times, such as mealtimes and greetings and in activities such as art and craft, music and storytime. The child care centre is located next to the Multicultural Resource Centre in Canley Vale and so has access to a wide range of resources and materials.

A number of children attending the centre do not have either an English-speaking or a Spanish-speaking background. To avoid some possible confusion, staff interact with these children in English. It is interesting to note, though, that because these children hear Spanish all around them, they have learnt to use some Spanish words. They also really enjoy the Spanish songs and games.

Our part-time worker speaks Cantonese, as well as English, and it has been a great addition to our programme to have her interact with several Cantonese-speaking children using Cantonese. Although her worktime is limited to half days, we know that the Cantonese-speaking families appreciate and respond well to her involvement.

As a staff we have noticed some very distinct advantages in having a second language in the centre:

- The children who speak Spanish are understood and therefore seem less frustrated when communicating their needs and wants.
- The Spanish-speaking parents feel very comfortable. They feel good because they can communicate important information about their child to the staff and know they will be understood.

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Children having fun in Canley Vale Child Care Centre

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- Both children and parents feel that their language and culture is accepted, promoted and extended. They can see that their language is valued and this enhances their self-esteem and confidence. They feel pride in their culture and are not ashamed to use their language. This also encourages maintenance of the language in the home. Some children who were becoming reluctant to speak Spanish at home before joining the centre, now use Spanish spontaneously.
- All children can see the differences between the way people look and speak and accept them as natural.
- All children are exposed to at least two different cultures and this increases their awareness of other people and the world around them.
- Learning seems to be more effective in the first language.
- Learning a second language encourages flexibility in children's thinking. We have noticed that children as young as 17 months can differentiate between staff who speak Spanish and staff who speak English.
- The centre provides a support network for parents who have been in Australia only a short time and are feeling very isolated. They know that staff will be able to empathise with their situation and provide a sympathetic ear when needed. Staff can also refer them to other services for assistance.

Whilst Spanish is very much an integral part of the programme we try to respect each child's language and culture as much as possible. We believe that each child is an individual who brings their own cultural identity to the centre. Having the second language has helped to provide all staff, children and parents with an increased awareness of each other and a greater acceptance for the individual. As the director, I feel that this has been the greatest benefit of the programme so far.

INFORMATION

The **National Council for Panjabi Teaching** publishes a quarterly Newsletter and it is available free of charge from:
S. Attariwala, Centre for Community Languages and Bilingualism, High Cross Education Centre, High Road, London N17 6QP, England.

BILINGUAL, BY ACCIDENT

Andrea Georgiou

"Your daughter speaks English so well."

"Thank you. Actually, she's bilingual.'

"How did you do it? Tell me!"

Here's my chance to tell a great success story. Instead, I'll tell the truth: I didn't do it. My daughter did it, with my help, despite my mistakes. I believe that she has an inborn talent for language. But luck and circumstance also played important parts in the story.

My part in the story begins during pregnancy. Like all others, I worried about whether my baby would be healthy. The rest, I took for granted. My child would love me unconditionally, sleep through the night and, eventually, speak English.

My rude awakening came in the clinic where she was born. It was quickly apparent that I would give the unconditional love, *she* would sleep when she felt like it, and English would be difficult to learn. Everyone around us spoke Greek – doctors, nurses and visitors – a constant stream of advice and criticism. I felt confused, then threatened. This was *my* baby. I wanted to do things *my* way, the American way.

In fact, when I left the clinic, I did. My husband was working outside Athens for eight months; the only other person in the baby's life was the sitter (a French woman I'd chosen for her fluent English). I was sure my baby would speak English, because she'd hear *only* English.

When my American cousin visited four months later, I admitted my need to speak English. "I haven't had much chance, living in Greece the past 12 years. But now, with the baby, I'll be speaking English all the time." He smiled. "When do you plan to start?"

"Start?"

"You've been speaking Greek to her since I came," he pointed out. It was true! I was speaking Greek to my own baby. On reflection, Greek seemed gentler, more expressive. Greek let me be enthusiastic, even passionate about my love for her. I tried the English version: "My life! My soul!" It just didn't sound right.

The babysitter admitted she'd been speaking French to the baby. "I didn't think it mattered – she's so little. And it feels natural."

> "For my baby to learn English, first I'd have to re-learn it."

So much for my plans! Insistent on the baby's learning English, I'd succeeded in creating a bilingual environment – in Greek and French. I was heartsick – but I'd learned a valuable lesson central to the issue of bilingualism: to be aware of my own speech. A child can only learn what it hears. It's the parent's responsibility to be consistent about using the language s/he wants the child to learn.

For me, this was unexpectedly difficult. I'd learned enough Greek that I spoke it without conscious effort and

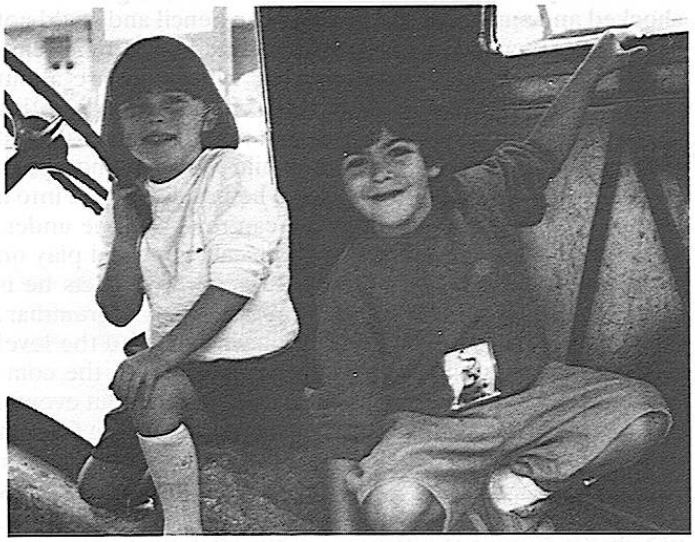
switched languages unaware. On my job, we used English and Greek – often in the same sentence. For my baby to learn English, first I'd have to re-learn it.

My English was improving when my husband came home. We'd always spoken Greek to each other, so now I spoke Greek to him, English to the baby, English to the sitter. He spoke Greek to the baby and me, but couldn't communicate with the sitter, who (he said) spoke only French. The baby, upset, cried continuously.

This was life in a polyglot family at its worst – a linguistic nightmare of missed connections and misunderstandings. In self-defence, my husband fired the French sitter. But that left us to cope with two languages and a crying baby.

This part – real life – is noticeably missing from the books on bilingualism. We had to work it out on our own. Over the years we developed the necessary skills – primarily the ability to keep track of what is said in each language and to whom, plus the patience and goodwill to deal with the inevitable misunderstandings – but at the time, we needed a quick solution, so my husband left town.

He said it was business, a job too good to turn down. I said it was cowardice. But living apart did help – we were able to separate the languages. In Athens, I spoke only English to the baby (and the new sitter spoke only Greek). On visits, I spoke English to the baby, Greek to my husband. We lived this way – single parent/bilingual family – for about three years.



Bilingual cousins (their great-grandfathers were brothers) Klara Takas of Sydney and Thalia Georgiou of Athens. Both girls speak Greek and English

While I don't recommend living apart, it seems to have been the key to our daughter's becoming bilingual. She heard much more English, in isolation, and at a formative age, than she would have in a normal family situation. Each language took on a strong and separate identity for her, as it belonged to a different way of life.

While we were getting our act together, she was preparing to speak. Which language would she speak first? "Greek, of course," maintained my husband. He was right: "baba". "It was probably an accident," I told him. "Let's see what the next word is."

The next word – the first dozen words – were Greek as well. Within a few months, our baby had an extensive Greek vocabulary and one English word: "shoe".

I'd been speaking English to her since infancy and all she could come up with was "shoe"! Feeling desperate, I consulted our pediatrician. "The Greek sitter is with her eight hours a day. What can I do in the few hours I'm home?" "Talk fast!" he joked.

I seized on the idea, thinking it through. I'd talk as much as possible, make every word count. When the baby said a Greek word, I'd repeat it carefully, then say its English equivalent. I'd speak slowly and emphasise each word. It went like this:

Baby: "Ποδι"

Me: "Ποδί? Foot! Your foot. It's your foot. Look at your foot!"

It was tiring, boring and made my throat ache, but it worked. The baby said one beautiful word after the other. I suppose they'd been there all along, since "foot" was likely to be followed by "monkey", "popcorn", or "zipper". Looking back, I believe that Greek words came first because they were easier to pronounce.

"Reading about bilingualism gave me a chance to re-think our experience. Many things I'd considered questions of language were actually wider issues."

That was it – our child was bilingual. By the time she was two, she was fluent in both languages and enjoyed translating for others. She was about four when I read the first book on bilingualism and realised I'd done everything to ensure that she speak one language, not two.

Reading about bilingualism gave me a chance to re-think our experience. Many things I'd considered questions of language were actually wider issues. For example, wanting her to be raised *my* way (the American way) was a sign that my adjustment to Greece was badly shaken. I'd accepted the Greek way of life – for myself – without question. For my child, I wanted something better. A cross-cultural life style was the answer – but I hadn't heard of that yet, either.

Focusing on language, I'd missed another issue – parenting. My husband and I had very different ideas. He felt that a father should provide financially for the family. I felt a father should be present, a co-parent. We needed to work out these differences, much more than we needed the baby to speak a particular language.

Focusing on the baby's speech, I'd overlooked my own – as my cousin pointed out. Too often we worry about whether the child speaks well, failing to notice that we speak too quickly, blur words, mix Greek and English ("Pascha? We'll go to the horio") or otherwise set poor examples.

Worrying about how *I'd* teach English to the baby, I didn't forsee *her* contribution. She had a strong desire to communicate, loved learning, and was full of humour. She wanted to learn *everything,* not just what I wanted to teach. In her own way, by insisting on having everything, she forced us to recognise and work on our differences in language, parenting, and culture.

With another child, it might have been a very different story. My insistence on English could have created conflict, making it difficult for her to learn any language. She's in first grade now – just learning to read and write. I'm unsure how to help her. Should I read about biliteralism? Or let her lead the way? I'd like to hear from parents of older children about what they did.

Many thanks to the Cross-Cultural Association of Athens for permission to reproduce this article from their quarterly Newsletter No. 35).

CONTRIBUTIONS

Please continue to send us your "stories", anecdotes, jokes, useful hints or any other contributions you think might interest our readers.

Remember, this Newsletter is for you, but above all, by you.

A NEW LIFE IN THE CHARENTE MARITIME

Anne Griscti

In Britain today there are so many people of different ethnic origins being integrated into our Western European society – with the help of specialists in the social and communication fields – that perhaps we have become somewhat blasé and unthinking about their predicament. In fact, one could hazard a guess that the majority of us are unaware and uncaring about the fact that, after arrival in a new country, many people must live in the midst of what must seem to be an incomprehensible babble. And it was not until we moved to France, to settle permanently in the Charente Maritime, accompanied by our ten-year-old non-French-speaking son, that realisation of the isolation which can occur, even in another European country, was forcibly brought home to us.

> "... the majority of us are unaware and uncaring about the fact that, after arrival in a new country, many people must live in the midst of what must seem to be an incomprehensible babble."

We had, of course, realised that a language problem would exist for our son, but optimistically assumed that a child, being so much more adaptable to changing circumstances than an adult, would soon overcome this difficulty and become as fluent as the indigenous population. And to a certain extent this happened, but not at first as smoothly as one could have hoped.

We arrived in France with our household effects, pets, etc., in July 1988 and installed ourselves in a house which was not quite as finished as it should have been. This was the first unsettling factor. Our son did not say much at the time, but, as it transpired later, was very upset to find himself surrounded by builders' rubble, and minus the benefits of a modern house which he had previously taken for granted.

The second unsettling factor was connected with our very friendly neighbours – unexpectedly as it happened – because a bonus as far as we were concerned was that just over the road lived another 11-year-old boy. His parents reciprocated in this feeling, as where we live is very sparsely populated. The boys were introduced and for a time seemed to relate quite well to each other. A few other children arrived on the scene; the weather was excellent; all seemed well, then suddenly our son did not want to go out to play. He stayed in his room and played with his toys – alone. Why? Questions stimulated outbursts of rage.

"Stupid froggies! Jabber, jabber, jabber."

Had the children laughed at him? Did they make remarks about the English? No, it was simply a question of language, of communication – he felt at a disadvantage and consequently lowered in his own esteem. Therefore he removed himself to where this did not happen, that is, his own room, surrounded by his own belongings. If he wanted human company – the company was us. In England we could not keep him in; here, we could not get him out.

What were we to do?

I should perhaps mention at this point that my husband was born in France, and spent the first 20 years of his life in Paris and in the centre of France. Therefore he speaks perfect French. I too speak adequate French, but apart from the time when my husband's parents lived with us, French has not been spoken in the house on a regular basis. We could perhaps have changed this and spoken French *en famille,* thus forcing Daniel to communicate in this language, but we did not want our son to forget his mother-tongue – very easy to do, as my husband discovered after leaving France. Words are forgotten, technical terms become obsolete, colloquialisms outmoded. No, what was needed was a relatively easy and painless route to fluent French, and the restoration of our son's self esteem – a very problematic situation. However, happily, more than one year later, this was resolved satisfactorily – at least in part.

The answer lay in the excellent village school run by a very efficient and conscientious "Directrice". This lady did not flinch when presented with a ten-year-old English boy. At first lessons and exercises were presented in English, later to be translated into French. Gradually more and more French was introduced until, as now, English was not used at all. Daniel gets lots of homework – but no more than the rest of the class – and he is expected to provide a standard of work never expected in England. One of the first things Madam took firmly in hand was Daniel's handwriting! She was shocked and amazed that he still used a pencil and could not really write in an adult way. As she pointed out, French children dispense with childish printing when they are about seven years old. And heaven help a child who does untidy work. Daniel was stretched to a limit never before expected of him. And it has paid off; from a child who could not speak a word of French only one year ago he has developed into a fluent speaker of the language; he can read well; he understands television programmes and he can work and play on equal terms with his classmates. In general subjects he is about level with the other 10–11 year olds – only in grammar, conjugation and dictation is he somewhat behind the level expected, understandably of course, considering the complexities and formalities of the French language. But even in these areas Madame does not consider it impossible for him to reach the required level in order to progress to the higher school in 1990. He takes dictation on Saturday mornings with the others and competes with no concessions given. "Faults" are counted and compared, and grieved over – all in all he has become very French in his attitudes towards schoolwork.

> "... from a child who could not speak a word of French only one year ago he has developed into a fluent speaker of the language"

One other aspect to be observed is that, in spite of our speaking English at home, Daniel speaks more and more French when with us or with the family pets, or even when playing alone with his toys. He is beginning to use French words when speaking English and, most significant of all, when talking in his sleep, as he does from time to time, he talks in French.

Our experience with Daniel has seemingly confirmed our belief in the adaptability of children to changing circumstances. However, this does not mean that a period of very painful adjustment has not to take place. Even the

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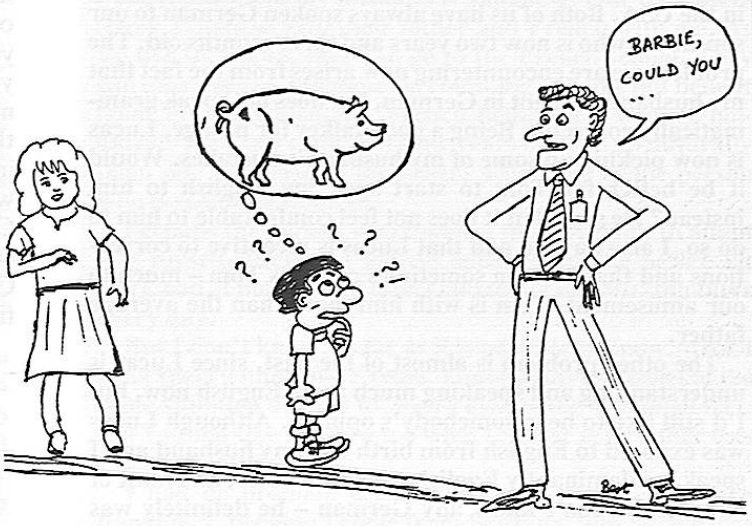
BILINGUAL HUMOUR

East Malaysians are sensitive about their names . . . Nobody likes it if you burst into howls of laughter or stifled sniggers and then explain that his name means this and that in your own language! This may be so: your name possibly means something bawdy or outrageous in the local tongue, but East Malaysians would not mention it except in an extreme case.

One such case was a Canadian gentleman who called his wife Barbara "Barbie". He did not pronounce the "r", and to East Malaysian ears it sounded exactly like *babi,* "pig", an abomination to Muslims and a strange name for a wife to anybody else.

The matter was serious. Much behind-the-scenes discussion ensued. It was finally solved by a middle-aged Malay lady asking her Chinese friend to mention to Barbara that it would be so much nicer if her husband called her by her full name all the time. It is suspected, though not known, that the Chinese lady did bring some basic Malay into discussion. To everybody's relief, "Ba'bie" became "Barrrbie" henceforth.



(Reproduced, with kind permission of Times Books International, Times Centre, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore, 1953, from page 114 of their 1988 publication Culture Shock! Borneo *by Heidi Munan. This very readable and informative book was reviewed in the October 1989 issue of the* BFN. *The cartoon was produced by the editor of the* BFN.*)*

READER'S QUERIES

My child, Alex, who is now 13 months, was raised, until recently, in a bilingual house. The Belgian au pair, Marie, spoke to him only in French. alhtough I speak French fluently, I spoke to him only in English, as did my husband, who does not speak French (but who is fluent in Spanish!) No one spoke Spanish to Alex. Now, however, the au pair has returned to Belgium and as yet, there is no one to fill the French void. Alex's language skills seem well along – he babbles (but it's hard to tell in what language). His favourite word is "daaa?" which could either mean *what?*, *that?*, or the French *quoi?*. He does great animal imitations but with English sounds (moo, grrr, baaa, hss, bow wow) and he says "hi", "bye bye", and occasionally "mama" and "dada". He definitely understood French before Marie left and I'm afraid that he might lose it before we get another French speaker in the house. My question is this: would it confuse him terribly and permanently affect or hinder his development in both or either languages if I switch and now speak to him exclusively in French?

My concern comes from the debate as to whether children who learn two languages at once ever learn either perfectly and how the answer appears to be that yes, it's possible as long as the speakers of each language are consistent in their use of one language to the child.

Monique Rubens Kruhn, Somerset, NJ, USA

Research into bilingualism indicates that bilingualism will not hinder children's language development. However, the degree of fluency and accuracy which an individual child will attain in each language will depend on a number of factors, among the most crucial being the amount of each language he or she hears and how much he or she is required to actively use the language. In most cases this will mean that a child will have one language which is dominant, stronger. This will normally be the language to which the child has most exposure and has to speak most. For school age children it will therefore usually be the language of the school and the community. In this language the child will (eventually) be indistinguishable from his or her monolingual peers. However, it is likely that he or she will not reach this level in a language mainly used just at home. This does not, of course, mean that a high level of proficiency is not possible. But it would be unrealistic and counter-productive to expect or insist on "perfection".

In your own case, your decision to begin speaking French to Alex may appear strange to him initially, but he will undoubtedly adjust to the new situation quickly. After all, French is not a completely new language for him. The fact that you are not a native speaker of French should not be a problem if you are a fluent speaker of the language and feel confident using it to him. In past issues of the *BFN* we have had articles about family situations where parents were passing on a non-native language to their children with about the same degree of success as native speakers.

So, if you do decide to shift to speaking to Alex exclusively in French, be prepared for some initial resistance on his part, as he (and perhaps also you) may find it unnatural at first. However, there is plenty of evidence that your fear is unfounded that the language change-over will permanently affect or hinder his language development in English. The level of proficiency he acquires in French will depend on the factors described above. And, of course, if you do not speak French to him, his French will be lost.

SHOULD FATHER CHANGE LANGUAGES?

I am German, my husband Tom is American, and we live in the USA. Both of us have always spoken German to our son Lucas who is now two years and three months old. The problem we are encountering now arises from the fact that my husband is fluent in German, but does not speak grammatically correctly. Being a good talker for his age, Lucas is now picking up some of my husband's mistakes. Would it be better for Tom to start speaking English to him instead? He says that it does not feel comfortable to him to do so. I also have to add that Lucas is receptive to corrections and that he even sometimes corrects Tom – much to our amusement. Tom is with him more than the average father.

The other problem is almost of the past, since Lucas is understanding and speaking much more English now, but I'd still like to hear somebody's opinion. Although Lucas was exposed to English from birth on – my husband and I speak predominantly English with each other, and most of our friends don't know any German – he definitely was dominant in German. During his first year he was almost exclusively looked after by one of us. When we started leaving him with English-speaking sitters and at childcare, we received quite a bit of negative feedback with regards to Lucas's seeming lack of communication. I never could really determine if this was really due to his English deficiency or due to these people's inhibitions. He was always quite capable of dealing with other kids and picked up the necessary phrases once he started speaking more. Do you have any feedback on this? I felt quite guilty at times about causing my son's apparent isolation.

Finally, I am aware that it is quite natural for bilingual children to mix the two languages for a while. Is it enough to repeat the sentence correctly or should I make him aware of his mistakes?

Gabrielle Duebendorfer
Woodinville, USA

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that your son is just over two years old. At that age it is natural for children to speak in a way that is different from adult speech in grammar, pronunciation, etc. Making what adults see as "mistakes" is a natural stage in children's language development. It is doubtful if there are even any monolingual two-year-old speakers of either German or English (or any other language for that matter) anywhere who speak the language with adult proficiency and grammatical accuracy.

In the case of bilingual children, too much correction, particularly in the language which is not the language of the world outside the home, could have the opposite to the desired effect and discourage them from using the language spontaneously. The amount of correction and its effectiveness will depend to a large extent on the personalities of both parent/s and child. Correction carried out constantly and/or in a very critical way will almost certainly distress most children and have a negative effect.

With regard to your husband's speaking German to Lucas, this is by now a well-established practice in your family. It feels natural to both father and son and would obviously be difficult for both of them to give up. Would anything be gained if your husband shifted to speaking English to Lucas? Probably not. Firstly, there would be the initial feeling of strangeness caused by such a change-over. Secondly, the amount of German Lucas is exposed to in the home would be reduced dramatically. So would the amount of German he would be required to use actively himself. Whilst German may now still be Lucas's stronger language, you do live in an English-speaking country and English will all too soon become his dominant language. Therefore, the more he hears and has to speak German the better. His English will take care of itself; it is, in any case, always present in your home as you and your husband speak mostly English to each other and most of your friends speak only English. Thirdly, you mention that already our son is becoming aware that your husband's German is not completely correct. Whilst he may adopt some of your husband's mistakes, it is very likely that he will recognise you as the "authority" on German and increasingly model his German on yours. It is, however, worth pointing out that it would be unfair to expect Lucas's German to reach the same level of fluency and grammatical correctness as that of a *monolingual* child growing up in a German-speaking country. This does not mean that his proficiency in German cannot be very good.

One of our readers, Dagmar Zahlbruckner Lane, from Bristol, England, whose family situation is very similar, but who has three children, the eldest of whom is now 13, has kindly contributed the following thoughts on the matter.

I am Austrian/German, trained as a teacher in West Germany, taught at the German School Dublin, Republic of Ireland for three years and have lived in England with my English husband, Bernard, for 17 years. We have three sons, Paavo 13, Patrick nearly 11, and Tom 5½. From the time of Paavo's birth I have only ever spoken German to him. My husband, who had just started to learn German at that time, also spoke only German to him, which he found the natural thing to do. As a couple, we either spoke German or English to each other. We have always had a number of close German-speaking friends here in Bristol, who also spoke German to Paavo and later to his brothers. Paavo started to talk in German only and only spoke German until he was four, but fully understood English, to which he was exposed every day through neighbours, friends, playgroup, etc. But he had no really close regular contacts in English at that time, as Bernard's relatives do not live close enough.

When Paavo was four, coming back from a three-week holiday in Germany, he suddenly started speaking perfect English to English speakers around him, but continued to speak German to me. Gradually he and his father spoke more and more English together, whereas to this day he still speaks only German to me.

Patrick's and Tom's acquisition of both languages followed a more common pattern, in that they used English as well as German actively right from the time they started to speak. The three boys always speak English to each other.

Although at the time I sometimes wondered if Bernard should not make a conscious effort to speak more English to Paavo, which at that stage Bernard would not have done "naturally", I now know that it was the right thing to do for their relationship then. It must have been Paavo's personality, even at that age, which stopped him using the less intimate language of the family, i.e. English, for a long time. He was hardly ever separated from us for the first years of his life.

Now, some ten years later, Pavo and his brothers speak German and English with equal fluency. Paavo and Patrick read German perfectly, and they can write thank-you letters in German to their relatives. I am confident that they will pass the GCSE Examination in German with some extra help from me and from their school without taking German from the beginning as a subject at school. This might give them time to learn another language instead.

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IS TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ BEFORE SCHOOL ADVISABLE?

We live in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. Until now we have always spoken English with our children aged 2½ and 3½. Their French is quite basic and consists only of a few words. They are aware that their parents address others in French and that we only speak English at home. However, they have not yet acquired much French themselves. My husband and I both speak French, so we would be able to teach them, but do not wish to confuse. We are not sure how to go about it – whether we should leave it until they learn at school or whether this would hold them back in some way.

I particularly wish to start teaching my 3½ year old to read. I think, however, that I should not teach the English sounds and words when his schooling will be in French later on. However, teaching him to read in French would be difficult because of his lack of vocabulary. He can write his name and has some understanding of the sounds of the letters.

Both my children have attended a local crèche on an occasional basis but are not happy about going regularly. They have no other social contact with children as I myself am quite isolated here – even after five years!

D. E. Henderson
Estayer-le-Lac, Switzerland

If possible, it would seem advisable to ensure that your children have at least some regular contact with French, so that the transition to schooling in French is relatively smooth. This does not mean that your husband should give up using English at home, since as the children get older and have more contacts outside the home French will increasingly become their dominant language and it will be their English which will suffer if not nurtured. Perhaps you could give regular attendance at the crèche another trial; once the children form friendships and acquire more French they will probably enjoy it more.

You should not be afraid of teaching your children to read in English before they start school in French. Whilst each country has its own traditional ideas about when a child is ready to learn to read, there is much evidence that children of pre-school age often *want* to learn to read, can learn to read, and do so with enjoyment. For families such as yours, where the children will receive their schooling in a language other than that of the home, learning to read in the home language also has the added advantage of helping to maintain and extend the children's knowledge and use of the language. The fear that being able to read in English will then interfere with your children's learning to read in French is a logical one, but the evidence suggests that this will not be the case. There will be some slight confusion at first as the children learn how French uses the alphabet to represent the sounds of the language, e.g. that the "j" of English *jug* is used for a different sounds in French *jardin*. You can easily prepare the children for this, once they can read well in English and before they start school, by pointing out the main differences between the two writing systems. However, it is important to note that your children will have an advantage over most of their French-speaking classmates in that they will already be able to *read*. They won't have to learn to read again, they will simply have to transfer the reading skills they already possess to the reading of French. This is a much easier task than learning to read from scratch.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

I am French and my husband is Japanese. Our daughters speak Japanese with their father and French with me. As we live in Tokyo, they can go to the French school. They can thus live in a Japanese surrounding at home but benefit from French education, French being their weaker language. They are eight and four years old and go naturally from one language to the other, according to the person who is speaking to them.

Perhaps the person who found it most difficult to adapt was myself, because I always spoke Japanese before (at work and at home), and then I had to use the two languages every day.

But I don't know, as far as it is possible to know, what I can expect within 10–15 years. I have many examples of the same situation around us, every case being unique in fact, but I would like to know too what the case is for other languages/countries.

I had no problem deciding on such a course for our daughters, because I come from Brittany, and my parents spoke much better Breton than French, even though they did not want us to speak the language of the minority.

Odile Furusawa
Tokyo, Japan

Unfortunately, we also cannot see into the future, and you have already observed that each family's situation is unique. However, judging from the family situation which you have described and from the progress which you and your children have made so far, the chances of your children growing up as competent bilinguals would seem to be very good indeed. The fact that your daughters are able to attend the French school in Tokyo will reinforce and extend the French they acquire from you at home and ensure a nice counterbalance to the strong influence of Japanese which they will encounter all around them in most aspects of daily life.

DID YOU KNOW THAT . . .
there is a **German Film and Video Library** in London: Viscon Ltd, Unit B11, Park Hall Road Trading Estate, London SE21 8EL. Tel. 01-761 4015.

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

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acquisition of a language does not prevent moments when "foreignness" seems to be an insurmountable barrier. It is only when attitudes and customs, as well as language, are understood and accepted, that something approaching true integration may ever be achieved. Our son Daniel seems to be well inclined in this direction, but even now he has his moments when nostalgia for England overwhelms him. If he, at 11 years old, feels like this occasionally, what of adults irrecoverably removed from their country of birth, what must they feel, surrounded by people speaking a totally different language from theirs?

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My advice to the Duebendorfer family would be: carry on speaking German to your son and do not listen to other people who have not succeeded in bringing up their children bilingually. In no time at all your son may start to reply in English to your German, and then it will be up to you as parents to continue speaking German to him. The way you describe his English-speaking background, he will have no problem with his English. I would never openly correct his mistakes in German, I would rather use the same wording correctly in a different context. Our children often learnt wrong grammar from their father, but later, without realising it, they acquired the correct form.

I hope that other families will experience bringing up their children bilingually and biculturally as an equally exciting and enriching adventure as it has been for all of us.

CONTACTS

If you wish your name and address to be included in the Contacts section, please send us the following information:

Name, address, languages spoken in the family, children's birth dates and specification of the type of families with whom you would like to get in touch.

Contact details removed

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