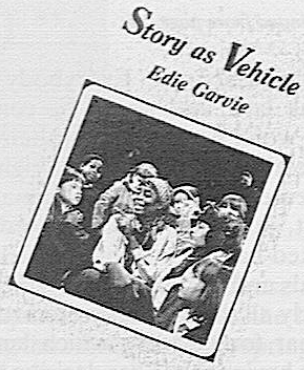
The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Editor:
George Saunders **1991** **VOLUME 8** **No. 4**



EDITORIAL

In this issue of the *BFN* we have a letter from a reader, Vanessa Behrendt, from Germany commenting on Part 3 of Reinhold Trott's article "Language development of a German/English bilingual child" which appeared in *BFN* 1: 1991. She raises a point which concerns all bilingual families at some time or other: how much correction should parents undertake when a child is speaking one language but uses words from his/her other language? The reader takes the Trott family to task for being pedantic and having an extreme attitude, since they try to ensure that their son's English is as free of German influence as possible.

I myself have also been accused at times of being too puristic in this regard, i.e. for trying to get my children, where at all possible, to use a German term when speaking German rather than "borrowing" the term from English, their stronger language. My main aim in this matter has been to give the children the terminology needed to communicate with monolingual German speakers and to encourage them to use this terminology if at all possible. The danger with not doing this is that if the children were to use a particular English term constantly in their German, they might come to regard it as being the German word as well and not realise that it was not until they used it in a conversation with a German monolingual and were not understood (there are plenty of English words now generally acceptable in the German of Germany, such as T-shirt, jeans, mountain-bike, cool, etc., which make such confusion in the case of other words quite possible). This probably would not matter much, if the number of such words were small, and sometimes, of course, it is necessary to borrow words, for example with culturally specific terms, such as the small Australian cake, the *lamington*. But where does one draw the line?

Undoubtedly attitudes will vary from family to family and even from parent to parent (and child to child) in the one family. However, it would be very interesting to receive other readers' views on the comments by Reinhold Trott, Vanessa Behrendt and my own remarks above. (My views on this subject are set out in more detail in my book *Bilingual Children,* e.g. p. 174ff.)

I would like to take this opportunity to wish all our readers a very Happy New Year and every success with their bilingual endeavours in 1992.

George Saunders

CONTEMPLATING BILINGUALISM? GO FOR IT – IT'S FUN!

Christine Frati

As encouragement to other parents contemplating raising their children bilingually I would like to share our very positive experiences (so far!) in raising our daughter Elodie with two languages: French and English.

Elodie is now three and a half years old and we have lived in France since before her birth. Her father, Robert, is French and I am English with far from perfect French, having arrived in France five years ago with just a little vocabulary. My husband speaks nearly perfect, although accented English, and because of his work with an American company, his days are spent speaking and thinking in English, and from what I overhear, his nights dreaming in English too. Conversation between by husband and myself is mainly in English, aided by the most fearful "melange".

Elodie having fun with two languages

When Elodie was born we started off with a one parent, one language policy, which for myself still holds good today. At the time we were living in Lille in Northern France where in shops and the local garderie etc. I was met with very

Continued on page two

Continued from page one

hostile reactions. Everybody told me that Elodie would speak late, and would be confused, would mix languages (the worst possible sin in their eyes!) etc., etc. Luckily they were all proved wrong; at eight months Elodie's first words appeared: Daddy and maman, followed shortly by kiss, toast, dog, duck, fish and teddy. From then on she never looked back; by 19 months Elodie had a vocabulary of 144 words and phrases, 48 of which were French. Interestingly, nearly all the phrases were French. Immediately Elodie had an ear for deciding which language was appropriate, and once having made her decision you can forget trying to change her mind. Any bilingual friends have to start out from the first seconds in the language they wish to continue in.

> "Elodie had an ear for deciding which language was appropriate, and once having made her decision you can forget trying to change her mind."

From the beginning she was aware of both languages separately. The acquisition of any new word was followed by "What's the other word for . . . ?". Both words were then repeated and were learnt. This is a process she still applies today.

By two years old Elodie was speaking in whole sentences and was at ease in either language, with no one language dominant. The only problem we were experiencing was getting a word in edgeways! Everywhere we went she attracted attention with her non-stop chatter and rapid language switches. The local garderie where Elodie spent one afternoon a week had now changed from being my biggest critic to practically putting Elodie on the the tourist map! They were amazed by her total swtich from 100 per cent French one side of the gate dividing the playroom from the reception area to 100 per cent English the other side of the gate. Everywhere we went in the village I was greeting with "Oh, so you are Elodie's mummy", our reputation going before us.

Three months after her second birthday we spent one month in Germany, while my husband set up a German office. We watched with interest her reaction to a third language. She was completely unphased by it and asked us for words and names of objects. She was soon ordering her "Milch und Kuchen" for herself. At the end of the second week she had 13 essential words and by the end of the month had outstripped my meagre resources. I was very sad that we had no way of continuing her German after our return, as it was clear to me that she would have absolutely no trouble with juggling with three languages. Two months later a holiday in Spain followed the same pattern for her, alas not for me!

School was our next hurdle (the one I had been dreading) when Elodie was two and a half years old. Selection was very important. Luckily our village had a very large infant population, resulting in four "écoles maternelles" to choose from. We selected the school showing the most positive reaction to Elodie and the most flexible attitude to attendence, as we intended sending Elodie to school no more that three mornings a week to prevent a French take-over. At Elodie's preschool medical the paediatrician pronounced her language development as "phenomenal". We were all set for the big test.

The first term we watched the balance of Elodie's language use with uncalled for vigilance. No one language was dominant and we wanted to keep it that way. Robert is the only person that Elodie speaks either language to, and since starting school she has shown very slight preference, by period, for one or other language in communicating with him, although imaginary play with him is always in French. Thus Robert has been able to provide the balance, which in reality means he speaks a lot of English to her in term time and mainly French during the school holidays. In speaking to him Elodie switches from one language to the other constantly, one moment he is Papa the next Daddy. Any attempts by myself to speak French with her when I feel English could be seen as impolite, are met my real fury and refusal to co-operate on Elodie's part, which secretly pleases me. This does have its uses, as all her loud personal remarks on our fellow shoppers are voiced in English to the incomprehension of most. She does mix French and English a little, but only with us. Outside of home it does not happen. Presumably she is following our bad example, or does she, like us, sometimes feel that a borrowed word suits her meaning so much better? There are mistakes with word order, i.e. English sentences with French word order. We say her sentence with words in the correct order and without us asking she always repeats it correctly.

> "Having heard her boasting to other children in the supermarket that she speaks two languages I feel our greatest danger lies in her having an excessively large head!"

Our first language crisis occurred just after her third birthday, when we moved to Vienne just south of Lyon. After just one term at school she had to start the settling in process all over again. Two weeks afer the start of term Elodie suddenly announced that she didn't like to speak English. Robert immediately switched totally to English and without a word on the subject I quickly arranged a week's "holiday" at my mother's in England. With no choice but to speak English that week, we have not heard another word on the subject since.

Elodie's language skills in either French or English are still greater than most of her peer group, but her desire to talk also seems greater than most of her peers! Has anybody invented an on/off switch yet for toddlers? Having heard her boasting to other children in the supermarket that she speaks two languages I feel our greatest danger lies in her having an excessively large head! Many factors have contributed to Elodie being (so far) really bilingual with no one dominant language. Our home language is the minority language. We have a constant stream of house guests, many of whom are business colleagues of my husband, and most speak more than one language which usually includes English. For

Continued on page eight

Bilingual Humour

DIEU MERCI!

After a busy day of shopping with her two children my friend took them to the library for their weekly visit. In a hurry, she failed to check the books her children had selected. At bedtime, when she opened the pretty red book her eight-year-old had picked out, she exclaimed, "Why, Jack this book is written in French!"

"Whew," sighed the little boy in relief, "I thought I had forgotten how to read".

Norma Clark

(Found in the *Reader's Digest*, May 1975)

ORGANISING A "SATURDAY SCHOOL": A JAPANESE EXPERIENCE

Martin E. Pauly

Introduction

Several years ago I was shocked that children of native English speakers living in Japan could not function in English or spoke an English incomprehensible out of their home or out of Japan. As an aid to the alleviation of that problem – the maintenance of a language not commonly spoken in a given country – the literature on raising children bilingually often mentions "Saturday schools".

In the spring of 1988 I was part of an organising committee for the formation of a Saturday school in Tsukuba, Ibaraki-ken, Japan. I will describe the experience of organising families into a group, the mechanics (e.g. teacher, fees, responsibilities, scheduling) of the school and the challenges of dealing with people from five different countries who often did not share the same pedagogical ideas.

Saturday School: A basic definition is "a school for teaching or maintaining the language of a people in a country where a different language is spoken". Classes do not necessarily have to be held on Saturday, but because of the working week and children's "regular" school, they usually are. There are Japanese Saturday schools throughout the world, e.g. in Frankfurt, and New York City. There is a Ukrainian Saturday school in Buffalo, New York. There is a Greek one in Vancouver. The Association of German Saturday Schools has five member schools in London. And there is an English one in Tsukuba, although it is held on Tuesdays.

> "An excellent opportunity for English maintenance/practice was vanishing before our eyes . . ."

Playgroup: Before entering into discussion of the Saturday school, it is necessary to give some background on the group which preceded it – "the playgroup". In the spring of 1986 a thrice-a-week playgroup for three two-year-olds was started. The children were A (Japanese/British), C (American/Japanese) and E (Icelandic/Icelandic). From the beginning the language of communication was English, and except for E's early attempts to force the others to speak Icelandic, she quickly picked up the new language. Although the parents often interacted with the children (usually in English) the majority of the time was "free play time" with the children left to their own devices in a room or at a park.

The next spring the three children entered different nursery schools where the language spoken was only Japanese. The children attended the nursery schools five mornings a week and the playgroup was cut to one day a week. Within a month a change to Japanese as the language of communication among the children (although the parents spoke to them in English), was noted. Within three months the change was almost complete.

It should be noted that it was never explicity stated that the group would be an English-language teaching/maintenance group. The parents were never responsible for teaching. An excellent opportunity for English maintenance/practice was vanishing before our eyes, however, and I tried to introduce vocabulary-building games (e.g. the slap game with picture cards). By this time English had become E's L3 and her verbal/comprehension skills were considerably below those of the others. I was firmly but politely instructed to please discontinue embarrassing her. Japanese remained as the language of communication among the children. In the spring of 1988 E's family returned to Iceland and, based upon the experiences of the playgroup, plans for a Saturday school were laid.

Organisation

As the idea of starting a school for English maintenance/upgrading had been discussed informally for a long time, and parents were realising that the English ability of their children was not what they had expected, five families sent representatives to the initial organising meetings. Agendas were prepared for these meetings and summaries of the previous meetings distributed to participants. Some of the problems and how they were dealt with follow.

Organisation – what form? As some of the participants had experience with organisations, but no one with organising a school of this type, many topics had to be discussed extensively. The decision-making process was usually by consensus, and when a consensus could not be reached, by voting. In early meetings all attendees had a vote but this was eventually modified to one family/one vote.

For the first two years the school was "family-controlled". By this I mean that almost all aspects of the operation of the school were decided by the families (parents). It was later changed to "teacher-controlled" with the teacher in charge of books, curriculum, money collection, class day and time, etc.

Number of children: A limit of seven was set with the provision that if this number were exceeded another group would be formed.

Day/time: Saturday afternoons for two hours with a 15-minute break was decided on. This was later changed to two afternoon classes of one hour each. It was generally agreed that this was more educationally sound as a week is a long lay-off from English class. Twice a week, however, proved to be difficult on parents because of work schedules and other activities. This was later modified to an hour-and-a-half class once a week (Tuesdays: 5.00 – 6.30 p.m.) with five short homework assignments.

The students: Who would join was never a controversial point. Requirements were simple – a child could not be under four years old and had to come from a family where English was one of the languages used in the home. The children who have been in the group are (expressed in terms of their parents – father/mother): American/Japanese (3), British/Thai (1), Japanese/British (2), British/Japanese (1). Others who were invited, but who chose not to join, included Japanese/Canadian, Nigerian/Nigerian, and Japanese/Australian.

Teacher: The question of who would teach caused much divisiveness in the group. For the past year there has been an instructor who commands the respect of all the participants but this hadn't always been so.

The original idea was that parents would share teaching duties on a rotating basis. The following examples illustrate why this was not feasible. At the first meeting a British woman said, "I hate teaching. I'm not good at it. I won't do

Continued on page four

Continued from page three

it". A British English teacher said, "I won't be comfortable teaching if my own chidren are in the class". When two Japanese mothers hinted they wanted to teach, several of the other members objected (although not openly at a meeting) that they felt non-native English speakers would be somewhat counter-productive. Hiring a teacher was therefore opted for, with the provision that when it was a family's "turn" they could either pay the teacher or take the option of one of the parent's teaching. It was understood that the teacher would be a native English speaker.

Occasional threats to quit the group were usually instigated by real or perceived shortcomings of the various teachers. Some sample objections: "He was speaking Japanese in the class", "She isn't strict enough", "He's just a hippy".

Curriculum: This was left up to the teacher or the parent who was teaching. In the first year a text was not used. Copies from various books, card games, songs, etc., although instructive, gave rise to objections that the class had no direction and was a glorified playgroup. The choice of *Oscar's Bridge to Reading/Workbook* (Sesame Street Series) as the core text silenced these objections. A complete set (11 books – Y12,613) of First Grade materials published by Scott Foresman (ordered directly from the US) is currently being used.

Observations/Conclusions

As of this writing our Saturday School has survived for two and a half years. A few observations on its successes and failures follow.

Publicity: Except for this article and a presentation at the Japan Association of Language Teachers Conference (1989) there has been, as far as I know, nothing published about our group. There have been no public announcements, be it for recruiting new students or for hiring a teacher. Everything has been done by word of mouth. The basic feeling is that our children, all foreign or of mixed race, get enough attention and that newspaper journalists, TV cameras, and observers are neither needed nor welcome.

Interest: Although there have been three core families who have continued from the group's inception, other members have come and gone. A pattern has been noted of initial enthusiasm and then a waning of interest on the part of parents who even begin to feel that an outside-of-the-home language maintenance class is unnecessary. A shock (e.g. a visit to the home country and the realisation that the child's language ability is far below that of his/her age group) often rekindles their interest.

It is also difficult to get a child interested in going to English class after a full day at Japanese school or while friends are playing outside. It is necessary for the parents to maintain the interest.

Teacher: There must be a teacher and there must be structure. From our experience, any attempts to "just let them play and speak English together" do not work because in most cases Japanese is the dominant language and English will simply not be spoken. The result then would be a playgroup, not a school.

As mentioned earlier, the question of the teacher stirred up normally calm emotions. Even a short-term substitute, who was judged to be unfit, would bring threats of "We're thinking of pulling out". A sad reality is that some people (even those with impressive academic credentials) often have no concept at all of how to control and teach young children.

Benefits: When the school was formed it was felt that two hours once a week would have minimal impact on the children's English ability. The effects/benefits, however, can only be described as exponential because of their rippling into so many other areas, sociological as well as linguistic, of the children's lives.

(a) Self-esteem. All week they are often the only foreign or half children in their class or school. Once a week they can meet children "like themselves" with whom they can share something.

(b) Competition. Being able to speak/read English counts for nothing in their own school but it hurts to be "not as good at reading as A" in the English school. Competition spurs accomplishment.

(c) Incentive. Something in the near future, that the child can readily relate to, like "study your lessons for next Tuesday's class", seems to offer more incentive than something in the distant future like "study your lessons for our visit to Gramma's next Christmas".

(d) Family participation. Practicing spelling words at the dinner table and correcting writing assignments for the next lesson can add a dimension that perhaps cannot be adequately explained in scientific and pedagogical terms.

A Saturday school is only one small part of the total picture in an attempt to raise a child with a command of a foreign language. More important parts would include attitudes of the immediate and extended family and those of the surrounding community. But based on the experience of the school in Tsukuba, the conclusion is that any drawbacks (e.g. money spent, transportation time, etc.) are far outweighed by the benefits and that this small part can be a very important part.

References

Harding, E. and Riley, P. *The Bilingual Family.* Cambridge University Press, 1986.

de Jong, E. *The Bilingual Experience.* Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Saunders G. *Bilingual Children: Guidance for the Family.* Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1982.

Saunders G. *The Bilingual Family Newsletter.* Multilingual Matters Ltd, July 1986, Vol. 2, No. 2.

Saunders G. *The Bilingual Family Newsletter.* Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1990, Vol. 7, No. 2.

Takizawa, K. "My Own Children Can't Speak English" in *The Language Teacher*, Vol. XII, No. 3, March 1988.

Yamamoto, M. "Significant Factors for Raising Children Bilingually in Japan" in *The Language Teacher*, Vol. XI, No. 10, Sept. 1987.

(An almost identical version of this paper first appeared in the Tsukaba University Foreign Language Centre's *Studies in Foreign Language Teaching*, No. 13, 1991. The author kindly made this article available to us after reading recent correspondence in the *BFN* about such schools.)

Bilingual Humour

OIE!

I am French, my husband is British, and we are regular readers of your magazine. Here is a typical "joke" from our two oldest children, as they were reading a book together (and talking in French):

Rebecca (5): "Oh, regarde, des *goose!*"
Emily (7): "Mais non, des *geese*!!!"

For a long time they were convinced that the word *goose* – with the plural *geese* – was a French word (in French it is *oie*).

Chantal James, Ploërmel, France

ASSISTANCE FOR BILINGUAL FAMILIES IN FINLAND

Margareta Pietikäinen
Chairperson, Association for Bilingual Families (Föreningen för tvåspråkiga familjer/ Kaksikielisten perheiden yhdistys)

Finland is a bilingual country with a Swedish-speaking minority of about 6%. Marriages between Swedish- and Finnish-speaking Finns are becoming more and more frequent. As a matter of fact, the situation today is that a Swedish-speaking Finn more often marries a Finnish-speaking person than a Swedish-speaking one. Earlier, families often chose one language for the family, in most cases Finnish. This is now changing and more and more young bilingual families want to give their children the gift of two languages from the start.

When we, a small group of bilingual activists, during a seminar on bilingualism, asked the participants if they would be interested in joining an association for bilingual families the response was overwhelming. We plunged into the adventure on 15th March 1990.

Up till now we have arranged seminars and meetings, visited schools and day care centres in order to discuss bilingualism with parents and teachers. We publish a newsletter every second month containing topical information – and we have, of course, informed our members about the existence of *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*. We also want to make the Finnish school authorities aware of the special needs of bilingual children in schools, pre-schools and day-care. Many members contact us with questions about problems they encounter in everyday life. We try to give them advice. Fortunately, we have a group of language specialists who are kind enough to help us when we are faced with really complicated questions.

Right now we are planning a big seminar on the pre-school child and bilingualism for the whole family. Special (bilingual!) activities for the children are arranged. This autumn we also plan to encourage our members to form local groups. As most of our members have small children it is difficult for them to attend meetings and seminars taking place far away from their homes. These groups could also establish contacts with local school authorities and point out possible needs for language strengthening programmes.

Our association is not only a forum for Finnish- and Swedish-speaking families in Finland. There are also other exciting language combinations among our members. In some cases we have bilingual persons (Finnish–Swedish) who marry somebody with another language. Many of these families would like to give their children three languages! Our task as an association is to encourage parents and stress the great possibilities we, as families with two or more languages, have to give our children a unique gift. The work is challenging and rewarding!

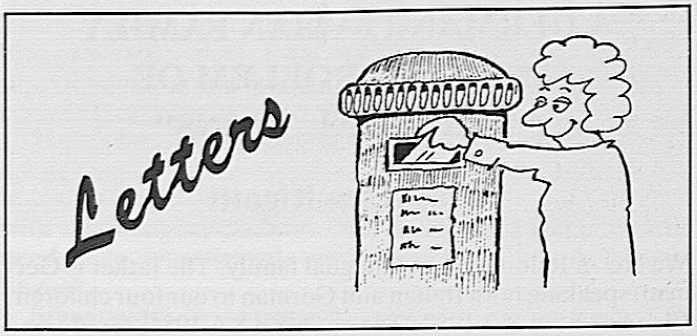
If any reader of the *BFN* is interested in getting more information about our group please contact our general secretary,

Contact details removed

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.



NO HARM IN CODE SWITCHING

I was greatly amused by Reinhold Trott's account of his family's attempts to avoid code-switching (*BFN* Vol. 8, No. 1). Whereas I also endorse the idea of avoiding mixed language in order that my daughter and son should learn to keep their languages apart, I find the extreme attitude adapted by the Trott family rather pedantic. In many bilingual communities code-switching is considered quite normal (see Romaine, S. *Bilingualism* (1989)). A bilingual child does not possess two monolingual-like codes, but rather two language systems which are constantly interacting with each other. I consider the monolithic view of total language separation to be intolerant and unrealistic. My experience has shown that bilingual children modify their speech according to interlocutor. My four-year-old daughter assigns words to their respective languages according to their phonology. In the company of monolinguals she does not code-swtich and if at a loss for a word asks me or her father to provide it. When talking to us or other bilinguals, however, she knows that she will be understood and we do not insist on absolute adherence to monolingual standards. I do, however, discourage other forms of language mixing such as syntactic or semantic interference.

Bilinguals are special people whose access to two languages offer a wealth of bicultural experience. In my opinion culture-specific vocabulary should not simply be translated in the other language for the sake of preserving monolingual phonological "norms".

A child's acquisition of language, be it in a monolingual or a bilingual context, is a wonderful, enriching experience for parents. Let us please keep the code-switching "problem" in perspective and not destroy our childrens' self-confidence with too much theoretical hair-splitting. I believe that there is no harm in code-switching, provided that bilingual children are aware of their switches and can eliminate them in the company of monlinguals.

Vanessa Behrendt, Tüblingen, Germany

A GERMAN-ITALIAN FAMILY AND THE PROBLEM OF "BILINGUAL TWINS"

Francesca Rigotti

We are an Italo-German bilingual family. The father is German, speaking both Italian and German to our four children, Claudio, born 8.2.1982, Teresa, born 8.6.1984, Guido and Cosimo, twins, born 22.1.1988, while I, the mother, am Italian, speaking exclusively Italian to the children. Since 1982 the family has been living in Göttingen, Germany, where all the children were born and where the elder two attend a normal German primary school. During every school vacation (four times per year) we stay in our flat in Northern Italy where the children and I spend a total of nearly three months a year (the father less), meeting friends and relatives.

This is undoubtedly a major reason for the excellent level of the children's "minority" language, Italian. I think that our elder children (Claudio, now 9;2 and Teresa, 6;10) could be classified as "absolute bilinguals" (according to Arnberg's definition), with a slightly better proficiency in Italian, or "true bilinguals" (according to Thiéry; in the sense that they are always taken for native by native speakers of either language (merely Teresa's strong "r" sometimes induces a suspicion in Italian interlocutors).

The Rigotti children at the zoo

Another reason for the successful bilingualism and biliteralism of Claudio and Teresa is probably that Italian au-pair girls have been living with us in Germany since 1987, speaking their mother-tongue with us all. However, the main reason, I suppose, is the considerable time Teresa and Claudio spend reading in Italian: books, children's magazines and comics are read, and re-read over and over. The fact that we don't have a TV (only the au-pair girl has one, in her room!) may also contribute. Both children learnt to read Italian from me at age three and they were able to read fluently by age five. Later, they began to read German before school by transferring the reading skills they had already acquired in Italian. Cosimo and Guido, now 3;3, are presently learning to read Italian, although their conditions are different from those of Teresa and Claudio's early childhood. Actually, the twins virtually speak only Italian at a very good level, and have poor linguistic skills in German. They are brought up at home by their father and me (we both work at the local university, but I have many more possibilities than he has to stay at home with the children) and the Italian au-pair girl and do not attend a kindergarten. Among themselves all our children communicate in Italian. The only exception occurs when some German playmates are in *close* proximity. In this case – and only in this case – Claudio addresses Teresa in German and vice versa, but they return immediately to Italian when the friends go away.

> "The twins virtually speak only Italian at a very good level, but have poor linguistic skills in German."

Why is the linguistic gap between Italian and German in the twins so deep, they speak Italian as if they were four and German as at age two? I am not really sure, but I wonder if it depends only upon the particular family situation or also upon being twins. Cosimo and Guido are probably identical twins, although we all try to point out the differences as far as possible. Their characters are fairly different and this is reflected in their different applications of their weaker language, German, Cosimo, the more reflective of the two, tries to speak German consistently with his father, while Guido, more impulsive and exuberant, seems too shy to do so.

> "I wonder if it depends only upon the particular family situation or also upon being twins."

It is true that the family conditions in which Cosimo and Guido are growing up are different from those in which Claudio and Teresa grew up for their first three years: they had German care (only a few hours a day); they heard Italian only from me (in the case of Claudio) and from Claudio and me (in the case of Teresa); their father was less busy in his job than he is now and thus more available for the chidlren. But in spite of these differences, I am not convinced that these are the only reasons that might explain Cosimo's and Guido's reluctance to speak German.

A GOOD EFFORT

I enjoy reading the *BFN*, and it does encourage one to persevere in bringing up the children bilingually. I'm Australian, married to a German. Weve been living in Germany now for 15 years, and we have three children aged 13, 10 and six. I stopped worrying about the children being able to speak English, although they mainly heard if from me and rarely used it themselves. Now that I'm planning a trip to Australia with my youngest daughter (6), she's suddenly determined to practise the language and continually surprises me with her prowess. She hears a lot of German, even within the family, but understands English stories. I read her C. S. Lewis at breakfast time, and she literally begs for more. All three children can converse fairly fluently in English.

It's a good effort you're making with the *BFN*, supporting parents in their attempts at cultivating multiculturalism. Keep up the good work!

Pamela Rehm, Bruckmühl, Germany

BILINGUALISM NOT ALWAYS POSITIVE

I know that you prefer to emphasise the positive aspects of bilingualism in your newsletter, but after my recent experiences with my son, I felt a strong need to send you our story.

With the birth of my daughter Aya, eight years ago, I started to subscribe to the *BFN*, and I have enjoyed it immensely. Following your suggestions, I used English with Aya from birth, and my husband Japanese. Although she demonstrated a passive bilingualism at first, by only speaking Japanese, she understood English well. When she was two and a half years old, we were transferred to Hondurus in Central America for two and a half years. While there, she attended a bilingual English-Spanish kindergarten, so that she began speaking English, learned a little Spanish, and was able to maintain her Japanese. We've been back in Japan three years now, and although getting her to use her English is a struggle at times, she is motivated to maintain it because of our yearly visit to the USA.

My son Keiji was born in Hondurus and lived there until he was one and a half years. Because of the ease with which my daughter became bilingual, I had no doubts that my son would also. I used English, my husband Japanese, and our maid used Spanish. Keiji, when he returned to Japan at one and a half years, only had a speaking vocabulary of about four words, and it only slowly increased to about 15 words at two and a half years. Besides his delay in speech, in retrospect I can say that he seemed to live in his own world and so wasn't interested in other children, could not follow simple directions and seemed hyperactive at times. I knew that many bilingual children show a speech delay, since they're learning two languages, but I didn't realise that they shouldn't be delayed in language comprehension. I failed to evaluate his speech progression and especially comprehension and blindly used English with him until he was three and a half years. Also he was being treated for serious otitis media over a long period of time, so that his hearing fluctuated.

Finally, between three and three and a half years, when we put him in a nursery school, he had tubes put in his ears to drain the fluid, and we only used Japanese with him, he finally slowly began to interact with others. A psychologist tested him and found that although he seemed to be of normal intelligence, his speech delay and withdrawal had affected his cognitive development, so that he was more than a year behind his peers. Finally, now at four and a half years he is slowly catching up.

Hopefully in the future he will be able to learn English also, but I realise now that my strong wish that he be bilingual affected my ability to evaluate his needs and development and take appropriate measures. Thank you for allowing me to share this experience with you.

Nancy Tsurumaki, Tokyo, Japan

Thank you for your interesting letter about your family's bilingual experiences. I was very interested in your evaluation of your son's language development and would like to comment on a few points you raise.

You express a commonly held view that bilingual children are delayed in their speech development, However, research indicates that if there is a delay it is only slight in comparison with monolingual children; any obvious significant delays need to be investigated, whether a child in bi- or monolingual.

Bilingualism is commonly blamed for developmental delays in children. The dropping of one of the languages is a common remedy prescribed by medical personnel, family members, etc., and it is almost always seen as effective, since with the passing of time the child eventually overcomes problems of immaturity etc., and goes on to develop normal language skills. However, partial deafness due to constant middle ear infection as in your son's case, or more serious disorders such as delayed development, are very difficult to pinpoint in very young children. It would appear that Keiji's problem was caused not by bilingualism as such but by his serious otitis media which impeded his language reception. In order for a child to produce words he must hear them. Because of his medical condition the problem with comprehension and production would, unfortunately, have still been there even if he had been exposed only to one language.

I'm sure that the nursery school has helped his cognitive development. Perhaps during your next yearly visit to America you can begin speaking to Keiji again in English and re-establish this as the language mother speaks, secure in the knowledge that he will acquire Japanese from his father and his peers at nursery school. I'm sure your son is a receiving bilingual to some degree, anyway, through listening to your conversations with your daughter.

Editor

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.

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

Contact details removed

If you do not already subscribe to the Bilingual Family Newsletter use the form below to enter a subscription for the next four issues.

If you know of any other bilingual families please help to secure the future of this publication by entering their address on the form and we will send them a free sample of a recent issue.

To: Multilingual Matters Ltd,
Bank House, 8a Hill Rd,
Clevedon, Avon,
England, BS21 7HH

Vol. 8, No. 4, 1991

From: NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

.....

TOWN .....

COUNTRY ..... POST CODE .....

☐ **Please enter a subscription to *BFN*.**
£5.00. Overseas £6.00 (US$12.50)

Payment or authority to charge your credit card must accompany each order.

Please send a copy of the following book(s):

☐ ***Intercultural Marriage.*** **£7.95**

☐ ***Key Issues in Bilingualism.*** **£8.95**

☐ ***Raising Children Bilingually: The Pre-school Years.*** **£8.85**

☐ ***Tavoitteena kaksikielisyys.*** **£12.95**

☐ ***Story as Vehicle.*** **£9.95**

☐ **Remittance enclosed for £/$** .....
(Please make your cheques payable to Multilingual Matters Ltd)

☐ **Charge my Visa/Access/Master/Euro/American Ex. Card**

Card No. .....

Expiry Date .....

Signature .....

☐ **Please send a sample copy of *BFN* to:**

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

.....

TOWN .....

COUNTRY ..... POST CODE .....

Contact details removed

Continued from page two

Elodie bilingualism is a normal state of affairs. We know several families in a similar situation to ourselves, where the maternal language is English. We make a point of meeting once a month for lunch to increase our childrens' sense of normality. We belong to an English bookclub, Red House (I recommend it both on selection and price) which means we have a good supply of English books. While in northern France we were able to receive an English children's television channel through the cable network. On quality alone this was useful, but at the point Elodie started school we were able to ban French television. We are also lucky in being able to accompany my husband back to the UK on three or four business trips a year.

For the future, I feel we have made an excellent start, helped by Elodie's interest in words, sounds and her sense of rhythm. We are just starting to teach Elodie to read (due to her interest) and we are starting with English, although this has its interesting moments: "h is for maison". Elodie will start learning a foreign language at school when she is seven. One of our reasons for choosing her school is that there is a choice between English or German, so we will be able to avoid the boredom factor. We will have to continue with our flexible approach, relying on our intuition, but above all hope that Elodie's very determined little character will push her to succeed. For all of you contemplating or just starting out, go for it. It's not difficult, in fact it's great fun.

Published by Multilingual Matters Ltd, Bank House, 8a Hill Rd, Clevedon, Avon, England, BS21 7HH.
Typeset by Wayside Books, Clevedon, England. Printed by Severn Graphics, Clevedon, England