The Bilingual Family Newsletter

News and Views for Intercultural People

Editor: **Marjukka Grover**

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In this issue

EDITORIAL

On 6th December, my country, Finland, celebrates 80-years of independence from Russia. Our local Finnish group is organising a party in Bristol to mark the event and one of the items in the programme is a poem describing vividly what Finns are like. Finns have sauna, sausage, lakes and forest. Finns do not smile, do not boast, do not master the 'small-talk' but speak only if they have something to say – or are on a mobile phone. And the description is not far wrong.

Every nation has its own characteristics and, of course, these are the source of many jokes from neighbouring nations. Stereotyping a nation can be hurtful, misleading and even dangerous. But we should also learn to laugh at ourselves and at the picture we give to an outside world. The world would be a dull place if we were all the same. By not taking ourselves too seriously I believe we have more chance to be open minded towards other nations.

What amusing national characteristics does your own or your host nation have and are they true? Please let us share your fun when you are laughing at yourselves.

Marjukka Grover

OUR TRILINGUAL EXPERIENCE
Catalan/English/Spanish Trilingual Family in Catalonia

M. Teresa Turell

I was motivated to write this article by Paola Crépin-Lanzarotto's letter (Vol.14:1) in which she narrates her contretemps involved in fostering and reinforcing trilingualism in her own family.

I'm myself a Catalan/Spanish bilingual who speaks fluent English and French.

" We also viewed multilingualism as a path to multiculturalism and intercultural understanding, and a way to bring her up to hold tolerant and pluralistic views towards diversity and difference."

My husband, David Sutcliffe, is English and speaks fluent Spanish and French. We live in Catalonia (where Catalan and Spanish are usual languages for most people). Before we had our daughter, Julia (born October 1993), we used to carry on our conversations mostly in English (80– 90%) but also in Spanish. After Julia was born, we continued using this pattern and by that time David had improved his Catalan a lot and can now speak quite fluently.

We are both linguists and there was no question but that we were going to reinforce whatever language Julia would be exposed to, and not just because we think that it would be a pity/waste not to take advantage of the current sociolinguistic situation in Catalonia. We also viewed multilingualism as a path to multiculturalism and intercultural understanding, and a way to bring her up to hold tolerant and pluralistic views towards diversity and difference.

There are both psycholinguistic reasons (very important findings as to language acquisition of bilingual and trilingual children, but which I will not consider) and sociolinguistic motivations that will help understand the reasons why we made the decisions in relation to both the languages we would use at home and the kind of school we would take her to. In David's case this was because English would be Julia's weakest language since it is not present in public life; in my case because Catalan still needs positive discrimination *vis-à-vis* Spanish.

Maite, Julia and David

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At Home

One parent - one language

From the very beginning I always talked to her in Catalan and David in English. The close extended family environment (grand-mother, *yaya,* in Catalan, uncles, aunts, cousins and most of my friends) is Catalan, although there are also some Spanish-speaking relatives and friends. She also has Catalan-speaking and Spanish-speaking baby-sitters.

Development

In her first years, she was a little more exposed to Catalan than English, since I spent most afternoons with her. When she started talking (2 years 2 months) she would produce complete, correct and fluent syntactic sentences in Catalan, including the use of Catalan 'weak pronouns' (*dona-me'l*, give it to me) and soon after complex Catalan tenses such as *s'han perdut* (they've been lost).

But it is also true that she had started developing bilingual skills very early. Before she was 2 years old she could choose the 'right' language to be used with the right person. If I pointed to the kitchen clock and said 'Clock!' she would shake her head, but when I said

" We want to acknowledge Julia's abilities to acquire three languages at the same time, which is after all something that can be achieved by any child around the world provided they have the appropriate environment... "

Rellotge! (clock in Catalan) she would nod her agreement.

For about six months (between 1 year 6 months and 2 years), Julia was much more productive in Catalan than in Spanish and English. The big turning point concerning English occurred in Summer 1995 when she was almost 2 and her father had more time to be with her. Her Spanish, however, remained very much receptive since her linguistic environment was either Catalan or English.

Schooling

In Catalonia children are now expected to attend the kindergarten level of school at the age of 3. Since English was going to be her weakest language the school we chose involves the sole use of English up to the age of 7, (the introduction of Spanish at the age of 7, and Catalan at the age of 9) and prepares pupils for both Spanish-Catalan and English secondary education with the final goal of mastery in the three languages.

Julia is now, aged 4 years 1 month, fluent in English, using this language with her father, teacher and peer group within the classroom (a lot of Spanish is used in the playground). When we visit the English family (grandpa, grandma, uncle, cousins and most important, David's children from his first marriage, of whom she is very fond) she understands everything they say and addresses them fluently in English. At the same time she has not stopped being fluent in Catalan, which she uses with me and my family. She can also speak Spanish quite well.

Her Discourse Now

In general, Julia keeps the three languages very separate, although because of Catalan/Spanish typological proximity, she sometimes mixes codes, making use of:

(a) Phonologically integrated borrowing, for example, using the Spanish word *ormiga* (hormiga) and adapting it to the Catalan pronunciation *urmiga*. The Catalan word is in fact *furmiga* (formiga), 'ant' in English.

(b) Morphological adaptation by making use of Spanish pronouns instead of the above mentioned Catalan 'weak pronouns', i.e. *agafa-lo* (take it!) instead of *agafa'l* in Catalan; the Spanish version would be *cógelo*.

(b) Borrowing words for example, she uses *pues* (Spanish) instead of *doncs* (Catalan) when speaking Catalan ('so, then' in English).

This type of mixing doesn't occur with Catalan and English or Spanish and English. She does, however, code-switch with her three languages, that is, she sometimes inserts English words when she speaks Catalan or Spanish, or the other way round. This also happens between Catalan and Spanish.

Another characteristic linguistic behaviour of Julia's is her wittiness in playing with her trilingual ability. For example, she occasionally chooses the wrong language to address the wrong person, but she does it as a humorous resource, in a conscious way.

Approach Used

We want to acknowledge Julia's abilities to acquire three languages at the same time, which is after all something that can be achieved by any child around the world provided they have the appropriate environment to do so. In addition, Julia is lucky in having a very good memory for new vocabulary in whatever language.

We feel, however, that our experience works because we made the following decisions:

Macro-sociolinguistically

(a) to make her aware that she will be addressed by each parent in their own mother tongue;

(b) to make her feel that even if she should associate one language with one parent, each parent is able to use the other parent's language;

(c) as a couple, to continue using the language we had always used, in our case, English, and letting her participate in the interaction in whatever language she chooses to;

(d) to always reinforce her use of language situationally; in English with her father, father's family and teachers; in Catalan, with her mother, mother's family, friends and baby-sitters, and in Spanish, with her peer group in the playground and our Spanish-speaking friends and baby-sitters.

Micro-sociolinguistically

(a) never to correct her directly or say that something was said incorrectly;

(b) to reinforce what she just said, by repeating the correct version;

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LANGUAGE LOSS

"... From private estimates by linguists who have worked widely in various parts of the world, I estimate that as many as 50 percent of the world's languages either are already no longer transmitted to children or, by the end of the century, no longer will be. Thus I believe it most likely that between 20 percent and 50 percent of the world's 6000 languages will become extinct during the coming century..."

"... The loss of any one language diminishes us all. Every language is as infinitely complex as a living organism, and the most marvelous manifestation of the human mind. A hundred linguists working a hundred years could not fully fathom the mystery of single language, let alone the world of human languages."

These are extracts from an article by Michael J. Krauss 'Language Loss in Alaska, The United States, and The World' published in *Frame of Reference* A Publication of the Alaska Humanities Forum, Vol.VI, No.1, 95.

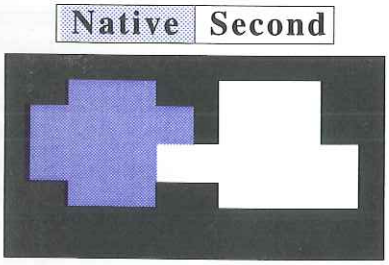
BLEST WITH BILINGUAL BRAINS
An important piece of 1997 research

Colin Baker

One recent area of research on bilinguals is how their two languages are stored and used in the brain. For example, if someone learns two languages from birth, with bilingualism as their first language, are the two languages stored differently in the brain from someone who learns a second language at school or in adult life? A frontier-breaking piece of research from Joy Hirsch and her colleagues at the Department of Neurology, Cornell University Medical Centre, New York used new brain imaging techniques to show a difference between early bilinguals (e.g. both languages learnt before three years of age) and late bilinguals.

In a region of the brain called Broca's area, there is a language-sensitive site. Joy Hirsch and her colleagues used a technique called 'functional magnetic resonance imaging' to show whether a bilingual's two languages are stored in close proximity or were relatively distant in the human cortex.

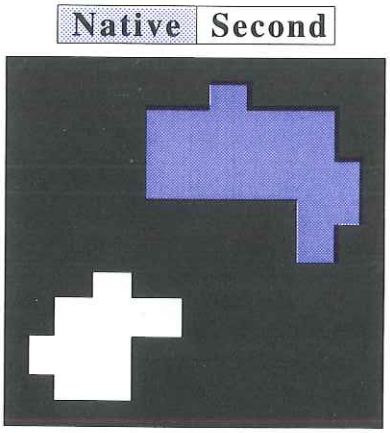
The basic finding is that in early bilinguals, the two languages are found in distinct but adjacent sites. That is, when two languages are learnt from early childhood, the languages sit next door to each other in the brain. This suggests that similar or identical regions of the brain serve both languages. In comparison, among late bilinguals , the native and second languages are stored in more separate areas.



Early Bilingual

As far as the brain is concerned, learning a second language later in life is different from acquiring it, for example, before the age of three. However, we therefore mustn't conclude that learning a language early on in life is better. Many people learn a second and third language later in life, and learn it fully and fluently. Also, learning a language later on in life is often quicker and more efficient than learning a language early on. So the conclusion mustn't be that languages are best learnt early.

The research, published in **Nature**, received much attention in the press. Like many pieces of innovative research, replication and extension is needed. Why? Firstly only 12 people were used in this study, of whom six were early bilinguals and six late bilinguals. The first and second languages included English, Korean, Spanish, German, Turkish, Hebrew, Croatian, Italian and Chinese. If bilinguals form about 60% of the world's population, 12 people is not a large enough figure from which to generalise. Secondly these bilinguals were shown pictures of morning, noon and night. They were then asked to think in one or the other of their two languages about what they had done during those times in the previous day. Thus the brain scans were restricted to someone thinking in language rather than speaking a language.



Late Bilingual

Reference:
Karl Kim, Norman Relkin, Kyoung-Min Lee & Joy Hirsch, 10th July 1997, 'Distinct Cortical Areas associated with Native and Second Languages'. *Nature*, Volume 388, Pages 171-174.

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HUMOUR, HUMOUR, HUMOUR

Phil (aged five) came in and was telling tales on his brother. His father told him *'Du sollst nicht petzen.'* (You shouldn't tell tales). Phil then turns to his brother and says 'Riky, you're a pest.'

L. Lynette Kirschner, Adendorf, Germany.

Second-class citizens?
Things aren't that simple

Alathea Anderssohn

When people in Britain discover that I am happy bringing up two daughters in Morocco, they are disbelieving, even horrified. After all, 'everyone knows' that women are second-class citizens in the Arab world. Western media encourage stereotyping by presenting only the most sensational news items. Even journalists who try to present Arab women's lives sympathetically often present Arab society as a whole in a very unsympathetic light. In reality there are great differences between countries. In some, there is a lot of discussion about women's role in society. Here in Morocco the subject is debated in the press and on television. One of the French-language newspapers regularly publishes letters from young men and women about their views of what relations between men and women should be, at home and in the workplace. In my children's school, part of last summer's end-of-year school review included a sketch contrasting the traditional and modern roles for women, acted out by one-year-olds.

Even within a single country there may be great differences between regions, between town and country, educated and less educated, between different families, and between different generations in the same family.

Western tourists who visit Arab countries rarely have the time or the contacts to make sense of what they see around them. Here social life is centred in the family, and unless you are invited into a family, you don't see what life is like. Unfortunately, the people most foreign tourists come in contact with are rarely typical of their society. Expatriate Westerners often live in a foreigners' ghetto, and many do not spend long enough in the host country to gain more than a superficial understanding.

I've had the advantage of being part of a family in Morocco. Even so, during the first few years I spent here, I tried to interpret what I saw around me by Western feminist standards, and I was often hopelessly wrong. For instance, when I used to go out with my husband in his home town, it was common for men who knew him to greet him, but ignore me. I thought they were being rude, but they were actually showing me respect. In some sections of society it is disrespectful for a man to talk to a woman - particularly a married woman - who is not a relative.

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This is a society which is changing very fast. When I first visited my husband's family fifteen years ago, married women with young children rarely left their homes except to visit relatives, or to go the *hammam* (the public bath-house). When they did go out, they wore long robes - *djellabas* - with enormous hoods pulled down to cover their foreheads, and veils which hid the lower part of the face. Only their eyes were visible. Now hardly any women go fully veiled. Many still wear the *djellaba* when they go out of the house, and many more wear it for special occasions. But the great hood is no longer drawn up to cover the head and half the face; it hangs down the wearer's back, a purely decorative item.

"Western tourists who visit Arab countries rarely have the time or the contacts to make sense of what they see around them. Here social life is centred in the family, and unless you are invited into a family, you don't see what life is like for most people."

Another custom which has changed in the time since I have been living here is the traditional wedding. When I got married, back in 1982, the wedding festivities were spread over two days. Men were invited on the first day, and women on the second. Now, more and more families are combining the two parties into one. Proof that the traditional segregation between men and women is breaking down? Yes, but only incidentally: the main motivation is economic. Families living in apartments in towns have nowhere they can entertain 100 or 200 guests, so they hire rooms for the wedding party. That's expensive, so they cut the costs by inviting everyone on the same day.

Some Westerners think that equality means sharing housework. I suspect that the trend towards sharing housework in the West had little to do with awareness of women's rights, and a lot more to do with changes in family size and in the kind of work done in the home. European men began to share in the housework when their jobs outside the home became physically less demanding, families became smaller, and machines became available to simplify housework. A lot of housework in the industrialised world is largely a matter of operating machinery. A cynic might say that this means men can do their share without threat to their masculinity.

Here, housework is still a physically demanding and time-consuming task. In most households washing is done by hand, bread is baked at home, and there are few, if any, machines to help with cleaning or food preparation. Working-class and rural households are still based on the extended family, with several adult women and teenage girls sharing the work. On big occasions, such as religious or family festivities, women from many related households work together. Women's experience of community is centred in all-female activities, which includes shared work as well as shared festivities. A man's presence would be unwelcome and intrusive.

Many women have grown up believing that their home-making skills are very important and very special. If it becomes clear that a man can cook or keep house, no role is left for them.

Educated women who work outside the home don't need their husbands to share the housework because most of them have maids. Things will change as the supply of maids dries up: few women want to work as maids in other people's houses if they can find work in a factory. Where the next generation is concerned, a very few professional women - doctors, teachers - are bringing up their sons to share in the work of the household.

Many middle-class women complain about the difficulty of finding reliable maids. Equally, many maids complain about the difficulty of finding employers who treat their maids properly. (It's not usually the men of the household who are the problem, but the mistress - and the children.) But I have never, yet, heard any woman, whatever her social status, say she wanted her husband to share the domestic chores. When women talk about what they want from a husband, mutual respect is more important. Many women say they want a husband who will not let himself be manipulated by his mother and sisters. It is not always the husband who makes a married woman's life difficult, but his female relatives. Indeed, failure of a marriage is more often blamed on trouble-making by relatives than on disagreement within the couple.

It is important for some women to be able to keep their job when they marry. Some professional men (though certainly not the majority) object to their wives going out to work. Traditionally, it is a disgrace for a woman to go out to work. It means that her male relatives - husband, father or brothers - cannot look after her properly. Indeed, some women take this attitude themselves, and look down on others who go out to work.

More generally, many women resent the double standard which imposes strict constraints on a woman's behaviour but none on a man's. They want women to obtain more rights in law, and to have effective enjoyment of the rights they already have.

Moroccan society is changing fast, and one of the greatest factors for change is education. Education shows girls that they are intellectually equal to boys, that they can learn skills which will be of use outside the home and can make them independent in ways which their mothers and grandmothers could not be. One of the greatest forces holding girls back may be the influence of older uneducated women: if not mothers, then grandmothers, aunts, older sisters or cousins. Living very limited lives themselves, it is hard for them to understand the aspirations of younger women. The danger in turn is that younger women will feel resentful of older women, and contemptuous of their ignorance. In a society where the elderly are accustomed to respect, it is difficult to admit that a younger generation is growing up much better informed, with broader horizons.

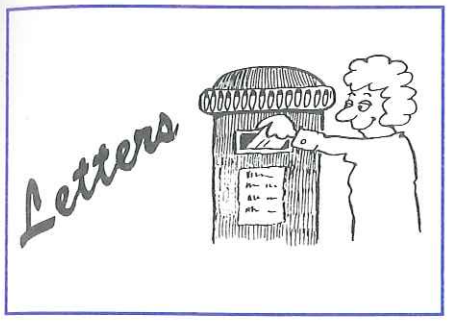
" But I have never, yet, heard any woman, whatever her social status, say she wanted her husband to share the domestic chores."

Educated young women, as well as the girls of my daughters' generation, are articulate and self-confident. Whether they succeed in living happy and useful lives depends not only on their society, but - maybe even more importantly - on their own resources as individuals. It seems to me that girls growing up in countries like Morocco have the potential to achieve as much as girls in any other society. And - dare I say it - at least my daughters won't have to face the pressures on teenage girls which I would certainly be worrying about if we lived in Britain.

DID YOU KNOW THAT ...

There is information available on the Internet on a book entitled **A Guide to Family Reading in Two Languages : The Preschool Years** by Theodore Andersson, published in 1977.

http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/preschlread/



Flexible Approach

I read the Newsletter from cover to cover the day it arrives - even if it means staying up beyond a reasonable hour (I have three sons who are full of energy every morning at 6 a.m.!).

I wish to lend my support first of all to Mary Goebel Noguchi (Vol.13 no. 3, 96) and to Faith Gibson-Tegethoff (Vol.14 no.1, 97) because our method of raising our three sons parallels their methods: flexibility, ingenuity and sensitivity. My husband is French, and I am American. We both speak French and English equally well. We were living in the USA when our first son was born, and our policy then was to speak only French at home. We were lucky enough to find a French-English bilingual school in the vicinity, and thus David spent his first three years of school in a bilingual environment. David is now 12, and is completely bilingual. I would have a hard time saying which is his native language. He is at the top of his class in a French junior high school, and I work with him at home in English to keep up his reading and writing skills, both of which are excellent. He is studying German and Latin in school, and next year will begin Spanish, so needless to say, bilingualism does not hinder, but rather enhances his education.

Our two other sons were born here in France, and were raised principally in English. Now that we live in France, we speak English in our home. Quentin, who just turned five, is in pre-school, and has just begun to really speak French, though he could always understand what was being said to him. He still mixes the two languages, and we simply ask him to repeat what he is saying in one language or another. In contrast, our third son, Victor, who just turned three, speaks quite fluently in either English or French, can easily translate when the need arises, and loves to tell anyone who will listen that he can speak both English and French. It's obvious that the ease we had with raising David bilingually is not the same with Quentin nor with Victor. What is essential is persisting with our idea that bilingualism can only be a plus in their future lives, and trying to be as

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TRYING FOR TRILINGUALS

Jayson Campeau

It does not take an extraordinary circumstance or an exuberant amount of effort to create trilinguaphones. We define trilinguaphones as people who have acquired three languages from birth and exhibit native-like fluency in all three.

We are in the process of creating three trilinguaphones of our own. The condensed version of our linguistic situation is as follows: my wife is from Belgium and speaks Flemish to the children, I am from Canada and speak English to them, we live close to a French region in south western Ontario and are sending them to a French language school.

Although each family's linguistic situation may be different and will vary over time, here are some things that we do to help with the process.

Firstly, it helps if you have a balance of the three languages. For example, my wife cares for the children all day and

Two of the Campeau's trilinguaphones, Jacob and Sarah

uses primarily Flemish with them. I 'play' with them in English in the evenings, on weekends, during holidays and in the summer for two months. The French comes mostly from school. The teachers speak only French to the students and expect the same from them. (We know that they speak Anglais in the school yard.) Although this scenario does not address which language is used with: playmates, baby sitters, relatives, visitors, etc., it is about as close to a balance as one might expect from this situation.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for books, magazines, newspapers, computer games, radio, music, story telling, videos and television in each of the target languages. The quality, intellectual level and quantity should be as balanced as possible. This is where networking, via BFN and other avenues becomes important. Having relatives in Belgium helps too.

Thirdly, the parents' willingness to learn other languages is very helpful and sends a strong message about multi-lingualism as well as fostering tolerance and piquing curiosity. For example, I am fully bilingual in English and French and I am

"We value each others languages and make overt efforts to show our children this..."

in the process of learning Flemish. I also have aspirations of someday learning Spanish. My wife is fully bilingual in Flemish and English and has an excellent working knowledge of French, Spanish and German. We value each others languages and make overt efforts to show our children this, but we are careful not to use our non-native language with the kids, beyond a casual comment, due to the chance of error fossilization. This occurs when a non-native speaker teaches through modelling, errors in the child's mother tongue.

Fourthly, persistence is essential in all that you do. Your entire family needs to be very diligent and follow the linguistic plan that you have laid out. It usually helps to have someone who is prepared to be the 'language police'. I am this person in our family and it is not always easy to insist on the use of certain languages in certain settings. However, the stricter you are about not mixing, the less the child will mix as they progress through to linguistic adulthood.

Although we may get the odd stare from the 'multilinguistically challenged' and visitors have commented on the apparent confusion in our home, we are having a really fun time in our multilingual household. We would love to have feedback on this article, either directly or through a letter to the editor. We believe that raising trilinguals can be truly trying, but we think that it is worth trying, truly!

Contact details removed

Effect of Separation and and Moving

Thank you for the support you have provided for me over the years. I am French, have been living in England for twenty-three years and my children are twelve and seven.

The 'one-person/one language' theory has been working fairly well, although the children lack confidence in French because they always answer me in English. I would say they are 'passive bilinguals' most of the time, except when we go to France and they have to answer in French then. However, I have been accepting the situation up to now.

But last year my husband, who is English, decided to leave us for another woman - English this time. Of course I was devastated and the children were accepting it very badly. He is not living very far from us and takes the children now and again (twice a week in the evenings for a couple of hours when I have commitments and sometimes on a Sunday). My twelve year old daughter is more resigned about the situation than my seven year old son, who gets very aggressive at times.

It may be that for my job I will have to go back to France, where I am a qualified teacher of English. I have been teaching French here, but on a very part-time basis since the birth of my children. Now I need something more permanent. I am at the moment applying for jobs in this country. But if I can't find anything I am considering applying for a job in France for September 1998. I have told the children about it but they are totally against moving. Of course I realise children are very 'conservative' and hate change. I wonder to what extent the move would affect their bilingualism. Their dad would probably look after them some of the holidays. The thought of an international school occurred to me but it is probably quite expensive.

You can see that I'm feeling unsure about our future and I don't know what's best for the children. I would be very grateful for any suggestions.

R. Smith, England.

As you are aware, it is essential to consider the psychological reactions to both a parental separation and an international move. These can sometimes seem overwhelming, but with careful thought they can become manageable. As I only know a little about your situation my views will have to be expressed in fairly general terms, but I hope they might help you find the solution which will work best for you and your children.

Whether or not you decide to move back to France, your children will continue to rely on you for both practical and emotional support for a considerable time to come. Parental separation and a geographical move do have similarities, in that they both involve upheaval, loss and change. If you decide to return to France, then the children's reactions to the move and the losses involved may be very similar to their initial reactions to their father leaving home. Your children may feel angry, frustrated and helpless, and will express these emotions differently depending on which is felt most strongly. Your daughter may seem resigned because she feels predominantly helpless, although she may be repressing anger. The aggressive behaviour of your son may show that his anger is nearer the surface, but I would expect that he too is feeling helpless and ineffectual.

"Parental separation and a geographical move do have similarities, in that they both involve upheaval, loss and change."

With regard to both the family separation and your possible move, being aware of the emotions involved can help to manage change more positively. This means giving the children opportunities to express their anger and for them to see that it has been acknowledged, rather than thinking that the whole thing must be smoothed over. If they are given useful tasks and their views listened to - and acted upon if possible - then this can reduce feelings of helplessness.

It is important too, for children to feel that although a period of change might seem confusing and challenging to him or her, adults close to them are in control and can thereby provide a feeling of security. You will be much better able to support your children before and after a move to France if you are convinced yourself that this is the best solution for you all. If you can keep to yourself (at least when in earshot of the children) any negative feelings and views you may have about your husband, England or the English, then this will help to foster a more positive framework for the children's bilingualism to continue.

Some practical points to help prepare the children for a move to France could include writing letters to any friends or relatives there, and receiving French comics and magazines - particularly relevant for your daughter, who, at 13 at the time of the move, will feel more comfortable if she is aware of trends in music, fashion and hobbies. This will not only help their linguistic skills but also establish a stronger link with the country.

By maintaining similar links with England from France, along with holiday visits, I think you will find that the children maintain a satisfactory level of English. This will keep options open for them in case they want to study or live here in the future. If they attend a local school then their English may have little practice for much of the year, but their passive knowledge will remain, especially if you encourage it with contacts, books, videos and perhaps a subscription to a magazine or comic.

You mention considering an international school for the children - my view is that if this is to be a permanent move to France, then they will establish a sense of being at home more quickly at a local French school, although initially this may be the more difficult option as they would be studying in French. Expect to have a year's settling in period, during which you may have to provide quite intensive support. You might want to enquire in advance what support (if any) is available to children for whom French is not the first language. Socially, too, the children may need up to a year to establish good friendships and to begin to feel at home. There will be difficult phases, and at times the children may blame you for their problems, but if well handled, then the long-term benefits of widening their social, cultural and linguistic horizons will last a lifetime.

Rose Aghdami

Rose Aghdami is a psychologist with a special interest in bilingualism and crosscultural issues.

GLOSSARY

Ethnocentrism: Discriminatory beliefs and behaviours based on ethnic differences.

Ethnolinguistics: A set of cultural, ethnic and linguistic features shared by a social group

When to teach reading and writing skills?

What advice you would give on the stage at which to teach reading and writing skills in English (the minority language). Italian children learn to read and write in their first year at elementary school, at the age of six. I gave up trying to teach my son to read in English before he started school, because he rejected the overt teaching by his mother. I am waiting until next year to give him the opportunity to learn those skills in Italian thoroughly and avoid interference, before coping with them in English. But is this necessary or can these skills, like oral language skills, be learnt in parallel in bilingual situations?
Alison Riley, Venezia, Italy

The formal teaching of reading and writing often starts around 6 and 7 years of age. Some children commence earlier, around 4 or 5 years of age. However, there is a prior stage that is needed - the building up of pre-reading skills in children.

Irrespective of whether a child is being brought up to read and write in one language or two languages simultaneously, giving a child simple books to handle in the first three years of life, reading to the child from as early an age as possible, relating pictures in story books to a movement of the finger across the page, having some key words in large letters on the fridge (e.g dog, cat), on the child's door and on the bedroom wall, helps the child to understand that letters and words create meanings. The young child will learn that letters and words relate to sounds, and that there is a special status placed on reading and writing. In good bookshops, there are often valuable pre-reading schemes, booklets and activities which can enable the parents to develop pre-reading skills in their children.

This means that the child does not start to read at the age of 5 , 6 or 7, but rather there is a continuous development from the first year of life to the stage when a child recognises the sounds of different letters, different blends of letters and short words. Reading doesn't start in school but in the home.

The home has another very important function. What is essential in such pre-reading activity, and when the child begins to read and write, is that there is fun and enjoyment. Such literacy activity must never become monotonous or be surrounded by conformity and pressure. Parents should never insist that their children engage in literacy activities because this will become counter-productive. A favourable attitude to reading in children means they will later develop advanced literacy competences by reading 'plenty and often'.

You ask whether it is more appropriate to become literate in one language first, or for literacy in both languages to be developed simultaneously? There are enough case studies to show that both simultaneous and sequential acquisition of biliteracy work successfully.

However, when a child has one much stronger language, it is often more appropriate for that child to become literate in that 'strong' language first. The skills of reading will easily transfer to the second language which can be introduced later when reading in the stronger language is well established.

While I do not know the full circumstances of your situation, nor the important relationship between home and school, a best guess is that it may be better for your child to become literate in Italian first, and then introduce English literacy later on. The reason for this is firstly, that there is a suggestion in your letter that the child's English may be weaker, and therefore, English competence may need to develop more fully before literacy is introduced in English. Second, if literacy in Italian is achieved successfully and with a positive attitude to reading, some of the skills and pleasures of reading should then transfer to English. Third, literacy in English tends to gain status as children grow older and become aware of the very high international prestige of English literacy.

Colin Baker

Colin Baker is Professor of Education at University of Wales, Bangor.

OUR TRILINGUAL... *from page two*

(c) to let her be very creative with the three languages, pushing her to use them situationally;

(d) never to answer instead of her when she is asked, even if she doubts or does not know how to continue;

(e) never to use baby-talk, but rather talk to her as an adult;

(f) to allow her to invent words.

Additional linguistic input

(a) to have a lot of children's stories and books in the three languages;

(b) to have the same story in the three languages in some cases;

(c) to have some stories or books in just one language to reinforce that it was written in the context of the father's or mother's country and culture;

(d) to have video-tapes and audio-tapes in the three languages;

(e) to watch films in the three languages, sometimes to watch the same film in the three languages;

(f) to visit the English family as frequently as possible.

Our conclusion is that our trilingual experience is very positive and successful for Julia. Linguistically speaking, it has made her creative, talkative, secure and outspoken (even if sometimes 'the needle gets stuck'), and from a personal point of view, it has made her more resourceful, open and tolerant to respect other children and people, and to make the others respect her.

M. Teresa Turell is Professor of Linguistics at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain.

The editor, with the help of the International Editorial Board, is happy to answer any queries you may have on bilingualism/ -culturalism. We reserve the right to edit any letters published. All contributions to the Newsletter should be sent to:

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CONTACTS

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

The following people would like to get in touch with either same combination language families or other bilingual families in their area.

Contact details removed

FLEXIBLE... ***Continued from page five***

consistent as possible with our teaching methods. Thus, we speak essentially English at home, with some conversations in French. We expose the children to a maximum of music, videos, magazines and especially literature in both languages. When we are in the presence of monolingual speakers - either English or French - we sometimes speak English, or French, or a combination of the two if some translation is called for (but never sentences with a mixture of the two languages). Is this consistent? To an expert, probably not. But for us, it works. For us, our languages are our cultures, our lives, our whole beings, and that can't be confined to a set of rules to be followed to the letter.

Do you think it would be possible in the future to create a column in the BFN with interesting sites concerning bilingualism/ trilingualism on the Internet? Jayson Campeau (Vol. 14 no. 1, 97) pointed out how much information was available 'out there'.

Paula Monfroy, Verriers, France.

If anyone comes across any interesting Internet sites concerning bi/trilingualism and -culturalism, please let me know. I will include the information in a forthcoming BFN.

Marjukka Grover