

# The Bilingual Family Newsletter



News and Views for Intercultural People

Editor: Marjukka Grover Assistant Editor: Sami Grover 2002, Vol 19 No.1

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## EDITORIAL

I have spent the past two months in Finland nursing my mother who is ill with cancer. As well as being a very sad time it has been a most enlightening experience. I have had time to talk with her about the past, present and future, about death and what she believes about the after life. We have had lovely afternoons just sitting quietly and letting the world go by. She is a fantastic lady!

I have also had time to reflect on cultural differences in the attitude to death. In Britain I feel death is somewhat taboo. In Finland, although a high-tech country, the people are still near nature and death is taken as being as natural a part of life as birth. Finns often joke about death in a manner that the English find morbid. I would be interested to hear how other cultures deal with this difficult subject.

On a happier note, I am pleased to tell you that my plea for new material has paid off. Many thanks to you all but please keep writing. The more we have the better the Newsletter will be.

In this issue Soile Pietikäinen tells us of a fantastic idea born in a Finnish sauna and Ciara O' Higgins explains what it feels like to be thoroughly European. Also, if you can, please take part in the research on multilingualism and emotions (p.3). The more we know about our behaviour, the less conflicts we have.

Finally, I want to thank past members of the editorial board and welcome the new ones, especially the new assistant editor, Sami Grover. Sami is my younger son, bilingual English/Finnish who is also fluent in German and Danish. No doubt you will be seeing the BFN moving on to its third decade with a new vigour.

**Marjukka Grover**

## FINNTASTIC NURSERY: DAY CARE MADE TO MEASURE

Soile Pietikäinen

### *Who needs bilingual childcare?*

One Friday night a year ago I sat in the sauna of the Finnish Church in London with a fellow mother. Once again the sauna got Finns talking. We ended up confessing our wildest dreams about childcare tailored to the needs of a multicultural family with pre-school children. The conversation flew high in the heat.



After all, we thought, most families have remarkably similar needs. Parents need to work. Children need good care during the day. Most bilingual families would like the minority home language to develop a little better than it does when you struggle all on your own. Many of us would wish our children to become more knowledgeable about all the cultures in the family.

It is sometimes difficult to manage the systematic effort required to bring up children with active and balanced bilingualism. Indeed, many of us have

faced disappointments after a promising start. And we have seen children losing their first language proficiency after moving abroad. No wonder we find ourselves having many questions on the way and often feel the lack of informed advice. Yet parents also have a wealth of professional skills and resources that could be pooled to raise our bilingual children.

After these considerations we decided we need bilingual childcare. Opening a bilingual day nursery could meet all these needs and more. It would have a specialised day care program for bilingual children. Parents would get competent advice and a conversation forum. Our eyes shone through the steam in the dusky room.

That night was the beginning of the project to open the first Finnish-English bilingual day nursery in London. One might ask: 'Now, have they gone totally bonkers?' Well, many did ask that question and the sceptics must be excused for raising their eyebrows. But believe it if you dare: now fifty families are interested in the service and we are sailing fast towards the goal. The first group of children is to start in autumn 2002.

### ***Segregation, assimilation and pluralism: Dealing with diversity***

There are many ways to organise care and education for bilingual children. One popular model in catering for different needs is to divide children into homogeneous groups and separate them from each other. In this manner, we could open a bilingual nursery for Finnish speaking children in London. In this case

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**FINNTASTIC...from page one**

we would focus on Finnish and English language and culture. We have chosen not to go for this solution. At the very beginning of our efforts a senior London Finn called this option 'creating a ghetto' for our children. This kind of nursery, we fear, would isolate our children from the surrounding society. Such segregation wouldn't be in the best interest of their future in English mainstream education either.

Most children from bilingual families go to ordinary primary schools in their native countries. Being different will not always be the coolest thing on earth. Encouraged by the institution and peer group alike, assimilation is likely to appear an attractive option. To help children overcome this transition we have opted for a dual language nursery and our doors will be open to the general public in the local area.

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*"A day nursery is a wonderful place for creating an environment where being bilingual is normal and a positive resource for the child".*

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Therefore this is not all about Finns. On the contrary, the core idea of the project is to create a multicultural nursery community. We will offer care to both monolingual English children and language minority children resulting in a daily contact with the English culture and a lively and varied language model in each of the child's languages.

The bottom line is our belief in the possibility of a positively multicultural society. It is founded on the fact that one in four families in our mailing list is multicultural and several of them have trilingual children. Many of our Anglo-Finnish children are also Nigerian, Italian, Swedish, Russian, Gambian or American. Apart from all the possible versions of Christianity, there are several Muslim families among us and some are atheist.

Such diversity cannot be overlooked if we are to serve the needs of our children. At the same time it all sounds terribly complicated. In addition the other local children will probably have different cultural origins and speak yet other languages. How can one possibly handle similar hotchpotch?

I admit, it is complicated and we haven't got a ready solution to put on show. But we are working on it and

there is a lot we can build on: skills of the teachers, sociologists, psychologists and childcare professionals involved in the project, practice in other bilingual nurseries and the available vast literature on bilingualism. It is a learning experience and the years to come will show how it will work out.

London is a multicultural living environment and, taking a closer look, the proposed situation isn't that abnormal. The majority of nurseries in London already have a very multicultural intake. It is just that only few of them pay much attention to the children's home languages.

New national standards on pre-school education have been introduced in the UK only recently. They specify that English, as well as children's home language 'needs to be learned in context, through practical meaningful experiences and interaction with others'\*. A new active status is given to the home languages in nursery practice. At the same time it is emphasised that all children have to reach the target learning outcomes for five-year-olds in English language. In the light of these recommendations we are simply setting out to explore how the new standards could be implemented in day-to-day childcare.

### **The Finntastic Nursery in London**

In any nursery everything should boil down to the high quality of day care. As parents ourselves, we aim to combine all the elements to be able to offer a service to rely on. This takes well-motivated staff, caring management and good planning. The nursery staff will have ordinary childcare qualifications combined with an adequate mix of first languages and practical on the job training on bilingual language development.

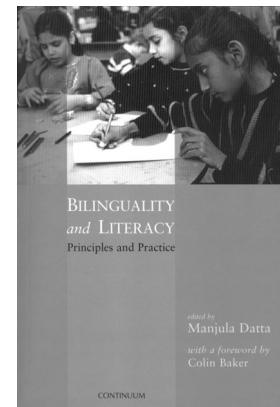
The nursery will offer full time care for children from 4 months to 5 years. In the future an after school club will be needed as a follow up for the children entering school. Opening hours will be the usual Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm.

The main nursery practice will be in English language and therefore accessible to the local population. All children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds will be given importance in the daily life of the nursery. All home languages will be promoted within the possibilities. In addition the Anglo-Finnish children will have two daily sessions in Finnish language. The care for the age group 3-5 must satisfy the new national curriculum

**BOOK REVIEW**

## **Bilinguality and Literacy edited by Manjula Datta**

**Reviewed by  
Terry Haywood**



*'Don't you think you're good in English? I asked the group (of children). 'No, because I'm not English, I speak Turkish at home'. 'But that doesn't matter does it, Miss?' responded another, looking very confused.*

This conversation is not taken from *Alice in Wonderland* but, just as reported in Manjula Datta's book on bilingual teaching strategies, it is an everyday occurrence in schools all over the world. Children ask themselves these very same questions and there is a very clear answer to their confusion – 'No, it doesn't really matter – in fact, it may even be an advantage!'

Manjula Datta would probably not claim to have made a major discovery in language learning. The research findings on which her writing is based have all been well established for some time and she summarises them well in one of the early chapters. The problem is that many educators are still not aware of how they can utilize the research in their own practice. Teachers, schools and communities often feel isolated as they pioneer their own way forward, often lacking coordinated support or guidance. That is why Manjula Datta's *Bilingualism and Literacy* will be welcomed by all those who work with children in an academic language which is not the mother tongue or the medium of communication at home. The collection's subtitle *Principles and Practice* is perhaps a little misleading in this respect as the focus of this book is most definitely practical. It contains a mine of valuable insights, suggestions and ideas that practitioners will be able to translate into their own environments.

The opening chapter explains how the author's interest in bilingual literacy emerged from her own background as a

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multilingual child growing up in Africa and India. She obviously benefited from a very supportive family, as she became confident in Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali and English before she reached her teens. Anecdotal evidence is not hard science but it is remarkably effective at providing situations that we can identify with. Many readers will sympathize with her 'silent period' that lasted almost two years following the family's move to Calcutta where a group of new friends teased her for 'speaking Bengali with a Punjabi accent'. Others will appreciate how her family came to send her to an English language secondary school because she

*"Most of all, there are huge benefits from being able to work across two or more languages and the effort is well worthwhile, opening vast horizons of experience and understanding to bilingual children that are denied to the monolingual".*

lacked 'academic rigour' in Bengali, the home language. Herein lies one of the central issues of the book and the essential dilemma for schools. Confidence and competence in oral interaction is *not* the same as being literate in the written word. The challenge for teachers is to encourage multilingual children to develop full command of the written academic language so they are able to express themselves effectively and have equal opportunities for success.

Most of this book explores strategies that can be used to promote literacy in children up to the age of eleven. The account is firmly focused on the classroom with a wealth of case studies

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## HUMOUR, HUMOUR



Timon, age 3, (speaking German/Danish/ English) enjoyed the fireworks on bonfire night. A few days later he said: 'Jetzt ist die 'bumm-feier-night' vorbei.' (Now the 'bang-party' night is over).

**Judith Sørensen, Hull, England.**

## ACADEMIA NEEDS YOU!

### Research on Expressing Emotions in Multiple Languages

Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1998: 85) point out that 'emotions are at the center of human mental and social life'. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon of emotions has attracted the attention of researchers in a variety of fields, including neurobiology, cognitive, social and cultural psychology, anthropology, and cognitive linguistics. This research suggests that there may be both cultural similarity and diversity in emotions. One of the leading researchers in this field, Wierzbicka, an Australian professor of Polish origin, claims that the connection between emotions and the body is encoded and emphasized in Russian to a higher degree than it is in English, and that English favours the adjectival pattern in emotion discourse, while Russian prefers the verbal one (1999). For example, experiences comparable to 'anger' are often conceptualized in Russian as inner activities in which one engages more or less voluntarily. As a result, they involve duration and are often designated by verbs, rather than adjectives (e.g., *serdit'sia*'to be angry', 'to rage'). In contrast, in English emotions are conceptualized as passive states caused by external and/or past causes; as a result, they are more commonly expressed by means of adjectives and pseudo-participles, such as 'worried', 'sad', or 'disgusted'.

A recent study by Pavlenko supported Wierzbicka's claims. It seems that 'the reading of the body' is not a culture- and language-free experience, but is shaped by cultural, social, and linguistic forces, as well as by individual differences (2002a).

To enhance intercultural communication and understanding, and to improve ways in which linguistic minority members in our own culture are dealt with in a wide range of contexts, it is becoming increasingly important to understand ways in which different cultures conceptualize and verbalize emotions. In her acclaimed memoir, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, a Polish-American writer Eva Hoffman (1989) poignantly recalls an encounter with her mother: 'My mother says I'm becoming 'English'. This hurts me, because I know she means I'm becoming cold. I'm no colder than I've ever been, but I'm learning to be less demonstrative'. Hoffman's perceptions reverberate through numerous other memoirs of bilingual individuals who see some of their languages as more emotional than others, and through research on psychoanalysis with bilingual clients where a second language is chosen sometimes to create emotional distance between the topic and the patient (Pavlenko, 1998).

Two recent studies looked at how bilinguals talk about emotions in their two languages. Building on the previously mentioned study (2002a), Pavlenko examined how late Russian-English bilinguals, who learned their English post-puberty, negotiate differences in conceptualization of emotions in narratives elicited in both languages. She found

evidence that some of the bilinguals had internalized and actively deployed American emotion concepts and generally favoured concepts and scripts shared by their two speech communities.

The second study, by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2002), investigated the use of emotion vocabulary in the advanced French interlanguage of Dutch L1 speakers and in the advanced English interlanguage of Russian L1 speakers. The results demonstrate that highly proficient and extrovert speakers use a significantly greater number of emotion words in their conversations. The type of linguistic material and gender were also found to have an effect on the use of emotion words (females generally using more and richer emotion words).

In order to create a larger picture of bilinguals' own perceptions of the relationship between their languages and emotions (i.e., whether they are more emotional about one language than others, or whether they see one language as particularly suitable for expressing their emotions, such as anger, irritation, or enjoyment), we developed a web questionnaire with 34 questions on bilingualism and emotions which we would love you to fill out if you have – at least some – knowledge of an L2, or L3, L4, L5...! The questionnaire is based at the following address : [www.bbk.ac.uk/lc/biling+emotions/index.html](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/lc/biling+emotions/index.html)

In the second stage of this study, a number of volunteers will be interviewed in-depth based on the questions in the questionnaire. Preliminary findings will be presented at two conferences in the autumn of 2002: at the EUROSLA 12, University of Basel, Switzerland, (18-21 September 2002) and, at the International Symposium on Bilingualism at the University of Vigo, Galicia, Spain ( 23 - 26 October 2002)

**Jean-Marc Dewaele**

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## BOOK REVIEW...from page three

in which the development of individual children and the work of specific teachers makes fascinating reading. The message is overwhelmingly positive. Ms Datta demonstrates how sympathetic teachers can guide children to successful outcomes. Gone are the days of 'full immersion' when exposure to the target language alone was paramount. The bilinguals in this book are children who bring a wealth of potential to school, based on their mother tongue or home language, but whose teachers are all too often unaware of how this can be exploited and translated into classroom communication.

Teachers often report that bilinguals tend to prefer non-fiction tasks. One of the reasons that Ms Datta pinpoints for this is the inevitable cultural dilemma and anxiety that these children face as they

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“...competence in oral interaction is **not** the same as being literate in the written word...”

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seek to pry 'hidden meanings' from their texts. Commenting on one exercise, a young Arabic speaker asked 'Why don't they write in normal language?' which contrasts with the author's perception that the child's mother tongue is particularly rich in the use of metaphor. Similarly, children do not find it easy to develop ideas or to transfer the enjoyment of reading into their own written language as they are aware of the culture-laden significance of the written word. Language does not just transmit factual information: it implies sensations, generates atmosphere and encodes commonly-held but implicit perceptions of the world. The cultural and social context of language learning cannot be separated from how the language is used – but the message of this book is that there are ways to unlock some of the pathways that allow experience from one language to enlighten literacy in another. Most of all, there are huge benefits from being able to work across two or more languages and the effort is well worthwhile, opening vast horizons of experience and understanding that are denied to monolingual children.

The book focuses on the United Kingdom and the teaching of English as the formal academic language, but its lessons and experiences should be useful in all bilingual

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## NEWS FROM THE USA

## An Obituary

**James Crawford**

*The Bilingual Education Act*

*Born January 2, 1968*

*Died January 8, 2002*

*Cause of Death: Political Assassination*

Legislation that transformed the way language minority children are taught in the United States – promoting innovations in the classroom, training a generation of educators, and fostering achievement among students – has died. It was 34 years old.

After years of political attacks, the Bilingual Education Act finally fell victim to its opponents. It was eliminated as part of a broader 'school reform' measure for elementary and secondary education, as proposed by the Bush administration and passed with bipartisan support in Congress.

Known as the *No Child Left Behind Act*, the new law will continue to provide subsidies to help educate limited-English-proficient (LEP) children. But no longer will the federal government administer a competitive grant program designed to promote excellence and ensure quality control. Instead, the funding will be distributed by individual states using a formula based on enrollments of LEP and immigrant students.

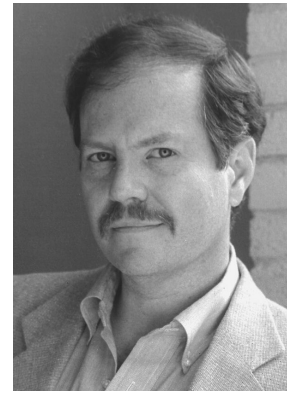
Few strings will be attached on how the federal money can be spent except for provisions that discourage the use of native-language instruction. For example, states, districts, and schools will be 'held accountable' for how quickly LEP students learn English. Annual testing will be mandated, 'measurable achievement objectives' will be established, and failure to show progress will be punished.

This marks a 180-degree reversal in language policy. Whereas the *Bilingual Education Act* included among its goals 'developing the English skills ... and to the extent possible, the native-language skills' of LEP students, *No Child Left Behind* stresses only English acquisition.

One exception is a small loophole that allows continued support for dual language instruction. Formerly known as two-way bilingual education, such programs enrol English-speaking students alongside minority students, enabling both groups to become fluent in two languages. That purpose, however, was apparently too controversial to receive explicit mention.

Indeed, the word **bilingual** has been expunged from the law, except to strike the name of the federal bilingual education office. It now becomes the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited-English-Proficient Students.

Other provisions of the legislation require instructional and training programs to reflect 'scientifically based research'. While such a requirement sounds reasonable in theory, the term remains undefined and is subject to



abuse – for example, as a pretext for denying support for bilingual pedagogies, which some critics claim to be 'unscientific'.

Perhaps most ominous, considering the chronic shortage of teachers who are prepared to serve the needs of LEP children, the new law will severely limit funding for professional development.

These radical changes come, ironically, at a time when both Democrats and Republicans are reaching out to Latinos, who are now seen as 'swing voters' in key states.

President George W. Bush tries to show off his Spanish at every opportunity (even if it's usually just 'Mi casa es su Casa Blanca'). Advocates for English as the official language, who successfully exploited anti-immigrant attitudes in the 1980s and 1990s, find themselves increasingly isolated. As more American communities become accustomed to diversity, bilingualism fails to arouse the fears it once did.

Yet these trends have not translated into political support for bilingual education. To the contrary, erstwhile allies – including the Congressional Hispanic Caucus – remained largely silent over the past year as the program was being dismantled. Behind closed doors, Democrats generally allowed ideological opponents of bilingualism to have their way in exchange for increased funding to educate LEP students. The money will be spread more thinly, however, as it flows to a larger number of states affected by immigration.

Virtually no political leaders stepped forward publicly to defend bilingual education. Clearly they sense the unpopularity of a pedagogy that is widely seen as an impediment, not a means, to acquiring English. Until researchers, educators and advocates find ways to correct this misunderstanding, further restrictions on the program would seem likely.

James Crawford's latest book is *At War with Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety* (Multilingual Matters, 2000). ISBN 1-85359-505-5, Price £9.95/US\$15.95.

For further information on the politics of bilingual education, visit his web site at:

<http://ourworld.compuserver.com/homepages/jwcrawford/>.

## AND WHERE ARE YOU FROM, THEN?

### Ciara O' Higgins

What does it feel like to be a multilingual and multicultural person? This is what happens to me whenever I meet someone new:

- *And where are you from, then?*
- *I'm Irish and French.*
- *Really? How is that possible?*
- *Well, my mother is French and my father is Irish.*
- *But you, what are you?*
- *Well both, I feel both*
- *But you must feel more one than the other!*
- *No, really I feel both*
- *But where were you born?*
- *In Dublin, in Ireland.*
- *So you're Irish then.*
- *Well yes, but I lived in France from 13 to 17, that's my whole adolescence.*
- *Oh right, so you feel French then.*

Usually at this point there are two possible outcomes to the conversation. Either it continues to go round in circles trying to assign me to either one or the other nationality, based on time spent here or there and the age when I left there and came here. The past being too complicated, the conversation continues about now:

- *And so where are you living now, France or Ireland?*
- *Well, actually, I am in the Basque Country, in Spain*
- *Oh, and are you studying?*
- *No, I'm working here, I studied in England.*
- *Oh, really in England and how long were you there?*
- *Well my degree in Canterbury took four years but I spent the third year in Germany, in Jena.*
- *In Germany? I thought you said Spain!*
- *Yes, that's right, I'm in Spain now, but during my degree I spent a year in Germany.*

This is usually the moment when my interlocutor tries to recap on my life story, gets it all wrong and I have to sum up a biography which by now I know by heart and can deliver flawlessly in all the languages I speak:

*My father is Irish and my mother is French. I lived in Ireland until I was 13, then we moved to France. I went to school in Strasbourg and did the International Baccalaureate at 17. Then I went to study in England, and spent a year in Germany. After England, I decided I wanted something new, which meant among other things a new language (and a Latin man probably*

*had something to do with it!) and off I went to Spain.*

At that moment, a look of awe passes over my interlocutors' face as they realise how many languages that implies:

- *Well yes, I speak English, French, German and Spanish fluently.*
- *Any others?*
- *In Ireland I learnt Irish (Gaeilge), in Germany I did a bit of Russian and last year I tried a beginner's course in Italian.*



The conclusion to the conversation is either one of the following:

- *you must be soooooo smart!*
- or
- *so you're a translator then!*

I have to say that I don't understand or share either point of view. I feel more like life gave me the opportunity to learn languages and not that I learnt them better or faster than others or that I am smarter than anybody else.

For me, learning a language is like learning music, you listen to others speak and you repeat what they say. If you have a good ear you can imitate accents and intonations, and you learn quickly and accent-free. If you try with grammar exercises and off by heart you will learn something, but it probably won't have very much to do with what people actually speak.

And as for being a translator I really don't understand why people think speaking languages just has one purpose, that is translating for others. I studied management and the most useful thing I

## BOOK REVIEW... from page four

settings and to a wide audience. Parents who are not teachers may find that the book is not easy to follow. After all, it is not written as a handbook for parents. On the other hand, while most of the book deals with pedagogical issues, there are also chapters on school policy formation, on the education of refugees and on community language schools. Heads, policy makers at national and local level, community leaders and others will all find Ms Datta's book to be a valuable contribution to their work.

This excellent text is highly recommended reading. Precisely because of its insight into the development of languages in children during primary school, it also poses unanswered questions about some aspects beyond the scope of this book. It would be interesting to know how the children in this book progress through their own adolescent years and also how we can help older children who have to embark on formal language learning following migration. This may be a special form of bilingualism but it is one that I often encounter as Head of an international school. Even more important, this book poses some serious questions for policy makers. The comments by school inspectors in this book would appear to show that there is now general recognition of the importance of developing home and community languages as the foundation for academic literacy. *Bilingualism and Literacy* shows how teachers can respond but it still seems that there is a certain amount of lip-service paid to mother tongue reinforcement without really promoting multilingual opportunities for the children themselves. Are we satisfied to leave formal education in home language to the private initiative of weekend community schools? How can we put families in touch with the research findings and encourage their own role in the language process?

Manjula Datta's love of languages and literature, together with her enthusiasm for the joys and excitement of multilingual story-telling and language development, is a pleasure to read. But will the policy makers ever listen to Colin Baker's view that it is not the bilingual learner who is unfortunate in today's world, but rather the monolingual learner who is not being given access to a powerful and invaluable experience. *'Such are the advantages of bilingualism and biliteracy that monolinguals must increasingly be seen as deprived'*. Now that is a revolutionary thought in the making!

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**FINNTASTIC...from page two**

for foundation stage\*\*. For the bilingual Anglo-Finnish children the Finnish pre-school curriculum (esikoulu) will be used in parallel. The two curricula cover the same learning targets and have a similar educational approach, making it possible to use ready materials from both. There are no similar requirements for the younger children. In their care a crucial element will be the personal relationship with a carer sharing their home language.

A day nursery is a wonderful place for creating an environment where being bilingual is normal and a positive resource for the child. The contact with minority home language is regular as well as rich and varied in content. But at the same time such a nursery can help bilingual children in developing those all-important English language skills they will need to enter the mainstream schooling.

*“...our aim is that of learning, and teaching our children, to operate effectively in a positively varied and pluralistic society”.*

A multicultural viewpoint is necessary in offering bilingual education for children with many different, and often multiple, ethnicities. It is not just telling about the different cultures and festivities people celebrate. We see it rather as starting to dismantle the institutionalised racism in the educational practice itself. This means giving up assumptions of cultural superiority that often lurk under the surface.

In this colossal effort our aim is that of learning, and teaching our children, to operate effectively in a positively varied and pluralistic society. It is quite a saga. I will let you know about the future developments in BFN. For now, I wish you all an inspirational day and get back to searching for suitable nursery premises.

**For more information contact**  
Soile Pietikäinen

Contact details removed

\*\*Foundation stage refers to the period from the age of three years to the beginning of primary school at the age of five in the United Kingdom.



## Pronunciation problems

**I am Venezuelan, my husband is English and my son, Rubens (3½), is learning Spanish and English. I am concerned about his self-esteem. Rubens attends Montessori Nursery School and now the teachers are emphasising sounds of letters and numbers. At home Rubens always says that he can not recognise or repeat sounds of letters. As a psychologist I am aware about natural delay in speech. I have visited the local speech therapist and she assessed his comprehension 50% on his age (3:2), but found immaturity in the pronunciation on some letters.**

**We were in Venezuela on holiday last year. There Rubens attended a nursery school and his Spanish improved so much that he is now more open to speak and try new words in Spanish. Back to England, he has started attending a ‘sounds awareness group’ run by the local authorities (Speech and Language Therapists) as well as his three sessions a week in Montessori Nursery School. At the beginning, Rubens was mixing both languages, but after a month he has learned which language he is using with who. So, Rubens speaks to me in Spanish and to everybody else in English. Still his fluency in English is 6 months behind and in Spanish almost a year.**

**Will my son copy other children’s language problems from the therapy he is attending? Which sounds are similar and different in English and Spanish? Because my husband is working I have tried to help my son to develop his pronunciation of the letters p, t, c/k and b, d, g. Also we have been doing rhyming words in English, but again I am afraid I am confusing my son talking to him in English with a strong Spanish accent (I have some difficulties pronouncing several letters, especially at the end of the English words). My husband is interested to know if our son has a ‘poor attention/concentration’ because he is processing which language to use?**

*Lilly, Richard and Rubens King,  
Albury Heath, England.*

Rubens seems to have figured out the person–language link very well. I don’t think the parents need to worry about Rubens’ copying other children’s language problems from the therapy, because I assume he receives adequate normal input otherwise in his life.

The question of which sounds are similar and different between Spanish and English requires an elaborate analysis.

Put in simpler terms /m, n, s, y, ch, b, d, g/ are the consonants probably the closest phonetically in the two languages. /p, t, k/ are somewhat different depending on the occurrence in the word (English /p, t, k/ are aspirated (produced with a puff of air) at the beginning of stressed syllables, whereas in Spanish they are always unaspirated). In other words, the /t/ of the word ‘top’ in English is very different than the /t/ of the word ‘taco’ in Spanish. However, the /t/ in English word ‘stop’ is similar to the /t/ sound in Spanish. The liquids of English, /l/ and /r/ sounds are very different phonetically in the two languages. In addition, Spanish does not have the English sounds /v, th, sh, z, j/

However, the problems are not just which sounds are similar/ different; one should also consider the distribution of sounds in different word positions and different syllable structures. For example, English allows far more complex consonant clusters than Spanish. Also, Spanish has a tendency for open syllables (syllables not ending in consonants), whereas English can put almost any consonant in that position (The mother’s comments on her difficulty of pronouncing several ‘letters’ at the end of English words is very revealing in this respect). Also, the vowel systems of the two languages are immensely different. These are some of the items in a very long list of things one can mention.

I can say that we have no evidence anywhere that learning (processing) two languages results in poor attention/ concentration in a child. The situation can only have positive effects. As for the mother’s concern if she is confusing Rubens with her strong Spanish accent in her English, my suggestion is that as long as Rubens has adequate exposure to native English input in his daily life, she talks to him in Spanish.

M.Yavas

Professor of Linguistics at Florida International University, Miami, USA.

**Please send us material which you think might be of interest to our readers. Remember the Newsletter is for you, but above all, by you!**



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## AND WHERE... from page 5

learnt at university was German. I have an advantage over other management students in that I can speak to people in their own language, try to understand their attitudes and their way of doing business. For me a language is not an end in itself, but a means to reach other people, to learn about and from people, to travel, to do business with people, to teach people, etc.

I think that most importantly, having lived in so many different places and being able to speak the people's language have been a means for me to discover different cultures. Not discover cultures as in 'let's go to the Bierfest in Munich and meet some Germans', but discover cultures by living with people and like people, feeling and experiencing what they experience as if I were one of them. So much so that at this very moment I feel Irish, French, English, German, Spanish and Basque!

When I am confronted with situations where I must decide on a plan of action, the different options I face usually correspond to the different ways in which people from different countries would resolve it: the 'nouveau-riche' yet rural Irish way, the centralised yet intellectual French way, the civilised yet hooligan English way, the liberal yet rigid German way, the conservative yet relaxed Spanish way or the stubborn yet loyal Basque way. All these cultures have contradictory and complementary characteristics and so does a mixture of all these cultures within one individual. In other words, I pick and choose the parts I want and need at each moment!

Were I to have just one culture to draw from, I would come up with a lot less solutions when I am at a crossroad in my life. Therefore I consider myself very lucky to have such an ample pool of resources and I am conscious of the importance of being able to relate to so

many different cultures in a Europe, which not unlike myself, is faced with the balance of powers and the integration of cultures, languages, economies, etc...

Although I strive to be influenced equally by the different cultures which are part of my identity, there are several factors that lead to the unequal influence of each culture in my life.

Firstly, and most obviously, I feel more French and Irish than I do anything else because of my parents. That, I don't think, will ever change. However, in addition to that, the country where I am living at present tends to (obviously) have a dominant influence.

The challenge I am often faced with is trying to differentiate between my true opinions and those that I am just

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*"Were I to have just one culture to draw from, I would come up with a lot less solutions when I am at a crossroad in my life. "*

---

accustomed to because they surround me.

Take for example political correctness. I am extremely sensitive to political correctness because I feel hurt myself when people express negative attitudes towards my origins. This helps me to understand why people feel insulted or hurt by certain words or expressions.

A concrete example is the record number of insults, derogatory words and common disrespectful expressions in the Spanish language. At first, I was utterly shocked by expressions such as 'no seas judío' (don't be a Jew, i.e. stingy), or the rich

vocabulary available for insulting homosexuals. After a while, I get used to hearing such insults to the point of not noticing them any longer and I grow tired of explaining to people why they really shouldn't say such things.

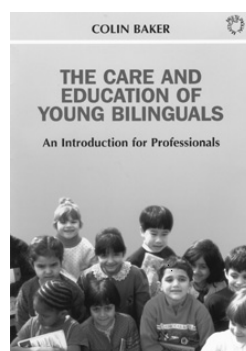
But as soon as I am back in France or Germany I immediately stop and become politically correct again. My explanation for it is that Spanish society is not (yet) as culturally diverse as other European countries and Spaniards will rarely know someone who would feel insulted by these words. It's as if these words don't have a real-life meaning and so they don't consider them strong insults like we would in English or French.

That's all very well some might say, but don't you feel a bit homeless and without roots? My answer is yes, quite definitely, I really don't feel at home anywhere. In Ireland I was always considered French and in France I was always 'la petite irlandaise'. In Germany they think it is all very European of me to have moved so much, and in Spain they don't even know where to start! Especially now that I live in the Basque Country, where roots and identity are so important, it is difficult to feel 'normal' or at least not 'abnormal'. The Basques' solution to my problem, which is really quite generous considering the current political and social reality, is that: 'it's ok, you can just become Basque if you want to!'

What Basque people precisely don't understand is that I don't want to belong or fit into just one culture. I'm quite happy to be a cultural mess!

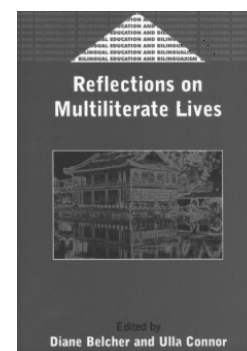
Other people just oooh and aaah over how lucky I am, how they would love to speak

*Continued on page eight*



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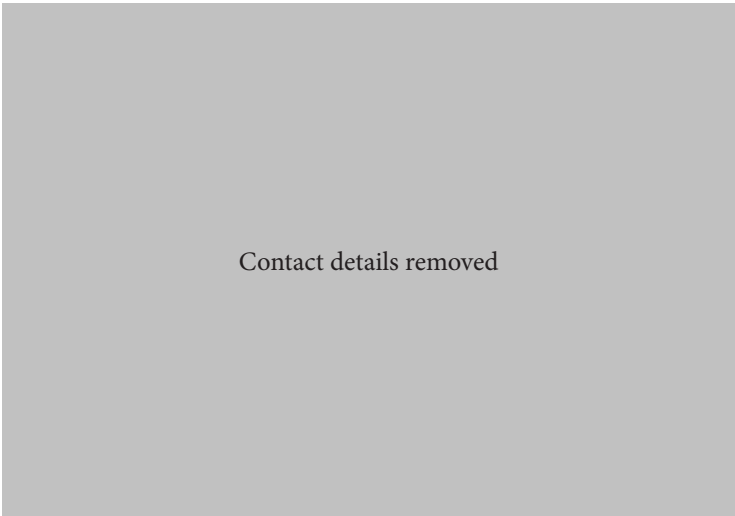
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 Name, address, languages spoken in the family, children's birth dates and specification of the types of families with whom you would like to get in touch.



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For further information please contact Robert Griffiths



**AND WHERE ARE YOU... continued from page seven**

so many languages and have lived in so many places. They, on the other hand, overlook the negative aspects, the sacrifices inevitably attached to my multilingualism and multiculturalism: I am always far away from one or more family members, I live out of boxes and suitcases and I can never think too far ahead because I don't always know where I'll be next. My friends are always somewhere else, I always have to start from scratch, build another life and very often feel lonely and misunderstood.

As Nancy Houston, a Canadian writer said in an interview in *Le Français dans le Monde* (2000): *'What I love about Paris is that there are many people like me. I love that cosmopolitan touch, I feel very anxious in a city where everyone is white and looks the same. But I feel even more at home in New York... I think it's because differences are not a problem there. I feel reassured by the mixture of cultures that one feels there.'*

In the end, like everything else, it's a question of weighing out the pros and cons and although I don't think I was ever conscious of the consequences (neither positive nor negative) I am very glad to have made the choices and moves I did. I would do it again and I would encourage others to do the same. My problem will be how to pass on my various cultures to my children and which language(s) I shall speak to them. Is this what it means to be European today? If things continue as they are now, I'll just tell my children to be Irish for the Eurovision Song Contest, French for football or food, German for the discipline, Spanish for the siesta and Basque for the nightlife!