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**editorial**

**My Trilingual Son: A Retrospective**  
 Nayr Ibrahim

It's strange to realize that this is the very last issue of *the Bilingual Family Newsletter*. The *BFN* has been going since I was five years old, and has played a strong role in my own bilingual upbringing, and that of countless families around the world. But, as Suzanne notes in her touching tribute, the times are changing - and there is less and less demand for a print newsletter. The online world has picked up much of the slack, and there are plenty of books and journals for more in-depth reading.

Nevertheless, reading Nayr Ibrahim's account of raising a trilingual son, and Dagmar Schaeffer's reflections on raising German-Greek bilinguals, I am once again struck by the diversity of experiences that have come to form the *BFN* community. I hope that new forums will develop to foster such exchanges.

To support those now picking up the torch, Multilingual Matters is launching an annual award to be given to individuals or organizations that are actively supporting bilingualism or bilingual education. (See page eight for details.) The fact that the first award will go to Corey Heller's *Multilingual Living* website ([MultilingualLiving.com](http://MultilingualLiving.com)) - itself a vibrant hub for all things multilingual, leaves me confident that the future of bilingualism is in good hands.

On behalf of Marjukka, myself and the entire team, I'd like to thank all those who have made the *BFN* possible over the years. We look forward to seeing what comes next.

**Sami Grover**

Karim, my trilingual son, is a 17-year-old young man who is about to start his last year of school in France. He is dreaming of reading Business and Economics in London. Karim's linguistic journey, which started before he was born, is one of cross-language exploration, surprise destinations, intercultural crossings and a tour of multiple identities; not to mention the culinary expeditions!



*Karim, dad and mum on table mountain in Cape Town, South Africa, August 2009*

Sitting down for Christmas dinner chez the Ibrahims' is a multicultural, mouthwatering experience that reflects my son's everyday living. An explosion of scents and colours from a multitude of geographical locations on the globe greet the guest and cradle the hosts in warm memories of childhood experience. The starters reflect our host country, foie gras with fig jam and baguette, coupled with dad's Egyptian

chickpea-based dips, tahina and babaganoush. The highlight of the evening is the Portuguese 'bacalhau', dried, salted cod fish; the Sunday turkey has given way to the smaller tasty French capon, all washed down with French wine for the non-Muslims in the family. Dessert brings together the differences: South African Cape brandy pudding, oriental pasties, French Christmas log and 'rabanas', a sweet cinnamon-sprinkled Portuguese version of French toast. Finally, crackers are pulled around midnight before the presents are grabbed from under the Christmas tree.

Now, how did all this happen? Karim was born in Porto, Portugal to the above multilingual family situation. I was born in the Rainbow Nation to Portuguese immigrant parents. Portuguese was our home language, English became my first language due to an English-medium education, and Afrikaans my second language as it was introduced in school from Grade one. I started learning French as a foreign language at the age of eleven. This was apartheid South Africa, so contact with the immense diversity of the majority of the population was controlled and censored, and a feeling of loss and frustration, curiosity and a desire for travel, whisked me away to a stopover in the Middle East on the way to discover my origins in Portugal.

Karim's dad was born and brought up in a village in the Egyptian Delta with the mighty Nile as his playground. With English as a foreign language he found

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## My Trilingual Son...

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work in the tourism sector in the Sinai desert, where we then met. We made Portugal our home for next five years.

Language choice for us wasn't a complicated matter as English was the common language: I couldn't speak Arabic and dad couldn't speak Portuguese: but what about our newborn dark-haired and dark-eyed baby? Portuguese was overwhelmingly present via grandparents (who also acted as babysitters), relatives, neighbours, television, and society. So I decided to speak to Karim in English only, and dad started addressing Karim in Arabic. Many a night Karim was rocked to sleep in Arabic or English or Portuguese. He knew finger chants and games in all three languages and responded appropriately with glee and energy. Karim's single word utterances were also multilingual: he reacted in the appropriate

*However, my one and only attempt at using Portuguese with Karim, was met with the following reply: "Mum, why are you speaking like that? With you it's English."*

language to our prompts, to everyone's utmost satisfaction. When he joined the local Portuguese nursery school, Karim's Portuguese was patchy, but gradually his communication became exclusively Portuguese. At this point Karim had realized that mum could speak and understand Portuguese, so he decided to answer in Portuguese only. Stubbornly I continued to speak English only with Karim. Even in the shops or surrounded by Portuguese people, I would address Karim in English – much to their confusion and disapproval.

Yet the story that follows is reassuring. Although English was perhaps not heard, it was always present, passively awaiting the appropriate moment to be reactivated. Karim, turning three, was preparing his birthday cake with me. As I brought the appropriate ingredients from the pantry, I was chatting to Karim about what we needed and how we were going to make the cake. I suddenly realized that we had run out of flour and said we had to go to the shop to buy some. 'Flour' and 'flower' sound exactly the same in English, but in Portuguese they are two distinct-sounding

words, *farinha* and *flor* respectively. As flowers are more common in the world of a three-year-old, Karim repeated what I had said in Portuguese: 'Mummy, we're going to buy 'flor' (flower) for the cake'. Karim linked the sound combination to the concept 'flower' in English, hypothesized about its meaning and translated it into 'flor' in Portuguese. I wonder if his little mind questioned my use of flowers in his birthday cake!

The next two years saw a decline in his use of English, which was rather disappointing. I tried to find strategies to encourage Karim to use English: I pretended not to understand Portuguese; I invented games where he had to speak in English only; I repeated or paraphrased everything he said in English. All in vain and eventually we settled into an English/Portuguese relationship, which was perfectly exemplified by the following event. By then dad had moved to France (Arabic completely forgotten) and we got on a plane to visit him in Paris. It was Karim's first time on a plane and he was so excited that he chatted all the way, asking hundreds of questions about planes and where we were going, and whether the plane was going to stay up in the air! In the airport bus, I overheard a woman, who had been sitting behind us during the flight, tell someone about *'this mum and her son: mum spoke English only, the son answered in Portuguese, yet they were having a perfectly normal conversation!'*

The next year was spent preparing for our move to Paris – a dream come true for me but a headache when I thought of schooling for Karim. I had already been considering bilingual education in Portugal, so I started researching the possibility of bilingual schools in Paris – totally unaware of the cost of living in the French capital, but then ignorance is bliss.

Even though instruction was bilingual, the children spoke French in the playground and amongst themselves. Within a few days Karim realized that his classmates could not understand him and he could not communicate with them, and felt frustrated and isolated. Five-year-old Karim developed a strategy: he started giving away his toy cars as a way of begging for acceptance. The teachers were not impressed and I tried to help Karim at home with his French. Fortunately, Karim had another bargaining chip: his physical ability and love of sports soon made him popular among the boys. Karim listened and observed, imitated and interacted with his surroundings. My Christmas present that year was a euphoric class teacher informing me, with a tone of surprise in her voice, that Karim had no problem with French. It took three months and a half for Karim to learn to communicate sufficiently

in French in order to function adequately in a French school situation.

Language mixing now became a three-way phenomenon yet, by the end of the school year, Portuguese was relegated to third place. Of course, now I became apprehensive at the thought of Karim losing his Portuguese. However, my one and only attempt at using Portuguese with Karim, was met with the following reply: *"Mum, why are you speaking like that? With you it's English."*



*Karim with Grandmother in Egypt, April 2007*

Unknowingly, and despite his lusophone replies, I had created an English relationship with my son – his affective and emotional link to mum was through the English language. Fear not, this was not the end of Portuguese: every year Karim spent two months with his grandparents in Portugal. This was a total immersion situation, the best way to improve a language for bilinguals. Even though Karim had difficulty retrieving Portuguese vocabulary in the first week, by the end of each summer his lexical range had increased. Slowly but surely he transferred his developing literacy skills in French and English to read signs, newspaper and magazine headlines, even though he had never learned to read and write in Portuguese. Karim also used the close phoneme-grapheme correspondence in Portuguese to make hypothesis about the language – even though the words sounded rather French when he was sounding them out, he would immediately switch to the Portuguese pronunciation once he realized which word he was reading.

Back in France, with Portuguese out of the equation in our daily lives, Karim developed his French and English. This was probably the beginning of Karim's trilingualism: English at home, with mum's friends and with the English teachers at school; French at school, with friends and generally in France; Portuguese with grandparents in Portugal during the summer and on the phone. Language mixing was probably at its highest during his primary years. For example, both French and Portuguese have the relative pronoun *que* which Karim integrated perfectly into his English sentence structure, instead of *that*! Fortunately, constant language contact ironed out these anomalies.

Even though Arabic hasn't been mentioned in the last three paragraphs, it has always been there on the backburner – dad's absence before we moved to Paris created a linguistic gap that we have never really been able to fill. Dad also resorted to English but continued to help Karim speak to his family on the phone. Just the other day Karim said he should learn Arabic: I can now pass the linguistic torch to Karim, so he can plan his own language itinerary.

I believe that my decision to give Karim a bilingual education, despite the heavy financial burden, paid off in the end. Some French high schools offer bilingual education in International Sections that aim to prepare children for the OIB (Option International Baccalaureate). After a nerve wracking year for mum, Karim was accepted at the International Section in Sevres, the first International section to be established in France.

Karim's languages stabilized in secondary school. His vocabulary in English exploded and his sentence structure reached native level status – even though, when I peruse his essays, I still find some strange sounding expressions that I realize constitute French interference. To this linguistic mosaic we have added Spanish, his second foreign language at school and some more language mixing according to his Spanish teacher: he relies too much on Portuguese to learn this close sister language!

When asked about his languages Karim lists them in the following order: French, English, Portuguese, Spanish and Arabic. I was surprised to see French at the top of the list. He explained that it is the language he uses the most, the one he could speak best because it was the language of the country and school. Very sensible! However, it's difficult to

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## Notes from the OPOL Family



### Name Games

#### Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert

##### Name Games

My sister has just had a baby and named her Roxene Tayla Anne. An unusual and memorable mix. We've been playing the name game for weeks now, emailing her French, English or just plain crazy girl names to make her laugh. And this led to inevitable questions about names from our children, now 13, 11 and 7. *'How did you choose my name?'* they asked, followed by *'What name would you have chosen if I'd been a boy/girl?'* So we explained that Marc was inspired by a romantic dinner in Paris when I was pregnant, where we saw a sign for rue St. Marc. Otherwise he would have been Mathilde if he was a girl (we can't remember why but we obviously liked names beginning with Ma...). Nina is the name of a dear German friend of mine who visited while I was pregnant, but she could have easily been a Clement. Gabriel was angelic, of course, a wonderful surprise when we thought two kids were enough...but he could have been named Chloe too. The kids were skeptical. Sitting in a row on the sofa like the kids in *'How I met your Mother'* they glared at us. *'Why didn't you choose something more interesting or unusual?'* they said, *'Our names are so boring and we only have one each! How come you didn't go online for some ideas?'*

In fact, kids, the internet was not as accessible in the 90's as it is now. When we read the books on baby names we were stunned by the potential choice of names and then hit by the fact that 50% of the names were either weird (Colin in French is a white fish) or unpronounceable (my parents were concerned when Jacques joked that he liked the name Xavier) or trouble (the delightful French name, Fanny, might be a good example, or the boy's name Jean, which is a girl's name in English). Cultural references tied us to deleting so many names there was no way we could have ever agreed on three names like my sister. Thomas, Simon, Emily or Anna were some

of the few names that crossed cultures and pleased the grandparents, but we didn't like these names!

Personally, I wanted short names for my child and their future teachers (I have an unproved theory from my teaching experience that children get better marks when they spend more time on their worksheet than on their name). Jacques wanted good classic names; he comes from a family with saintly names (Pierre, Philippe and Jean). So Marc and Nina were very practical decisions. Gabriel was more spur-of-the-moment, because we naively forgot that Gabriel is pronounced differently in French and English. Since we knew we would be doing a lot of form-filling in different countries and languages we kept life simple and just chose one name. The Belgium name, Hauwaert, from my father-in-law, is complicated enough to spell out as it is. I don't regret that, especially when filling in the visa applications. I suspect our kids would be unhappy with any combination of names, simply because we picked them. The answer is to become famous and change your name like Lady Gaga!

##### Real life

I've just read François Grosjean's new book, **Bilingual: Life and Reality\***. This excellent book about being bilingual infused with Grosjean's personal experiences, not only as an academic but also as a child and parent in a bilingual family. Like my family, he juggles French and English on a daily basis. I particularly like his observations on real-life families living with two languages, such as a family visiting their relatives in Switzerland. The American mother (speaks only English), Father (French, German and English) and their daughter (English, German, and some French) are eating with the Swiss Grandmother (German, French) and Great-Aunt (German, French). An illustration shows that the father and daughter do most of the talking, while the mother, sitting next to the Great-Aunt, struggles to join in. This is a familiar scenario for anyone who has suffered the frustration of being sat next to someone you want to chat to, but are limited to gestures or smiles. Or the equally frustrating situation of having to be the linguistic middleman at the table, madly translating between courses or finding subjects to cover all language levels. The book accurately describes the highs and lows of bilingualism with empathy and amusement and is well worth reading.

**To continue to hear about Suzanne's OPOL Family you can read her blog: Notes on the OPOL Family - <http://opol-family.blogspot.com> Facebook page: Notes from the OPOL Family**

\* **Bilingual: Life and Reality** is published by Harvard University Press [www.hup.harvard.edu](http://www.hup.harvard.edu)

# A Tribute to the Bilingual Family Newsletter

Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert

*The Bilingual Family Newsletter* (BFN) has been important for many bilingual families, supporting, informing and bringing a sense of community to parents living all around the world. Over the last decade there has been a change in the way bilingual families connect and interact with each other and paper is slowly being replaced by online text. As a parent, researcher and teacher, I've seen the way the internet has sped up the way we find information and process it. How has the internet affected the way we research bilingualism? Can online websites for bilingual families ever replace *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*?

*How was I supposed to know if Marc was speaking English or French? At what stage would he talk in both languages?*

I will miss reading my brightly coloured copy of the BFN with my coffee, a rare moment of calm between writing, teaching and sorting out my three squabbling children. I first discovered the Newsletter thirteen years ago. I was living in Budapest with my French husband and teaching bilingual and trilingual children as a Teacher of English as a Second Language. I had seen bilingual children effortlessly switch from language to language and become fluent in less than six months. I had started a Masters in Education course by distance learning to learn more about bilingualism when our first son, Marc, was born in 1997. Even with my experience I was surprised to be suddenly faced with my own bilingual conundrum – how to support our child's dual language learning.

I was literally surrounded by textbooks - Language, Linguistics, Child Psychology and all the parenting baby books I could buy. The problem was that the Language textbooks and academic papers on Bilingualism and Linguistics went into so much detail on dual-language syntax, grammar order or mixing words in the same sentence, it didn't seem to apply to real children. In fact, it was terrifying to

imagine all the mistakes and errors a bilingual child could make. Add to this the parenting books, which only ever mentioned acquiring one language. Even that would take over five years, starting with babbling and one word sentences. One syllable or word? How was I supposed to know if Marc was speaking English or French? At what stage would he talk in both languages? Should I be talking to him in my language, his father's language, the country language or a mix of all three?

I was wandering round the English language bookshop in Budapest, thinking about all these questions, trying to find something to read when Marc had his afternoon siesta. I bought a newspaper and found a short article by Colin Baker on bilingualism and a reference to *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*. This was before email or internet, so I rang the office in Bristol to ask for a sample copy, which promptly arrived in the post a few days later. The BFN was a welcome addition to all my heavy reading, and has been so ever since. It was a revelation; a readable mix of real multilingual parent's stories and summaries of recent research in the field of bilingualism. Questions regarding family bilingualism were answered with empathy and understanding by members of the Editorial board, which encompassed several continents, languages and fields. The editor, Marjukka Grover, clearly had a deep understanding of the way bilingual families work, from her personal experience as a member of a Finnish/English family.

## Trilingual families

For my Masters dissertation I decided to focus on the language patterns in trilingual families; specifically two parents speaking different languages and living in a country where another language was spoken. This was the case for my family; Marc was now two and a half years old and on top of his two parental languages (French and English) he had been exposed to Hungarian for six months in Budapest, Arabic for nine months when we lived in Cairo, and a year of Swiss German in Zurich. I needed to find trilingual families to interview, and an advert in the BFN put me in touch with twelve families who had the family language combination I needed. I sent out a questionnaire and telephoned them, and they answered all my questions about living with three languages on a daily basis. A few months later I was asked

by Marjukka Grover to write an article summarizing my dissertation results for the Newsletter. In 2000 I was invited to join the Editorial board. This was the start of a decade of writing for the BFN.

## One-parent-one-language

Two years later we were living in England and I decided to write a book on the one parent one language approach. I now had two young two children, Marc and Nina, and OPOL seemed to be very restrictive. I was skeptical of all the success stories relating that OPOL was the 'best' and recommended approach for bilingual families where parents spoke different languages. Was that the case for all families? Did other parents, like me, find themselves switching languages every now and again, or mixing languages? Did parents have a child, like Nina, who simply refused to speak her father's language? Again the BFN was the natural resource to find the international families I wanted to



talk to. Over a hundred families replied to my call for families to be interviewed or to complete a postal questionnaire. The internet was now up and running, and one kind BFN subscriber offered to set up an online questionnaire, which suited parents with computer access. 50% of the sample chose the online version. The range of languages and nationalities was extensive, and the parents gave me an insight into how they found OPOL and living with two languages.

In 2003 we moved to live in Malaysia. I started a Bilingual Support Group in Kuala Lumpur and people often asked about my children's language development. A friend told me about a new site called *Blogspot* and suggested I set up an online blog. A quick search revealed I was not the only

parent with bilingual kids writing about life with two (or more) languages and it seemed a fun way to get in touch with other bilingual families too. I had always made notes on my children's language development and liked the blog format as a way to write about our family and some of the linguistic ups and downs in our life.

*Parents need to know which site to look at, or which document to open. The BFN was excellent for distilling the latest research into a readable format.*

We were now a family of five with our third child, Gabriel, copying and learning all kinds of naughty words from his older siblings. Should we sing 'Happy Birthday' in both languages? What religion do we choose for our children when we come from two different countries? How do we deal with a child coming out of school and refusing to speak our language in front of their friends? Which language do we watch a film in? Should I read a bedtime story in my language or my husband's? These dilemmas and amusing moments contributed to the blog, which evolved into the quarterly column 'Notes from the OPOL Family', which has run for over five years now.

### Siblings and Language

More recently, in 2007, I started research on siblings and language use after noticing the language interaction between my three children, then aged ten, eight and four. We were living in France and I noticed how my children would rapidly switch from telling jokes in French to recounting a dvd they watched in English to flipping back to French for an argument about about who could change the television channel. One child might start using one language for say a game, which then the others were then forced to follow. Their choice of language between them, or what is often known as their preferred language, was irrelevant to the parent's choice of language. That made me curious about the effect siblings could have on each other's developing language skills.

Compared to my first book, where I spent hours in the library in London, I was able to access recent research with just a click, and either download or read academic papers online. I could email academics directly instead of having to meet them at conferences. For the book I needed a

hundred families, with two or more bilingual children aged three years or more, to discuss their experiences with siblings and language. I set up an online survey and another blog to explain the project to potential survey families. The BFN was, for a third time, my greatest supporter and half of my sample came from the BFN readers from all around the world. This time there was no paper version, just electronic questions, but people seemed to prefer that and it worked just as well. The other survey parents I found through several websites, like *Multilingual Living*, that had recently been set up for bilingual and multilingual families with lively chat forums and message boards.

### Fast but lacking interpretation

The internet has undoubtedly changed the way parents look for information on bilingualism; we are less reliant on printed books and journals now that we can click and find the same information online. As an independent researcher living in rural France, far away from university libraries and bookshops, I am grateful for the open access to academic articles from around the world that I have via the internet.

But a lot of information is not always the best thing. Tap 'Bilingualism' into a Google search engine and you'll have countless listings of Bilingualism. What parents really need is for someone to interpret these academic papers, which are often long and complicated. Parents need to know which site to look at, or which document to open. The BFN was excellent for distilling the latest research into a readable format.

Likewise, advice is something to be taken with caution on the internet. The Questions section of The BFN gave considered careful replies to parents in need. Forums and chat rooms are great for getting parental support and bonding with people with similar language combinations or problems. However, advice from parent to parent in chat rooms is patchy and sometimes can be downright misleading. Proper specialist advice and guidance is sometimes lacking from websites. It remains to be seen how the internet will evolve and how academic research will align with the new technology. I hope that in the future that parents can still have access to the same warm encouragement and interesting articles that the BFN provided.

Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert researches and writes about bilingual families and their dual-language patterns. She is British and married to a Frenchman, and lives in France. She has three bilingual children.. Suzanne is the author of **One-parent-one-language: Language Strategies for Bilingual Families** (2004, Multilingual Matters) and her new book, **Bilingual Siblings: Language Use in Families** will be shortly published by Multilingual Matters (see page eight).

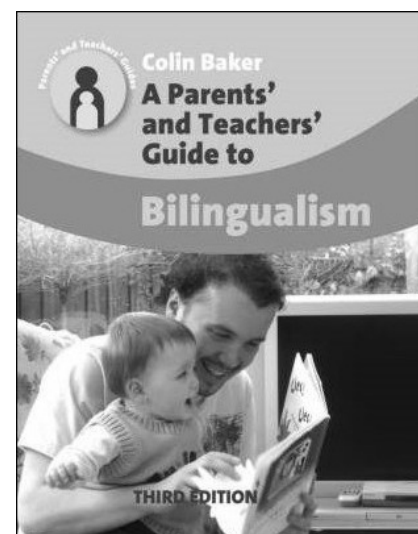
## Foreign Language Friends

Hello! Hola! Bonjour! My name is Denise Leitch. I am the owner of *Kultural Kids LLC*, a company dedicated to creating foreign language educational materials for young children (KulturalKids.com). My students are between the ages of 1 & 12 yrs old. At our learning center Central Illinois, we teach French, and Spanish. We also offer a few creative arts programs such as Theater, Science, and Art.

Last year we launched *Foreign Language Friends*, an exciting new website created just for kids to help them learn a new language in a fun and encouraging environment. This program uses games, animations, sing-a-longs and other activities designed to help build a strong foundation for acquiring a new language. You can learn more about Foreign Language Friends at [ForeignLanguageFriends.com](http://ForeignLanguageFriends.com)

Denise Leitch

Contact details removed



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[www.multilingual-matters.com](http://www.multilingual-matters.com)

## Being Multilingual: A New Blog

Madalena Cruz Ferreira, author of *Multilinguals Are...?*, has launched a new blog covering all matters related to bilingualism and multilingualism. She welcomes submissions from guest writers in in English, French, Portuguese, Swedish, and related languages.

<http://beingmultilingual.blogspot.com/>

# Overcoming Difficulties when Raising German-Greek-speaking Children in Greece

Dagmar Schaeffer

How is it to raise German-Greek-speaking bilingual children in Athens, Greece?

Well, at first you would say, quite easy. There are many Germans in Greece; there is a German school in Athens, and there are many private day-cares, pre-schools, primary and secondary schools with intensive German instruction or immersion programmes.

But then again, it is not so easy, when you are not from an affluent family background to pay for all this private schooling for two children. And when you have to deal with relatives and friends who have their reservations about the mother speaking a “foreign” language to the children, who think that this will hinder the development of the “mother” tongue, and some of whom are not fond of the German language anyway, because it reminds them of suffering under the German occupation of Greece between 1940 and 1944.

So here we were, my Greek husband and myself, a German, starting our new life together in Athens in the early nineties, after having met in the United States. Our two sons were born in 1993 and 1995. We took off on a journey of raising them bilingually, knowing our destination well (“*We want them to be fluent in both German and Greek, and if possible, also English*”) but far from knowing what kind of adventures were waiting for us.

The fact that I had studied the field helped us to be confident: I have a university degree in German Language and Literature and a Master’s degree in Bilingual Education. Yet, things are quite different when you are dealing with your own family.

There were counter-arguments (“*Your children will not learn Greek properly and they will have problems in school later on*”) and there were non-verbal signs of disapproval. My mother-in-law had almost starved as a young girl during German occupation in World War Two, and her brother-in-law was executed by the Wehrmacht in revenge for Greek Resistance actions. The German language represented horror and trauma for her.

On the other hand, there were many relatives that were supportive. One of the more amusing arguments was that we would save a lot of money on language classes – while, of course, our most important motive was to enable our children to enjoy and live their mother’s heritage, to be able to communicate with

family and friends in Germany and Austria; to make them open to other cultures and people, and only secondly, to equip them with a valuable language tool for their future careers.

Fortunately, we as parents were absolutely sure we were doing the right thing in opting for bilingual education, and we had decided already.

Because the children’s father does not speak German very well, we decided to use the One Person One Language (OPOL) approach. Jorgos would always speak Greek and I would always speak German with the children. The Greek grandmother who took care of them when I was working part-time as a teacher, would also speak Greek with them, as would all the other relatives here.

*There were counter-arguments (“Your children will not learn Greek properly and they will have problems in school later on”)*

When Dominikos was two years old, we met a British-Greek couple who gave us an issue of *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*. We subscribed to it, and from then on it was our faithful companion in raising our children. It was so comforting to read other families’ experiences, giving us valuable expert advice or good ideas from other bilingual families.

The most important thing in raising children bilingually is self-confidence. It helps a lot to deal with situations where you have to defend your stance against most of the relatives and other well-meaning people. An example: Dominikos was a very quiet, observing baby. By the age of two, he was still not speaking. So the common explanation of relatives and friends was “*It is because of the two languages. You are confusing the child. Maybe you should see a therapist with him.*” We did not pay much attention to all this, being quite sure that Dominikos was all right. In fact, a few months later not only did he start speaking, but he almost skipped the one or two

word-sentence-phase and went right into speaking two languages in full sentences! He had just needed more time than other children to digest all the language input properly. Our younger son, however, was very different. He started speaking at the age of 13 months; he mixed both languages freely, making many “mistakes” in both languages and communicating happily in a mix of both languages within the family and sometimes beyond. Which caused again concern from well-meaning people: “*Oh, the poor child is confused with these two languages, maybe you should concentrate on one.*”

As you may have anticipated, in the course of the years, Gregoris, now 15 years old, has managed the two languages beautifully. And although his Greek is much stronger than his German, he can communicate perfectly well in a German speaking environment without mixing languages.

When our bilingual children started going to school, more self-confidence was needed. Our eldest son was crying on his first day in pre-school and he did not want to stay. So I sat outside on the doorstep with him, talking quietly to him, when the head teacher appeared and said to me: “*Of course the child is confused and rejects school – it is because you are talking a foreign language to him. You should speak Greek, so he gets used to it.*” I looked at her puzzled, and then said to her calmly that I did not think she was right and that we would discuss the matter later.

Another special occasion was when our children were being called “*Hitler!!! Hitler!!!*” in Primary School (interestingly enough, the callers were children of immigrant families from Albania), which triggered some talking on European history at home, as the children were enquiring the reasons for being called this name.

While one basic thing is knowing what you want for your children, it is also important to have support. In our case, major support came from the German grandparents, who spent endless hours taping wonderful German TV programmes for children (like the famous “*Sendung mit der Maus*”). My boys always awaited with great pleasure the next parcel with video tapes from Grandma. They watched them again and again, and not only learnt German, but also a lot about Germany. I also invested much time and money on nice

German children's books, and spent many hours reading them to the children. This is definitely one of the best ways to connect the "minority" language with tenderness, love and happiness. Another good method was frequent travel to Germany. We made it a habit to go at least once or twice a year, even when it meant sacrifices in other areas.

And one last important piece of advice: Never give up! Even when the boys stopped speaking German to each other (which happened once they both started attending public Greek pre-school) or when they started to answer in Greek to me (which happened a few years later), I always made an effort to continue speaking German to them – not always successfully, but does it matter?

My mother-in-law passed away two years ago. She had loved her grandsons dearly. Over the years, she had definitely made her peace with her grandchildren's bilingualism, as had all the other relatives, seeing that their German neither affected their knowledge of Greek, nor did the children grow up rejecting Greek culture.

*The most important thing in raising children bilingually is self-confidence. It helps a lot to deal with situations where you have to defend your stance against most of the relatives...*

As I am writing these lines, our sons are fifteen and seventeen years old. Both are bilingual, if not trilingual, given their good knowledge of English, which developed quite easily in a home with frequent guests from abroad and in the age of the English speaking Internet. When saying "bilingual" or "trilingual" I do not mean that they master the languages in the same way in the same situations – this is quite impossible. But they can understand almost everything, they can read, write and speak in a way that is well understood by native speakers. Dominikos even passed the language exams required for attending German universities. Will he go? We don't know yet. It will be his decision.

Our children know both countries, both cultures, more than three languages - they will be children of Europe, and I am definitely looking forward to seeing them as grown-ups!

## Queries



**I've enjoyed reading your newsletter so much over the past few years and being able to ask or even answer a question or two. Now I have another question for you.**

**My oldest daughter is eight and is in 3rd grade where they are learning multiplication. Since**

**she is relatively slow, I made her flashcards to practice. But of course I quiz her in English. We live in Germany and my husband insists that she needs to learn math in German. I feel that if she knows the answer in one language then she also knows it in the other language, although between English and German there is some interference with numbers getting turned around ( $7 \times 8 = 56$  may come out as sixty-five instead of fifty-six).**

**My German is good enough to quiz her in German. But I was wondering if there is some sound professional advice on this specific (numbers) issue. Should I revert to the majority language in this case?**

**I'd really appreciate hearing someone else's opinion on this.**

**Claudia Ziersch**

Contact details removed

First of all, what is important is that your daughter understands what is happening in addition, subtraction, division or, in this case, multiplication. That is, there is a language of mathematics, mathematical thinking and mathematical understanding. A child may be able to give the correct answer for  $7 \times 8$ , but that may have been learned by rote without understanding what it means. When a child has learned something by rote, then the mathematical understanding may not be there in German or English.

Second, on a more positive note, if a child understands something mathematical or almost anything else they learn in school, if they have learned it in one language, the understanding is available in another language, so long as they have the vocabulary to understand and express it. For example, if we teach a child for the first time how to use a mobile phone, and if that was taught in German, they do not have to be re-taught all over again how to do so in English. The ideas, understandings and concepts transfer from one language to another.

Third, if you're going to explain something, then so long as the child has sufficient language competency in both languages, it doesn't matter if the explanation is in German or English. There is transfer from one language to the other. There is obviously a slight advantage in using the stronger language to increase the probability of understanding.

The example you give is not really about understanding but about being able to repeat something parrot fashion. It is about remembering and repeating. That can be attained in either language.

Fourthly, the mathematics learnt at school and home hopefully becomes useful in shopping and playing, as well as in the classroom. Parents often support work in the classroom by talking in the language of the classroom. Since your child will use German outside the classroom, then being comfortable in using numbers in German seems quite important.

However, if a child is fluent in both languages, then being asked questions in a different language from the classroom may make them think through and not just repeat what they have learnt. Moving the learning from one language to another may in fact deepen the learning experience.

**Colin Baker**

*Colin Baker is Professor of Education at the University of Wales, Bangor and the author of numerous books on bilingualism including*

**A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism and Bilingual Education (3rd edition) and Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism (4th edition)**

More information from

**[www.multilingual-matters.com](http://www.multilingual-matters.com)**

The editors, **Sami Grover** and **Marjukka Grover** would like to thank the past and the present editorial board for the help and encouragement they have shown during the 27 years of publishing *the Bilingual Family Newsletter*. This is the last published issue of the BFN, but to encourage the availability of sound information and advice on bilingualism, the publishers have created an annual award being offered to groups or individuals who are setting up or running a project to promote and develop multilingualism (see details below).

**International Editorial Board:**

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### The Multilingual Matters Award for Multilingualism in the Community



Multilingual Matters is delighted to announce the creation of a new award to support multilingualism in families, schools and communities.

Each year we will award £2000 to a group or individual that needs financial support in setting up and running a project to promote and develop multilingualism. This may

be a website, a newsletter, school or playgroup, or something else entirely, and can be based anywhere in the world.

The recipient of the 2010 award is Corey Heller and her *Multilingual Living website (MultilingualLiving.com)*. Primarily a community which brings together multilingual families from across the globe to share their experiences, the website also contains a wealth of advice and experience from parents and some of the world's leading experts on multilingualism. Corey will keep us up-to-date throughout the year on how she has used the money, as well as providing a few tips for other people hoping to do something positive to support multilingualism in their community.

We are now accepting applications for the 2011 award, which will be made in September 2011. All you need to do is fill out the form which can be downloaded from our website ([Multilingual-Matters.com](http://Multilingual-Matters.com)) and send it to [info@channelviewpublications.com](mailto:info@channelviewpublications.com) by 1st June 2011.

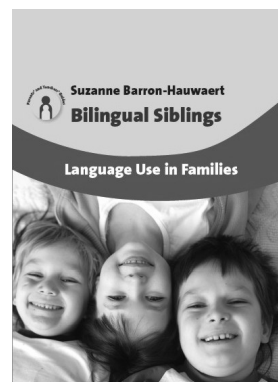
The only condition is that your proposal must primarily be about languages and language use.

## Press Release

### BILINGUAL SIBLINGS Language Use in Families

**Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert**

Taking a different perspective to traditional case studies on one bilingual child, this book discusses the whole family and the realities of life with two or more children and languages. What do we know about the language patterns of children in a growing and evolving bilingual family? Which languages do the siblings prefer to speak to each other? Do the factors of birth order, personality or family size affect language use? This book unveils the reality behind life with bilingual siblings.



*This book is a must-read for anyone interested in bilingual and multilingual families.*

Jean-Marc Dewaele, Birkbeck College, University of London

*A resounding cheer goes out to Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert for writing this insightful, informative and truly essential book.... It is an amazing resource for anyone eager to understand why bilingual children in the same family develop along uniquely individual linguistic paths.*

Corey Heller, Editor-In-Chief of Multilingual Living Magazine

Parents' and Teachers' Guides 240pp,  
Pbk ISBN 9781847693266  
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<http://www.multilingual-matters.com/>

### My Trilingual Son...

*Continued from page three*

relegate English to second language status, seeing that he got an A for the IGCSE and is now preparing the OIB. His linguistic attainments aside, his access to the written word in three different languages has engendered three different world views, a heightened sense of tolerance and diversity, and multidimensional discussions on current affairs.

Karim's language journey will take many more turns as multilingual speakers exist in a fluctuating, ever-changing world within a solid base of intercultural living. If he is accepted at a university in the UK English will outmaneuver French and become his first language. He may even start sounding British! In retrospect, all the uncertainties and apprehension about the lack of language purity, fear of language loss and perseverance in the face of friends and family's outspoken or whispered disapproval – have only constituted minor obstacles on the path to Karim's healthy trilingualism.

*Nayr Ibrahim has been an EFL teacher since 1992. She works at the British Council in Paris, where she manages the British Council Bilingual Section. She has just enrolled at Reading University to do a PhD in Bilingualism.*