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Cover Story: Bilingualism

By Lia Timson*

Thirty-three years ago, a boy was born in Brazil to a Swedish family. His parents hoped he would grow up speaking their language, so Patrik(OK) Alneng, his Swedish-born sister Susanne and their parents only spoke Swedish at home. They often travelled to Sweden on holidays and had many friends who spoke the language helping to keep it alive.

It was also necessary for the children to speak Portuguese which Patrik learnt from his local primary school. Later, his English was nurtured through attending the local American (High) School of São Paulo.

So Alneng grew up to be a trilingual adult who today values his ability to communicate with people from all of his three backgrounds, as well as the many nationalities he meets along the way in business. (He owns Buono Pane, a Sydney-based manufacturer of Brazilian-style cheese breads which are taking Asia and the United States by storm.)

Alneng is one example of how a child may learn more than one language simultaneously and live to tell the tale.

There was a time in Australia when some child psychologists and speech therapists believed children would become confused if exposed to more than one language from birth.

It was not rare for migrant parents to be told to stop speaking their home language to a child until he or she could master English.

It was also common, and part of the White Australia Policy until 1974, for children of migrant parents to be forbidden to speak their language at school for fear it would delay their cultural absorption into Australian society.

These theories have now been disproved by a number of national and international studies into how bilingual children develop their language ability and how it impacts on their social, emotional and learning skills.

Schools of today not only don't object to a foreign language being spoken on school grounds, they actively seek to encourage multiculturalism.

Maya Dobrenov-Major, director of linguistics, Griffith University, Queensland, an octolingual herself, says it has been proven that children are fully capable of absorbing and processing more than one idiom at once. This is possible because different languages are stored in different parts of the brain, while their common features – some grammar rules, for example, are stored together.

“Multilingual children achieve higher flexibility in the brain function,” says Dobrenov-Major.

“They develop higher-order thinking skills such as counting, contrasting, comparing, guessing and deriving meaning. And they have better understanding of culturally-distinct queues such as body language. It is a simple fact: the more input, the more the output.”

Flexibility in thinking also applies to the way multilinguals view the world.

“You don't have a mono-linear relationship with things. For example, a table is not a table because it is called that, it is an object that can be called many things,” she says adding children apply the same attitude to life.

From personal experience, Alneng agrees:

“I do tend to empathise with different cultures and am perhaps more tolerant and more understanding of them. Knowing a few languages makes it easier to pick up others because you understand the meaning of words and their roots.”

The theory that bilingual children speak later than monolinguals has also been debunked, according to Katie Laybutt, speech pathologist, Early Support Team, Fairfield City Council, NSW.

“There is no evidence to suggest a child without a disability or speech disorder will have difficulty speaking another language, but if a child has a problem in their best language, they will have a problem learning another,” Laybutt says.

“Being bilingual is not a language impediment. Most children are capable of learning more than one language at once. Speech disorders are independent of how many languages a child speaks.”

In fact, multilingual children achieve the same milestones in language development as monolinguals, speaking their first words (in whatever language) at around one year of age.

However, Laybutt confirms the theory that children experience “silent periods” when learning a new language sequentially.

This refers to a migrant child, for example, who is monolingual until exposed to English for the first time at school.

“It is quite normal for that child to not speak while building confidence and vocabulary in the new language,” she says.

And it is not true that bilingual children perform worse at school.

When adolescent English speakers resumed their normal schooling in Brisbane after an immersion program where they learnt certain subjects in German, they showed they had gained excellent learning strategies and had worked out for themselves how to cope with a new subject in a language they didn’t know.

“They outperformed everybody in the mainstream classes,” Dobrenov-Major says.

Queensland has seven schools offering immersion programs from a Japanese-program for Year 3 students in Rockhampton, to French, German, Chinese, Indonesian and Italian for Year 8 classes in Brisbane, according to Anna van Hoof, acting assistant director, Assessment and New Basics Branch, Education Queensland.

A Dutch-descendant, van Hoof says she too experienced discrimination at school when young.

“My brothers were bashed up for having a funny surname,” she says.

Today, she is working on a new curriculum project named New Basics, which will aim at preparing children for the new world.

“Part of being a person in the new world is to have a multicultural understanding.

“It should be about celebrating where the different kids come from and accepting that,” she says.

However, teaching children to be bilingual is easier said than done.

Many migrant parents still sacrifice their home language to speak a sub-optimal level of English to the children believing this will help them.

But Laybutt says children require a competent model of language construction to learn well.

“Parents must make sure they speak in the language that is their best, because if they often form incorrect sentences children will follow that pattern. Multiple languages are a positive thing provided there is quantity and quality,” she says.

Dobrenov-Major says parents should always speak to their children in the language they can cuddle with, which for her is Hungarian, the language of her mother.

“The main issue is to be very consistent in separating the languages. One person-one language works best,” she says.

Consistency and perseverance are also required to avoid despair when after so much effort, some children insist in speaking English back to their parents.

Laybutt says children use the words that first pop into their minds and if they know mum understands both, they will use what is most efficient at the time.

Thus the key is to build up vocabulary through plenty of exposure and motivation, not pressure, plus plenty of chances to practise.

Box: Hints on how to encourage bilingualism

- stick to one parent-one language (sometimes a grandparent, nanny or helper can fulfil this role)
- whatever strategy you chose, be consistent
- provide a good language model for children to learn and borrow from
- sing songs, read books, teach rhymes, talk about the other culture, celebrate differences with your children
- demonstrate how languages are useful to you
- socialise with other people who speak the language
- join a language-based playgroup
- join a language-based library
- practise
- be persistent
- make it fun

Source: Education Queensland, Griffith University, University of Western Sydney, MumMe

(*) Brazilian-born freelance journalist Lia Timson is co-founder of the Sydney-based Brazilian Playgroup Brincando and of the AB²CD - Association for Brazilian Bilingual Children’s Development Inc. She describes her commitment to the bilingual upbringing of her two boys as another career.