

Where to begin....

Coming to Australia from Brazil's dictatorship in the early 70's mustn't have been easy for my parents. I admire their guts and determination to make a better future for themselves and their children .

The 70's and 80's were a time of adaptation for Australia. All of a sudden a flood of immigrants arrived.

In my 30 odd years, I've seen great changes and lived great changes in the 'Country of the Future'.

At 5, my parents put me in a Catholic school, as this was what they'd learnt to be the best educational option. I was immediately placed in an ESL class. I remember clearly that there were no blond and blue-eyed children in the class and that most of our names were extremely un-Australian, like Gino, Giuseppe and Maria.

I had no clue that ESL stood for English as a Second Language. Who said English was my second language? I was born in Oxford Street, Paddington. Was I different?

My parents only spoke to us (my brother Michael and I) in English but every weekend we were immersed into the culture, sounds and smells of Brazil. The Brazilian community was smaller and therefore closer than today's. Everyone knew everyone. We always met at Bronte beach on the weekend for volleyball or football games and picnics. Special traditional festivities were always celebrated with the best food, music and laughter.

My first trip to Brazil was at age 4-5. My parents bought some little Portuguese textbooks to help Michael and I learn to read and write. I have them to this day (show books).

My grandparents migrated to Australia.

When I was 8, my parents went their separate ways and this in turn began a language chapter in my life that I clearly remember. My Portuguese was forced into play.

My dad began seeing a lady from Minas called Dinha. For some reason dad and Dinha were quite adamant that Michael and I should pick up our Portuguese textbooks and try to REALLY learn how to read and write.

I used to get frustrated and many times I just threw it all in and gave up.

My second trip to Brazil at age 10 was the beginning of a love affair, one that is hard to explain.

Looking at where my parents came from and interacting with my cousins, I found that I was beginning to understand myself.

Relationships with friends and family started to become important.

The language - family member relationship was looking at this stage to be set in concrete.

I spoke English to my mum and dad. Portuguese with my Vô. (my Vô passed away when I was 10) Portuguese with Dinha. My parents spoke excellent English and for a reason I am unsure of, we always spoke English at home.

I have tried for years to understand the reasoning behind why we only spoke English. The only thing I can come up with is that being in a mainly white Anglophone country wasn't easy and they likely believed it safer to blend in as much as possible.

My father once told me that in the first few years he was called names like *daigo* and *wog* and people thought that Brazil was an exotic jungle country. The remarks didn't stop my parents from making this country their home. I remember fondly watching *The Paul Hogan Show* and *Hey, hey it's Saturday with Daryl Somers* on our big black and white TV set.

The studies surrounding the benefits of learning another language were also not so wide spread

Into high school, I began learning French; German, then Japanese. *Nihon go wa? Do you speak Japanese? Well, if you don't, but know Brazilian Portuguese, let me tell you, they are phonetically twins.*

In high school, I did not have to attend ESL and it seemed that Australian schools were no longer placing Australian born and raised children of migrant parents in ESL, just because the parent's first language was not English.

Australia visited a new era in the late 80's early 90's,. While white Australia celebrated 200 years in 1988, the aboriginals began to gain strength and recognition and with this began a multicultural learning curve.

I began to identify myself more as a Brazilian and search more for all that was Brazilian. In my teenage years I recall there being two groups at school. The Skippies: Australian born with completely anglo and sometimes convict backgrounds and The Wogs: Australian born children of migrant parents.

Having friends that shared your second language and culture was very important as a teenager. I befriended a girl at a leadership camp, who to this day is my best friend. Two young girls at a camp and one turns to the other and says, 'Are you Brazilian?' The other answers, 'yes'!

It turned out we had mutual friends and had even been to the same crèche when we were little girls. Thais was born in Brazil and came to Australia a toddler and felt very Australian and I was born in Australia but felt Brazilian.

More and more I was speaking Portuguese on a daily basis. I knew the slang of many regions of Brazil and different words for certain foods and things that change according to the region. Like the word pumpkin. I know at least 3 words used in Brazil.

My father was born in Pernambuco, my mother in Rio and my stepmother in Minas. We had many friends from all over but Zé Leite spoke the funniest. He was from the interior of São Paulo and said things like, *porta*.

I searched for Portuguese classes so I could do it for my HSC, but Portuguese from Portugal was not what I wanted.

At 17 I lived in the south of Italy and thanks to my Portuguese picked up not only Italian but also the regional dialect in no time.

I discovered I loved languages and had a knack for them.

I thought carefully about how I was going to "teach" myself to read and write in Portuguese.

I bought books and surrounded myself with Brazilians constantly. It helped having parents who were well known in the community.

Mum was a singer and Dad and Dinha always organized the biggest Brazilian functions for the community.

I passed a French entry exam to study a Bachelor of Arts in Languages at the University of Western Sydney.

When I arrived at university, multilingual people just like me surrounded me.

We discovered a lot about ourselves in these three years.

Many found that from living within their respective communities and not having lived in their parents' homeland, they didn't have a specific regional accent.

This was my case. In fact, it continues to baffle people. Brazilians always ask me where I am from in Brazil...they just can't pick my accent. This is because my accent is a great mixture of influences from many people.

Studying Bilingualism and Biculturalism with Dr George Saunders was an eye opener.

He has written extensively on raising children bilingually. Although a native speaker of English, he raised his three children as English/German bilinguals using the one person-one language method.

He once asked in an open tutorial in what language I thought in before I spoke.

My answer then and my answer now...I don't think, I just speak.

In university I had the opportunity to study German again and Spanish, as well as of course my majors French and Italian.

To finish my degree I returned to Italy for an intensive 3 months at the Università per Stranieri in Siena.

I had finished and was now fluent in French, Italian, Portuguese and English. But, my Portuguese was only spoken. I had never studied.

I began working with my languages as a multilingual tour guide around Australia,

I continue my interest in the grammatical studies of Portuguese.

At 25, I get pregnant. For some unknown reason, I speak only Portuguese to my unborn child.

Now giving birth is not easy. It took me 44 hours in total...but the last 7 years trying to maintain a second language, which is also my

second language with my son, hasn't been easy. 44 hours is nothing. This is a 20-year job.

All my attempts to study Portuguese through an institution failed.

For my son however, things have been different.

When he was 2, Tchai went to a family day care in Allambie 3 days a week. On his first day I gave the carer a list of all the words he knew. They were all in Portuguese. His carer, what a fantastic lady!... learnt the key words. *Água, mamãe, papai* and so on. Actually, Tchai was her first child in 14 years that came to her without English. She used this opportunity and went on to learn about bilingual development.

When possible, Tchai used to go to the ABCD playgroup. A vacancy became available at the Warringah Mall Kindy where Monica teaches and I jumped. This was like a dream for me. Tchai made friends with other little kids just like him. I put Tchai in the follow on program from the Kindy, which are the Portuguese classes.

Last year I moved him to Dulwich Hill Public School, which had Portuguese. Even though it was Portuguese from Portugal, I knew that Tchai had learnt a lot through the ABCD and with our home language being Brazilian Portuguese; I thought it would be ok. Tchai was coming home saying things like, '*Mãe*, we were learning the alphabet and you know the Portuguese say 'g' (gue)? But we say 'g', don't we? Tchai is 7 and reading Portuguese! Thank you Maria Sandra.

I have spent the last nearly 6 years working for the Brazilian Consulate and recently found myself in a spot of bother. At work, where I am 1 of 2 non-Brazilian born staff, I used a certain word in Portuguese that was highly offensive. The word I heard my dad say all my life was a word that did not carry a heavy offensive meaning. When I said it in front of a member of the public and my colleagues, including my boss, they were horrified. After days of questioning many of my colleagues and Brazilian friends from different regions and age groups I came to a conclusion.

40 years ago, before my dad migrated, this word was commonly used. He continued saying it.... I learnt it. Today the word is offensive.... no one informed me!!!
I used it, whoops.... and spent the next few weeks trying to scrape my face off the floor with embarrassment.

Regardless of these one off moments of total embarrassment, my Portuguese knowledge helped me to go on to study 5 other languages, not including Portuguese or English.

Moral of the story

Can children learn more than 1 language at a time? Sure they can!

We must remember that a bilingual child's brain is always working double time. For a child that speaks only 1 language, there is only 1 word for 'book'. For a bilingual child there are 2. 'book' and '*livro*'

We now live in a country that accepts differences. Lets make the most of it and persist with giving our children not only a second language but second culture too. It's a 20 year job.... but definitely worth it.

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