



Ask An Expert...

ANSWERED BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

The questions in this section have been collated from those that readers sent in to us.

Do you have a question for our experts? Send your questions to: editor@multilingualliving.com.

Question: We are raising our children with two languages, one for each parent, but the children also have close contact with speakers of other languages, for example in school where other children are also multilingual in different languages, or in the community where we live. Is it all right to let them be introduced to a third, or even more languages, or will this threaten their first languages? My wife is also bilingual, should she start using her other language with the children too? When is the best age to do so? We don't want to deliberately introduce a "Tower of Babel-like" situation in our family, but we have a love of languages, and hope this passes on to our children. They should be as malleable as possible linguistically for later years to help facilitate whichever directions they desire to pursue in-depth in languages. In order to mould their "phonetic fluency" for a variety of languages, we have thought to begin playing tapes of different languages (stories, songs, readings) as they are just lying quietly, or going to sleep, and even while sleeping, softly in the background. I am also interested in feedback on this idea.

Answer: Children will learn any languages which are relevant to them, at any time they become relevant. Languages are not collectible items, as it were, unless you are yourself interested in them, as you say. You don't know whether your children will come to share your interest, and I don't think you can train them to become interested in languages. The reason is that young children are not interested in languages for their own sake: languages are tools that get things done for them, which is in fact what languages are there for in the first place. Introducing a new language poses no problem and no threat to other languages, so long as the children know that there is good reason to introduce them. Many bilingual parents do exactly what you ask about here, they speak their two (or more) languages to their children, because that's what comes naturally to them. Chances are that conditioning your children's ear in the way you suggest won't work. Their ear will become attuned to whatever languages matter to them, not to meaningless background 'noises'. Languages are much more than their sounds and they are learned through natural, active interaction with human beings, so language tapes, or TV, or computer-bound activities may eventually become interesting to children but simply to reinforce what is already there.

Question: In my country, there is a phenomenon going on. People want to learn how to speak English and have their children speak English. But there is no structure in place to deal with this. It is very difficult to find a nursery or school dedicated to teaching English, although they all claim to be bilingual. Some do have English-speaking teachers, others offer only two hours of English a day, like one nursery I just interviewed. Is there anywhere I can find information about what a bilingual school should be? The worst part of this is that I see many schools advertising themselves as bilingual, and charging huge fees because of that claim.

Answer: I don't think there is a clear-cut definition of 'bilingual school' to be found, and I don't know whether and how different countries can, or do, enforce compliance with a definition, if one is indeed available. For better or for worse, many schools are businesses, and many want to capitalise on the new fashion of becoming bilingual, especially in English. I think you are doing exactly the right thing, which is to shop around for a suitable school according to what you require of it for your child, not according to their own advertisements. Arm yourself with a solid set of questions, not just about how many hours a week English is offered. What is taught and how, at which different levels of proficiency, and why, that is, which are the expected learning outcomes, are also important matters to discuss with prospective schools.

Question: What is the best way to encourage a partnership with my children's teachers so they will be supportive of our bilingualism? My 6 year old attends school in a second language and she is struggling. She will have to resist her first year of primary school because she didn't understand enough of the material. I really want to help, but I don't know how. Should I let the school know they are bilingual? I've heard that sometimes schools diagnose language issues that may not really exist after learning that a child is bilingual. Also, what will be a productive way to work with foreign language teachers later on, when the children begin to study their own first language as a school subject? I may end up having the opposite problem here, because my children are already fluent and some of the language instruction will be too basic, although they will need help with their reading and writing.

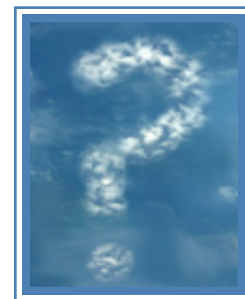
Answer: The best strategy is to ask for the school's cooperation. I should perhaps add that next, expect the best but be prepared for the worst. One of my children was indeed 'diagnosed' with behavioural problems in school which were flatly attributed to her multilingualism, and referred to both psychologists and special needs teachers. We parents were also sternly advised to stop speaking anything but the school language to our children, for good measure. We simply disregarded this, of course, and went on as before with our two home languages. What did help was to secure private tuition in the school language, for which we asked the school's advice and fully heeded it. The 'problem' disappeared after a few months. So I don't think you should try to help your children develop in a language in which you perhaps don't feel confident yourself. It's best to leave language teaching to language teachers. Later on, you just follow the same strategy and explain to the school your children's situation concerning their own language(s). I don't know what kind of support you may expect here either, but some schools will have alternative streams for fluent and beginner children. If not, you can always suggest gently to the teachers that they use your children as language 'teachers' too! Children learn best from peer interaction, and beginner learners can only benefit from seeing their friends enjoy speaking this 'funny' new language.

As far as reading and writing are concerned, your children will be on the same beginner level as their peers, which will also be good for their own and their friends' self-confidence -- your children are not 'the' geniuses, after all. If the school doesn't introduce reading and writing at beginner level, or doesn't do so in one of the languages the children know until literacy in another language is in place, don't worry about this. Again, leave matters of language teaching to the teachers.

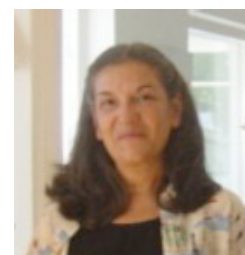
Question: What do you do when one of the parents speaks both a standard form and a dialect of a language as well as English -- how do you deal with teaching that dialect as well as the standard form?

And how does one handle bilingual siblings? What influences them to select the language they talk to each other in? How do I encourage my children to keep on speaking our home language and not the community language with each other?

Answer: First of all, we all speak dialects of our languages, one or more. A standard form of a language is also a dialect -- a 'lucky dialect' of that language, for political and other reasons which have nothing to do with the dialect itself, as some linguists have observed. So if you speak both dialects naturally, just do so with your children, as you do with different languages. What won't work is forcing yourself to speak in an artificial way to the children. They will notice it immediately, and start wondering what is wrong. Same thing for siblings, you can't force them to use, or not use, particular languages among themselves. Older siblings will know what language to speak to newborns as naturally as you do. Later on, they will sort their languages out among themselves and they may change the language(s) they use with each other. The reason is that by around age 3, the models that start mattering to children are peer models, not parental ones. So younger siblings will adopt as peer language the language they hear from elder siblings, or vice versa. I don't think there is a problem in having your children speak the community language among themselves. This is in fact what happened in my family, because the children were schooled in the community language, and school models are very powerful indeed. So long as our children go on speaking our languages with us parents, which they do, we see no reason to deny them their own language.



*Madalena Cruz-Ferreira, a native of Portugal, is the author of **Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment**, (2006) Clevedon, Multilingual Matters (www.multilingualmatters.com). She has received postgraduate degrees in linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK and is currently a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Her main research interests are child multilingualism, multilingual phonology and intonation, and the language of science. She has lived in Singapore for over 10 years with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children.*





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YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

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Question: I have 3 children and they all grew up with 4 languages (English, French, German and Greek). Both our 11 and 9 years old have problems with orthography in French and in the other languages, to the point that it has become a problem at school. Is it possible that the 4 languages have created or impacted the problem? Should we give up (with great reluctance) any of the four languages to help the situation? Any ideas how to deal with this, please?

Answer: I've got some dreaded, old-fashioned advice: Copies. It's a low-tech thing that involves the user only (plus some written/writing material) and is therefore low-valued too. But it's extremely effective. I've used it myself, as an adult trying to cope with foreign spelling, and I've assigned it in palatable chunks to my (trilingual) children for the same purpose, at home, with favourite music on the headphones and/or a nice cup of tea. Then ask the child to assess the accuracy of the copied work against the original. It works like magic. Reading as much as possible helps enormously too, there are endless good-quality French publications for children of all ages.

And please don't stop using your languages at home, nor consider any changes to the family's linguistic make-up. Spelling is a skill that has nothing to do with natural everyday use of language in a family.

Question: Suppose that a natively bilingual person who is equally proficient in both languages moves to a place where a third language is spoken and is completely immersed, but does not receive any instruction in the new language. What would their accent be like? A mixture of both native languages' accents? Or would they have to default to one language or the other to draw their accent from?

Answer: That person would acquire the accent with which s/he would feel most comfortable for interaction in that language, in order to understand and be understood. There is no reason why one or the other, or both, of the native languages should be the source of an accent, and not the new language itself. Total immersion means full focus on a new language, including on its accent. If by "instruction" you mean some form of schooling, then chances are that the person will have no problems with strange accents, because a lot of language instruction is given through written material that inevitably spawns 'spelling pronunciations'.

Hope this answers your questions!

Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is a multilingual parent, educator and linguist. She is Portuguese and she received postgraduate degrees in linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK. She is the author of Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment (2006) Clevedon, Multilingual Matters (www.multilingualliving.com). Her main research interests are child multilingualism, multilingual phonology and intonation, and the language of science. She has lived in Singapore for over 10 years with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children.

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