

## Thoughts on Bilingualism

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When I was asked to speak on bilingualism, my first thought was, *why me*, when we have experts like Antonella Sorace among us. Needless to say, I'm not going to speak on the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism because that's the job of researchers like Dr. Sorace.

Bilingualism, though, has been close to my heart for one reason or another for half a century. Although I am not a researcher, I would like to give you insight into how bilingualism can be accomplished, drawing on my experience not only as a bilingual with bilingual children, but also as a bilingual educator.

50 years ago, a little immigrant girl from a small village in Cyprus suddenly found herself in London, thrown into the deep end of a mainstream English school. After a few days, my father assumed I had learned the route to school and, with my younger brother's hand in mine, I was left to my own to get us to school. It didn't take long for me to take a wrong turn and become lost. I do not remember exactly what I said to the policeman who eventually took us home, but I must have said something because he obviously didn't speak Greek. This was my first taste of communicating in this new and alien way....in this new and alien culture.

The months that followed were overshadowed by sheer frustration, feelings of inadequacy, and discrimination. Whether it was watching the teacher ask for solutions to maths problems that I knew but could not express, or standing in some corner of the playground, wanting desperately to join the children at play, I can only characterize my feelings as misery and desperation. My determination, however, soon grew, and I began to acquire the language rapidly thereafter. Within months I was communicating with ease in this what soon was to become my first language.

You might think *great*. And, at the time, it was, because within a year or two I would be considered native speaker. By the time I got to high school, I was in an advanced group that was destined to reach university standard.

Outside of school, however, being of an immigrant family and the eldest of four children, and typical of millions around the world, I had parents who were always at work and I was left to fend for my siblings. Regretfully, my parents' lack of understanding of the language and culture, as well as their lack of formal schooling (in my mother's case), meant they were unable to foster our education. Basically, my siblings and I were learning without help in either language.

Not surprisingly, this had one result. Lack of exposure to L1 meant that by late teens, without parental input, my mother tongue was suffering badly, despite meager attempts to attend Saturday classes at the local church school. By the time I needed to seriously use my mother tongue again in my late teens, I had to re-learn most things as

if I were a beginner, although some aspects of the language must have lain hidden in my subconscious.

Having come so close to losing my mother tongue (which was true of almost all people with similar backgrounds), and beginning to understand how both languages could have been better fostered, I was determined my children would benefit from my experience. All three of my children grew up in London with one parent speaking Greek to them and the other English during their pre-school years. After starting school, they were immersed in English at school (later Greek and English) and in both Greek and English at home, even with my frustrating gaps in Greek. (Bilinguals will always search for the same words in both languages.)

During these years, I discovered the pleasure of having two home languages and how these children actually never confused them, except when intentionally using “Greeklish” to tease each other. Their teasing took the form of using root words from one language and suffixes from the other, as in “to kanonisify,” or sometimes making mistakes such as “to plean your hands,” a mixture of *pleno* and *clean*. Their most common form of fun with language was in constructing sentences using both languages, with the stronger of the two for more difficult words, as in “In the summer, *tha pame* Greece.” Amusing for some; annoying for others.

One day I was chatting with a Greek parent in London and, to my surprise, he said “Why should I impose my mother tongue on my children, who are growing up here?” I wanted to tell him that bilingualism was one of the greatest gifts he could give his children, but I guess I didn’t have enough confidence or insight at the time. Until recently, having bi-glossal parents has not always been seen as an asset. Nor have the advantages of bilingualism been fully appreciated.

Today, bilingualism is considered a worthy field of study, and valuable research is being done. The world is now perceived as smaller and smaller. And economic and social problems at home are causing people to seek work and stable homes in countries other than their place of birth. It is no longer desirable to acquire two, or even three, languages but assumed; whether it is for cultural or educational reasons, or just to have greater opportunities in life.

How can we nurture bilingualism? It can be fostered wherever and whenever a suitable environment is created. This works best when it’s a home environment characterized by children’s opportunities for quality language interaction with parents and siblings in the mother tongue, especially when the children are not exposed to their mother tongue away from the home. Absent this home environment and missing opportunities to engage in the mother tongue outside the home, children—like myself and my siblings—risk losing this tie to their heritage altogether.

Unfortunately I spent a good part of my adolescence denying my birth language and culture. When my English literature teacher at school asked me to verify that the ‘es’

ending in a name we came across in a book was typically Greek, I was embarrassed to admit I knew and I said I didn't. (Little did I know that, years later, the ending would be part of my married name.) Children need to be able to stay in touch with their L1 culture and develop pride in it, whether it be national holidays, music, traditions, and religion. This helps children grow up more solidly bi-cultural and more socially aware and confident.

If a positive linguistic environment is nurtured by the primary caregivers in children's lives, these children will not only *not* lose their mother tongue and but will also develop the other language—when the other language is the one outside the home and at school. When all goes well, they will also be enriched by two cultures. This can prove the most beneficial education of all.

Development, including literacy development in the mother tongue, can then take place alongside children's schooling in the other language. Children sort out the two, distinguish one from the other, and become successfully literate in both languages.

We now know that this is how bilingualism and bi-literacy work. And, of course, we now know from experts like Dr. Sorace that the development of one language promotes language, literacy, and cognitive development in the other. That's the magic of these processes.

At Anatolia School, which is the institution I represent, we are very proud of our bilingual program. It nurtures bilingual and near-bilingual children in an especially-designed English-language curriculum that focuses both on oral and literacy development and on school-promoted writing skills, as well as on an awareness of culture. The program is designed for children who have lived abroad, who have at least one English-speaking parent, and/or have been exposed to English from a young age.

The recent waves of immigrants to Greece echo my background. I can't help but draw parallels between these families and my own 50 years ago. Many of these families, too, are having difficulty maintaining and nurturing their children's development in their mother tongue. For many reasons, these parents cannot offer their children the emotional and academic support to fully benefit from their rich ancestral background, just as my parents could not, those many years ago.

Whether the focus is these immigrants, or those relocating to Greece for work, or families returning to Greece after a long absence, the initiative of Aristotle University to bridge the gap between the world of research and everyday life and to support bilingual families in understanding the benefits of a bilingual upbringing is invaluable. This initiative is long overdue, and it has our full support.

If, as a point of summary, I can characterize bilingualism in a few words, I would say it is the greatest gift a child can receive.