

This quarter's edition contains an article on raising and educating a multi lingual family, and some information on the next Eurotck conference.

Bilingualism and multilingualism - Raising a family in the context of several languages

Introduction

The following article was written by a missionary mother with five adult children. It describes the experiences of the whole family as they changed countries and languages, including the language of instruction for the children. Two of the children have contributed their personal reflections, and instead of using their real names we have referred to them as G and N. The article refers to two French educational qualifications, the 'brevet' and the 'Baccalauréat' or 'bac'. The brevet is taken at the end of 'troisième' (Grade 9 in the US, year 10 in the UK) and assesses the students in seven core subjects. The 'bac' is the end of high school qualification which allows students to enter tertiary education.

The Family's Experience

My husband and myself both have Swiss German parents who met each other and got married in Geneva. We were born and grew up there, hearing and speaking Swiss German at home and French at school . We gradually reduced our use of Swiss German as the years went by, and although we also used Swiss German during the holidays, French rapidly became our main language. So both of us grew up bilingual, aware of both the benefits and the challenges.

It is important to note that there are 4 main languages in Switzerland, and all products in the shops are labelled in the three principal languages. Swiss German is a dialect, and so we also learned High German at school. Among the advantages was the fact that we could understand and communicate easily with the family in Swiss German, as well as with people in general both in this area and in Germany. We also learned to fit into two different cultures, and were more open to the multiculturalism that we found in Geneva, with neighbours who were Italian, Spanish, Portuguese...

Amongst the challenges, we had to work hard to attain a good level of French and we felt neither completely Swiss French nor fully Swiss German. At school in Geneva, I was sometimes called 'sale Boche' and in the German part of Switzerland 'petite française'.

Despite everything, as our families are Swiss German, it seemed useful to help our children to become bilingual as well. For this reason, even though we lived in a francophone environment, we only spoke Swiss German to the children from birth. However between ourselves my husband and I spoke French.

We have five children, of whom four were born before we left for the mission field in West Africa. When the eldest was four, we realised that we were reaching the limit of our Swiss German vocabulary. In order for her to make progress, it was better that we spoke to her in French from then onwards. Also, at the same time we realised that when we got to West Africa our children would have to be educated in German.

So we spoke French to the eldest one, while continuing to use Swiss German with the others, until each of them reached the age of 4. It is true that this took a lot of effort, but we were already used to speaking different languages with different people.

We arrived in West Africa when our eldest was 5 and our youngest was one. The year before that we had moved a great deal, meaning that our eldest had attended kindergarten in Swiss German for four months and then in French for 6 months. Also, while we did a one month course in England, our two eldest were looked after in an English crèche. They learned very early on to communicate in different languages to various people, following our example.

When we arrived on the mission field, we had a tutor to teach our two eldest children, along with the two eldest from another family. So they spoke German and Swiss German at school, French at home, as well as phrases in a Fula dialect and Wolof from our neighbours. This was the experience of the older two for three years, and our third child was in the same situation for one year.

Our original idea was to send our children to the local school where the education was in French. However, we were told that the level was not good enough, and at that time, the only other option open to us was to send our children to the MK boarding school run by our agency. This school was about to open a German speaking branch (using the Zurich curriculum), so we sent our two eldest children, at the ages of 8 and 6½. In this new context they spoke Swiss German in the dorm, German in class, and English in the dining room and generally with the English speakers. At home, during the holidays, they spoke French with us. (During this time, our two boys, aged 4 and 5, were able to attend a French kindergarten with a Senegalese teacher.)

Then we had a year of home assignment. We wanted to avoid a change in the language of instruction, so we spent the year in the German part of Switzerland at my grandmother's house. During this time our three eldest spoke French with us, Swiss German with my grandmother and school friends, and German in class. We then had our fifth child, with whom we all spoke Swiss German.

On our return to West Africa, the four eldest all went to the boarding school. The eldest was 10, the next one 8½, the third 7 and the fourth 6.

We were very aware of the language changes that they would have to cope with, the different languages spoken in our host country and the fact that they could communicate with the local people in French, so we never really encouraged them to learn a local language. They did understand some words and a few phrases in at least three local languages, but no more than that.

When we first arrived in our host country, we were asked what our educational plans for our children were. We were thinking of sending them to the mission's boarding school, enrolling them in the German-language branch up to the age of 16 (the age limit there) and then transferring them into the French school in the capital to complete their school studies. We were told that this would not really work. However, in Switzerland one may be obliged to change languages in order to pursue higher education, depending on the location and choice of course. So we didn't see what the problem was. To prepare our children for the transition, I worked on French with them (vocabulary, spelling and grammar) in the holidays for five hours a week during 10 weeks of the year. I used material that a teacher friend had given me, and some books that I read aloud to them from when they were little.

After they had been at the boarding school for two or three years, a discussion began about the possibility of putting all of the secondary age children into an English-speaking dormitory. As our children spoke French at home, Swiss German in the dorm, German in class and English with the Anglophones at school, we were not prepared for that, and began to think about taking our children out of the school if they were faced with having to be in an English speaking dorm. Also at that time, 'by chance' we learned that the latest age for changing the 'functional language' successfully was around 11 or 12 years. So a school proposal which seemed to us to be unwise was the means by which the Lord prompted us to redirect our children at the right moment.

Due to the problems caused by a separatist movement, we had to move more quickly than expected to the capital city, where there were French schools. As our eldest daughter was about to turn 13, we planned for her transfer to the French school system, leaving the other three free to choose whether they wanted to change then or the following year (which would be our home assignment). The other three chose to stay at the boarding school. The change to the French system was a challenge for our eldest as it had been for me, but she passed her year.

We then had our next home leave year, which we chose to spend in France, near the Swiss border, in order to avoid another change of school system for our children on their return to West Africa. The eldest would be able to continue in the French system and the next three to enter it. Fortunately, we had already learnt how the French system worked with our eldest daughter.

This year was very difficult for all of our children, and we prayed a lot for them throughout. There were so many changes for them to cope with - country, climate, culture and language. A change like this during the teenage years is not to be recommended, but we had very little choice. Fortunately, we lived in community with two families (good friends) during that year, and each family had four children around the same age as ours who went to the same schools.

Our fourth child was young enough to go to primary school, and he and the eldest one seemed to cope best with the change. Our fifth one was only 4 - we had only spoken Swiss German with him up to that point, but he had heard French around him. He now went to a French kindergarten, and from that moment onwards he no longer wanted to speak Swiss German with us. We would have liked to carry on

speaking it so that he didn't forget, but it was not possible. Having said that, it was easier for us to speak French all the time.

By the grace of God, all five passed their school year. Then we returned to the field, where all five children were able to go to the same French school. As well as French, German and English, the eldest also learned Spanish, and the second and third Italian. One after the other, they passed their *brevet* and the three eldest passed their *bac*. We stayed in West Africa for seven consecutive years, to avoid changes for them during this important phase of exam years. We only returned to Switzerland twice during summer breaks, making the most of the opportunity to visit colleges and spend time observing different trades. This enabled them to get a feel of how they could pursue a career after the *bac*.

Our four eldest were converted and baptised in West Africa, each witnessing to Christ in their own way to their friends and teachers.

Our eldest studied languages and translation at Geneva; the second, who has always preferred German, trained to be a nurse at Berne, and the third did a year's internship in a German region of Switzerland before training to be a special education teacher in Geneva. The fourth moved to France at the same time as his brother and lodged with one of the families with whom we had previously lived in community. He passed his *bac* and then studied at the engineering school in Lausanne. Now he works in Berne, so he is grateful to us for teaching him Swiss German.

All of them left us at different points to study in Europe: the eldest was 19, the second 18 ½, the third 18 and the fourth 17. All four speak French, German, Swiss German and English well. The two eldest are married to Germans and currently live in Germany. The eldest has given lessons in German, French and English, and she also speaks Spanish and Arabic.

We returned to Europe with the youngest one when he was 12. He has an excellent accent when he speaks or tries to use foreign languages, but he still doesn't know German or Swiss German very well. He is the only one who followed his entire school programme in French, and currently he is studying IT/computing in Geneva.

The Views of the Children

Two of our children have expressed their own thoughts to us which they have permitted us to share. G. is very positive about his bilingual and then trilingual upbringing. He thinks that it is really worthwhile for each of the parents to speak to the children in their mother tongue or their main language (the one that they know best). On the other hand, the parents should avoid using a language that they speak badly, simply because they find that their child needs to speak that language.

Regarding the change of academic language that he went through between the ages of 11 and 12 (from German to French): it was difficult, but he managed, because he had good preparation at home, speaking French there and having lessons with his mother. Otherwise, it would have been impossible. When he goes through the

alphabet in his head (to look something up in the dictionary) he always uses German, whereas he does calculations in French.

(As a reminder - his parents spoke Swiss German (their mother tongue) with him till he was 4, then they spoke French to him (their main language). He heard his parents speak French to each other, then with his eldest sister from the time that he was 1, and with his next sister from the time that he was 2½.)

In West Africa he did a year of kindergarten in German and Swiss German (age 3-4) and a year in French (age 4-5), then a year of primary school in Swiss German (age 5-6). In this last year he spoke German at school, Swiss German with his friends and great-grandmother, and French with his parents.) This was followed by four years in the German branch at the boarding school (German in class, Swiss German in the dorm, English the rest of the time at school and French at home in the holidays). He then did a year's education in French, then six further years in French in a French Catholic school in the capital, where he passed his *bac*. He then completed a one year placement in the German part of Switzerland, before studying special education for three years in Geneva in French.

His main language is French, but he is quite at ease in German and English, and is also studying Spanish. He has spent five years working in his field of special education, and is about to embark on Bible College training, also in Geneva.

N loved learning several languages and being able to understand so much. On the other hand she can see the risk of knowing multiple languages to a limited extent while never mastering one. She said that it is important to think in advance about changes in schools, education systems and languages. Changes are difficult for the children. It is crucial to realise that language includes culture, and this is often not sufficiently recognised when thinking about multilingualism .

It is important for parents to consider where they would like their children to end up, for training and their future as adults, and in which language and culture they would prefer them to feel most comfortable. However, afterwards they also need to be open to each child's personal choice.

(As a reminder: her parents spoke Swiss German to her [their mother tongue] until she was 4, then they spoke to her in French [their main language]. She heard her parents speaking French to each other, then with her older sister from when she was 1½. She is the only one of the five who has always preferred Swiss German to French, from a very young age.

In West Africa, she completed three years of kindergarten in Swiss German (aged 3½ to 6½), and one year of primary school in the MK boarding school (German in class, Swiss German in the dorm, English the rest of the time at school, and French at home in the holidays). Then she did a year of primary school in Swiss German, at age 6-7 (German in class, Swiss German with her friends and great-grandmother, French with her parents), and 4 further years at the boarding school, with the same language mix as before. After this, she did a year of school in France, transitioning into the French system, then five years in French in the French school in the capital, passing her baccalaureate there.

She completed her four years of nursing training in German, in Berne. Her main language is Swiss German, but she also speaks German fluently, is very much at home in English and French, and can get by in Italian. She recently got married to a German and they have moved to Germany for a year, after which time they are planning to serve the Lord together overseas.

What lessons can be learned from our experience?

There were no bursaries available to us for our children's education, which is why we enrolled them in a private Catholic school teaching both the French curriculum and the one from the country that we were living in. It was cheaper than the French private schools, but as we had five children, of whom three were at higher secondary level, it was still expensive for us. However the Lord provided in unexpected ways.

If parents are going to move their primary aged children from one school system to another in a different language, it is crucial that they are well established in reading and writing in the first language before changing to the second. Probably they need at least two years of primary school, but it is best to seek advice on this from experienced teachers who know the children.

It is important for parents of young children to have some idea about the direction in which they wish the family to go in the future, even if there are a lot of uncertainties. Although it is not possible to know the details of how this will work, they need to have the 'big picture' in mind. This involves answering these questions:

Where do you want them to complete their higher education?

In which language?

At what age would you expect them to go to the relevant country for higher education?

Do you expect to accompany them, or remain in your field of service?

It is important to consider each child's needs, temperament and gifting. They are individuals and a good solution for one may not work for another.

Eurotck 2017

Dates: 11th - 15th May 2017

Location: Freizeitheim in Friolzheim near Stuttgart

Theme: Conference Theme: Window on the TCK World – A clear view on the globally mobile

Plenary Speaker: Christian Quartier (of Le Rucher)

Prices: From €190 dormitory, €220 twin room for the conference

Eurotck is a conference for all people with a heart for Third Culture Kids, those with TCK responsibility within an organisation, mission or church, and TCK staff such as dorm parents, teachers, re-entry camp staff or any other form of TCK Care. Adult TCKs are also welcome whether they are involved with an organisation or not.

The prices quoted are early booking prices so book early to get these special rates. Prices are per person and include all meals, refreshment and overnight accommodation.

Further Information available from the web site at <http://www.eurotck.net/events/eurotck-2017/>

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