

Welcome to the March 2005 edition of Educare

After last quarter's edition on multilingualism there was a considerable response, showing what an important issue this is to so many families. Some of the articles included are part of that response; others have been invited to help understand the issues involved. If you would like to contribute or respond privately then we would welcome that. We would also like to tackle the issues of living as an MK or Christian TCK in secular societies - working in them, living there on re-entry or both. If you have any contributions or other comments on that one then we would like to hear from you. No comments that you make will be published without your agreement. E-mail us on SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk

Matt & Margaret Paton from France

Thank you for the interesting article on children being multilingual. We thought our experience with our boys in France may be of interest. We spoke English with them from birth, of course but due to the people we often had in the home when they started to speak it was in French. We spoke to them in English and as they understood perfectly they however answered in French. This wasn't such a problem except when we went to the UK and the grandparents could not understand a word. We felt we had to rectify this and began when they were about 4 and 5. After reading James Dobson's book 'Dare to Discipline', we gave 10 centimes a day to them if they only spoke English in the house. Whether or not this was the right way, it worked, though they had a struggle and needed lots of encouragement before they were fluent. Now they are bilingual and both preach in English and French and are able to interpret in meetings. Timothée went to Bible College in England but Marc who can read easily in English has a problem with writing, but he doesn't need to do this very often. (He is a trained social worker in a Christian Rehab Centre here in France) No doubt we could have done things differently, but that's our story and we hope that it will be of interest to you and your folk who need advice.

MULTILINGUALISM; ONE FAMILY'S RESPONSE

Our family is one of many who have had the privilege and positive experience of being a bilingual family. My late husband Nan Pin was a Malaysian born Chinese. His mother tongue was Hakka, a Chinese dialect. He was educated in Mandarin, spoke Cantonese on the streets and in the market place, Bahasa Malay was a compulsory language component at school and on reaching Form 6 & 7, changed to an English medium school. His tertiary studies have all been in English. Living in Hong Kong meant his Cantonese language was the predominant language spoken at the expense of his English and other languages.

I am a Caucasian New Zealander with mother tongue English and learnt Cantonese as a second language. Our eldest child Elizabeth was 9 months old on arrival in Hong Kong. Son Matthew was born here. What were we to decide for language and education? For many of the reasons stated in Educare, December 2004 - cross-cultural marriage, relationships with extended family, language of the host culture and ministry, as well as language of education if local schools were to be chosen - we decided on mother tongue English with Cantonese as a second language.

The standard of education of national schools in Hong Kong is very good, being equivalent or even higher in some subjects, than my own home country. This together with the cost factor of

international schools, plus reasons stated above, helped us decide on local schooling for our children's education. With this decision made we then had to work out how we would keep up their English standard. Schooling begins at the age of three for HK residents, with three years at kindergarten, six years at primary school and seven years at secondary school. I began to teach our children to read at a very young age. By the time Elizabeth began school at three and a half years of age, she could read on her own. I continued to work with her each day on her reading. Matthew was a little older before reading on his own, but still pre-primary school age. We chose not to have a TV so the only English they were exposed to was my speaking to them in the home, some music and story tapes as well as English books from the local library. All other involvements were in Cantonese. I have not done any remedial English work with them at all during their education in HK.

Neither child had any Cantonese to speak of before entering kindergarten. This was difficult for them at first, being in a total immersion situation, with no parental involvement allowed and the kindergarten teachers also could not communicate with them in English. However, as with all children, they very quickly picked up Cantonese, both spoken and written.

On returning home from school each day, they would continue to use Cantonese with Nan Pin, especially when relating incidents that happened at school or with doing homework. After an hour or two, and especially at the meal table, English was the preferred medium. If we had Cantonese speaking guests in our home, the children would naturally use Cantonese with them and English with me.

Over the years (Elizabeth now 23, and Matthew 17) they have felt comfortable in both languages but if asked, would always say English was their mother tongue and preferred language. I have watched them in different situations and observed that there are times when Cantonese is the preferred medium. I must add however, that there have been pressures although these have mostly come from the education system rather than being in a bilingual situation. I do praise God that my children have had this privilege of learning two languages side by side, and are now fully literate in both.

Son Matthew writes:

Hi! I am Matthew Chee, a 17 year old multilingual. After reading Educare December 2004, I very much agree with what the author said, that exposure to more than one language should begin at the earliest possible age. In my opinion learning a language also means learning part of a culture, the idioms used, and the spoken and unspoken rules of a language which more often than not, also reflect the rules of the culture. Thus for missionaries who have multilingual children, this can be a great asset. Their children can, to a certain extent, help their parents fit into the new culture, especially if their parents have not long arrived.

Being multilingual also means you can take the best from each language. I am fluent in both Cantonese and English, and when talking with my sister, will frequently switch between the two. It is just that some parts of one language are good for describing one thing and another part of the other language is good for describing something different. Humour can take on another meaning as you intermix jokes from both languages!

Daughter Elizabeth writes:

I agree heartily with my brother, and count an upbringing in a multilingual setting as one of the great perks of growing up an MK! Especially now, studying Linguistics and English Language at University, and learning from an academic angle what we grew up with, I find it even more fascinating. Practically, being able to learn a culture through the language is an invaluable experience, definitely well worth the hard work.

(Eleanor, Elizabeth & Matthew Chee)

Comments from Tabitha, Aaron and Rebecca Bohl, having grown up in West Africa 1989 to 2001:

We speak Swiss German (language of both our parents) fluently, High German (spoken language in school and written language in Switzerland) also fluently, English reasonably well and a little French. We used to speak a local language of The Gambia called Mandinka during some of our early years. Not having continued living in this particular language group, we forgot how to speak it. Only Tabitha, who is the oldest of the three of us, still understands words and some of the meaning when Mandinka is spoken.

We started learning English and Mandinka at the same time at the age of 3 and 4 years, mainly by playing with kids of colleagues of our parents, relating to the missionaries, as well as playing with African children. There were some Adults from Germany which helped us learning to speak High German also. The situation was such that we switched from one language to the other, depending on what language that person spoke. We picked up really good English at the WEC International boarding School BCS by daily living together, watching English speaking movies, etc. French was on the school curriculum at BCS and because we did not mix so much with the French speaking Senegalese people, we had to learn it mainly from books.

Our parents were always very open towards any kind of people. They encouraged us to make friends, to invite them or spend time at their houses. Tabitha picked up any of the languages fairly quickly, as did Rebecca. Aaron who is more of an introvert and not very comfortable with lots of people around him, took some more time and would also not have a vocabulary quite as wide as his sisters.

Speaking other languages did probably affect our Swiss German mainly when we used certain words in English, Mandinka or High German instead of Swiss, that is jumble words together. Our parents did that, too. Words like okay, freezer, meeting, church. We as a family created sort of our own language. Although we always spoke Swiss German at home, these words just crept in and nobody realised it. Settling into life in Switzerland, we realised that our vocabulary was smaller. However, this has probably also to do with the different world and environment we grew up. As many western things did not exist in Africa, we did not know the words of them.

The main advantage of knowing more languages by having learned them "on the side" is that it is easy to speak them. It comes naturally. To the other children at school in Switzerland it feels strange to speak English, whereas with us, it is part of ourselves. We would say that we did not have any problems growing up multilingual; on the contrary, up to today it has only advantages. All of us can understand and speak English. It helps us a great deal in school (English class, Computer class) and at work. Tabitha is working in a flower shop where sometimes English speaking people phone to make orders. She would always be able to take these orders whereas the other staff find it difficult. Also travelling is easy. We went back for a visit to Gambia this past Christmas after 3 1/2 years and could communicate easily with everybody speaking English.

The only sad thing was when we went back to Gambia after our first home leave, that we had forgotten all our Mandinka and could not relate to our friends anymore. However, we then left Gambia to go to Senegal for our schooling and did not need to understand Mandinka anymore. If we ever want to go back and live in Gambia we would have to learn Mandinka from scratch as all the Adults have to do.

Lydia Aartsma

My name is Lydia Aartsma and I'm currently living in the Netherlands with my parents and two older sisters. In the year 1989 I was born in England (High Wycombe), as my parents were doing the WEC candidates-course at Bulstrode at that time. When I was just twelve days old, my parents and my sisters and I moved back to the Netherlands. There I lived for about half a year, after which we moved to Belgium. There my parents learned to speak French. When they finished their French language study, we moved to Burkina Faso, a country in West-Africa. That was in November 1991.

And that was when my "multilingualism" started. My sisters and I were home-schooled by a Dutch teacher who came especially for us. So in the family and at school (pre-school for me) we always spoke Dutch. But of course we also got to know African kids, and by playing with them, we very quickly learned to speak the native language (Birifor) and French. I don't know how on earth I managed to learn Birifor just by playing, as my parents had a hard time trying to learn it with their language-helpers... I don't remember learning French and Birifor; I only remember knowing the languages already and happily playing "church" and "funerals" the African ways, together with my sisters and African friends. It was a good time, those good old days...

In August 1995 we went on furlough, back to the Netherlands. I don't remember having much trouble with my Dutch at that time. I was in grade one, but I had already learned to write and read, so I was allowed to read along with grade two. In the two years we spent in Holland I totally forgot my Birifor, but my French was still fine.

We went back to Burkina Faso in June 1997. At that time I was eight years old. There wasn't an opportunity to home-school us anymore, so my parents decided to send us to boarding-school. And so my sisters and I went to the boarding-school VIS (Vavoua International School), in Côte d'Ivoire, a country next to Burkina Faso. As it was an international school and there were so many different nationalities, everybody had to learn and speak English. My parents had done some efforts to try and teach us some English, but what we learned from them was limited: 'yes', 'no', 'thank you' and 'could you pass me the peanut butter please?' Very helpful of course, but apart from that we didn't know any English. Luckily there were some children there who also knew French. We played together and they would teach me English words by translating them from French (I remember one of the first words I learned was 'queen'). But then the staff forbade the kids to speak French with us, because we really needed to learn English. One of the staff members taught me the English alphabet by a "Go Fish" card game, and I remember being quite proud of this achievement. I found the first year at VIS very hard. But I must say, after that year, all three of us could speak English fluently. I remember a friend enjoyed hearing me speak to my sister: we were in a conversation and I had started talking to my sister in Dutch. When I had finished speaking, she "guessed" what I had talked about. I was very surprised to hear that she had completely understood what I had said! But then she remarked that during the conversation I had switched from Dutch to English, and I hadn't noticed it!!

In the holidays my sisters and I would go back home to Burkina Faso, where we could speak Dutch all the time again with our parents, and French with our friends. But because we spent most of the time at school, my French got much worse, and my English much better (sadly I never really learned the native language Birifor again). I didn't mind this very much, but it was annoying when communicating with our African friends back home.

Then it was time to go to the Netherlands again. We had stayed in Africa for three years, and now it was September 2000. The first year in Holland I jumbled many English words through my Dutch. Sometimes it was annoying when I could only think of the English word instead of the Dutch word, but that doesn't happen often anymore. Another annoying, but typical, thing was (and is), that when people heard I had lived in Africa, they would always ask: "Oh, cool, do you know an African language? Please say something in Birifor? Or in French??" But it's a thing you get used to I guess, and I think a lot of MKs will recognise this.

Learning the different languages does have advantages, as now I have French and English as subjects at school, so I've got a head start! I don't find the way they teach languages at school very good, as it's very theoretical. The best and fastest way to learn a language is to actually use it full time, that's my experience. Growing up with French and English didn't really affect my Dutch in any negative way, of which I'm grateful. But when my friends correct my Dutch, the fact that I didn't grow up in the Netherlands is still a great excuse..!!

Resources

MK Manual by Jean Barnicoat; 2 volume edition available from us for £2.50/€4/\$US5 plus postage and packaging. A gold mine of information for a very reasonable price.

A manual and children's workbook for pre-field preparation of children, plus re-entry guide and workbook for young children are all available from us on one CD for £1/€1.50/\$US2 + postage & packaging.

Any comments about the content and layout of Educare are welcome. If you would like to raise an issue that you would like to see us tackle, or send in a contribution, please do so to SteveGill@mkea.freeserve.co.uk
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