



## Interview with: *Barbara Zurer Pearson* author of *Raising a Bilingual Child*

INTERVIEWED BY ALICE LAPUERTA

### 1. Can you tell us a little of your personal background, and how you came to write this book?

I say it took less than a year to write the book—but more than 20 years to do the research for it! Raising a bilingual child is a bit like a Goldilocks story. Some people think it's too hard—so they don't attempt it—and some people think it's too easy—so they don't do the relatively simple things they need to do. *I wanted to write something to show parents and other caregivers that it's not too hard and not too easy, but "just right."*

It's not "rocket science," but it's also not a slam-dunk. A child rarely becomes bilingual as a child without the parent intending it and acting to make it happen. People often ask me if I was raised bilingually, or if I raised my children bilingually. The answer to both questions is "no." *We lived in Miami, and I thought the children would become bilingual without my doing anything to make it happen—but I was wrong.*

As it happens, my two children and I *are* bilingual. That is, we have lived at some point (or in the case of my son who married into a Cuban family, he is living) in two languages – thinking, dreaming, joking and maybe cursing in another language. But all three of us started our second-language learning in school. I grew up in New York in a town with many Russian (bilingual) émigrés; we also had long-term visitors from abroad, like a Japanese exchange student, a French au pair (who wanted to learn English), and other students from Europe who would stay with us. I was always jealous of their ability to switch back and forth between their two languages. I went to Middlebury College aiming to spend my junior year in France—so that I could become bilingual, too. Not all the Americans that were with me in Paris that year got good enough to be called bilingual, but I made sure that I did.

Many years later at the University of Miami, Kim Oller and I brought together a group of psychologists and linguists in the Bilingualism Study Group. Over the years, these colleagues and I learned so many fascinating

*Barbara Zurer Pearson, Ph.D., a bilingualism expert with more than twenty years of research experience in the fields of bilingualism and linguistics, is a Research Associate at the University of Massachusetts. Her pioneering work on bilingual learning by infants and children and on language assessment has been published in scholarly journals and in the book /Language and Literacy in Bilingual Children. Visit her homepage at: [www.umass.edu/aae/bp\\_indexold.htm](http://www.umass.edu/aae/bp_indexold.htm)*



things about bilingual children. I wanted to share some of them with parents, both the parents of the children who participated in our studies and also a more general audience.

**2. *Is it possible to become bilingual as an adult? Or are the “real” bilinguals only those who have been raised in two or more languages since birth?***

Who are the real bilinguals?? There are definitely degrees of being bilingual and I don't think anyone knows where foreign language learning slides into bilingual learning. We have clear mental pictures of people who are bilingual, and people who aren't, but we can't really put our finger on a boundary between the two. As I said above, my personal litmus test is whether you can directly experience interactions in two (or more) languages – thinking, dreaming, and so forth in both – or whether you have to translate from one language to the other.

Many, many people become bilingual as adults. One certainly can't become a “child” or “infant” bilingual as an adult, but it's never too late to learn another language, and eventually become bilingual. Even for adults it is usually better to do so in an immersion situation, where one lives surrounded by real-life interactions in the “other” language, but older children and adults can also use other analytical skills that aren't available to younger children to help them understand the second language, so they can also get some benefits from books and formal lessons. To the extent, though, that language is an activity that one learns by doing, thinking about the language is not the same as thinking in the language, and so formal study is rarely a substitute for informal situations where the “language happens.”

Child bilinguals do seem special, though. Their bilingualism is so natural. I recommend that parents begin as early as possible because it is easier for the child than it will be later. It is also helpful for the parents to set up their household patterns from the beginning, so it doesn't involve a change. Changing habits is always more difficult than not changing them.

**3. *Is it possible for one parent to teach two languages simultaneously to a child, or is that not advisable?***

We certainly know it's possible, because people do it. For me the question is time, not separation. One-parent-one-language, which separates the languages by person, is often convenient, but not required. In the Minority Language at Home strategy, children are quite successful speaking two languages to the same people depending on where they are and who else is with them. A parent providing exposure to two languages also probably has to make a bigger commitment to the language strategies they adopt because there's less of a time margin. They have to make more of their interactions count.

**4. *How much exposure is enough exposure for a child to become bilingual? I am wondering about the famous 20%. Put in practical terms, what exactly does that mean?***

The bottom line in learning a language is time spent hearing and speaking in a language, --you can't learn to speak a language well in just a couple of hours a week. But 20% is not set in stone. Other labs (like Janet Werker's in British Columbia) use a 30% threshold. They don't enroll anyone in their bilingualism studies who has less than 30% exposure to their non-dominant language, so I think that's another way of saying they think it takes 30% exposure for a child to become bilingual. Maria Perez-Bazan in her dissertation at the University of Michigan estimates 90% of the home environment needs to be in the minority language. That probably translates into about 45 or 50% of the child's time overall. We found 20% to be a minimum for the child being willing not just to respond but to initiate conversations in a language.

Whatever the magic percentage is, the key is that there seems to be a threshold. Up to a certain point, amount of exposure is essential, and after that point, it's less important.

On the other hand, as I put in the book (Chapter 4), there are other considerations besides time. It's also important how much the child wants to speak a lan-

guage, who speaks it with her or him. Children can tell when a language isn't important to other people, and it loses importance to them, too. These other factors are less potent than time, but they have an influence, too.

**5. The myth that multilingualism leads to language delay is particularly difficult to root out. In your book, you mention that some behavior on the part of bilinguals is rather common. Can one say that what may qualify as common behavior on the part of bilinguals is often mistaken for language delay? Is it possible that the root of the problem is the definition of the term "language delay" and parents simply not knowing what that language delay really encompasses?**

You are very right that we do not have good benchmarks for bilinguals, and so typical development is sometimes "diagnosed" as delay. As you know, I spent a lot of time on this question in the book: Chapter 6 is about "special needs" children and Chapter 7 looks at the research on possible language delay from as many different viewpoints as I could think of (and that the editor would let me include). We can't fault parents for not knowing what language delay really encompasses, because it's not just one thing, and it's not "black and white."

Language delay takes different forms in different languages, but I would have to agree that in many languages, the markers of delay for monolinguals are also things that take bilinguals a little longer to master as well. When a child has fulltime input, difficulty with these things can show that the child is not processing language very well, but difficulty with the same language elements for a child with part-time input can usually be attributed to a child not having yet had a chance to learn those features.

**6. At the same time, this puts us parents in somewhat of a fix. How can we tell whether our children's language behavior is normal, and simply a result of the fact that they haven't had enough exposure to a language, or whether there is indeed a problem – without having to consult an expert (who may not be**

**understanding of our multilingual situation)? Or is consulting a speech therapist the only option that we have when we have concerns like that?**

I think when parents have concerns, they should speak first with other parents and/or relatives with older children and who are familiar with bilingual upbringing. They very often have a longer-range view. (That's one of the things that is so wonderful about websites like MLM.) However, studies show that there is relatively little knowledge and a lot of misinformation about language development in the general public, so it makes sense to consult therapists, who devote time and study to language development. In the best of all possible worlds, there would be speech therapists familiar with typical bilingual development who could advise them. But even those people have a hard time, because there are no standardized materials that they can administer to the child and say, "see, it says here that everything is okay (–or not okay)." They have to use their professional judgment. But we live with uncertainty in other parts of our lives, too. As with a doctor, I suggest getting a second opinion when possible and weighing the two opinions in light of your own common sense and experience.

**7. What about children who grow up with three or more languages simultaneously: is their language acquisition different from that of bilinguals or is there really no difference?**

Less is known about bilinguals than monolinguals, and less about trilinguals than bilinguals, but so far there is nothing that appears different for children learning three languages simultaneously. There are now several groups around the world turning their attention to trilinguals, so more information will be available soon, I'm sure.

**8. We often hear and receive the advice that we do not need to concern ourselves with the majority language because our children will pick it up automatically anyway; after all, children "soak languages up like sponges". You point out that this is a common**

**myth, and that children do need to put in some effort to learn a language. What does this mean for the majority language, though: should we be actively fostering it as well?**

It's motive and opportunity, again. Children don't get a language completely for free, they have to use it. Motive and opportunity for them to use the majority language abound. We have yet to find a national culture devoted to silence 24/7. The large task for parents of bilinguals-to-be is to build motive and opportunity for the minority language where it might not exist without their help.

Once again, in the best of all possible worlds, we could be supporting both languages, but in reality, our efforts in favor of the majority language often diminish the minority language in the child's eyes. My favorite formula (for parents in the U.S.) is minority language at home with a bilingual preschool and then a bilingual school. It would be different elsewhere, as it was for different parents in the examples in my book.

**9. All of us have heard the comment about "that immigrant who still cannot speak English after 20 years of living here". You point out something that we hardly ever think about: namely, that there are not enough programs that teach English to accommodate the demand for them! Can you elaborate on this?**

I hear this from a lot of sources, and went on-line to see what current information I could find. It was not hard. According to this document

<http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/policy/esl.pdf> (accessed 8/8/08) even without comprehensive recordkeeping, researchers have established a pattern of long waiting lists for English classes in all regions of the U.S. The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) considers it a civil rights issue and prepares an ongoing report for the U.S. Congress to try to get more resources: <http://renewthevra.civilrights.org/resources/ESL.pdf>

**10. Of all the methods you presented, the MLP (mixed language approach), while successfully used in countries like India and Singapore, may not be our best option. Can you elaborate on this?**

For this suggestion, I am leaning on the work of Joshua Fishman and other people involved in what's called the "language revitalization" movement. When a community wants to reestablish a language that is dying out, like in Hawaii, Ireland, or the Navaho nation, the revitalizationists recommend creating a situation where the weaker language is not in competition with the stronger one ("weaker" and "stronger" in terms of the numbers of speakers). Two equal languages can co-exist, although they usually have their own domains—one language in the home and church, another in the stores and the government, for example. It's hard for smaller languages to compete with the "killer 8" languages—like English, Arabic, or Chinese. It's like a mom & pop store trying to compete with a well-financed chain of stores. Unless the small store has a special niche, something to offer that the big-box stores don't have, the big-boxes win. We see this happening in towns all over the world, with stores, and with languages, too.

**11. One of the most popular advice that we like to give (and receive) is that to support a language, we should use a lot of media: TV, DVDs, speaking books, etc – and yet it seems like this is not as effective as we would like to think. Is too much reliance on media support counter-productive?**

Motive and opportunity again. Everyone, young or old, needs both of them to learn a 2nd or 5th language. I think different forms of media are great—for motivation. In making a movie or a record or a book, people give special thought to how to make it engaging for children—how to catch their attention and keep it. We say the child was "glued to the TV," don't we? Media also give us content, interesting things to talk about. But the important thing to remember is that they don't substitute for the opportunity to interact with real speakers. Media make it easier and often more enjoyable, but they do not replace live interaction, especially early on. When children are older, reading for example, in addition to being a motivator also becomes an opportunity to increase the child's exposure to the language. Once we have the basics, we can learn a lot through the written form. (The same is true for movies and CDs, too, I suppose.) ❖