

Further Confessions of a Parent of Bilingual Children

Charles Fox

This is not a traditional research paper; know that at the outset. It is life experience reflected upon, but without the security of knowing that the material dealt with is distant from oneself, safely in the past, and that one's own situation in life is in no way dependent upon its further development, other than one's professional standing in one's research field. No, what I will talk about here is my life as a parent – my continuing life, that is – of bilingual children in an increasingly interconnected and always multicultural contemporary world. Now, I have written of this before, in 2009 in the form of an article entitled “One Experience of Bilingual Child Rearing in the Contemporary World,”¹ which Gordon Ratzlaff, the retiring professor in Ritsumeikan's Policy Science Faculty whom the essays of this edition of their journal are honoring, read and commented on afterwards to me. Gordon specifically asked me to continue the line of thought that I began in that earlier article, and it is to honor that request that I take the subject up once again now.

Because I must assume that most readers here will not have read that earlier article, I need to repeat some of the basic information that I detailed there so that what is said here will have its proper context. I am a white American male married to a Japanese woman, and we have twin sons who are now twenty-eight years old. It is hard to believe that my wife and I are now old enough to be grandparents, but we are easily that. Now, most people would assume that our jobs as parents would essentially be over and that there is no more for us to say on the subject, or not much anyway, but like that old *Kokinshū* saw that comes up again and again in the *Tale of Genji* about a parent's heart always being lost in darkness because of worry for his/her child, we find that we are still often consumed with worry about our sons, about their paths in life, about their futures, and about our responsibility for any of the problems that they might be experiencing. The question for the present article, though, is how much of any of that worry derives from or connects to the bilingual part of their beings and experience – a tough question indeed. I will not be able to answer this definitively, but I will do the best that I can.

We raised our sons bilingually from the very beginning of their lives. It was our belief that the

rewards far outweighed the risks, the chief of those rewards being the comfort and support that an extended family in both of their home cultures would give them and which would be impossible to realize without native language capability in both of their languages. The risk, though, was also very real – that they might not really master either of their languages and therefore be made to suffer feelings of inadequacy personally and lack of achievement therefore in their chosen fields of endeavor.

In “One Experience of Bilingual Child Rearing in the Contemporary World,” I related our family’s story up through our sons’ graduation from university. That segment of our and their story had a happy ending, which made all the pain that I spoke of in the years prior to that graduation not seem so serious in retrospect, though it was very real and very hard to bear up under (especially for the kids themselves) when it was being experienced in the present. What is different in what I relate now is that we are still in the midst of the next stage, where no end is in sight and we all remain filled with both hopes and fearful imaginings. My wife and I find that even now we are still trying to monitor whether we have succeeded as parents or not and whether we have done the right thing in bringing up our kids bilingually when we might have made it easier on them by limiting them to only one native language. This thought process and this worry, we have found, does not end when the children have successfully gained a college degree and left the nest for the outside world.

There is no question that all in our family, both parent and child alike, believe that being bilingual is a good thing and that the decision to strive for it was a wise one. I have talked a lot about this with my sons. One of my great fears during the nurturing process was that my sons might end up angry at us for having foisted such a difficult life course upon them – two languages, two cultures, certainly double the life decisions and life choices. I am thankful to say, though, that both sons agree: Having the choices is better than not. As one of their friends stated it to them, because they have been exposed to two languages and two cultures, they can compare and consciously choose for themselves what other people have no choice of and are usually not even consciously aware of. They have made choices, therefore. And one of those choices was to seek out similarly hybrid, multicultural environments when they moved beyond university and out into the world, and even before. One of my sons spent a junior year abroad in England and found it exhilarating. Interestingly enough, it confirmed his Japaneseness to himself in that though he had many friends from various countries as well as England, some of his closest relationships were with fellow Japanese foreign students, and much of his free time was spent in their company. Following both sons’ graduation from university, they spent six months on the island of Kauai in Hawai’i looking into various problems in the multicultural community there for a documentary film they were working on.

But if there are gains, there are also losses. One of my sons has never returned to Japan for any

length of time, as if to say that the way forward for him is only in America. My other son has filled me in on why that may be so. He tells me that neither he nor his brother feel a part of the Japan of their age peers. It is as if to say, together with Tom Wolfe, “You can never go home again.” There are no jobs for them really other than English teaching posts at conversation schools, which they would rather not do. They essentially took themselves out of the normal Japanese career-tracking scheme when they left the country for high school and university, and there is little opportunity for them now to reenter that scheme, even if they desired to. For years my wife and I thought that we had one American child and one Japanese, as one of my sons seemed so focused on America and the other on Japan, one always matched up with American girlfriends and the other with Japanese, but it was my “Japanese” child who clued me in to his feeling that he and his brother no longer fit into the Japan that that we raised them in and the place that he so loves. Perhaps this is why my “Japanese” child, who is now in Japan working with me on a documentary film on what are known as the *Ōbeikei* 欧米系, or Western Islanders, of Chichijima in the Ogasawara Islands, is so enthused about the project and says that the discovery of this group through this project has changed his life. He has found fellow Japanese who know intimately what he has experienced growing up in Japan, and the feeling is mutual. These contemporary *Ōbeikei* take to him similarly, an almost visceral response that I never receive from them, no matter how warm they might feel towards me. This has been fascinating for me to watch develop. What I have been seeing, I think, is that which I have helped to create, that is a hybridization that is both linguistic and cultural in nature. My own thirty-seven years of concentration on and living in Japan have made something of a hybrid of me as well, but my hybridization is different from that of my sons.

In “One Experience of Bilingual Child Rearing in the Contemporary World” I emphasized that the only way that I saw to go about the raising of bilingual children in the contemporary world was to approach it flexibly, as a negotiation. As a parent, you can set a direction and in the early going set some ground rules, but the negotiation metaphor means that not only does the child have the right to bargain and change certain of the terms along the way, but he/she is also not alone in the process – the parent(s) must be active participants as well. That means reading to the kids when they are young in the second language, watching those videos and films and children’s shows with them, staying engaged in dialogue with them as much as possible, and, most importantly, staying aware of their feelings without at the same time intruding on their private worlds. And what I have found is that the process therefore does not end when they grow up and leave the nest. Though we are not calling the shots, so to speak, for our sons any more, that we were members in the negotiation up until now means that we remain a part of their steering configuration in the years beyond university graduation. One son has joined me on my documentary film project focused on the Ogasawaras. The other has just quit his job working for the Nickelodeon cable giant in New York City and entered a film school producers’ program at UCLA. He has found the pressure in

graduate school intense and suddenly, for the first time in probably eight years, has felt the need to get his bearings. Is his disorientation a language problem, a cultural problem, or a psychological problem that he is experiencing? Probably it is a little bit of all three, but the point is that once you involve yourself in your child's life the way the parent raising bilingual children usually does, the moment at which you can sit down and say, "Okay, my job's done" will come very late, if at all. But if you ask me, that's also what is great about this whole process.

Note

1 *All Grown Up: The Bilingual Adult*, ed. Stacey Tarvin-Isomura, Mary Goebel Noguchi, and Amanda Gillis-Furutaka. JALT Bilingualism SIG Monograph 15 (May 2009): 25-32.