



# Raising multilingual children

BY FRANCESCA FURLANI

***A family experience and an interview with the founder of Tutti Frutti bilingual school***

**W**hen our family is together, beyond the chatter and singing of our lively girls, you'd hear bits of conversation in English, Italian and French. I am pretty sure that sounds familiar to many of you.

I was born in Italy speaking Italian 'only', my husband is French-American, and our two girls were born in Germany. While this may have been somehow exotic 30 years ago, it's definitely not today, and for sure not in Brussels.

My husband and I were used to mixing Italian and English, but when our girls arrived we decided that I would only speak to them in Italian, while he would just use English. We basically started to follow at home what is generally called one person, one language method. Also, we relied a lot on books, songs and -limited- screen time, alternating languages.

Our eldest daughter started creche in Frankfurt, so soon she started to learn German as well. While some friends and family were concerned that she had too many languages on her plate, we thought that was OK we were prepared for her to start speaking a little later and ready to help her along the way. The fact that my husband grew up bilingual, following the same method with his own parents, gave me confidence in our choice and made us aware of the potential pitfalls, (more on that later...).

We moved to Brussels almost two years ago, and by then it was time to look for a kindergarten for our eldest daughter. While we heard a lot of positive feedback on the Belgian public school system, we decided to look for a smaller bilingual school, thinking that a multilingual environment would make the transition easier.

After talking to many other parents, we decided to apply to Tutti Frutti and she started there the following September, in the German/French section. After a year, she moved to the Italian/French section. Before the change, we pondered a long time on how she would react to changing (again), and whether it was good to drop German.

Luckily, it went well. She is now only four, understands all four languages, speaks English well, is improving her Italian, picking up French, and when she meets

her German friends, switches to German. We, of course, encountered (and still do) our share of doubts and roadblocks along the way: our daughter started stringing together sentences later than monolingual kids and sometimes mixes languages. Some days I wish her Italian was stronger (my husband is always nudging me to ask her to speak to me in Italian).

I am sure our experience is similar to that of many BCT families. While every child and family situation is different, our main learnings from these first years are that kids are very flexible and curious: they do not suffer from dealing with multiple languages (and changes) like we tend to fear, as long as everyone is patient. Also, consistency is paramount: I encourage other parents not to give up when there is confusion, things get a bit frustrating, or a child



seems to prefer one language to the other. These issues will arise, but the long term benefits of being persistent are, I believe, immense.

Our school helped along the way and made me believe even more strongly on raising our children multilingual. When I pick up my daughter, I hear English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and many more other languages. It makes me so happy to see how the kids seem to live the diverse environment not as a burden, but as the norm, as a way of taking everyone's differences and turning them into a richness.

The founder of our school **Ms. Pitisci**, spent most of her life supporting the growth of multilingual children. Beyond leading the school, developing its pedagogy and philosophy and training its teachers, she published several books on the topic: I asked her to have a chat with us.

***Based on your experience, is there a best time to start learning languages?***

The sooner, the better!

We know that young kids are like sponges. However their brains are not yet fully developed. We need to give them time, support and a reassuring environment.

***How long does it take a child to pick up a new language?***

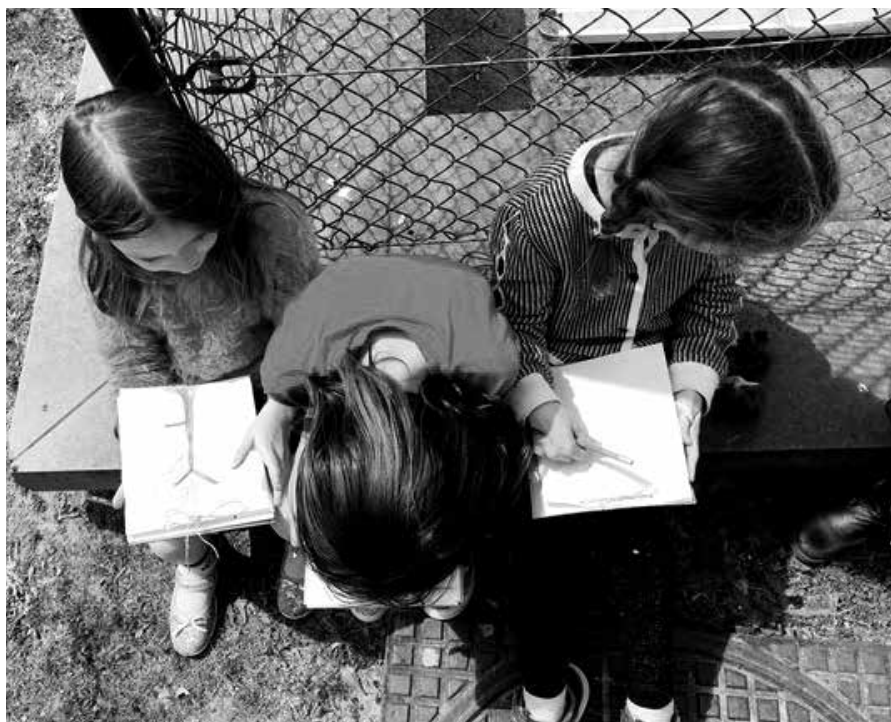
Oh, it's a tricky question!

It depends on many parameters : the child's maturity, interest, the duration of the exposure to the new language (how many times per week); if the child is unilingual, bilingual ...

I would say we need at least one or two years to start to get familiar. That means to accept the foreign language (and to feel comfortable), to understand some key words and key sentences.

Of course, a child who is living in a new country will learn the new language quite quickly (after a few months, if exposed all the time to the foreign language).

I would also like to add a word on mixing languages: some parents may be reluctant to the idea of a bilingual education because children could mix languages -the verb "to mix" has often a negative connotation-.



For me it is the magic of the linguistic creativity of a child. He/she will use the tools he/she knows and put them together in order to communicate.

Once I heard a child saying: "Je dois pipi doen" ("mixing" French and Dutch). In my opinion that's very positive: he dared to ask something in a foreign language and he intuitively understood a grammar rule by putting the infinitive verb at the end of the sentence. He expressed himself in that way because he didn't know the other way. It's the "mission of the teacher" to reformulate the sentence in one language: "Ik moet pipi doen".

***What are the best methods to teach languages to young children? And what kind of environment fosters a positive and effective learning?***

It's delicate to say which method is the best.

For kids (and I'd add for adults as well) of course full immersion is effective but it isn't sufficient in itself. It could even be destabilizing and a little bit frightening. A bilingual approach is reassuring when starting in a new language and school environment or country.

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The environment and the teacher's attitude are essential : small classes (in my opinion, it's impossible to apply an active pedagogy with huge groups), caring adults, warm atmosphere, interesting and varied activities. The children need to "make things", to be active. Learning is positive and effective when children get actively involved in an activity. The results aren't always immediate but will have good "benefits" (good fruits!) in a long-term perspective.

### ***How many languages can a child learn/speak -comfortably-?***

It's also hard to give a precise answer to this question.

I've seen kids struggling with a second language and others absolutely comfortable with five!

What I often say to the parents, they need to accept it's a long process. Let's avoid putting pressure on children. Slowly but surely.

A Chinese proverb says that with patience we'll see herbs becoming milk.

On the other hand, it depends also on the child: his/her maturity, personality; if he/she feels happy and comfortable in new situations ...

### ***What language do you see kids using when they interact? Do they only tend to use their mother tongue or switch between languages?***

It depends a lot on friendships and... on fun activities!

I see children at our school (particularly primary and kindergarten pupils) switching easily from their mother tongue to another language.

### ***What are the challenges you have seen with children that speak two or more languages and can you share ideas to overcome them?***

Some children are perfectionists and won't speak if it isn't perfect!

Others prefer to observe: it doesn't mean that they aren't learning (it's almost the opposite).

It could be more frustrating for adults.

Hum... I'd advise the adults (parents or teachers): to be patient, to understand the child's personality and what kind of intelligences he/she has (meaning what kind of learner he/she is), and of course to be supportive. It doesn't mean to accept everything. On the contrary the framework needs to be clear (warm, positive but clear) for children (especially young ones).

### ***You have taught children for the past 20 years, what changes have you seen from when you first started to now?***

On one hand I'd like to say that children are the same! They want to play, to have the adults' attention and trust.

On the other hand we (adults) think they have less attention or less candour...

Then I observe their enthusiasm: for instance in an activity such as a cooking class!! And I remain convinced that the substance is the same!

### ***Could you tell us a bit about your school and its history?***

Tutti Frutti was founded in 1997 as a language school for children aged 3 to 11 and in 2003 we opened the bilingual

kindergarten (with classes in French plus a language of choice among English, German, Italian and Dutch). In 2018 we welcomed our new 'child', the Primary school (French plus English or German, for now...hopefully more languages in the future!).

In 2000, the European Commission and the "Communauté française de Belgique" awarded us with the European Language Label – an award encouraging the development of new techniques and initiatives in the field of language teaching and learning, as well as the enhancement of intercultural awareness.

### ***How do you see TF's future?***

I still have so many dreams for Tutti Frutti!

First of all, to be recognised and supported would be an important milestone.

That would enable us to further innovate, continue to improve the quality, support the teaching staff, publish new books, propose more outdoor activities to children... And who knows, maybe one day to have a bigger structure!

