

Growing Up Bilingual in Australia

A ViệtSpeak Podcast - Episode 7

Title: Cecilia's Translanguaging Journey

[THEME MUSIC]

Lisa Divissi

Welcome to Growing Up Bilingual in Australia, the podcast where we speak with bilingual children and their parents about language, culture and what it feels like to be multilingual in Australia.

I'm Lisa Divissi, a volunteer with language advocacy group ViệtSpeak and today we're bringing you something a little different.

In 2023, ViệtSpeak and Kids Own Publishing, facilitated a special book making workshop with the parents and kids at Cherry Crescent Preschool in Braybrook. The end result is a brilliant published book called Crocodile và Unicorn Đi Chơi.

You're about to hear a discussion between language scholar David Nunan, and author and parent Cecilia Le, which took place at this year's Williamstown Literature Festival.

The event was called Translanguaging - and if you don't know what that means, don't worry, you soon will!

Hopefully this gives you some insight into how a fantastic Vietnamese and English language storybook, written and illustrated by kids and adults, was brought about.

David kicks things off by asking Cecilia how she got involved with the project.

Cecilia Le

I was very lucky because at Cherry Crescent, we were invited to be part of a bookmaking process. We didn't know what the book was about. We didn't know what was going to come of it. But I've always been interested in language in books in general, so I decided to participate and it turned into something very, very special for my family.

David Nunan

Okay so you turn up at Cherry Crescent, you meet some people you already know, some people you don't know, your kids are there. Maybe you thought that you're going to have to get a story going or you'd be given a story of one kind, and you color in some little pictures, and then you do some readings and so on. But what happened on that very first day?

Cecilia

It was a very big first session, actually. So we were asked a simple question of what does language mean to us. And the parents got together, we had this long table full of scraps of

paper, lots of coloured paper, and we were cutting and pasting and very unsure of what will, really, but basically, putting together imagery of what was important to us, how we interpreted what language meant at home. And mind you, the parents that attended this bookmaking project, they weren't all Vietnamese backgrounds, either. So it was just language in general, what it meant to them in a society in their family to themselves personally. And just putting together these very special images, and then going through, we had different sessions per week for like six weeks.

David

When you came across this notion of translanguaging, what was your reaction?

Cecilia

I had to look up the word. I didn't know what it was. It's an interesting one, I think, being born in Melbourne. speaking Vietnamese at home, I was always already doing it without realizing. So when I speak, and I'm a second generation here, I mix Vietnamese and English in a single sentence. So, you know, I would never need to translate the word again. So if I speak to Jubilee at home, and I tell her, you know, ăn đi, like, you know, eat your food, we're late for school, that's just a single sentence. I wouldn't have to say, ăn đi, eat your food, like, you know, I don't need to translate it. So it naturally actually happens already. But when we were putting together the book, in my mind, bilingual would have made more sense. And that was only because I was used to a world of subtitles, I was used to a world where you would have word for word translation all the time. But through the process, I realised that in the real world when you're travelling, so for example, we were in Japan for a month last year. It wasn't a bilingual experience. While we were travelling, they were actually speaking, like, we were immersing ourselves in their language and their culture. And towards the end of the four weeks, I started picking up terminology and word words that I wouldn't have otherwise kind of knew. So I think in terms of translanguaging, and with the language being used in a way where it's just organic, you do pick it up faster once you are immersed.

David

Okay. So at the beginning, then you're all connecting the themes of language and identity and culture and so on. And reflecting those in your own experience, at what point and how did the transition? Or how did the community start to grow between you, the other parents and the other children who were taking part, at what point did that happen? The coming together of your own personal narratives and bring those together to achieve some kind of unified project as we've seen in this book, which is a very engaging and coherent narrative.

Cecilia

To be honest, it wasn't until towards the end. The first four sessions were purely based on our personal experiences and coming up with the collages, coming up with the artwork for the characters, which the kids drew themselves. And it wasn't until towards the end of the process where we got together and we're like, okay, so how do we bring all this together? It was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, we've, we went through quite a process to try to agree on what the storylines should be on which of the scenes meant the most to us, I guess. And by doing that, what we did was each person that was part of the project had to go through all of the collages that we were creating in previous weeks, they were all kind of photocopied in different formats, and over the number of weeks, we cut out bits from each person's artwork that meant something to us, overlaid it, came up with a new scene, overlaid it again, come up with a new scene. So whatever you see in the book, actually, from multiple

weeks of work, and multiple collages from different people, it wasn't just one person's work.

David

Of course, I guess over that six week period, there was an enormous amount of material that was put together that didn't find it to enter the book. But the principles upon which Kids' Own Publishing works is that every single individual who's had a part in the process will have some of their artwork at least represented in the book. And in, as I was looking at some of these materials in evolution, and I saw the picture of the farting crocodile, and I thought, well I bet that's those three boys over there. When the project finally culminated, and you were able to put it together, I couldn't come to the launch, unfortunately, back in December, but that would have been a wonderful affirmation. What's changed? What's happened? I mean the project's finished, but what differences, if anything, did it make to the ways in which you think about education, about language, and about identity and culture?

Cecilia

Now, that's a big question. It's changed a lot. It's changed a lot in terms of how I view language as a whole. I think, as I mentioned before, I was kind of under the mindset that things need to kind of be bilingual, in order for the community to understand. My kids as well, they. We try to teach them Vietnamese at home, they, I wouldn't say refuse, but it's hard. It's hard to get them to speak in Vietnamese. But after this project, after doing the book launch, reading it in Footscray, they were very excited. Like we went home in the car and they were actually went through the book trying to read each Vietnamese word, looking at the glossary and the disc, the definitions of the words and it's actually allowed my daughter Jubilee and Hamilton to give it a shot, to just try, to at least say some of the words where whereas back then they will be embarrassed and I think for, I can't say for all the other cultures, but for Vietnamese people, there's an element of it's not so much embarrassment, but I feel like the younger generations growing up they don't think it's cool. It's not a cool language. It's not a cool culture. It's not like Korean dramas and Japanese stuff that's all over Netflix. So it's not something that the kids were excited about. But now they are, they are actually proud to be Vietnamese. They're proud to be part of this project and the events that's coming out of it. And it's kind of given me a lot of inspiration now to kind of continue with any work that there is to try to promote the language more, try to promote kids speaking in different languages and embracing their identity.

David

Okay, thanks very much. Round of applause. So would anybody like to comment or ask Cecilia a question?

Hong Tran

I'm not a parent myself. But it'd be really good for other parents within the room because some of the feedback that I hear from the community is the challenges that parents have with time and resources and support. What advice would you give as parents to others, about encouraging children to really embrace their culture and their language and being a part of that journey?

Cecilia

For me, they're very small things. So give you an example of food. Food is always big for my family. So we go to markets with Asian food, I pick out items that are quite uncommon.

And then I introduce them to the kids. So feeling it, smelling it, tasting it, how does it look? Do they like it? Even if they don't like it, it's just introducing them to it. And Jubilee goes to Vietnamese school on Saturday mornings, where they speak English in class, but they do slowly pick up things. So they learn things that are more engaging for kids. So singing songs, even things that the teacher did recommend to me. Don't force it. But repetition is key. So if there's something like, you know, a table, or a chair, or a fork, spoon, very basic day to day words, but just repeating it. So if you're serving the food, and you're saying, okay, this is what it is. Or if you're saying can you get me a food, spoon or fork, then you say it in the language and over time, the kids will naturally be able to pick that up. To be fair, at home, we don't just speak Vietnamese, we mainly kind of speak English and interject Vietnamese words into it. Even though I am fluent, I would only really speak Vietnamese to my mom. So I think parents just take it easy, don't force it, make it fun. And I think if they are interested enough, they will naturally start picking things up if they enjoy it. So one horrible example is Jubilee couldn't order food at a Vietnamese restaurant unless she knew the Vietnamese word for it. And so we ended up ordering other food that day. On the car home all of a sudden she had this moment of truth where she's like, Ah, it's [been cool-Vt word] like so she she actually on her own remembered the word of this dish that she wanted to eat and so now she's it's stuck with her and next time we're at the restaurant she can order it now but just very very simple examples.

Lisa

That was Cecilia Le, a parent at Cherry Crescent Pre School, speaking there with language scholar David Nunan.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Growing Up Bilingual in Australia.

We're guessing you'll now want a copy of Crocodile và Unicorn Đi Chơi - so we've put a link in the shownotes.

And, if you scroll down that page a little further, you can also watch a reading of the book presented by Cecilia Le.

This episode was produced by Hoang Tran Nguyen. Script supervision provided by Lisa Divissi and music is by Quang Dinh. See you next time!