

Growing Up Bilingual in Australia

A ViệtSpeak Podcast - Episode 2 Bonus

Title: Michael's Extended Interview

[THEME MUSIC]

Chi: 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 Chi Vu, a writer and educator. And with me is Hoang Tran, a member of the language advocacy group ViệtSpeak.

Throughout the podcast, there will be code switching between the different languages. So if there are words you don't understand, don't worry too much. I think you'll still grasp what's going on from the context. And even if you don't, I want to give you permission to not understand every single word on this podcast. Instead, let yourself hear the music of the various languages spoken by these multilinguals. On today's episode, we meet Mai and her mother, Tanya and dad Michael. Younger siblings Vi and Marco are scooting around the house as well as in the background. We're in the house in Melbourne's suburb of West Footscray. It's a lively Sunday morning and Melbourne's just come out of another lockdown.

Nếu Mai gặp người nói tiếng Việt, Mai tự giới thiệu với họ là Mai tên là gì?

Mai: Um.

Chi: Con tên là?

Mai: Mai

Chi: Con tên là Mai hả. Con mấy tuổi?

Mai: Um, I'm seven.

Chi: Oh, ở trường con có nói tiếng Việt không?

Mai: Well, not really. But I do speak Italian because I go to Italian teacher at school.

Chi: Oh, wow.

Mai: Oh well, my name is Mai and I am seven years old. There's five people in my family. I've got a brothers and a sister. I live in with footscray.

Chi: And how many languages do you speak?

Mai: Um four, if you count speak English.

Chi: What are the languages?

Mai: Um, Greek, Italian and Vietnamese.

Chi: What's your favorite Italian food?

Mai: Pizza or pasta, maybe with both of them?

Chi: Oh, well, what about your favorite Greek food?

Mai: Oh, it's kind of like a kind of like a custard, but like with pastry on it. I forgot what it's called, but really yummy?

Chi: Oh yum. And your favorite Vietnamese food?

Mai: Uh, I do like lots of noodles. Lots and lots of noodles.

Chi: Bún hay là mì.

Mai: Both.

Michael: Για σου. Με λένε Μιχάλη. Γεννήθηκα εδώ στην Μελβούρνη. Ciao. Mi chiamo Michele. Sono nato qui in Australia. Hello, my name is Michael I. I live here in in West Footscray with my wife, Tanya and our children, Mai, Vi and Marco, and um. A bit about my language photography. I, both of my parents were born overseas, my dad in Italy and my mom in Greece. So I grew up in a household where both Greek and Italian were spoken regularly to visitors to on the phone. But the common language that my parents spoke to my brother and I was English. We've both maintained Greek and Italian. Though only to kind of an extent that we have kind of needed to in kind of in in our lives. So it's not nearly as well as we would have liked to. We grew up in a suburb where there were a lot of Greeks and Italians, and so walking down the street, going to local shopping strips, we we heard a lot of our languages and in the shops. So kind of similar to living near a suburb like Sunshine, where our kids regularly get to kind of walk into Vietnamese businesses and just hear really spoken in the street. So they, my kids' childhood is probably sort of akin to that kind of childhood that my brother and I had, though with Vietnamese, and not Greek and Italian.

Tanya: Em tên là Tanya, tiếng Việt tên là Thi. Ba mẹ qua Úc hồi năm 82, rồi 83 xanh em. Ở nhà em nói tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Rồi em có một gia đình, chồng với ba đứa nhỏ. My name is Tania. I'm Vietnamese Australian. Second generation migrant and I can speak Vietnamese and English. So I was born here in Footscray, actually.

Chi: Was it hard for your parents to maintain memories when you were growing up?

Tanya: So I think as I got older, they started realizing the challenges of raising kids in a country that they are not from or born from. So that was when it started become challenging.

Chi: And then so as you got older and more and more kind of assimilated or acculturated was there more challenges for your your parents to.

Tanya: Yes, on a number of levels. So I think the social norms of what they were used to in Vietnam in terms of raising a teenager and they worked a lot. We they run their own business. And so we spent a lot of time in a factory. Actually earlier on, my mom was an out-worker, so she worked in the garage and I would sleep and next to her and next to boxes, a lot of car van trips with my dad like delivering clothes.

Chi: Yeah, so perhaps your Vietnamese vocabulary has like is maybe more skewed to that world of work a little, I don't know.

Tanya: Yeah, a little bit. So like, there's a lot of words I can recall that I sometimes I didn't realize that I know the word like, you know, there's different sewing machines I can probably recall as well. You know, the hàng gấp and may đồ trẻ. And then in terms of language, I mean most of the times my parents and I spoke Vietnamese. We come from a family of three. And so being the first born, my language is the most fluent. And then my sister, who's five years younger than me. And then my brother, who's 13 younger than 13 years younger than me, kind of gets, you know, it's like a downward slope. So there are challenges, and you know, I kind of remember being the translator for my parents, calling services and connecting it or disconnecting it or translating letters. And it was a bit off of why do I have to do that? [Laughter] So I've got one kind of group of five or six friends. And yeah, we're all Vietnamese. Most of them are married to Vietnamese people. We speak in English.

Chi: Hmm. Why is that?

Tanya: I think because English has become our first language and it's easier. Yeah, there are times when we converse will throw in, you know, particular words that don't. The word on Vietnamese is has more meaning than when it translate to English.

Chi: What's an example of such a word?

Tanya: Recently, my friend bought, you know, he went to he went to his favorite florist in Williamstown, who bought his mom this beautiful bouquet of flowers for Mother's Day, you know, gave it to her and she'd be like, Oh, tại sao con cứ đổ uổng tiền quá. Or you know, there's that, those those kind of things, I think only another Vietnamese person would understand the meaning of it. And then also, when you say it in Vietnamese, it just has that more of emphasis and significance.

Chi: So when you were growing up, did your school kind of know about tét and Mid-Autumn Festival and all that stuff?

Tanya: No, we it was a very, so it's a Catholic school, a very Maltese. So we had, yeah, Malta day. We had we had like cultural days where you would come and your áo dài or. And then they would say, you know, bring a plate of food from your background, which that was the connection piece.

Chi: Your body language was like [LAUGHTER]

Tanya: Recoiling a little

Chi: A bit cringy, why was that?

Tanya: More just, when I think back at it, it's just, you know, it seems like such a superficial an attempt but, I guess that's that is an attempt, at least. And so credit to the school and they celebrated a lot of Maltese culture. Yeah. So that was their culture.

Chi: Yes. So you probably know a lot Maltese.

Tanya: A bit more than, yeah, more than what you'd think for a Vietnamese girl.

Chi: Yeah, it's really shows the impact that the school culture has on student's attitudes towards, you know, maintaining or keeping links with the heritage, culture and language.

Tanya: It was New Year's, so Lunar New Year, and we've decided that for each Lunar New Year, if it hits a school day, we would, the kids won't attend school so that we could, you know, participate in our rituals. And it happened to be that the Lunar New Year fell on a curriculum day, which worked out well, and I recall kind of taking Mai to school and just talking to the principal and saying it's a great coincidence that Curriculum Day fell on the Lunar New Year, and his reaction kind of alluded that they hadn't been that connection that there is Lunar New Year, which is when you think about, you know, proximity to Footscray and it being associated with, strongly associated with Vietnamese people. It was quite surprising it wasn't a more celebrated day for the school.

Chi: Why are you trying to teach your kids Vietnamese?

Tanya: I think it's important for them to know who I am, you know who they are and what makes up them. Also, that's a big part of the connection to their grandparent where they've come from and we've come from as well and our family history. So that's the biggest driver for me to maintain our languages. Language is something that Michael and I are quite conscious of maintaining our language. However, we've spoken about language schools and drawing on our

experience of language schools. It feels, it's not the avenue for our children. My recollection of being forced to go three hours of my Saturday morning and being taught in a rote learning kind of environment, it just wasn't effective.

Chi: What's your family's biggest challenge in trying to have a multilingual family?

Tanya: I think it's effort. So on a personal level, it's effort. I know that, like my mind thinks in English, so it's retraining myself. So when I speak to the children, it's, if it's conversational or anything that I'm using Vietnamese to, to just talk to them or read to them or tell them the words in Vietnamese, it's probably the conceptual thing of, you know, the kids associate Vietnamese only with me, mainly at home. It's a private, I guess it's a private, I don't know. Yeah. So it is resting on the parents shoulder a bit. I'm consciously always asking myself, have spoken enough Vietnamese today, have I? I could have said that to the kids of Vietnamese. I didn't have to switch. And then, you know, we read at night to the kids and with Marco or with Vi, I try and I'll translate on the spot the story in Vietnamese. So, and then sometimes they would be, oh, but mommy, can you just do it in English?

I try not push things or like take her cues from, take cues from her in terms of what her interests are in connecting, you know, with identity, her connection piece to identity, and try and integrate it into things that she's interested in. So, you know, she's she's a very curious person by nature and interested in stories. So, you know, I've been wanting to incorporate, or I have incorporated some of the old Vietnamese folk stories, because that's her connection piece. I think sitting down with a, you know, a book around the Vietnamese language, she wouldn't connect into it as much like, you know, the Việt ngữ book. Whereas if I can find different ways of connecting the kids to it, then at least, you know, I'm putting sowing the seeds in for that. Food's food's another way and just ensuring that I'm actively celebrating, you know, Tết and they see me doing the preparations and the cúng, and you know, we've got a bàn thờ as well, and I'll ask him to đốt nhang and. So there's a few little things that we've incorporated and even on the Greek and Italian side as well, we actively trying to do that. Hai đứa con you sing Bella Ciao

[Singing in Italian]

Chi: Mai nói tiếng Việt với ai?

Mai: Um my mum and my grandparents, maybe to some of my aunties and uncles.

Chi: What about cousins? Do you have cousins?

Mai: Yes, lots.

Chi: Do some of them speak Vietnamese.

Mai: Maybe

Chi: Do you speak to them in Vietnamese?

Mai: I think sometimes, pretty sure sometimes. Some of them are teenagers

Chi: Its hard to talk to teenagers.

Mai: Yeah

Chi: So where else do you hear Vietnamese?

Mai: A lot around the neighborhood.

Chi: Oh, really?

Mai: Maybe sometimes at um shops.

Chi: So if you go to the restaurant?

Mai: Um yeah maybe.

Chi: You live in an area with lots of Vietnamese speaking people? How does that make you feel to hear so much Vietnamese?

Mai: Well, it makes me feel happy. That there's lots of loneliness. But a bit sad that is not that much Greek and Italian.

Chi: Can you explain more why it makes you happy?

Mai: Well, because it makes me happy that my family's language is around the neighborhood?

Chi: Oh, that's great. Is there somewhere that you hear a lot of Greek and Italian? Is there another area or suburb?

Mai: Maybe in Brunswick

Chi: Uh-Huh. So if you're going to visit someone in Brunswick do you hear a lot of Greek and Italian?

Mai: Oh, pretty much a lot.

Chi: Yeah. Does that make you feel

Mai: Still a little happy

Chi: Still a little happy

Mai: About, because there's like a little bit of Greek and Italian?

Chi: Yeah. Do you think, cause you're a multilingual kid, so a kid who can speak many languages, do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?

Mai: Well, I like it. Yeah, I think it's a good thing that I get to speak lots of languages, and maybe I could teach all the kids.

Chi: Even some kids only speak one language. How do you explain to them what it feels like to be able to speak many languages?

Mai: It feels good because you can like, if people don't know that language, it's kind of like you speaking in code. It's like secret.

Chi: What about on the TV or the radio? What languages do you hear?

Mai: Mostly I hear English.

Chi: Would it be nice to hear other languages?

Mai: Yeah. It would be nice.

Hoang: You used to watch Pokemon didn't you?

Mai: Yeah. But I can't find any more. Even with his like 30, like 30 something movies of it.

Chi: Uh-Huh. Have you ever watched Pokemon in Vietnamese?

Mai: No, I don't think I've ever found one. I like the Studio Ghibli movies.

Chi: Oh yeah, they're beautiful, aren't they? Yeah. So I found that a few of those animations you can set the language, the audio to Vietnamese. So maybe you can also do it in Greek or Italian?

Mai: Maybe.

Chi: Yeah. If if that was the case, would you be interested in watching Pokemon in Vietnamese or.

Mai: Well, yeah, I've only watched the Little Prince in Italian.

Chi: Oh, what was that like?

Mai: It was, it was ok. And I've also watched it in English.

Chi: Oh, which one was better?

Mai: I think both were good. Mm-Hmm.

Chi: Did you get something different from each one?

Mai: Well, it was kind of the same and kind of not the same.

Chi: And does it make you feel different things? The different languages?

Mai: Yeah.

Chi: Oh wow. Can you tell me more about that?

Mai: Well, it's not like bad feelings. They're good.

Chi: Yeah. OK. Is it like it's just a different part of your brain that you get to use? Yeah. OK. So if the characters speak Vietnamese, Greek or Italian, do you feel that that's OK for the characters to speak other?

Mai: Yeah, yeah, I think that's OK.

Chi: Yeah. You don't feel like, Oh no, I just want Pickachu to speak English.

Mai: No, not like that.

Chi: OK. Wow. So if Pickachu were multilingual like you. Is that, how does that feel?

Mai: It feels good.

Chi: Why would it be good for you to speak many languages?

Mai: Because then, like other people that don't know English could like, um watch the movie and they'll understand Pickachu.

Chi: Do you think if your grandparents watched Vietnamese Pickachu, they'd be into it?

Mai: Maybe. Maybe, yeah, I think so.

Chi: You've been listening to growing up bilingual in Australia. A podcast where we speak with bilingual children and their parents about language and culture and what it feels like to be multilingual in Australia. For bonus materials and transcripts from this episode, including a longer chat with Mai's dad Michael, and a shorter kid-friendly episode featuring Mai first self, head to vietbilingual.org/podcast.

Mai: Growing up bilingual in Australia is hosted by Chi Vu and produced by Hoang Tran Nguyen. Script development is by André Dao and Chi Vu. Music is by Quang Dinh.