

## BICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES:

### NAVIGATING TWO WORLDS IN CHILDHOOD, EDUCATION, AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

*Four clinicians describe their experiences of growing up bicultural, bidialectal, and bilingual*

By: CLD Committee Members

The CLD Corner was created in an effort to provide information and respond to questions on cultural and linguistic diversity. Questions are answered by members of the TSHA Committee on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD). Members for the 2013-2014 year include **Lisa Carver, MA, CCC-SLP (co-chair); Ivan Mejia, MA, CCC-SLP (co-chair); Raul Prezas, PhD, CCC-SLP; Christina Wiggins, MS, CCC-SLP; Brittney Goodman, MS, CCC-SLP; Sarah Panjwani, MS, CCC-SLP; Mary Bauman, MS, CCC-SLP; Phuong Palafox, MS, CCC-SLP; Marisol Contreras, BS; and Alisa Baron, MA, CF-SLP.** Submit your questions about cultural and linguistic diversity to [ivanmejia@bilingualspeech.org](mailto:ivanmejia@bilingualspeech.org) or [lisa\\_slp@msn.com](mailto:lisa_slp@msn.com). Look for responses from the CLD Committee on TSHA's website and in the Communicologist.

In this article, four perspectives are offered regarding growing up bilingual, bicultural, and/or bidialectal.

Our life experiences are as diverse as the languages that are spoken in the world. For example, is it “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” or “the duck that quacks loudest gets shot”? We all have unique perspectives regarding culture, language, and dialect. While some may speak two languages fluently, others who are bilingual may be stronger in one language and have dialectal differences. In both cases, there are cultural influences at play that create a dichotomy or two worlds—that of native culture and mainstream culture. Still, many individuals speak only one language and also find themselves facing a bicultural/bidialectal reality. In this article, four perspectives are offered regarding growing up bilingual, bicultural, and/or bidialectal—one from a graduate speech-language pathology (SLP) student, one from a clinical fellow SLP, and two from professional SLPs. Although each portrays a very different worldview, all share common themes that include language learning, cultural acceptance, overcoming barriers, personal struggle, pride in one's community, and advocacy/helping others.



Valeritta Liddle

“In every conceivable manner, the family is [the] link to our past, [the] bridge to our future.”

—Alex Haley

#### **Growing Up Bicultural: Indian**

*(Contributed by Valeritta Liddle, a graduate student's experience)*

**Childhood.** My parents travelled from India to the United Arab Emirates in the early 1980s, where my older sister and I were born and raised. When I was a year old, my extended family members joined us, and I remember living in a big, happy joint family unit consisting of eight people who collectively spoke five different Indian languages at home. My father learned Arabic to help him teach Arab students engineering studies. My mother had to take up a job that had two shifts and had to leave my sister and me with a babysitter who was my primary caregiver as a child. I don't remember my caregiver but will always be grate-

ful to her. She taught me a language, Hindi, which is not my native language. My parents were very shocked to find their daughter at the age of three translating conversations between Hindi and English. But growing up my sister and I never considered learning a language as a gift but rather a necessity to be able to comprehend our parents' conversations as there was always a language they could converse in if they didn't want us to understand.

**Education.** I grew up in a multilingual community and attended an Asian school. For most of my early life in school, I was unaware of the native languages my friends spoke. We all knew we were from different countries, but we always conversed in English. Although the majority of instruction in my school was English, other language classes were mandatory. I remember teachers discouraging us to speak in languages other than English. We were always told to speak in a common language, especially in a group. Since this was hard, English was the only common language that all my friends understood, hence I spoke English a lot during my school years.

**Professional Experiences.** As I was doing my undergraduate studies in India, I realized my bilingualism did not fully equip me. With more than 415 languages being spoken in India, being a bilingual speech-language pathologist is the minimum requirement. It certainly was a huge learning curve for me as a speech-language pathologist. I realized how blessed I was to be able to learn languages as a child, and my heart went out to those children who had language disorders. I could relate to the stress both the families and children face due to their inability to exchange thoughts and needs. Those experiences definitely made me more passionate about being a speech-language pathologist and cultivated a fondness for unknown languages rather than fear.

I always felt very comfortable while conversing in English, but while attending graduate school in the United States, I became more aware of the different dialects that English consists of and how differently I sound in comparison. Apart from my accent, the way I labeled objects made me stand out in a crowd. For instance, "trolley" for shopping cart, "boot" for trunk, "serviette" for napkin, etc. There are many funny episodes with my "British" vocabulary that I will treasure forever.

During one of my clinical practicum experiences, I recall a child asking me why I sounded different. After explaining my origins, he promptly replied that his grandfather was Indian too (Native American). It led to a very good discussion about different countries around the world and the history of America. This led to good therapy sessions involving language expansion and vocabulary building. I realized that, as a bilingual SLP, every opportunity should and can be used to build language.

*"Being exposed to the existence of other languages increases the perception that the world is populated by people who not only speak differently from oneself but whose cultures and philosophies are other than one's own. Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all people cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea*

*that if we try to understand each other, we may even become friends."*

*—Maya Angelou*

### **Growing Up Bilingual and Bicultural: Russian**



**Alisa Baron**

*(Contributed by Alisa Baron, a clinical fellow's experience)*

**Childhood.** I was born in the Ukraine and immigrated to the U.S. when I was 5. My two older sisters, parents, maternal grandparents, and maternal great-grandmother all made the trip together to an unknown place called Cleveland, Ohio. My parents couldn't even pronounce "Cleveland" when we arrived! My dad couldn't sit around at home to get adjusted to the new way of life. He immediately started looking for a job. At the time, there were many Russian-speaking families that were immigrating to Cleveland, so my parents started taking English classes while trying to get their degrees translated so they could begin working. Unfortunately, many degrees are not translated accurately, and many immigrants are forced to start all over again. My dad was able to find a job similar to what he had done in Ukraine, but my mother had to go back to school while taking care of six family members.

**Education.** My sisters and I were placed in an English-only school with no other Russian-speakers. I would cry every day and say I had a stomach ache. My oldest sister would come calm me down, and I would go and sit and not understand anything in my kindergarten class. I was one of those kids who went through a silent period that entire year. The following summer, my sisters and I went to camp, and something clicked. I started talking in English as if it were my first language.

Over the years, we learned about American customs, traditions, and holidays. My parents worked very hard to integrate us into the society of our new country. We even started having a traditional Thanksgiving dinner every year. My parents still don't understand American football game watching never became part of our American Thanksgiving of turkey, gravy, and mashed potatoes (with approximately 10 other Eastern European foods on the side).

We eventually switched schools, and I liked the new school much better than the previous one. I picked up Spanish and Hebrew along the way and fell in love with learning, but I always felt different. I worked so hard to fit in, but the way I dressed, answered certain questions, and analyzed situations made me stick out. When my mother would come to school and speak in English ungrammatically, I was so uncomfortable and wished my family was like everyone else's.

Over the years, I've learned to appreciate my unique upbringing, and I am grateful for having such a wonderful family to tell me that different was good. Yes, my home life is different, and yes, the food

I eat is different, but now I realize that I wouldn't have it any other way. I love talking to my mother in Russian every day and being able to talk to my family members in Russian halfway across the globe. I am now proud to introduce my mom to others and tell them my story.

**Professional Experiences.** I always thought I would end up in the hard sciences, but languages always came easily to me. I realized toward the end of college with the help of my parents and thesis advisor that I could put the two together in a profession in which I could use languages and sciences all in one. After shadowing several speech-language pathologists, I realized that this profession was a perfect fit.

Knowing several languages and being able to use them on a daily basis at work has been incredible. I mostly use my Spanish to interact with clients and families, and although I did not grow up in a Hispanic household, I understand the differences and am more aware of the struggles of immigrant parents. I have also conducted several evaluations in Russian. There are not many Russian speakers in Austin, let alone Russian speaking speech-language pathologists. I had the honor to evaluate a few girls who had been adopted from Russia. I was able to help figure out which skills the children had already acquired and accurately diagnose them since I could communicate with both the child and the parents in their respective languages. On a day-to-day basis, I am able to help children and work with families that cannot always help themselves. I am able to clarify situations and explain the ins and outs of the schools' expectations. I love the opportunity that we have as speech-language pathologists to help families like no other professionals can as communication is the basis of life and the way we form relationships throughout our lives.

*"If we spoke a different language, we would perceive a somewhat different world."*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein



**Phuong Lien Palafox**

### **Growing Up Bilingual and Bicultural: Vietnamese**

*(Contributed by **Phuong Palafox**, an SLP's experience)*

**Childhood.** I spent most of my childhood happily living in a two-bedroom mobile home with my parents, sister, and brother in the small, rural town of Wylie, Texas. I do not recall anyone else

looking like us. I do, however, remember my parents working hard to provide for our family of five. Without a strong grasp of the English language, labor jobs served their needs, and they were grateful for it. My father worked two full-time jobs in two factories. My mother would sew 10 hours

a day. From early on, emphasis on working hard was a natural and important part of our days.

We did not have much money, and it did not make an impact on my childhood. On summer days, we would go swimming in Lake Lavon. We collected our soda cans, exchanged the aluminum for coins, and went to buy snow cones from the local stand. It was an ideal childhood composed of sibling fun, special family dinners at Pizza Hut, frequent trips to the library, and love.

**Education.** As the oldest of three children, my initial school experiences paved the path for my sister and brother. My parents, through trial and error, learned about the schools. I was quickly identified as an English-language learner and do not recall speaking my entire kindergarten year. I now understand that the silent period is a natural part of language acquisition.

In that first year, we also needed to learn about American holidays. Valentine's Day surely made an impact on me. A note was sent home stating that all students needed to bring Valentines to school. My parents and I figured out that the local Eckerd's, a pharmacy and a meet-all-your-needs store, could help us. So Dad and I went to the store, saw all of the heart displays, and decided to buy construction paper to make hearts. We spent the entire evening cutting the most perfect hearts and gluing them together. We made a total of four masterpieces. The next morning, I walked into school and saw the 60-plus bags I needed to fill. While peers were placing small white envelopes into the sacks, I stood there. I did not have enough. One of the most vivid pictures I have etched in my mind (even to this day) is seeing the disappointed look on my Dad's face that morning. He felt bad that he did not understand what he needed to do for his child. At that very moment, Mrs. Minihan walked up to us and said, "Phuong! I have never, ever seen such beautiful Valentines. Who is going to be lucky enough to have them?" In the span of a few seconds, I quickly learned that teachers who cater to students' and parents' heart-needs make the most impact.

The remainder of my education was positive. I tried my best to fit in with my peers and found solace in working hard. It was not until college that I realized that there was an entire world of culture and language I dismissed while holding onto conformity and assimilation. For information on identifying second language-learning processes and how this affects academic performance, please refer to <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/easl>. In this article, Roseberry-McKibbin and Brice (2014) summarize the phenomena in an easily printable handout that is available in both English and Spanish to present to educators, administrators, and parents.

**Professional Experiences.** I consider myself to be a member of the best and most rewarding professions. I wake up each morning to work with students, clients, families, and educational teams to provide a voice. I am an advocate for all those needing to find a communication system to express their wants, needs, humor, and thoughts. As a bilingual speech-language pathologist, I bring all my

experiences from my childhood, education, and upbringing into my job. When I walk into an assessment room and see parents who only speak Vietnamese, I see their relief. Then I see the furrow between their eyes disappear only to be replaced by a welcoming smile as they say, “Chào, Cô Phuong/Hi, Ms. Phuong.” When I assist with interpreting and translating at an Admission, Review, Dismissal (ARD) meeting, I have had mothers tell me that they have never been able to express their concerns and gratefulness previously. I watched parents cry as they said, “Finally we understand. Thank you.” As a bilingual speech-language pathologist, I am bringing honor to my culture and making my parents proud. I consider myself lucky to be able to use my heart-needs, upbringing, and SLP-brain in my awesome profession.

*“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”*

–Nelson Mandela



Brittney Goodman

### **Growing Up Bidialectal: African American English and Standard American English**

*(Contributed by Brittney Goodman, an SLP's experience)*

**Childhood.** I grew up in an African American community. At an early age, I understood how my dialect connected me to my community. This was

demonstrated in music, poetry, and everyday lingo. It was a way to connect with my peers

and family members and express my thoughts, and it provided me a sense of belonging. Growing up, I would hear my parents code switch from African American English to Standard American English. The shifting of dialects always caught me off guard. I would ask my parents, “Why did you sound funny?” They began to explain to me the importance of speaking Standard American English in an American society. They stated that in order for me to be successful in mainstream culture that I would have to be able to understand and speak standard American English. However, they told me my dialect was rich with history and that I should be very proud of it as well. Meanwhile in my community, I would see an individual who spoke Standard American English, and my peers would state, “They were talking funny” or “He/she sounds white,” and eventually this person felt a sense of loneliness and was never openly received in the community. On the other hand, in school I was expected to speak Standard American English. I was presented with books and tests that were written and normalized on Standard American English speakers and expected to be successful. However, most teachers did not know how to address the needs of students who spoke African

American English in their lessons. There were teachers who had a negative view about African American English; thus, they viewed the speaker of African American English as intellectually deficient. There were other teachers who did not feel comfortable speaking to the parents of African American English speakers to design a plan to assist the learner who speaks African American English in the school. Luckily, I had awesome parents who served as my greatest advocates and who assisted me in the process of learning in a mainstream school. To say the least, it took several years for me to fully understand why it was important to speak both African American English and Standard American English

**Education.** While in college, I had the opportunity to meet other individuals who spoke African American English. It was there that I realized that African American English came in many forms and that many people, including Caucasians, could speak it. I had some friends who would pronounce “skrimp” for shrimp, while I pronounced shrimp as shrimp. While I was deleting my -ing at the end of words, other speakers of African American English did pronounce -ing at the end of the words. Fortunately, I had mentors who were also speakers of the African American English dialect and who helped me become stronger at speaking Standard American English. They also stated the importance of speaking standard American English in the mainstream community. My mentors told me that, in order for individuals to respect me, I would have to be able to code switch, which would make me a stronger individual. They also stressed the importance of being yourself around your family and friends around whom I could speak African American English. My mentors reminded me of how my ancestors came to America and did not have the ability to communicate with each other or in the American society. However, my ancestors were able to form a language, a dialect of their own that allowed them to experience the gift of communication. I always felt a sense of pride when I heard of how African American English was formed. Finally, while in graduate school, I had two experiences that enabled me to grasp the full understanding of the richness of African American English. My professors took me to the Gullah in South Carolina, where some of the first slaves were taken to when they first arrived in America, and then they took me to West Africa, where the slaves were stolen from. It was there that I began to learn how African American English was formulated and was able to connect features of the African American English to the dialectal features of speakers who are African from West Africa who spoke English. I finally understood that my dialect not only connected me to “my community” but to my ancestors.

**Professional Experiences.** After countless tutors, writing several papers, and having amazing mentors (including my parents) who are bidialectal, I was able to join a field where I could be an advocate for culturally and linguistically diverse speakers. I am now able to utilize my experiences as a bidialectal speaker to advocate for other individuals and teach my colleagues about language

differences and language disorders. As a bidialectal speech-language pathologist, I feel I experienced many of the same feelings and confusions of a child growing up bilingual. Often I see children come to school utilizing his or her first dialect. The teachers are expecting them to speak Standard American English, and if the child does not speak standard American English, they may refer the child to speech therapy. These teachers fail to realize that the child's first dialect is the norm in his/her community. It is a difficult stage for a child to conceptualize the importance of code switching from Standard American English in an academic setting to speaking his/her first language and being accepted by their peers in a social setting. The process of learning how to code switch must be considered for a bidialectal child. This is very difficult because there is not a standard process. When I observe my group of friends, we all began speaking Standard American English at different times and learned to code switch through different experiences. As a speech-language pathologist, we are the gatekeepers for these children being identified for speech therapy. My profession allows me to help other children from being identified as having a language disorder when they simply present with a language difference. I believe my experiences as a bidialectal speaker allows me to look at the broader picture while conducting my evaluations and providing therapy as a speech-language pathologist.

*"Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going."*

—Rita Mae Brown

### **Summary**

Regardless of our own personal journeys and unique perspectives, we all have similar wants and needs. Our understanding of others' diverse experiences not only broadens our own perspectives but also helps us do what we as professionals came to the profession to do—help others to communicate to the best of their abilities. We have an important responsibility in addition to speech and language goals. Understanding our role in nurturing and supporting these families, a critical aspect of our profession, can both directly and indirectly influence our clients' futures. They will remember how we made them feel, for example, and whether they felt safety and acceptance for who they are. Positive (and negative) experiences can leave a lasting mark on an individual. We need to learn from one another's life perspectives and strive to leave positive memories in the lives of others.

*"When you learn something from people or from a culture, you accept it as a gift, and it is your lifelong commitment to preserve it and build on it."*

—Yo-Yo Ma ★

### **REFERENCES**

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## **TSHA 2014-2015 Executive Board Meeting Dates**

◆ September 18-20, 2014

Executive Board and Council Meeting • Dallas, Texas

◆ January 29-31, 2015

Executive Board and Strategic Planning • Austin, Texas

◆ March 19-21, 2015

Annual Convention/Executive Board Meeting • San Antonio, Texas

◆ June 18-20, 2015

Executive Board and Budget Meeting • Granbury, Texas