

# Becoming Bilingual: A Tale of Two Bilingual SLPs

By: CLD Committee

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. Members for the 2016-2017 year include **Raúl Prezas**, PhD, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Phuong Lien Palafox**, MS, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Mary Bauman-Forkner**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Alisa Baron**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Judy Martinez Villarreal**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Irmgard Payne**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Lisa Rukovená**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Mirza J. Lugo-Neris**, PhD, CCC-SLP; and **Andrea Hughes**, MS, CCC-SLP. Submit your questions to [TSHA\\_CLD@gmail.com](mailto:TSHA_CLD@gmail.com), and look for responses from the CLD Committee on TSHA's website and in the Communicologist.

It is no secret that being bilingual, especially as a speech-language pathologist (SLP), carries many advantages. Monolingual SLPs are often overheard praising their bilingual colleagues and mentioning how they wish they too were bilingual. Perhaps the desire of becoming bilingual stems from the knowledge that in many states, and Texas in particular, bilingual SLPs are coveted. They are often prioritized for a job opportunity due to a need for their skilled services. Moreover, whether it's a stipend or a higher hourly rate, bilinguals often make slightly more than monolinguals. Yet monolingual practitioners who have aspirations of becoming bilingual should not feel discouraged. Despite the fact that the majority of bilingual professionals grow up speaking two languages to some degree (e.g., simultaneous, sequential; Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007), the journey of the bilingually trained SLP is one that is unique to each individual and depends on many factors. For example, many bilingual SLPs become bilingual through experiences or desire (often later in life) as they study a language and immerse themselves in that language and within the community.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) provides general guidelines for clinicians who promote themselves as bilingual, and policy documents are posted on the ASHA website in regard to providing bilingual services (ASHA, 2004; [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)). Practitioners who grew up speaking both languages (or became bilingual later through experiences) should not automatically consider themselves a bilingual SLP; they must become bilingually trained. Guidelines for what it takes to call oneself "bilingual" are highlighted in many resources, including the *ASHA Leader* (Cornish, 2011), and consist of the following:

- Native or near-native proficiency in another language (vocabulary, word-meaning, phonology, grammar, and pragmatics)
- Knowledge of typical language development for both monolingual and bilingual speakers of the language
- Ability to administer and interpret diagnostics; differentiate difference versus disorder
- Ability to provide treatment in the other language
- Ability to recognize cultural factors that may impact services

As part of a discussion on the evolutionary process of becoming a bilingual clinician, the TSHA CLD Committee initially presented a CLD Corner article detailing the reflections of a CLD Graduate Student during the application process (CLD Committee, 2015). In this current CLD Corner piece, two personal accounts from professionals who sought opportunities to become bilingual are shared: one completing her Clinical Fellowship Year (CFY; CF) and another who is in her first year with her Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC). General tips for completing a successful bilingual CF year and career also are offered.

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**Spanish-English Bilingual Story: Leah Joseph, MA, SLPCF**

Quite like most individuals born in Texas, I grew up with exposure to the Spanish language and Latino culture through my natural surroundings. For me, however, knowing cliché Spanish vocabulary words like “burrito” and “fajitas” in conjunction with the main chorus line of popular Tejano hits such as “Como La Flor” by Selena weren’t enough to satisfy my craving for a true immersion into the Spanish language. I took my first Spanish class during my freshman year of high school. From there, a love for the language was born. I went on to study Spanish for the next four years of high school and an additional two years at the University of Texas at Austin, where I received my bachelor’s degrees. After I fulfilled all of the necessary requirements to claim my foreign language credit in order to graduate, I was left wondering how I would continue to learn and practice my Spanish. By this point, Spanish was more than just a hobby. It was a second way of life and a door into a culture that was completely different than my own. As an African-American female from a monolingual, English-speaking household, my heritage culture was very different from the new culture I was beginning to adopt. To this day, I am the only individual in my family who has an interest in the Spanish language and/or culture. I was eager to learn as much about the language as I could.

Many students learning a second language have the opportunity to study abroad in order to completely immerse themselves into the language they wish to learn. I did not have that opportunity. I learned Spanish primarily here in the States by listening to and memorizing all of the lyrics to songs of the reggaeton, bachata, and bolero persuasion. Telenovelas like *Mi Corazón Insiste (en Lola Volcán)* majorly improved my ability to comprehend spoken Spanish in a more colloquial (and dramatic!) way. By the time I finished all the required Spanish language courses at UT, I considered myself to be bilingual. I even low-key considered myself to be an Afro-Latina.

When I made the decision to begin studying speech-language pathology my sophomore year of my undergraduate studies, I had no doubt in my mind that I would end up in the bilingual sector of the field. Spanish had become a part of who I was as a person. The limited literature and resources for bilingual individuals with speech and/or language disorders baffled me. I knew from the start that I wanted to be a part of the solution to that problem. Upon graduating from graduate school in May 2016, I began my clinical fellowship year with the bilingual gurus of the field—Bilinguistics. Currently, I work out of two public charter schools and also at our clinic here in Austin. Approximately 70% of my caseload consists of school-aged children in primary education, and the other 30% of my caseload consists of children who are preschool age. About 90% of the kids on my caseload speak primarily Spanish, and the remaining 10% of the kids are English-dominant. As I near the end of my CF year, I look back at the many things I learned that truly taught me not only what it means to be a bilingual speech-language pathologist but also what it means to be a bilingual and bicultural individual. Many of the unexpected lessons I learned are included at the end of this article.

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### **Vietnamese-English Bilingual Story: Andrea Hughes, MS, CCC-SLP**

As a blonde-haired, green-eyed Louisville, Kentucky native, it is no wonder that many people are curious as to how I became a Vietnamese-English bilingual speech therapist. My story is quite complicated and takes many turns, but each chapter led me further along this rewarding path. While growing up, I was always encouraged by my parents to step out of my comfort zone by traveling, exploring other cultures, and volunteering in the community. I found my mother’s passion for the English language and teaching inspiring as well as my father’s altruistic and inquisitive nature. Equipped with this background, I was led to volunteer within Louisville’s Vietnamese refugee and immigrant community teaching English to adults and providing reading support for children. Through my work, I became connected with a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thay Thich Hang Dat, who encouraged my development as an English teacher and started teaching me Vietnamese. As I spent time volunteering, I learned so much about Vietnamese culture and the beautiful, complex, tonal Vietnamese language. This motivated me to consider teaching English and studying abroad in Vietnam. I was fortunate to complete a summer studying abroad program in Ho Chi Minh City,

Vietnam. Once back in the U.S., I decided my future was in teaching and in Vietnam. This was a pivotal point in my development. Once I graduated from college with my bachelor's degree in anthropology in 2006, I made the decision to move to Vietnam, and I did not move back home to the U.S. until 2013.

Upon arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, I completed a British certification course for teaching English as a second language and began teaching at a language school. After a short time, I was fortunate enough to secure a position at one of Vietnam's nationally recognized and prestigious universities, RMIT University Vietnam, teaching academic English. My time at the university was formative, and it is where my true career as an educator began. Over time, I found out that I especially enjoy teaching grammar and pronunciation. My other area of expertise was providing academic support for students with learning difficulties. I provided study skills support and counseling services. My Vietnamese language skills became a real asset because I was able to differentiate areas of typical versus atypical difficulty for Vietnamese speakers learning English as a second language. I had students with disabilities who had not received any early childhood intervention. During this time, I also came to realize the realities of the special education environment in Vietnam. Early intervention and special education services were extremely limited. I felt I needed to help, and I pursued a volunteer opportunity within a disability resource center and other nonprofit organizations that supported students with disabilities.

I devoted great effort and time into my Vietnamese language studies to achieve my current level of linguistic and cultural fluency. I immersed myself in the environment and in my language studies to the fullest degree from the moment I set foot in Vietnam. I took classes at the local university, I studied with a tutor three times a week, and I talked with everyone I could in order to practice. I spent countless hours studying and soaking up all the local banter that I could. My love for Vietnamese poetry, music, and literature drove me to dig deeper and explore the language from all angles. By 2010, I had achieved advanced-level competency at the local university. Around the same time, an Australian speech-language pathologist lectured at RMIT University. A close colleague of mine told me it might interest me because the lecturer focused on typical pronunciation differences for Vietnamese speakers learning English. From that day forward, I did more research about speech-language pathology. The spark of inspiration having been lit, I knew it would be my future career. I went on to complete my prerequisite leveling courses online at a U.S. university in order to apply to U.S. graduate school for a master's degree in speech-language pathology. While working full time at RMIT, I completed my prerequisite courses for a master's degree in Vietnamese studies at a Vietnamese university. The big moment came where I had to make a life-changing decision. I could stay in Vietnam and pursue my master's in Vietnamese and continue teaching or move back and pursue my master's degree in speech-language pathology with the hope of doing bilingual therapy in practice. I weighed my options and chose a path toward becoming a bilingual speech-language pathologist as a non-native speaker.

The application process was daunting due to the challenges of living abroad. In total, I applied to multiple graduate programs and was accepted by two, one being in my hometown. After considerable thought, I decided to return to my hometown to be close to family and complete the program in two years. For my last semester in graduate school, I wanted to gain bilingual experience by completing an externship with a bilingual supervisor. I researched and reached out to a well-known Vietnamese speech therapist, Dr. Giang Pham, and she provided me contacts through which I could complete an externship. On the short list of contacts, I found **Phuong Palafox**, a Vietnamese bilingual speech therapist working at Bilingualistics in Austin. Phuong was able to offer me bilingual experience along with an opportunity to work in a school district. This experience allowed me to use my background to provide early intervention services in the Vietnamese community.

Following graduation, I felt inspired to expand my job search nationwide—even worldwide—for my clinical fellowship year. I tried to find a CF placement in Vietnam through my contacts, but my only options were in Singapore and China. I turned my sights to U.S. cities with large Vietnamese populations and personal contacts. I interviewed for about 20 placements, including Seattle,

California, Texas, Colorado, and Kentucky. I then narrowed my location down to Austin and applied for several different placements across local school districts and outpatient clinics. After completing numerous interviews (in person, video calls, and phone calls), I was offered positions within school districts in Austin, Louisville, and Denver. The criteria which I used to make my final decision included salary, quality of life, outdoor recreation/parks, work hours, city life, local contacts, weather, work culture/environment, cost of living, distance from family, size of organization/district, the interview experience, and bilingual experience. In the end, I chose a position in Austin that gave me the bilingual experience I needed and the quality of life I desired. I wanted to work at the secondary level and provide bilingual speech services in the schools while living in an up-and-coming city...with warm weather...VERY warm weather.

Since completing my clinical fellowship year, I have shown significant growth as a bilingual clinician by refining my clinical judgment and putting into practice all that I had learned on my road through graduate school. I hope to return to Vietnam and continue volunteering and advocating for speech therapy services. I would not be following my dream today without the support of my most influential teachers: Thay Thich Hang Dat (Louisville, KY), Thay Huyen Truong (HCMC, Vietnam), Co Ngoc Diep Le (HCMC, Vietnam), Co Ho thi Dam (Louisville, KY), Phuong Palafox (Austin, TX), and Dr. Giang Pham (San Diego, CA).

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### **10 Tips for a Successful Bilingual CF Year and Career**

1. **Be prepared to be asked to translate across different settings as you may be the most available resource.** As a bilingual SLP, you are viewed as a bridge between the community and other service providers. Parents and monolingual SLPs also may prefer you to explain evaluation results and answer speech-related questions.
2. **Constantly brush up on your knowledge of special education vocabulary at a professional level.** When translating special education materials, it is important to know the subtleties of language and what certain words and phrases can imply to others. In other words, make sure you know the most politically correct way to present information.
3. **Make a binder or folder with all of your favorite bilingual resources (developmental norms, reliable standardized assessments, scholarly articles, etc.) for quick and easy access.** Some of the best evaluation tools and therapy materials may not be available in languages other than English. The same is true for developmental norms. Do your research on developmental norms for children who speak your second language in the beginning of your CF job placement and document your findings. Don't be afraid to create your own robust bilingual evaluation tools and templates. Also, be sure to prep/translate information and handouts for counseling bilingual patients/families. These materials take considerable time and thought to develop, which is why it should be done ahead of time to save you stress in the long run. Collect and organize all of the materials in a binder or file folder for easy access.
4. **You might experience culture shock *within* the culture shock of being a bilingual CF.** Bilingual SLPs are in high demand because, frankly, there aren't many of us out there. Providing therapy in a language other than English is already a huge feat, considering the limited amount of resources that are available to non-English speakers. Now imagine being a non-native speaker of a second language! If you are a sequential bilingual (like us), and you happen to look very different from the population that you serve, there is a possibility that you will come up against skepticism that you can actually do the job. This skepticism can come from families and professionals at work. Whether you learned your second language growing up or acquired it later on, be proud of your culture as an individual and own the cultural diversity that you contribute to the workplace.
5. **Use everything you know about your language other than English, but get organized and be ready to learn the things you don't know.** If you land a job that requires you to be bilingual, there is no doubt that you speak the language fluently and have the capacity to

meet the pre-established job standards and expectations. That being said, there may be times when you learn new information and others may correct you. Have an open mind, and learn from others. Remember that there are different dialects and cultural differences that may arise. For instance, the language spoken in the U.S. may look different from the language spoken in the home country (i.e., Vietnamese in the U.S. versus Vietnamese in Vietnam). Be flexible and responsive to the linguistic needs of the populations you will serve.

6. **Network with other bilingual SLPs in your district/workplace as best as you can.** Reach out to other bilingual SLPs and licensed specialists in school psychology (LSSPs) for support, even if they speak a language different from your own. You will need support in learning the district/organization procedures and online record-keeping database. Other bilingual professionals also may have bilingual resources (such as translated documents and parent/caregiver training handouts) that you can add to your bilingual materials.
7. **Stay current on bilingual speech literature.** Don't think that just because grad school is over your days of reading articles have gracefully come to an end. In recent years, there has been a push for more research in the area of cultural and linguistic diversity. Thus, the current literature we are familiar with is constantly changing. Try to stay up-to-date with CLD matters in order to capture new information as it becomes available.
8. **Learn to form and rely on your clinical judgment based on the knowledge you have acquired.** You may be questioned by parents or administrators regarding your clinical decisions, so you must be prepared to give clear explanations. You may not know the answer to all speech questions that may arise due to your limited experience. It's OK to say you will get back to them with the answer once you do your research. Be confident when presenting your findings and frequently refer to your training and professional judgment. Don't let the bilingual component deter you from trusting your gut. You know more than you think you do, and being bilingual only enriches your knowledge base.
9. **Know the specific questions to ask when interviewing for your bilingual CF position.** Interviewers may not provide certain information unless you ask directly. This information is valuable when making decisions between CF job opportunities. Don't be afraid to inquire about:
  - o Your supervisor's bilingual experience
  - o Your expected workload (initial evaluations, reevaluations, consult)
  - o Where you can get bilingual support in your environment
  - o Your monolingual work assignments versus bilingual
  - o How many other bilingual therapists are in the district/company
  - o Projections for future needs of bilingual services at the organization
  - o Monolingual versus bilingual compensation (i.e., bilingual stipend)
10. **Remember that life still happens during your CF year.** Most recent grads going into their CF year know that making it through from point A to B (the land of the CCCs) means a year full of hardships, learning curves, and personal growth. One big thing that not many people discuss is that life happens even while you are in one of the most difficult stages in your career. You could get in a car accident, your significant other might lose their job, a loved one could fall ill or, worse, pass away. The reality is that any of these events can happen at any moment in your life, and that includes your CF year. Whatever comes your way, just remember to take it one day at a time and form a strong support system at home and at work. Accept when the stress level is too much, and take time to decompress. Lastly, have fun and enjoy the unique experience of providing a rare and valuable service to your clients and their families. You will be challenged as a bilingual CF. Those challenges, however, will equip you to do great work and make a meaningful impact on our field.

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If you are interested in becoming bilingual, the stories presented in this CLD Corner piece demonstrate that it is possible! Opportunities to learn a new language and language immersion are

possible. Remember that being bilingual does not mean that you are expected to speak the second language at the same level as your native language. Bilingualism is fluid and does not imply equal knowledge of two languages (Cornish, 2011; Grosjean, 1989). Becoming bilingually trained not only is essential but also is possible via many facets, including graduate-level coursework, seeking internships with bilingually trained specialists, working within a community, taking courses or completing CEUs related to bilingual development/disorders, and working/studying abroad. Studying bilingual development and having opportunities to work with bilingual clients in grad school or a work setting particularly are important. Moreover, finding an expert/mentor who is bilingually trained in the language (e.g., Vietnamese) also is recommended. Maintenance of bilingual skills is critical as is the importance of clearly defining your skills and not overestimating your abilities. Whether you are a current/recent graduate or a seasoned clinician, if you are interested in becoming bilingual (or bilingually trained), it's never too late! With the right level of time, motivation, perseverance, and patience, becoming bilingual may be a tangible reality.

**Leah Joseph, MA, SLPCF**, a born and raised Texan, is passionate about language and communication. Leah earned her Master of Arts degree in CSD from UT Austin and currently works at Bilingualistics in Austin, Texas.

**Andrea Hughes, MS, CCC-SLP**, is from Louisville, Kentucky. She attended the University of Louisville, where she earned her Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology. She currently works for Pflugerville ISD in Pflugerville, Texas.

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