

When, early in my pregnancy, I told people I was going to speak Portuguese to my baby, they looked at me funny. Maybe it was because of my Nashville, Tennessee accent. Or because I didn't even start learning Portuguese till a few years before. Or maybe because my husband doesn't speak it. Typical responses went like this:

- 'Wow, is your Portuguese that good?' (*Skeptical look of 'Let's be realistic.'*)
- 'REA-ally? When are ya gonna fit THAT in?' (*Dubious look of 'You have no idea how much time a baby takes.'*)
- 'What does your husband think about that?' (*Eyebrows raised in warning.*)
- 'Why Portuguese?! Why not Spanish?' (*Followed by unsolicited advice on how much more useful Spanish is.*)

These reactions made me doubt myself. Maybe it was impossible to teach a language I didn't know that well. Maybe my husband would feel left out. Maybe I had chosen a less useful language. But added to the voices that nearly made me give up were the voices that made me hang on for dear life:

- 'I only have a little French from high school, so my kids are out of luck.' (*Furrowed brow, defeated shrug of shoulders.*)
- 'My mom's originally from Germany. It's too bad she didn't do that with me.' (*Disappointed look of 'Too late now.'*)

Here were people who regretted their parents didn't pass down a language. Here were parents who wanted to share a language, but assumed it was too hard or too late.

## The Impetus

So, pregnant as a whale, I decided to get to the bottom of this non-native thing. I turned to every book on bilingual parenting I could find. I looked online, too. Very little mention was made of parents – like me – who were still learning a second language.

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I decided to begin my own research, interviewing people from different parenting groups. There were moms who had some experience with other languages. There were dads who wished they had foreign language experience and were willing to learn. And there were parents who were scared of learning a language because somewhere in their past, a mean or boring teacher had bled the enthusiasm right out of them. I published some of the findings in popular parenting magazines. The subsequent emails and letters to the editors sent a resounding 'Tell us more!'

## Why Me?

I'm able to write this book for you for two very good reasons. First, professionally, I've taught two different foreign languages, trained language teachers and given talks on language acquisition for over 15 years. My research focus has been on motivation and expectations in second language learning – which has a huge bearing on how successful we are at picking up languages.

Second, and more importantly, I'm living the part. Our household is bilingual by choice, but neither my husband nor I grew up bilingual. Learning Portuguese started during a six-month stay in Brazil, teaching English to teenagers. When people ask if I am 'fluent', I tell them fluency is a project I don't expect to finish in my lifetime. I speak what I can to my children and learn more each day.

All this to say that yes, professionally, I'm well qualified to write this book. Personally, though, I'm not much different from you!

## The Myths

Back when I was young, I envisioned memory as a mailbox that could become completely full. New memories would crowd out the old ones. Memorizing a new phone number might just bump out the name of a famous president. Unfortunately, this faulty notion of memory is frequently applied to our brains with language learning. Parents fear that if little Johnny learns words in a second language, he might automatically forget or get confused about words in his first language. Though evidence does not support this full-inbox version of memory, the myth gets propagated, even by health professionals and well-meaning educators. This book will help you deal with other people's misconceptions and feel confident about your language choices.

## A Book for Non-Natives

This guidebook isn't like other bilingual parenting books. They're written for parents who have spoken a second language from birth, and often include case studies of people who've traveled the world, who've grown up around many languages, or who live in a multilingual environment.

Instead, this book speaks to people who are still learning the second language they want to impart to their child. The case studies include parents who did not grow up speaking two languages, who are not well traveled and who are in a location where mainly one language is spoken. The examples from books and articles on bilingualism cited are ones that are useful to non-native speakers of the language.

This book focuses not only on ways to teach your child another language, but also on how you can improve your own second language skills. You'll abandon the notion

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that parents and teachers have to know everything. Top-down teaching from parent to child is replaced with a parent-child partnership. And some psychology is included to help you deal with mistakes and uncertainties.

## My Own Case Study

I've also used my own stories throughout this book. Since my pregnancy, I've kept journal notes on my interactions with doctors, friends, relatives, and my husband and children. I wrote entries in little black notebooks strewn around our apartment, or tucked in diaper bags and purses. Later, when my children were napping, I typed them up. As the kids grew, I started typing my observations directly into Bilingualwiki.com, in the section 'Journal from the Trenches'. The entries detail my children's progress in English and Portuguese, as well as my own efforts to improve my language skills and cultural knowledge. They let me air my frustrations and gush with glee. You'll see them cited as 'journal' and I'll put the date, too. Please forgive the run-on sentences, but I want to keep the entries faithful to the original flow of emotions.

It is perhaps this section that is most different from other bilingual books. I show you how I succeed, but also how I fail. I show you times when my family was amazingly helpful and other times when I cried from feeling weird or wrong in the bilingual endeavor. All this to give an accurate picture of the work and stamina that are needed, but also to show how worth the time and effort each bilingual moment will be.