

# Bilingual Cake

*The Bilingual Cake talk uses everyday language to explain to adults why some children growing up in bilingual families seem to become bilingual quite easily while others in apparently similar situations struggle.*

*Most importantly it explains how we can enhance learning and significantly improve children's chances of harmonious bilingual childhood.*

*The talk is based on my research on naturally occurring everyday talk in bilingual families and on vast knowledge of academic literature on bilingualism.*



## **But children just learn languages very easily, don't they?**

There is a common sense belief that bilingualism is a relatively easy goal to achieve. The assumptions are that children learn languages easily and that if you just keep speaking your language to your child they will automatically speak it too.

The disappointment is huge if that does not happen. A parent may have spoken their language to the child very systematically for years, but the child responds in English.

Frustration can build up, as it is hard to see why the child does not learn to speak the parent's language. Speaking our own language systematically is indeed necessary, but it is not enough for active bilingualism to develop.

## **Whisking**

In the Bilingual Cake we compare parent's persistent speaking of their language to vigorous whisking. Talk between two people is a social action, just as concrete as whisking.

## **Bowl**

Family is the most important learning environment for childhood bilingualism, it is like a bowl, but not all bowls are equally handy for whisking batter. You may discover to have a very easy bowl or a very difficult one.

## **Oven**

Most bilingualism specialists are linguists or psychologists. They talk about language and individuals. I am a sociologist of family and education. I talk about human relationships. It changes the entire perspective. Family is the fundamental social unit of human life. Love and care are the foundations of our wellbeing and of learning too.

## Ingredients

There are specific social and environmental factors that help children to learn and use multiple languages. The most important is a genuine need to use the minority language. In the Cake talk I call it the flour. We will learn to identify several key ingredients of bilingualism, including the crucial but nearly invisible raising agent – the baking powder.

## Learning to bake a bilingual cake

It is never fool proof, but with knowledge and experience we become better bakers. Anyone can learn to become a better baker.

### What is the Bilingual Cake based on?

After two decades of exploration into family bilingualism I was certain: nobody had ever studied everyday talk between school-aged children and parents in bilingual families. It had to be done.

Bilingual cake is the fruit of my Kone Foundation funded PhD project for Goldsmiths, University of London in 2009-2012. The research was on the social and environmental factors affecting school children's bilingualism in the families of the Finnish community in London.

Many families let me in their lives to carry out the research. I observed children in classrooms, community settings and in their homes. I recorded everyday talk and story telling tasks.

As a sociologist of family and of education I was interested in how parent-child interaction and everyday social practices explain children's starkly different bilingual learning outcomes. I learned a lot and created the Bilingual Cake talk to share that new understanding.



### Soile Pietikäinen

*I have been interested in bilingualism since 1992. I am a sociologist, educational researcher and a teacher trainer. I used to work as a university researcher and lecturer in London 2003-2012. Then I founded the Bilingual Cake. In 2015 it grew into Bilingual Potential Ltd. I am trilingual and mum to trilingual teenagers.*

### What has baking got to do with bilingualism?

This research project, as any, involved plenty of technical vocabulary and abstract concepts. That kind of language is hard to understand and boring to follow.

However, the whole point of my research was to genuinely help bilingual children and their parents.

Therefore it was essential to find a way that could present the academic content in language that any adult could access. Moreover, the cake analogy acts as a memory aid.

Talking about baking a cake I can introduce quite a lot of academic content. I would dare to say that Bilingual Cake is far easier to understand and remember, compared to a traditional academic presentation with similar knowledge content.

### After the Bilingual Cake

Families can get more personalized help through a family consultancy. There are also follow on talks on parental communication styles and on learning literate language. Find out more ☺