

Episode 30: Being Bilingual

Summary

Nick's colleague Sandra grew up speaking both English and French and now she teaches both languages. In this conversation she talks about her experiences in the two languages.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm speaking to my colleague Sandra and, Sandra, you grew up speaking both English and French, so you're truly bilingual. Is that right?

Sandra: If that's possible, yeah, I think I am.

Nick: And so why is it that you grew up with both these languages?

Sandra: Well, my, uhh, my Mum's English and she came to Geneva because she was, uhh, appointed with the WHO (World Health Organisation). And, uhh, so all the family came here and so I grew up here. And at home we used to speak English but I learned French at school.

Nick: Ahh, OK. So you were born in England yourself?

Sandra: Yes.

Nick: OK, and you came here. OK, and so even ... and then is your father a French speaker?

Sandra: No, my father's Italian.

Nick: OK, and do you speak Italian as well?

Sandra: So I speak Italian too, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Nick: I didn't even know that until just now.

Sandra: Yeah, so, umm, I think French and English are my two, if we can say, two mother tongues, and then Italian I learned when I went to Italy on holiday with my grandparents and that kind of thing.

Nick: That's very interesting because a lot of people here in Geneva are kind of the opposite of you, which is that they're Swiss and they speak French at home and if they go to an international school, then they speak English at school.

Sandra: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Nick: But you have the opposite experience. OK, and so when you first went to school in French, was that ... did you struggle a little bit with that or not?

Sandra: Ahh, well, I can't really remember but what I can remember and, umm, I'm going to compare with my brother who's seven years younger. Umm, so when we were first here, my Mum couldn't speak French or really understand it. So when I used to come back from school and wanted to speak the French I was learning, she was, 'Well, I'm sorry Sandra, I can't ... I don't understand what you're saying and, uhh, can you repeat in English?' And so I was forced to keep speaking English. But my brother, who was born seven years later, my Mum of course had learned a bit of French and all that, and, umm, so when he spoke French, she answered back. But she answered back in English, but still she understood what he was saying. So funnily enough¹, my brother doesn't have such ... I think he has a bit ... some difficulties of pronunciation, a bit more of a French-y accent in some, uhh, respects.

Nick: OK, that's very interesting. Because really the parents sometimes have to force themselves to speak one language or another with their children.

Sandra: Yeah, and they have to keep speaking their own mother tongue. And sometimes, I know that in some, uhh, families who immigrated, the parents wanted their children to, umm, to integrate, yes, they wanted them to integrate so well that they spoke French to them although they were maybe Spanish or Portuguese or whatever other nationality, and so I think that's a big shame², yeah.

Nick: And that's exactly what happened in my family, actually, because my grandmother - and both my grandparents - were Dutch and they immigrated to Australia and they spoke only English with their children, and none of their children speak any Dutch at all.

Sandra: That's ... yeah, that's a big shame, isn't it?

Nick: But that was in the 1950s, you know, so they thought, 'OK, it's a new life, it's a new beginning here. Yeah, let's integrate in that way.' But now when you look back on it, umm, you wonder if that was the right choice or not to make.

¹ funnily enough: curiously, strangely

² shame: disappointment, pity

Sandra: Yeah, well I think now we're much more aware about all this. And for example, my brother has a son and he speaks to him in English, uhh, all the time because he really wants to make sure that he'll grow up bilingual.

Nick: Yeah, and I had a student recently who was bilingual French and Spanish because of her parents. She had one of each. And she's only speaking French to her daughters here in Geneva, and they're at the age now - one of them I think is seven, the other one is 12 - if she doesn't start speaking Spanish to them then they won't learn it, especially the 12-year-old, as a true, uhh, kind of, native language.

Sandra: Yeah. And also because I read, uhh, in a magazine that there was ... children can pick up³ languages so much easier because they don't think about, 'OK, am I saying this correctly or not?' They just repeat. And so that's why it's so ... it's really useful to start at an early age and not wait.

Nick: Yeah, so with your three languages, you basically haven't really learned them at all, you just kind of spoke them.

Sandra: Yeah, yeah, so that was interesting when I wanted, uhh, to become a teacher, then that's when I had to really analyse the language, and say, 'Oh, OK, we say it that way - but why?' And, uhh, I realise that in class, sometimes I ... you know, a student asks me a question and I'm like⁴, 'Hmm, good question, yeah, why do we say it that way?' And so I have to go back and look it up⁵ or ask, uhh, my colleagues or, you know, that kind of thing.

Nick: And so you teach both French and English and sometimes on the same day, right?

Sandra: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Nick: And so is it difficult at all to switch between the two?

Sandra: Umm, no it's not that difficult, but it's a completely way of teaching.

Nick: Right, I was going to ask you about that as well.

Sandra: Yeah, that's what's really fascinating, is that French is, for me, is much more technical. And you've got to be very clear from the beginning what you're doing and how you're going to present it, because then, later on, it could, you know

³ pick up (phrasal verb): learn quickly and easily, become good at

⁴ I'm like (informal): I think, I say (often used when telling a story)

⁵ look it up (phrasal verb: to look up): research it

... problems could come up because, 'Oh, I've forgot to say this thing,' or, you know, the feminine, masculine, plural and all that comes up in a big mess after. So, yeah...

Nick: But in English teaching you enjoy the mess. Is that it?

Sandra: In English teaching, it seems to me that in the beginning, it's simpler.

Nick: OK.

Sandra: Umm, I think you can say things and pick them up, umm, quickly. French, you really have to ... also, pronunciation and, uhh, yeah.

Nick: Yeah because in English teaching there's a lot of work going on on methodology, how do we teach? It keeps changing and developing and now we're all about student-centred learning, and French is maybe a bit more old school⁶.

Sandra: Absolutely, yeah, definitely more old school. Umm, and it shows also I think in the materials, in the books, the course books. Uhh, English course books, or English language learning, are quite fun. They try to use topics that are quite, uhh, modern and create a meaning ... a reason to communicate. But French is much more based on grammar and how, you know, the languages works and how it functions, and so it can be a bit off-putting⁷, maybe.

Nick: And so are you able to use some of those things that you know as an English teacher in your French teaching, or do you really separate them?

Sandra: Yeah, yeah, I use a lot of the setting a context and functional language in my French classes and I try, OK, I have to teach grammar but I try to make it, umm, more, yeah, more communicative because I set it in a context. And then we're going to look at the grammar a little bit and maybe not go so in-depth⁸ compared to other people.

Nick: OK, and do you have a favourite language of the two of them?

Sandra: Umm, I like the ... I like English because I think it's maybe more, uhh, open and because of, you know, you learn a new ... OK, the word google comes up and suddenly it becomes a verb and you use it every day and it changes and it's

⁶ old school: established or traditional style

⁷ off-putting: unenjoyable, disagreeable

⁸ in-depth: in a lot of detail

accepted. In French, there are barriers⁹ and, you know, you can't just, uhh, integrate new words so easily.

Nick: No, that's true, and I think that's because of the history of the language, that English has borrowed words from many different sources so it's a language that can accommodate new words very easily. Umm, I thought you were going to say French.

Sandra: I like French, I like French, uhh, because I like reading in French. I think there's a lot of, uhh, beautiful words and, uhh, the structure, also, it's a bit more, do you say flourished¹⁰? I don't know if you say it like that. Yeah, but I like the way English is so direct.

Nick: No that's interesting. Because I think in general, French speakers are very proud of French. I'm not really sure if English speakers think of English in that way. Umm, but, you know, I remember when I was first taking French classes when I first arrived here and you would be in the class and you would say something like, 'Why can't you say it like this?' And the teacher would say, '*Parce-que c'est pas de la musique.*' You know, it's not music, and in English you would never say that, umm, you would just say, 'Well, it sounds wrong,' or 'It's wrong.' But it just seemed like there was a certain level of thinking that it was more than words, it was something greater than that.

Sandra: Yeah, but what I find interesting in English is, uhh, the intonation, and there is a music, it is quite musical, uhh, and, uhh, you know, we would say, like, 'Oh really?' You know, you would never say that in French.

Nick: That's interesting. OK, well thank you very much.

Sandra: You're welcome. It was nice speaking to you.

⁹ barriers: obstacles, limits, boundaries

¹⁰ flourished: embellished, decorated, attractive (in this case)

Comprehension Questions

1. Why does Sandra speak both English and French as native languages?
2. Why does Sandra speak English better than her brother?
3. Which language does Sandra prefer, and why?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Kids are very fast learners. They _____ new skills all the time.
2. The waiter kept mentioning that the tip wasn't included in the bill. I found it _____, so I didn't tip him.
3. Baroque art is more _____ than Renaissance art.
4. It's a _____ that more people didn't attend her workshop, because she put a lot of effort into it.
5. I don't know what that word means. I'm going to _____ in the dictionary.
6. They said the flight was cancelled and the next one wasn't until the next day. _____, 'I'm not staying here overnight'.
7. There aren't as many _____ articles in the media as there used to be. People prefer to read shorter articles these days.
8. This Italian woman always makes pesto by hand using a mortar and pestle (British English: pestle and mortar), never with a food processor. She's a very _____ cook.
9. If you're going to reach the top in any profession, you will probably have to fight your way through a lot of _____.
10. I used to hate vegetables when I was a kid, but now I'm a vegetable farmer, _____.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Do you know anyone who is truly bilingual like Sandra? How much of an advantage do you think this is?
2. Do you think parents should force multiple languages on their children? Why or why not?
3. Nick said that he doesn't think English speakers are proud of English the way French speakers are proud of French. Are you 'proud' of your native language? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. She was born in England and has an English mother, but her family moved to French-speaking Geneva when she was young and her schooling was done in French.
2. Sandra's mother forced her to speak English at home but let her brother speak French because by that time, Sandra's mother understood French.
3. She prefers English because she says it's more open and flexible.

Exercises

1. pick up
2. off-putting
3. flourished
4. shame
5. look it up
6. I'm like
7. in-depth
8. old school
9. barriers
10. funnily enough