

Growing Up Bilingual in Australia

A ViệtSpeak Podcast - Episode 3

Title: Karina and Sean's Vietnam Language Adventure

[THEME MUSIC]

Chi Vu: Hi, welcome to our podcast. Here we speak with bilingual children and their parents about growing up multilingual in Australia. I'm Chi Vu, a writer and educator, and with me is Hoang Tran, a member of the language advocacy group ViệtSpeak.

Today we are visiting the home of Vietnamese-Australian mum, Thu-Trang, and her two young children, Sean and Karina. The kids have just come home from Sunday activities and they're about to have a snack. We're in the mezzanine level of the family home and with the door open we can see the Melbourne skyline in the distance.

Sean: Well hello, my name is Sean and I was born in 2013.

Karina: I was born in 2015. And my name is Karina.

Sean: And I'm eight years old.

Karina 0:13

I am seven years old and I am in grade one

Sean: I go to Holy Rosary primary school

Chi: Have you always gone to this school?

Sean: We went to Yellow Bee in Vietnam from 2019. We went to Vietnam for vacation that we were supposed to say only three weeks, but then extended to one month, three months, then two years. Yes, so it turned out from free week vacation to two years staying in Vietnam

Chi: How did you like that?

Sean: It was okay. Like when I got back to Australia it was a lot different like the language, the population and the food. Like they're very different but they also very the same

Chi: That sounds really interesting in what ways are they different?

Karina: One is hot and one is like a bunch of

Sean: In Australia like the weather changes quickly when Vietnam is either storms or hot-weather:

Chi: What about đồ ăn?

Sean: Um, it was, I don't know.

Karina: Sean doesn't understand

Chi: So what language do most people speak in Vietnam?

Sean: Vietnamese. Now in Australia they speak English like like you're right now. In Vietnam, we both learned Vietnamese in three months. And I had to say a speech in 2019 somewhere.

Chi: Oh, in Vietnamese?

Sean: Yeah. I, I only been there for like a year. We speak Vietnamese also at school but we spoke English at home. Like our parents wanted us to be able to speak both languages, but now we speak English at school and English at home.

Chi: So what's your favorite word in Vietnamese?

Sean: Hello, Chao. That's one of the ones I remember

Chi: Yeah.

Karina: And I know how to count to 50. Một hai ba bốn năm bốn mươi, I just count to forty

Chi: Wow, that's amazing. I loved hearing that... and so when you spoke to your friends did you speak in Vietnamese?

Sean: Yes, we did speak to in Vietnamese.

Karina: We also learn Cantonese.

Chi: Can you tell me about that?

Sean: Well, Cantonese is my dad's culture. We have to, we're watching videos every day. But it's not like videos where to learn Cantonese. It's like a cartoon, but it's in Cantonese. So we kind of learn the words in Cantonese. Where it where it has English sub. Yeah, so we know what it means.

Chi: So do you think you're learning Cantonese from watching this?

Sean: When we see the subtitles? Yes. I can read.

Chi: What do you think about having being able to be bilingual?

Sean: Being, be able to speak different languages, like allows you to get a wider range of education. Like you can find more books, for example, like that one?

Chi: Could it get a little bit confusing sometimes?

Sean: I guess. Like is you talking to someone that knows two languages and you say something that's a word in two languages, but there's different meanings. Like, for example, if I say something in English, I also mean something in Cantonese. And the person that you're talking to you both knows both of them. They might get confused which one you're talking about?

Chi: That's a great example. So do you think most people speak one language or more than one language in Australia?

Sean: I think most people are bilingual.

Chi: So what's the word, like, if you see your friend, would you use the word, mầy, or do you use the word em? Or do you use the word anh?

Sean: When I was in Vietnam, I was actually the oldest kid in the whole school.

Chi: Okay. And so thy

Sean: I had to call everyone em

Chi: Everyone was em. And did they call you anh?

Sean: Yes.

Karina: Except for the teachers, the teachers. The teachers were the oldest.

Chi: What did you call them?

Sean: Cô.

Chi: Cô. They were all female?

Sean: Yes. They were all female.

Chi: No Thầy?

Sean: No. If there was a Thầy, I would know the word Thầy. I don't know the word Thầy even when I was in Vietnam,

Chi: But I just said it then. But you seem to know what it meant.

Sean: No, this you just told me what it meant, male teacher.

Hoang Tran: So what did you think in Vietnam when you spoke Vietnamese at school, but English at home?

Sean: It actually wasn't that hard to get confused, because home looks a little different than school.

Hoang: What about the other kids, what language did they speak at home?

Sean: They spoke Vietnamese.

Chi: And so was it hard talking to the other kids in Australia when you went back to school?

Sean: No, like I said, we did English at home.

Chi: If you had your choice, would you continue to learn other languages or not continue?

Sean: Well, I don't want to learn another languages into a like in high school. Yeah, because I liked speaking English.

Chi: What about you, Karina?

Karina: I'm okay to learn Vietnamese

Chi: Yeah, really?

Karina: Say I can speak to my mum in Vietnamese.

Chi: Oh, is it fun? What do you like about it?

Karina: Speaking different languages

Chi: Does it feel different?

Karina: Uh huh

Chi: Where does it feel different?

Karina: My mouth.

Chi: Yeah, because you have to do different shapes with your mouth to say different languages. When you talk about food do you mostly talk speak in English or Vietnamese with your mom?

Karina: Engilsh

Chi: What about going to sleep? Do you speak English or Vietnamese with your mom?

Karina: Vietnamese, when the light is off

Chi: Oh, what do you say to her?

Sean 2:13
We say Good night.

Chi: Well, I think it's amazing that you and your brother know all these languages. It's I think it's so impressive. So thank you for talking to us.

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Chi: Pottering away in the background the whole time we've been talking with Karina and Sean is their mum Thu-Trang, so now we jump into that part of the conversation.

Chi: So are you deliberately kind of trying to find, like, parenting groups that are bilingual or anything like that?

Thu-Trang: Well I was deliberate when they were younger? But to be to be frank live is just very busy now? So it's basically just mean keeping up with their extracurricular activities, as you heard, soccer and swimming alone. Yeah. So I guess I think one of your questions was like, What would I say to bilingual moms? And I would say, actually, women or moms asked to do everything on the sun and we can't do it all. And so it's this year is all about soccer. Yes. And between the two of them soccer alone is four all days of the week. So the choice of Saturday schools either for Cantonese or Vietnamese is impossible, well not impossible, but it's about priorities.

Chi: Exactly. And I think that's a great message of you know, you can do you can have one focus at a time.

Thu-Trang: Yes. There's no multitasking. That's my new motto for my kids. Like there's no such thing as multitasking. Focus on one thing at a time.

Chi: How old were you when you kind of went oh I'm feeling the energy with English?

Thu-Trang: Yeah, 15. year nine. Yeah. So to starting to feel the switch. And so always remember, are still reading books? Yeah, in year 7 year 8 in Vietnamese books. But then at the age of 15, suddenly, I could read more, absorb more music, friends, everything. So it's like, stop reading my Vietnamese books and Vietnamese newspapers like Việt Luận and all that. And start reading all my, all my English. Yeah. Well, and there was just a lot more interesting stuff in English, because the stuff in Vietnamese was starting to get dry.

Chi: From eight to 15, you were still operating in Vietnamese. Dreaming in Vietnamese, counting.

Thu-Trang: Thinking, counting. It's the counting? Yeah, like counting

Chi: Adding. And then 15 the switch.

Thu-Trang: For me, it was just probably more along the lines of Sean just a whole new world just blossomed. And it felt natural, but I didn't feel like had to reject or focus on English, just just. just natural, you know, suddenly, the learning curve, you become, you're conscious of your incompetence. Yeah, you're aware of your incompetence, and you learn and you become competent. And then it just becomes natural. You didn't have to consciously focus on learning English. My Vietnamese was still fine then. That's the true bilingual state. Right. And so you converse in both and was easy in both. But then, you know, as you've got stronger one, and, you know, I didn't have many exposure to Vietnamese community thereafter. So it's like a muscle, you don't use it, you lose it. And so I lost it, because I didn't have the circle of friends or the exposure. With the bilingual thing, right now it's good enough. And they've got their foundations. And so yeah, Seany, no pressure on him. No pressure on me. No pressure on the kids, because there's other pressures more pressing as a result of the lockdown and pandemic.

Chi: What is your thinking? What's your definition of the foundation?

Thu-Trang: Or they just had the exposure? Right. So the science, as I understand it, is their brains form the greatest number of connections from zero to six. And they form the connections and they the frequency of the sounds, I guess, the muscle of the mouth, they can articulate the frequencies and the words. Yeah. And so hopefully, they can pick it back up. Like riding a bike, you might have to invest in a bit of time, but they can pick it back up, because it's already registered in the recesses there.

Chi: I found it really hard to picture what Sean was saying about him speaking Vietnamese to his friends, can you fill in that picture a little bit?

Thu-Trang: He just learned it and spoke. So it's that immersive environment like it because everyone else is speaking it? I. In order for him to survive at childcare, he had to be able to articulate his needs, like I need to go to the bathroom. I want my meal. I want a second serving. Can I have a piece of paper?

Chi: So he did all of that.

Thu-Trang: Yeah. Because I wasn't there. So from nine to four, five days a week. He was on his own and he had to learn. You know, they just learned the basic vocab as he articulated. About the playground, getting the ball getting the food, and don't hit me. So I never actually had to translate for him. He just, kids being kids, they figure it out themselves. Right.

Hoang: When we first spoke, you mentioned that. You, you started out speaking Viet with your kids.

Thu-Trang: I already knew about bilingualism being very important. And so I could do that quite easily when they were kids, because it was just basic Vietnamese on my part. And you know how the maternal nurses will teach you just to narrate what happens during the day what you're doing to them. So I could narrate that quite easily. And that's the language I grew up with my parents, you know, what are you eating now, what I'm doing now, going for a walk, there's a tree, the birds kind of that so all those things.

Hoang: Your family is based in Sydney, how's it to raise kids here? Without family?

Thu-Trang: When I guess I chose to raise my family in Melbourne, I've already had the benefit of having travelled a lot. And to see that it's possible to start a new life. In any city, I have that skill set, and I have that muscle to build relationships. And the way I say it is, I make family out of friends. And so just having had the confidence and the networks, you can have people caring for your kids the same way your parents would care for your kids. And you still have aunts and uncle-like relationships with close friends.

Chi: Thank you so much for your incredible mind and your incredible stories and your kids story. Sharing the afternoon with us.

[THEME MUSIC]

Chi: You've been listening to *Growing up bilingual in Australia*, a podcast where we speak with bilingual children and their parents about language, culture and what it feels like to be multilingual in Australia.

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Karina: *Growing Up Bilingual in Australia* is hosted by Chi Vu, and produced by Hoang Tran Nguyen. Script development is by David Nguyen and Chi Vu. Music is by Quang Dinh.