



## **Lost in Translation**

**Jennifer Friedman, May 2008**

Walking to school Cecilia informed me that I could walk on these lines but not those lines on the sidewalk. Taking the opportunity to throw in some new words, I asked her, “¿Puedo caminar en las líneas horizontales pero no en los verticales?” (“I can walk on the horizontal lines but not the vertical ones?”). She then proceeded to talk about why it was okay to walk on the “*horizontales*”, yet again amazing me at the way children just absorb new words.

Jack has a few friends in his dual language program who did not speak any, or much, Spanish before entering the program two years ago. When I speak to them in Spanish, he often tries to translate for them as I speak. I have repeatedly asked him not to do so, yet it seems to be instinctual for him. I believe it is instinctual for all of us to translate because it is the easiest way to ensure the other person understands us. I ask him not to translate, and resist the urge myself, because I see it as a lost opportunity if I do so.

When I do not understand something my kids say they do not translate, they describe what they are trying to say with other words. This is a strategy I have tried hard to model for them, and sometimes even push them to do. It would often be easier for me to just tell them in English what I mean, and I do lapse at times and throw in an English word, such as the other day when I could not think of the word for “ticket” (as in a parking ticket).

The question is how do we respond when a bilingual child asks, “What does that mean?”? Why not respond to a bilingual child the same way we would a monolingual child? If a monolingual child asks what a word means, we describe it, provide synonyms, show them pictures, use gestures, or point out what we mean in our environment. We do not have the crutch of translation, but if you think very carefully about a time this has happened you can easily realize the benefits a single “What does that mean?” provides a child in terms of the conceptual and linguistic information that follows. Responding to a bilingual person in the same way rather than simply translating, takes advantage of that golden opportunity for learning.

I often hear parents, caregivers, and even teachers translating for children. Yet, when we translate we lose the opportunity to build vocabulary, develop a concept further, and make conceptual connections. When we translate, we simply provide the child with a single, isolated linguistic connection from one language to the other. There may be something valuable in that, but I would argue that the benefits of the experience when we explain without translating far outweigh the benefit of having a single word. Translation serves its purpose, but most certainly, we lose something in the translation.