Mama, Mere, Mother Eric Speaks All Three

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If you were to follow Eric Mateos through a day you might find him speaking Spanish at breakfast, English at lunch, and French at dinner. Eric’s father, Manuel, a graduate student in Civil Engineering at Iowa State, is a native Spanish senor. His mother, Brigitte, a language instructor at Iowa State, was born and raised on the west coast of France. And his babysitter is an American. Mrs. Mateos teaches all day and Manuel stays with Eric in the morning. His conversations with his son (still quite one-sided) are always in Spanish. In the afternoon, Manuel goes to class and the babysitter takes over. Of course she chats to Eric in English. When Brigitte gets home, she feeds and plays with him and carefully speaks French to him.

The Mateos’s talk a mixture of French and Spanish to each other. Eric can say a few of the words they use, in all three languages — baby, milk, daddy, dinner — are in his trilingual vocabulary. Although many folks feel that such a young child shouldn’t be “confused” by being taught three languages, Brigitte and Manuel disagree vehemently. Eric’s doctor told them the only possible effect could be that perhaps he would not speak quite as soon.

The Mateos’s have no doubt that their son understands regardless of whether it’s mama, mere, or mother. “Do you want a cookie?” gets a quick response from Eric in any language. But “It’s time to go to bed,” secures a reverse action — often he hides — sometimes he acts like he doesn’t hear or understand.

Eric’s own name was a word carefully chosen by his parents. They searched for a name that was common to all three languages, a task which turned out to be impossible. However, Mrs. Mateos said that Eric was common in France as well as America. Though this name was not known in Spain, the Mateos’s liked it very much and so their son learned this as his own name early in his language education. In another year or two, Eric will be able to converse with his relatives whether in Spain, France or America. And incidentally, maybe he’ll be able to help you study for your French and Spanish finals.

**Eric Speaks All Three**

by Jean McKee, H.Ed. Sr.

Brigitte Mateos holds her son Eric, 3, who is learning Spanish from his father, French from his mother, and English from his babysitter.