When my oldest daughter was just three-years-old, I signed her up to attend a Spanish Immersion preschool twice a week. At the time we were living in Chicago, and it seemed that similar language schools were popping up everywhere for children of all ages. Having curiosity, but very little understanding of the immersion concept, I was both uneasy and excited the first time I walked into the classroom and observed the instructor speaking only Spanish to the children.
As a matter of fact, I later learned that the instructor did not even speak English! The method of instruction was to naturally introduce the language to the children through games and songs taught by a Spanish native. The experts say that the younger a child is, the easier it is for the brain to grasp new languages.

My excitement was short-lived because soon after starting the program, my husband took another job that moved us from Chicago to Wisconsin (there were no language programs near our new place).

Now let's fast forward to present. Although it has been ten years (and four job changes, and two more babies) since I first attempted to "grow" a bilingual child, I am ready to give it another try. Another motivating factor is that our family is going to Germany this summer and we want to be able to at least communicate the two most important questions; where's the best place to eat and where's the bathroom? Here are a few budget-friendly options I discovered to help our family of five to go from unilingual to bilingual. Check them out…pronto (fast in Spanish)!

Your local library

(Oh how I love the library!) Over the years, I have borrowed various language instruction books, tapes, and CDs from the library for our family. Some have been helpful, and others not so much. The wonderful thing about the library is that they get new material on a regular basis. Check with a friendly librarian at the information desk and they can usually help you find the most current material. Note: After you have been helped, remember to say "danke" (thank you in German).

Live mocha

Do you want to learn a language online for free? Then try www.livemocha.com. You will learn a foreign language, spoken by a native speaker, and then you get to give instructions to an individual desiring to learn English. That sounds like a good barter system to me!

BYKI

Another recommended site is www.byki.com. They also offer free basic language learning options, and deluxe programs you can purchase that start at about $50. If you are on the go, consider placing your lessons on your mp3 player and listening while you exercise. Check it out and you could be speaking a new language before you know it!

Rosetta Stone

The price of the Rosetta Stone www.rosettastone.com language program is a whopping $539, but it is still cheaper than paying for private lessons for several months. With a near-perfect customer satisfaction rating and a host of awards of excellence, this would be a worthwhile investment if you have the extra cash. I would recommend this investment if you seriously want to learn the language for longer term use (versus a short vacation). It's also a great option for those who need to brush up on foreign language skills that have become rusty. Better yet, if you just want a short-term commitment, then "rent" the program. This will give you unlimited online access for a six-month or one–year period at the rate of $200 and $300, respectively.

Over twenty years ago, I took my first Spanish class in high school and I regret not continuing in college. I want to help my children see the value of learning a second language, and appreciate the beauty of the diverse world of people among which we live. While your budget might not allow you to have private lessons if you really want to learn a language, review some of the above options and see which works best for you. Ciao (bye in Italian) and Enjoy!

Marcia Humphrey is an interior decorator and home stager who specializes in achieving high style at low costs. A native of Michigan, she and her husband, Lonnie, have three children.