

# Intensive parenting and elective bilingualism English/Spanish in Spanish monolingual families: From language ideologies to practice

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**ABSTRACT:** In our globalised economy, English proficiency is currently a priority for Spanish families, as it is fundamental for ensuring their children's future economic and personal welfare. As a sign of good parenting, families are increasingly acting as linguistic entrepreneurs and adopting family language policies oriented to provide their children with the best methodologies to enhance English learning, thereby investing their personal and financial capital in extracurricular classes, local English camps, and stays abroad. In searching for more natural learning environments, those parents with knowledge of English emulate native bi/multilingual families and raise their children in English and Spanish. This type of non-native elective bilingualism upbringing is gaining momentum in Spain and deserves further scrutiny. Therefore, this paper is devoted to better understand this phenomenon by means of the study of 16 Spanish families who are raising their children in English and Spanish. Their family language policy (FLP) will be analysed in terms of language beliefs, language management and language practices. Results reflect parents' desires and imagined identities with English as a metaphor of accomplishment, as well as their emotional implications, disruptions and negotiations to bring to fruition this complex socialization practice.

**Key words:** elective bilingualism, family language policy, intensive parenting, language socialization, linguistic entrepreneurship.

## **Paternidad intensiva y bilingüismo electivo inglés/español en familias monolingües españolas: De las ideologías lingüísticas a la práctica**

**RESUMEN:** En nuestra economía globalizada, el dominio del inglés es prioritario para las familias españolas, al ser considerado fundamental para el futuro bienestar económico y personal de sus hijos. Como muestra de buena crianza, las familias actúan como emprendedores lingüísticos y adoptan políticas lingüísticas familiares orientadas a proporcionar a sus hijos las mejores metodologías para potenciar el aprendizaje del inglés, invirtiendo su capital personal y económico en clases extraescolares, campamentos de inglés y estancias en el extranjero. En busca de entornos de aprendizaje más naturales, aquellos padres con conocimientos de inglés emulan a las familias nativas bilingües o multilingües y crían a sus hijos en inglés y español. Este tipo de bilingüismo electivo no nativo está cobrando fuerza en España y merece mayor análisis. Por ello, este trabajo pretende comprender mejor este fenómeno mediante el estudio de 16 familias españolas que educan a sus hijos en inglés y en español. Se analizará su política lingüística familiar (PLF) en lo que respecta a creencias, gestión y

prácticas lingüísticas. Los resultados reflejan los deseos y las identidades imaginadas de los padres con el inglés como metáfora de realización, así como sus implicaciones emocionales, disrupciones y negociaciones para implementar esta compleja práctica de socialización.

**Palabras clave:** bilingüismo electivo, política lingüística familiar, paternidad intensiva, socialización lingüística, emprendimiento lingüístico.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

European institutions underpin a wide range of policies to enhance language learning and bi/multilingual education, as a strategy to promote cohesion, mobility among member states and economic growth (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, 2018). In fact, the acquisition of multilingual competence is one of the key competences for lifelong learning recommended by the European Council ([www.europarl.europa.eu](http://www.europarl.europa.eu), 2020), essential for personal fulfilment, employability, active citizenship, and social inclusion. The (OECD, 2018) expands the conceptualisation of plurilingual and pluricultural competence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018) and spotlights both the need for successfully interacting with others, and examining global and intercultural issues, in order to live and thrive in a changing and interconnected world.

Within this framework of promotion of language learning, English has gained an extraordinary prominence as the global language and *lingua franca* and has become the most popular second language omnipresent in all educational systems, which increasingly implement bilingual programs among other innovations to foster English learning. However, particularly among Spanish families, the narrative that school is not enough to provide a decent -not to mention, bilingual- level of English is extensively circulating. As they feel that, as good parents, it is paramount for them to act and take agency in this essential area, some families are intensifying their efforts to complement English learning with different strategies, such as extracurricular English classes, conversations with English natives, local English camps and stays abroad. Among these practices, bilingual English/Spanish upbringing is increasingly being implemented in monolingual families in Spain, with one of the progenitors being proficient in English and raising his or her children in this foreign language, which is not their mother tongue, and it is not either spoken in the social context.

This article intends to research this emerging and highly interesting phenomenon and is organised as follows. In the first sections the constructs that frame the investigation will be presented and expounded: commodification of languages, linguistic entrepreneurship, elective bilingualism as a family language policy and good parenting. In the next section, the methodology of the study is described, followed by the results and discussion of the findings. In the last section, the main conclusions will be outlined.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This investigation focuses on socialization practices, obstacles and emotions within these families that have decided to raise their children in English, which is truly “nobody’s mother tongue” (Alarcón & Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, in press), since Spanish is the L1

of all family members and it is also the societal language. This type of non-native bilingual upbringing is not new and has already been labelled as “artificial bilingualism” (Kielhöfer & Jonekeit, 1983), in opposition to native bilingualism in which one or both parents transmit their mother tongue, which is different from the societal one. Valdés and Figueroa (1994), in turn, prefer to call this practice “elective bilingualism”, thereby highlighting the parental election of raising their children in English to extend their employment opportunities in their future. This term is the one we will use in this paper, since it accounts for the intentionality and will of these parents, as well as the socioeconomic drive behind this family language policy (FLP).

FLP is a field of research that studies “explicit an overt planning in relation to language use within the home and among family members” (King et al. 2008, p. 907). Although FLP initially focused on native bilingualism and its main concern was related to language maintenance and language loss in multilingual families, its theoretical frameworks, such as the Spolky’s (2009) model, can be applied to elective bilingualism environments. Thus, this FLP can be analysed in light of the conjunction of three major elements: language beliefs, family language practice, and family language management (Spolsky, 2009). The study of language beliefs is essential to understand why families decide to implement elective bilingualism, and to better investigate the affordances and values ascribed to English proficiency. Family language practice is the second dimension established by Spolsky (2009) and includes the investigation of everyday language interactions, along with the main strategies developed, which can range from Time & Place approaches (English is spoken only during specific activities) to OPOL (one parent, one language) with a total maintenance of the target language by one of the parents for communicating at home and sometimes outdoors too. Finally, language management informs about family efforts, in terms of personal, affective, and even monetary investments.

The elective bilingualism FLP is connected to the frame of “linguistic entrepreneurship”, which emerges from the pressure “placed on individuals and institutions to enhance their language skills” (De Costa et al., 2021, p. 141). Linguistic entrepreneurship is defined as the “act of aligning with the moral imperative to strategically exploit language -related resources for enhancing one’s worth in the world” (De Costa et al., 2016, p. 696). Hence, learning languages becomes a responsibility of individuals, and, as far as FLP is concerned, this “linguistic entrepreneurship” is also related to the parental decisions regarding their children’s language acquisitions, and their wish of providing them with essential tools to compete in the global market.

In this sense, globalisation and neoliberalism seem to be paramount to understand this socialization practice, since, as Darvin and Norton (2017) state, investing in English learning is associated with achieving increased capital and social power. This way, the mastery of languages is part of the capital of individuals and assumes the form of commodities, since they are considered “as consumer goods which have to be offered in a free market, sold and bought as well as profitable in financial terms” (Pardo Pérez & García Tobío, 2003, p. 39). In this regard, children are seen as “investments for future economic productivity” (Sims, 2017, p. 1) and parents are considered clients and consumers who look for effective bilingual strategies to ensure a better acquisition of English language, thereby investing in the future multilingual and multicultural competence of their children. Within this backdrop, education becomes “a cost- effective enterprise” (López et al. 2012, p. 49).

Thus, the globalized English fever defined by Krashen (2006) as an “overwhelming desire to (1) acquire English, (2) ensure that one’s children acquire English, as a second or foreign language” (p.1) puts families’ peace of mind at stake in the face of the ever-increasing job competition in the neoliberal society, thereby allocating a central place to competitiveness in second language acquisition. This “competition is heavily structured through a host of testing, assessment and ranking mechanisms, many of them explicitly privilege English as a terrain where individual and societal worth are established” (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 23).

This exigence to compete and excel emerging from the Neoliberal game rules impacts families, who are immersed in a scenario of professionalization of parenting (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014, p. 96). This entails an “intensification of parenthood” (Vincent & Maxwell, 2015, p. 269) which “places significant pressure on parents” (Yerkes et al. 2021 p. 349). Thus, progenitors with English proficiency are increasingly raising their children in English, as a sign of good parenting, since transmitting this language would help their children acquire a new imagined identity (Myers-Scotton, 2006), enter “a new linguistic, scholastic, social and psychological reality” (Nyikos, 2014, p. 23), in which they can succeed in a global context. Thus, in this framework of individual competitiveness, linguistic entrepreneurship, and pressure to be a good parent, progenitors exert internal and external control to support their FLP, being the elective bilingualism a solution for enhancing English learning in a monolingual context.

Although elective bilingualism is an increasingly popular practice, there is a paucity of studies to date focused on this phenomenon. Saunders’ publications (1982, 1988) were among the first attempts to look into this practice from an autoethnographic perspective. The author described the method used to raise their three children in German in an English-speaking country (Australia), which was mainly OPOL and additional support via TV shows and storytelling. His books provide reflections on the impact of social pressure (friends, relatives), and his own non-native status on the success of the approach, although in general terms, he considered his children, to a higher or lesser extent, acquired active bilingualism.

In recent years, in most of the studies published, unsurprisingly, it is English the language chosen to implement non-native bilingualism as FLP. In this vein, Szramek-Karcz (2016) sheds light into the shift regarding this practice from the use of non-native Russian to English after the communist period in Poland ended. Hurajová (2020) describes the expansion of this type of elective bilingualism in Slovakia, reports on her own experience with her two children, Henrich and Veronika, and reflects on the causes of the different degree of success attained with each one -an outcome already detected in the previous literature (Barron- Hauwaert, 2011). In turn, the autoethnography conducted by García-Armayor (2019) is a reference for the academic discussion on elective bilingualism in Spain. The author describes the strategies put in practice, percentage of English input received, and results obtained, which were particularly successful in the development of his daughter’s receptive skills. Garcia-Armayor (2019) concludes with some tips and strategies for parents and advises “not (to) be afraid of what other people may think or say about you speaking a minority language that is clearly not your L1” (2019, p. 293).

Therefore, to bridge the gap between the increasing implementation of English/Spanish elective bilingualism and the scarcity of studies on this practice (Nogueroles et al., 2022), this paper endeavours to investigate this phenomenon linked to family language policy, linguistic entrepreneurship, and intensive parenting against the backdrop of Neoliberalism

and globalisation. The main objective of the study is to examine the family language policy implemented in elective bilingualism with children between 0-6, drawing from the theoretical model by Spolsky (2009), and their three components:

- 1) Language beliefs.  
OB1. To explore the motivations that may lead families to adopt this practice, studying the connection with the prevailing ideologies in society such as globalisation, neoliberalism, and the commodification of languages.
- 2) Language practice  
OB2. To discover language practices and strategies adopted by each family, their commonalities, and differences.
- 3) Language management:  
OB3. To examine threats and disruptions that may arise when acquiring the second language.  
OB4. To analyse parental emotional stances when providing elective bilingualism.

This study is of interest because i) Non-native elective bilingualism is an emerging practice and there is a dearth of studies focusing on its understanding, ii) the participant families live in rural areas and small towns in central Spain, and this fact entails specific conditions, notably the social perception of these practices and the limitation of opportunities to English socialization, and (iii) this study may be relevant not only to researchers, but also to families.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Participants were 16 middle-class monolingual families, with Spanish as the mother tongue, and one or both parents with knowledge of English. There was a total of 31 children aged from 4 to 18 who were or still are involved in the bilingual upbringing (by means of OPOL or Time & Place) from birth and at least during six years, so the period intended to be researched (0-6) was guaranteed to be covered. All families were based in Central Spain, in rural areas and small towns. In order to guarantee confidentiality, participants are identified with numbers, and children with pseudonyms. In Table 1, are shown participants, pseudonyms, and the strategies used depending on children's ages.

**Table 1.** *Participants*

Particiànts	Profession	Children	Language strategies/ age of children
P.1	Clerk	Carmen (18) Laura (16) Alonso (12)	OPOL (0-3) OPOL (0-6) OPOL (0-6)
P.2	Clerk	Pedro (13) Manuel (8)	T&P (3- 13) EC (3- ) BS T&P (3 - 8) EC (3- ) BS
P.3	Teacher	Sergio (10)	T&P (0- 10)
P.4	Nurse	Gabriel (11) Arturo (8) Héctor (6)	T&P (0-11), EC (6- 11) BS T&P (0-8), EC (6-8 ) BS T&P (0-6), EC (6-) BS
P.5	Clerk	Ángela (11) Luis (9)	OPOL (0-3), T&P (3- 11), EC (6- 11), OPOL (0-2), T&P (3- 9)
P.6	Teacher	Jaime (18) Aitor (14)	OPOL (0- 13) OPOL (0- 13)
P.7	Teacher	Lucía (14)	OPOL (0-6) T&P (6- 14)
P.8	Nurse	Yolanda (9) Elena (6)	OPOL (0-3) T&P (3- 9) EC (3- 9) OPOL (0-3) T&P (3- 6) EC (3- 6)
P.9	Teacher	Fernando (7)	OPOL (0-3) EC (3- 7) T&P (3- 7) SA (as a baby)
P.10	Nurse	Iñaki (11) Jesús (10)	T&P, EC (3 -11) BS T&P, EC (3- 10) BS
P.11	Speech therapist	Mireia (8) Victor (4)	T&P (0- 8) EC (0- 8), SA (4) EIC (3) T&P (0- 4) SA (0:8) EC (0-4)
P.12	Teacher	Beatriz	OPOL (0-3) T&P (3- 9) EC (2- 9)
P.13	Teacher	Susana (9) Olga (6)	T&P (0- 9) EC (6 – 9) T&P (0- 6) EC (6)
P.14	Teacher	Prado (14) Tomás (12)	OPOL (0- 2) T&P (2- 14) T&P (0- 12)
P.15	Housewife	Cristina (14) Gael (11) Baltasar (9)	OPOL (0-6) T&P (6 – 14) EC (3- 14) BS OPOL (0-4) T&P (4- 11) BS OPOL (0-4) T&P (4 -9) BS
P.16	Nursing assistant	Mila (14) Sandra (9)	T&P (0-6) BS T&P (0-6) BS

Note: OPOL: One Parent One Language; T&P: Time and Place; BS: Bilingual Siblings; EC: Extracurricular Classes; EIC: English Immersion Camps; SA: Stays Abroad.

### 3.2. Method, and instruments for data collection.

The methodology used in this research follows the principles of qualitative and ethnographic investigation based on data collection through personal interviews with families. There was a total of 16 individualized semi-structured interviews conducted in Spanish, since it was the language selected by all participants when they were asked at the beginning of the conversation. The interviews were videorecorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately from forty minutes to an hour. Parents were asked about their family language policy: motivations, aspirations, practice, difficulties, personal and financial investment, and emotions.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section language policy of these monolingual families implementing elective bilingualism is analysed and discussed drawing upon Spolsky's (2009) FLP model and its three components.

### 4.1. Language beliefs

Interviews reveal parents show strong beliefs which underpinned their decision to raise their children in English. Their narratives resonate with the prevalent ideologies of the neoliberalism market, and the need for training effective and flexible workers. Families feel they have a moral obligation -which has been externally imposed- to provide their children with "the best possible education" (P.10), as a tool to compete in the future labour market. Education in general and a bilingual command in English are seen as instruments for future success. These connections: English/ competitiveness/ future rewards/ parental obligation are conceptualised by parents in the following ways:

It has been imposed by society, the future, work (...) the fact you want your children to have the best possible education (P.10)

I believe that English and new information technologies are what will define the future, not only in the workplace but also in the children's holistic future. New jobs are more telematic and there are fewer jobs in your own city, therefore you must go abroad, so logically you need a second language. English is the language that can be spoken anywhere, it is the common link (P.13)

In terms of employment, whether you have to go abroad (...) or you work here, (Spain), you need English (P.14)

As a result, families narratives transpire English language is a commodity, a consumer good to acquire and refer to English learning in economic terms, thereby considering it as an "investment"

It is the best investment you can make: investing in education for your children (P.9)

We have spent a lot of money on education, but we will do whatever is necessary (...) because English is going to add value to everything they do, it is fundamental (P.11)

Parents want their children to acquire bilingual proficiency, but not in any language. They reproduce the schemes of the so-called “English fever” (Krashen, 2006) and locate English hierarchically on top of any other language. The terms “international”, “global” and “lingua franca” are commonplace:

English is the international language (...) you can communicate in English on all five continents (P.1)

When there is any contact with other countries, you have to master English (P.14)

Thus, English proficiency opens doors, and it is an essential part of an imagined identity in which their children are citizens of the world, travel to different countries and have opportunities for their personal, academic, and professional development:

Knowing this language will open many doors and provide her with many opportunities of all kinds (P.9)

Since we have not had those wings to fly, we want to give them to our children (P.16)

I want them to continue to be interested in the language, in their studies, also that they travel abroad to complement their studies for them to have a more comprehensive education (P.15)

We are citizens of the world and learning a second language is essential to communicate (...) I would like her to get C1 level because, above all, it is fundamental at a work level and it is essential to travel, to get around (...) it is the universal language” (P.7)

I have seen very well- prepared people who have been closed many doors for not being certified in English (P.3)

These excerpts also point to fact that certificating the English language level is also a concern and aspiration and is seen as a precondition to enjoy all these benefits. In fact, most parents are familiar with different certifying institutions and with the levels established by the CEFR certificates (Council of Europe, 2021), which proves that parental mindsets are aligned with the official language policies that use assessment and ranking strategies to organise this competition in the language market (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 23).

Interestingly enough, it is worth mentioning the ways in which parents who put in practice elective bilingualism are influenced by their past experiences as English learners. Parents wish to spare their children problems they themselves endured in their own English learning process, a baggage that in some cases has affected not only their relation to the acquisition of the second language but their future aspirations for their kids. In a nutshell,



parents want their children to learn in a less stressing and more communicative way than they did:

I want to ease the path that was so hard for me (P.9)

Perhaps the importance we give to English comes from the fact that we had needed it and realised that we had a lot of gaps (P.16)

At first, I did not like it because I only learned vocabulary lists and structures, we did not speak English and I did not understand the listening part (P.8)

In most cases, parental past experiences acted as negative models and influenced their beliefs regarding second language acquisition theories. Most of the participants started learning English at the age of 11 at school, where written skills and grammar were privileged, oral communication absent and the learning situation not very motivating. For the participants in the study, that way of learning English was not “natural”, not effective, communicative and frustrating, and started too late. Therefore, parents decided to begin as soon as they could (from birth) with the bilingual rearing to ensure their children got the necessary input in the target language, putting communication and orality first, and providing a natural, funny, and effortless acquisition of the English language:

Our generation, has had a hard time getting started with this language, as we started learning English very late (...) that's why it is very important for us that children start earlier (P.15)

For us, it is very important, to introduce a second language from childhood, mainly because it is easier when they are young, when the learning bases are still maturing (P.11)

When they are little children is when you have to take advantage (...) they are relating ideas to situations in a natural way (P.6)

Only two parents reported good experiences as English learners, which served to give them clues to support their children's acquisition process. For example, Participant 9 lived for a year in the USA with her family when she was a little child, and hence, she believes immersion is the best practice to learn English. Likewise, Participant 11, remembers an English teacher who, by means of introducing cultural elements, succeeded in motivating their students

Along with the “natural” acquisition of English, parents -particularly the ones who are English teachers- pay special attention to affective factors. Most parents felt stress, insecurity, and anxiety when they learnt English in their childhood and adolescence, and therefore, they want to prevent their children from suffering distress during the process. Hence, parents try to help them develop positive attitudes, so that the English language may be a part of their own identity:

I would like them to enjoy the languages (English) in a natural way, to see it not as something academic but as a part of their lives (P.11)

(...) it is important that children appreciate in their supporting figures the taste for a second language (P.9)

English language has to be present not as a learning process but as something fun (P.11)

Additionally, these parents who are English teachers are more concerned about the impact on family well-being, and are more open to negotiation with their children, trying to be respectful with their children's agency and their language choice. This way children's decisions are taken into account, and consequently, the practice capitalises on their willingness, endorsement, engagement and participation. As a result, more efficient and enriched learning environments are created (Baker et al., 2021):

The more the better, but not by imposition (P.3)

I wanted them to take it as something natural, so I did not want to force learning actions (P.6)

## 4.2. Language practices

### 4.2.1. *Strategies*

To create immersion environments in English, some parents implement OPOL (One-Parent – One Language). This is a strategy typically used in real multilingual families; one parent speaks one language, normally the majority language (in this case, Spanish, being both the mother tongue and community language) and the other parent speaks the minority one, which in this case is not a heritage mother tongue, but a foreign language, English:

“Since they were born, they listened to Spanish at home on my wife's side and English on my side (...) I wanted them to identify me with that language and everything happened naturally” (P.6)

“We plan to start with bilingual parenting from birth (...)” (P.9)

In other families, the strategy used is “Time & Place”, which is less intensive and demanding, and consists of choosing a specific activity to regularly use English. It encompasses practices, such as reading books at bedtime, singing songs, playing games, simple interactions in English when going to school/ after school/ during lunchtime, etc:

“From the very beginning, through children's stories, games and cartoons, we work on very basic notions such as, colours, geometric shapes and so on” (P.9)

“We do “English time” and he has improved a lot...” (P.3)

The study also highlights that online applications for learning English and watching TV and videos in YouTube are popular strategies among these families to create immersion environments at home:

“From a very young age, we have explored applications, digital resources, videos on the Internet (...) we realised that everything or the vast majority, was in English and we took advantage of that” (P.13)

“Nowadays, thanks to networks (books, films...) they can pick up more culture quickly” (P.1)

“Practically from the time they were born we played cartoons, songs, and loose words” (P.16)

The bilingual siblings’ strategy is also present in some of the families. Older siblings, who were raised in English, positively influenced the second language acquisition of the youngest ones, thereby finding an additional support within home. Parents explain this practice even contributes to creating a special bond between siblings as they share a language that not everyone understands:

“They talk to each other (in English), the eldest always takes the initiative and try to get them to follow her” (P.15)

“There are times when they start talking to each other (in English) because they like ...want (...) sometimes it is so that we do not know what they are talking about (...) the older one tries to correct the younger one who leans a lot on her sister” (P.16)

#### 4.2.2. *English learning outcomes*

Parents highlight the advantage of this approach for English learning. Children are able to understand and interact without translating first in the L1, since they have learnt words at the same time in Spanish and English; and, in some cases, even before in English:

“I know that thinking in English (...)is important (...) that is why I try to get them to think in English by integrating it into our daily lives” (P.13)

It is underscored by participants that children “understand all” in the interactions at home and also the cartoons and TV shows. Although children do not always answer in English, they usually use this language when playing alone with their toys, and in some cases with their older siblings and cousins, showing an English command wide ahead of their age:

“...my older nephews and nieces come over and he is able to have conversations with them and he likes that, it motivates him” (P.3)

One of the aspects which most benefit from bilingual upbringing is pronunciation. Parents explain they were amazed by their children’s capacity of reproducing difficult sounds from nearly the very beginning and acquire a near native-like intonation.

Although participants declare they always could have done more, they are satisfied with the results, which are in line with their expectations and investment. For example, Participant

6 intensively implemented OPOL until his children were 13 and he believes they have a bilingual command in all the skills. Participant 7, in turn, more focused on providing her daughter with an effortless, natural, and smooth way of learning English, underlines she has succeeded at school, was never stressed and has been able to use English to learn contents in the bilingual branch during primary and secondary education:

“She is happy, she has never had any problems and in secondary school she has continued with the bilingual itinerary” (P.7)

### 4.3. Language management

#### 4.3.1. Threats and disruptions

The study reveals that the age of children represents one of the most important threats to bilingual rearing. As children grow older, parents find it more difficult to maintaining their immersion practices:

“The kids are growing up and now it is harder” (P.13)

Most families report there are two critical moments: at the beginning of pre-primary school (when children are around 3 years-old), and at the beginning of primary education (about 6 years-old). These moments entail consecutive expansions of their social circle with Spanish as the language for socialization. Their lives are not so confined to the home environment and children feel they are not so dependent on their parents. They are shaping their personality and show their own agency in language choice:

“When she was a little girl, she started to understand and speak to us (in English) as time went by, she refused it and we started to lose it” (P.9)

This new scenario usually entails a decrease in the time devoted to communicating in English and in some cases instead of OPOL parents put in practice time and place strategies, along with watching TV shows in English and using digital resources. Another consequence emerging from these critical periods is the need for the parents to negotiate with their children to continue with some of the immersion practices at home:

“They used to watch cartoons and films in English... when they are very young this works. Then, the time came, and they wanted to watch the cartoons in Spanish, so (...) we had to” make a deal” with Disney Plus because they can watch them but only in English” (P.8)

In other families, these tensions, along with other circumstances (the arrival of a baby brother or sister, for example), and the lack of time are used as explanatory reasons for the discontinuity in the bilingual practice, although behind these justifications it seems that imperfect command of English to communicate and express emotions plays even a more crucial role:

“I was very motivated (...) from the moment she started to speak, she watched cartoons in English, we sang songs also we spoke to her in English, and I thought I would continue like that for a long time (...) then, her brother was born (...). I think I gave it up due to lack of time” (...) “In my experience, not being my mother tongue and having to make an extra effort, when it came to expressing emotions, I found it very difficult to do so and I gave up” (P.14)

In addition, the double role some parents play as parents and teachers, when they try to enhance the assimilation of language patterns, seems to be an obstacle particularly for kids, who do not take their parents seriously when assuming that role of “teachers”, and try to stop the “English class”, by negotiating to shift the target language, and looking for any distraction:

“Being your kids’ teachers does not work, we started really motivated but we stopped doing it over time” (Damian)

Social disapproval of the elective bilingual practice is also reported as a major threat. Participants explain they feel alone and isolated, and compare their situation to native bilingual families, who, unlike them, can find support in a linguistic and cultural community. Some of the parents think their elective bilingual practice is not considered “normal” in their social environment:

“As a family it is fundamental but also as a community, as a town (.) there should be alternatives to normalise bilingualism” (P.11)

Thus, social criticism seems to have a role in shaping the bilingual practice, since some parents decide not to speak to their children in English in public to prevent social judgement or disapproval, and if doing it, some of them feel observed and unease. Participants of the study came from rural areas and small towns, characterised by a more rooted sense of identity, where the social paradigm tends to cast aside the ones who are different. In the case of Participant 6, even if he was able to maintain the bilingual practice for many years, he finally gave it up, largely, to avoid social disapprobation:

“I do not know why I stopped speaking to them in English, (...) maybe... It happened because the social range opened up, such as visits to the doctor where I felt uncomfortable when I had to speak in English to my kids as well as in public places when I felt we were observed (...) (P.6)

These reactions might somehow be connected to the psychological phenomenon of social dominance called “the tall poppy syndrome” (Marques et al. 2022), consisting in disparaging any person considered more prominent and sabotage their achievements. This line of research would require further investigation to better understand this trend by profiling “victims and executioners”, and determining the influence of contextual variables (rural/urban, social class, etc.).

#### 4.3.2. *Good parenting and emotional stances*

In spite of the sacrifices and investments to create learning environments and positive experiences for their children in relation to English language acquisition, most families feel they did not or are not doing enough. This feeling is deeply linked to the professionalisation of parenting in a neoliberal society: a professionalization of the role of the parent to anticipate and ensure a place in society for the child. As a result, parents are focused on doing the right and better thing for their children and put emphasis on improving their parenting skills to conform to this ideal, but this intensive thinking can lead to increased parental anxiety. It is very common, for this middle-class working parenthood, to struggle against lack of time for family life and blame themselves for not having as much time as they would like to devote to second language acquisition, as work responsibilities undermine their availability:

“You can always do more for them” (P.3)

“Since he was very a baby, my goal was to make time to dedicate to English but our day- to- day life is very fast” (P.3)

For example, they also regretted not having travelled with their children to English-speaking countries and not having devoted more time to support bilingualism at home. Parents also considered:

“It is a big economic effort (...) but it can be very motivating for them” (P.13)

“You always think that you could have done more (...) that you could have gone with them and spent a summer there (in an English- speaking country) or that you could have spent more time working on it at home” (P.14)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research was to explore how parents in monolingual settings implement elective bilingualism practice at home to ensure better acquisition of English language, with a focus on the period 0-6. It also examines aspirations and beliefs related to bilingual parenting, along with family tensions and threats involved in this immersive learning process.

Results showed that language policy of these families is in keeping with the demands of the neoliberal society and transpires the neoliberal conception of individuals as entrepreneurs, responsible for finding the strategies and tools to thrive in a competitive environment. Participants explained they lusted for providing their children with the best education so, kids could belong to the bilingual elite that would allow them to be academically, personally, and professionally rewarded in adulthood. Particularly, it was especially important for them to keep their children away from the frustration and embarrassment of not being able to cope in English that they themselves experienced in their past learning process. Therefore, they planned to give their children what they did not have: a natural way of acquiring the language, in which children would learn without effort or pressure.

To this end, they started with the bilingual rearing from birth, with strategies such as OPOL and “Time & Place”, and being assisted by digital resources in English such as videos, songs, films and online applications and games. However, elective bilingualism confronts many challenges, and two critical moments were detected: the beginning of the pre-primary and the beginning of primary education. In those moments the social circle of children is wider, they feel more autonomous, and start to be reluctant to use a language different from the one they use in their social context (Spanish). Consequently, the time devoted to English immersion usually diminishes and parents have to implement more negotiation strategies.

Interestingly enough, while the digital world is an ally, the social context becomes a threat, and bilingual practices are usually confined to the home environment. Some families reported that, when speaking in English in public, they have been the focus of criticism by those who consider this child rearing as an extravagance. Thus, social censure seems to have influenced the abandonment of the practice in some cases, which can be interpreted as an outcome in connection to the so-called “tall poppy syndrome” phenomenon.

Elective bilingualism is undoubtedly a demanding language practice, which generates a wide range of emotions. For example, parents with knowledge of English feel that passing on the language to their children is a sign of good parenting and a moral obligation; something they should do no matter the effort it requires. In addition, although they do their best, they always feel they could have done more and experience feelings of guilt. However, the effort is worthy, since parents are satisfied with the experience in terms of learning outcomes and underline their children’s progress in oral comprehension, pronunciation, and their positive attitude to learning English.

This investigation aimed to shed light on elective bilingualism in monolingual settings; an emerging family language policy which, notwithstanding, calls for further scrutiny. More studies are needed to explore in depth multiple factors that would help better understand this more and more popular approach to English language learning.

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