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English Proficiency as Capital in Family Language Policies: Beliefs, Strategies and Investments

El dominio del inglés como capital en las políticas lingüísticas familiares: creencias, estrategias e inversiones

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Abstract

In the context of neoliberalism and globalization, English plays a pivotal role for global communication, trade, technology, and in the academia. As a result, a high command in English is increasingly considered to be a prerequisite for competitive participation in the labor market and upward socio-economic status. Within this backdrop, this paper explores family language policies to guarantee their children's English learning and aims at uncovering how families deal with this issue, including rationale, practice, efforts and investments. The research design of the study was qualitative, the non-probabilistic convenience sample was made up of 17 Spanish families, and data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews. The results revealed a strong parental commitment to

their children's language education, driven by an intensive parenting style marked by sustained support and a clear focus on securing future success. Families acted as linguistic agents and entrepreneurs and strategically sought opportunities in the flourishing English language learning market to maximize their children's language capital, thereby supplementing the input received at school. This proactive approach was rooted in the view of English as an essential asset in securing their children's competitive advantage in a neoliberal global economy. Besides, families positioned their actions (particularly in the case of stays abroad) as a symbol of status and socio-economic privilege. The differences between those with access to these extracurricular learning experiences from those without, solidify English's role as a social marker.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Family Language Policy (FLP), neoliberalism, intensive parenting, subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship.

Resumen

En el contexto del neoliberalismo y la globalización, el inglés desempeña un papel fundamental en la comunicación global, el comercio, la tecnología y el mundo académico. Como consecuencia, un alto dominio del inglés se considera cada vez más un requisito para la participación competitiva en el mercado laboral y el ascenso socioeconómico. Con este telón de fondo, este artículo explora las políticas lingüísticas de las familias para garantizar el aprendizaje del inglés de sus hijos y pretende desvelar cómo afrontan las familias esta cuestión, incluyendo sus razones, prácticas, esfuerzos e inversiones. El diseño de investigación del estudio fue cualitativo, la muestra de conveniencia no probabilística estuvo formada por 17 familias españolas, y los datos se recogieron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados revelaron un fuerte compromiso por parte de los padres con la educación lingüística de sus hijos, impulsion por un estilo de crianza intensivo caracterizado por un

apoyo constante y un claro enfoque en asegurar el éxito futuro. Las familias actuaron como agentes emprendedores lingüísticos y buscaron estratégicamente oportunidades en el floreciente mercado del aprendizaje del inglés para maximizar el capital lingüístico de sus hijos, complementando así la formación recibida en la escuela. Este enfoque proactivo se arraiga en la visión del inglés como un activo esencial para asegurar la ventaja competitiva de sus hijos en una economía global neoliberal. Además, las familias situaban sus acciones (sobre todo en el caso de las estancias en el extranjero) como símbolo de estatus y privilegio socioeconómico. Las diferencias entre los que tienen acceso a estas experiencias de aprendizaje extraescolar y los que no, solidifican el papel del inglés como marcador social.

Palabras clave: Inglés como lengua extranjera, política lingüística familiar, neoliberalismo, crianza intensiva, emprendimiento lingüístico subrogado.

1. Introduction

English, as the dominant vehicle of communication in multiple spheres, is perceived as an essential asset for seeking upward socio-economic mobility and, consequently, proficiency in this language has become an educational priority. Against this framework, this paper explores the reception of these narratives within families, in light of the increasing number of parents that intervene to supplement institutional English language education. The topic addressed in this study is particularly novel, as it examines family language policy through the lens of linguistic agency and entrepreneurship, a concept that remains underexplored in existing literature when applied to families. While previous research has extensively analysed bilingual education and neoliberal influences on language learning, this paper provides fresh insights into the agency of families in shaping linguistic opportunities for their children. By highlighting the intersection of intensive parental

ideologies, economic resources, and educational aspirations, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the commodification of language in contemporary society.

The paper is organised as follows: section 2 reviews the relevant literature on neoliberalism, commodification of languages, family language policy, intensive parenting, and linguistic entrepreneurship, establishing the theoretical framework for the research. After listing the research questions which lead the study, section 4 describes the methodology, detailing the qualitative approach and data collection through semi-structured interviews with Spanish families. Section 5 presents and discusses the key findings, focusing on parental beliefs and motivations, strategies, and investments in English learning to end with the conclusion section, which summarizes the main findings and broader implications of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Neoliberalism and the commodification of English as a global language

In the context of globalization, English has emerged as a dominant lingua franca, a global medium of communication transcending national and cultural boundaries. This phenomenon of linguistic homogenization is also linked to cultural globalization "by which the experience of everyday life, as influenced by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, reflects a standardization of cultural expressions around the world" (Watson, 2022). Cultural and linguistic globalisation have been deeply intertwined with the processes of neoliberalism, "an ideology that valorises and institutionalizes market-based freedom and individual entrepreneurship" (Gao & Park, 2015, p. 78).

Neoliberalism imposes a cultural and societal shift marked by accountability, competitiveness, excellence and individuality, and

these ideas are manifested on multiple scales in the economic, political, and cultural fields. Along this line, neoliberal market-driven values give rise to the commodification of various aspects of life, including language (Block et al., 2012). Among languages, English has been reframed as a skillset or product that can be acquired, traded, and capitalized upon (Heller, 2010).

Thus, English is increasingly perceived not just as a means of communication but as a valuable commodity, which allows to gain broader economic opportunities and social mobility. This is how English language "has become reconfigured for market purposes and treated as an economic resource" (Holborow, 2018, p. 58), thereby deemed to be a consumer good to acquire. As a result, as Duchêne & Heller (2012) highlight, language is commodified as a tool for social mobility and economic advancement.

In the same vein and drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, English is seen as a form of social capital that individuals can leverage to progress in terms of their socioeconomic status. In this vein, neoliberalism establishes, as imperative for individuals, to improve their personal worth, including their linguistic capital, and reinforces the association between the acquisition of a fluent command of English and obtaining better jobs and higher social standing. Hence, as Darvin & Norton (2017) underscore, investing in English language learning is seen as an instrument to increase individual capital and social power.

These narratives have permeated the educational language policies of institutions and governments. This is, undoubtedly, the case of Spain, whose educational laws are aligned with these market requirements. This way, English is the main second language to be learnt at school and a number of measures to promote English learning are set, such as its introduction in preschool education, increase of the number of school hours devoted to EFL (3-4 hours a week in primary and secondary school), improvement of teaching methodologies and assessment and implementation of bilingual programs, with school subjects such as science of art taught in English.

Besides, this commodification of language influences not only

institutional policies, but also is behind the booming global English Language Teaching (ELT) industry. Learning English is marketed as essential for personal and professional advancement (Piller & Cho, 2013), and not only individuals, but also families, incorporate these narratives and play the role of consumers in the English language learning market (Alarcón Utrera & Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, 2023). As Krashen (2006) observed, societies are experiencing an "English fever" which includes "the desire to (1) acquire English and (2) ensure that one's children acquire English, as a second or foreign language" (p.1). This longing is reflected on family language policy. This type of micro-level policy merits further scrutiny, as families are the final receptor of dominant ideologies and are one of the last links for their implementation to take place.

2.2. Language Policy, Family Language Policy and Family Language Policy for L2 learning

Bernard Spolsky (2004) provided foundational frameworks for understanding language policy as a multidimensional concept involving three key components: language practices (actual use of language), language beliefs (ideologies), and language management (explicit efforts to influence language practices). These components operate across domains ranging from national governments and institutions to local contexts like communities and families. Although research has traditionally focused on macro-level policies: education, nation-building, or multilingual governance, a growing body of literature is nowadays devoted to exploring micro-level policies, such as family language policy (FLP). This recent line of research examines how language choices are made and maintained within family units. In this regard, Spolsky (2009) highlights the role of FLP within the conceptualization of language policy. He argues that the family is a central domain where language ideologies and practices intersect, often reflecting societal

norms but also accommodating personal values and goals. Similarly, Curdt-Christiansen (2009) emphasizes that FLP is shaped by both macro-level ideologies -such as national language policies- and micro-level concerns- such as cultural identity, familial relationships, and educational aspirations.

Research on family language policy has gained significant traction in recent years (Lanza, 2021), driven by the foundational impulse of King et al. (2008). These authors define family language policy (FLP) as the explicit and implicit strategies families use to manage language practices, beliefs, and planning in domestic settings King et al. (2008). Most studies on FLP examine immigrant and minority families, where intergenerational transmission of a heritage language is at risk due to external pressures of assimilation into dominant linguistic cultures (King & Fogle, 2013). Thus, the overriding focus of the area is on heritage language maintenance and loss (or "language shift"), meaning-making and lived experiences (Hua & Wei, 2016), agency, ideology (King & Lanza, 2019) and identity construction within multilingual transnational families (Smith-Christmas, 2019).

Although multilingual households have been the centre of attention of FLP research, its frameworks are equally relevant in non-multilingual families where a single dominant language is spoken. These families also engage in practices, ideologies, and decisions that shape their children's linguistic development and educational outcomes, in their mother tongue and, particularly, in foreign languages. Among the foreign languages to learn, English, being the global lingua franca par excellence in the neoliberal era, undoubtedly emerges as the main aspiration of families. Proficiency in English is associated to educational and professional success and status by parents (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas & Alarcón Utrera, 2022) and youngsters (Patiño-Santos & Poveda, 2022), showing that these beliefs intersect with the imperatives of the neoliberal society (Moustaoui & Poveda, 2022).

This value ascribed to English is behind the proliferation of bilingual schools in Europe, (and particularly in Spain, where this study is set), which offer more exposure to English and promise

higher levels of proficiency in this language (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas & Custodio Espinar, 2022). Another language learning service which has recently drawn the attention of researchers is the linguistic stay abroad (Codó & Sunyol, 2024), epitome of the parental desire to provide their children with language and culture immersion in English speaking countries. In turn, non-native or elective bilingualism emerges as another strategy of parents with a knowledge of English as a L2, who try to provide a bilingual upbringing by talking to their children in English and creating immersion environments at home (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas & Alarcón Utrera, 2022; Nogueroles et al., 2022). These initiatives and efforts to provide their children with all these services and learning experiences are concurrent with the adoption of an intensified family involvement in their children's education, a parental style that has become nowadays a cultural norm (Ishizuka, 2019).

2.3. Intensive parenting and subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship

Parenting practices have increasingly reflected the neoliberal pressures and values associated with preparing children for competitive, knowledge-driven societies. Two interrelated phenomena—intensive parenting and linguistic entrepreneurship—illustrate how parents strategically invest in their children's linguistic abilities to ensure future success and mobility.

Intensive parenting, as described by Hays (1996), refers to a child-centered, time-intensive, and resource-demanding approach to raising children. As Ishizuka (2019) highlights, this commonplace parenting style is characterized by the increase of parental efforts to provide children with the best opportunities to guarantee their academic achievements and prospective success. This trend is in connection to the concept of "professionalization of parenting" (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), which entails that "parents spend a great deal of time, energy and money on their children's well-being" (Yerkes et al., 2021, p. 349). According to Rosen & Faircloth

(2020), this parenting style includes an intense desire to provide their children with a different and better childhood from their own. To this end, parents look into what is best for their children and invest in them as much as they can, thereby regulating their upbringing and behaviour accordingly (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Gillies, 2005). Families that follow this intensive parenting style are expected to actively shape their children's educational and social trajectories, often by providing them with skills deemed essential for success in a competitive global economy.

In line with these parenting strategies, Lareau (2003) coined the notion of "concerted cultivation," a parental style adopted mostly by middle- and upper-class families, which consists of deliberately planning and managing their children's developmental activities. This approach emphasizes the accumulation of cultural capital, including knowledge and behaviors needed to succeed in formal institutions like school. The adoption of this active nurturing aims to build specific skills through participation in numerous organised activities, such as sports, music, lessons and a wide range of culture experiences., thereby showing a "supplemental outsourcing behavior" (Chavez, 2024). Among these activities, English language learning is viewed as a fundamental investment, with multilingualism seen as enhancing cognitive, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Providing their children with these English learning experiences outside school, parents become linguistic agents and linguistic entrepreneurs.

De Costa et al. (2021) defined the concept of linguistic entrepreneurship as "a project of entrepreneurial self-development" (De Costa et al. 2021, p. 139), which is considerd to be "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). This concept builds on neoliberal ideologies that frame individuals as entrepreneurs of their own lives, responsible for cultivating marketable skills. This construct finds a relevant scenario when applied to analyse family language policy. In this case, as children have not the knowledge, means or maturity to take agency in this regard, parents decide and act for them. This

way, parents play the role of subrogated linguistic entrepreneurs, since they make decisions replacing their children, and invest in English language learning in order to secure their place in a competitive future. Thus, subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship may be defined as a language learning structured project designed and planned by the parents, which includes financial and personal investments of all family members. Its aim is to develop their children's English language command as a form of future-proofing their prospects.

Subrogate linguistic entrepreneurship is a product of intensive parenting, since it occurs due to the parents' intention to provide their children with what is best for them. Likewise, there is a connection between intensive parenting and subrogate linguistic entrepreneurship with the neoliberal ideology which dictates what individual skills are necessary to succeed in the labor market and in the sociocultural sphere. Within this framework, proficiency in English is undoubtedly, one of these "must have" skills to thrive in their future, and the learning of this language has become a focal point of the efforts of these families especially involved in their children's education.

3. Research questions

In line with the tripartite model created by Spolsky (2009) to analyse language policies, the research questions of this study are directed to exploring these three components that integrate family language policy: beliefs (RQ1), practice (RQ2), and management (RQ3) in the context of English learning as a second language:

RQ1) What are the motivations and beliefs about languages that drive families to intervene and introduce specific practices to improve their children's English learning?

RQ2) What are the main practices, resources and services hired by

families to foster their children's English language proficiency?

RQ3) What kinds of efforts, sacrifices and investments are described by the families and how these efforts are socially constructed and interpreted?

4. Methodology

4.1. The context of the study

This study was set in a region located in central Spain, with a population of around 2 million inhabitants. Contrary to Spanish bilingual regions, which count with two co-official languages - Spanish plus Catalan, Basque or Galician, depending on the territory- in this region, there are no co-official languages, and Spanish is the only official language. This is the case of regions such as Madrid, Murcia, Andalusia, Extremadura, Castilla-León and Castilla-La Mancha, among others.

As long as English language learning is concerned, it is necessary to indicate that Spain has not a long tradition of effective learning of this language, and even nowadays, researchers warn about the "precarious language teaching and learning situation" (Sánchez Pérez & Salaberri Ramiro, 2017, p. 142) in the country. Nevertheless, it is important to note, that, in recent decades, the education system has been introducing a range of improving measures to enhance English learning concerning (i) early start, (ii) increased time of exposure to the foreign language at school, (iii) teaching methodologies and (iv) implementation of bilingual programs.

Thus, nowadays, (i) English as a foreign language (EFL) is currently taught at school at least two hours a week since students enter pre-primary education when they are three years old. (ii) Students in primary and secondary school (6-16 years-old) received between 3 and 4 hours a week of EFL. (iii) Teachers usually follow

communicative approaches, and (iv) in the region, there are more than 500 bilingual schools and high schools delivering in English the contents of 2 or 3 academic subjects (such as science, music, and art) (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas & Ruiz Cordero, 2018). This is, indeed, a quite different English learning panorama compared to the situation experienced by the parents participating in the research. At the time these parents studied English at school, the subject of English started to be imparted much later than now, when they were 11 years-old, and teaching methodologies were based mainly on grammar-translation approaches. These parents did not have either the opportunity to study in bilingual programs, and the private offer to extend their skills in English was limited at that time.

However, all the improvements, including the early start at school, the number of sessions a week of English as a foreign language and the bilingual programs, seem not to be enough, and, therefore, a prosperous market is emerging around English learning including extracurricular classes, short stays abroad, local English camps, and academic years abroad, among others.

4.2. Method, sample, instruments, and data analysis

The study had a qualitative research design to better understand family language policy, beliefs, practice, and investments regarding planification of children's English language learning. Families were recruited by snowball sampling through acquaintances of the researchers, who asked other families to participate in the study. Data were collected by means of 17 individualized, semi-structured, online interviews conducted in Spanish, since it was the language selected by the families. Participants were informed about the aim of the study and the preservation of anonymity and confidentiality of their data. They signed informed consents, and all the principles of ethics in research were observed, as acknowledged by the university ethics committee.

The non-probabilistic convenience sample was made up of 17

families. The reason for inclusion were willingness to participate in the study and geographical proximity to the researchers. The respondents were 82 % mothers and 18 % fathers who were in charge of the family language policy regarding English learning and raised a total of 33 children. The socioeconomic and cultural level of the participants may be labelled as middle class. Most participants finished university studies (82 %) and 18 % had completed upper-secondary education. 41 % were teachers of different areas of knowledge in educational levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary education), 35 % were health care professionals, 17 % were clerks and 6 % in charge of a household. Families lived in 7 different areas in central Spain; 53 % resided in a city with around 75,000 inhabitants; 29,4 % in 3 towns with populations ranging between 15,000 and 30,000 inhabitants, and 17,6 % in 3 villages of 1,500 to 4,000 inhabitants, which were located in rural areas but in proximity to a town or city. In Table 1. participants with pseudonyms are shown, along with number of children, job, and place of residence.

Table 1: *Participants*

Pseudonym	Number of children and ages	Job	Location
Gracia	2 girls (23).	Nurse	Village 1
Gloria	3 boys (11, 8, 6).	Nurse	Village 2
Isabel	1 girl (11). 1 boy (9).	Clerk	Village 3
Nerea	2 girls (9, 6).	Nurse	Village 4
Verónica	2 boys (13, 8).	Clerk	Town 1
Damián	2 girls (18, 16). 1 boy (12).	Clerk	Town 2
Alejandro	2 boys (18, 14).	Teacher	Town 2
Amanda	1 girl (14). 1 boy (12).	Teacher	Town 2
Marta	1 girl (14).	Teacher	City
Sara	1 boy (10).	Teacher	City
Rosa	1 boy (7).	Teacher	City
Alma	2 boys (11,10).	Nurse	City
Silvia	1 girl (8). 1 boy (4).	Speech therapist	City
Rosana	1 girl (9).	Teacher	City
José	2 girls (9, 6).	Teacher	City
Margarita	1 girl (14). 2 boys (11, 9).	Housewife	City
Mar	2 girls (14, 9).	Nurse assistant	City

The questions used for the semi-structured interviews revolved around three topic blocks: 1) Beliefs and motivation. This block aimed to answer RQ1 and was connected to the first component of Spolsky's triad: Beliefs. The questions intended to uncover ideologies on language and language learning, the values ascribed to English, the view of parents as linguistics entrepreneurs and the role of parental past experiences in English learning in shaping their language policies. 2) Practices and strategies. The aim of the questions of this block was to explore the strategies implemented and the most popular language services hired among families, and it was related to RQ2 and the second component of Spolsky's model, "practice" 3) Efforts and investments. The questions of this block were connected to RQ3 and the third element of FLP, "management", according to Spolsky. The objective of this block was to look into the kinds of parental investments to better understand this phenomenon of intensified support to English language learning.

Each semi-structured interview lasted from forty minutes to an hour. They were videorecorded and the transcripts were generated automatically via Teams. Afterwards, the transcripts were revised, and the chosen excerpts were translated by researcher 2. Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns, common themes, and topics. After a previous familiarization with the contents, data was coded, and the main themes emerged. These themes were reviewed and contrasted to define them with more precision, and capture patterns related to the research questions.

5. Results and discussion

Results will be expounded and discussed under three major emerging themes. The first two are "English as a key for success", and "subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship and intensive

parenting", which will serve to answer RQ1 and unveil parental beliefs and drives to intensively intervene to supplement their children's English language learning. The last rubric, "families as consumers in an instrumentalised and stratified language market", aims to answer RQ2 and RQ3, and will help us explore the services hired, the investments made by families to ensure the acquisition of the desired level of English, and the implications of these efforts to establish social boundaries and stratification.

5.1. English as a key for success in the neoliberal market

Parents shared common beliefs regarding their motivations to take the initiative to support their children's English learning. In parental narratives English learning is a priority for their children's education, and the most frequently mentioned adjectives to describe its acquisition are "extremely/very important", "essential" and "fundamental". Furthermore, to explain their motivations, words such as "compete", "competition", "competitiveness", "labour market", "better jobs", "work", "future prospect" are common among families. These mentions confirm that families have assimilated the neoliberal ideas, including the instrumentality and commodification of the English language. Below, some of the quotes from the families, which are representative of these opinions, are reproduced:

> "The study of a second language is very important, especially in these times of increasing competition" (Margarita).

> "Studying English is extremely important. Nowadays, you can go nowhere if you cannot speak English, both at a personal and professional level" (Sara).

> "English is going to add value to everything they do, it is fundamental" (Silvia).

In this vein, families put the acquisition of the English language at the service of the economic and socio-cultural expectations they have for their children. Parents are very aware of the rules of the neoliberal game and want to prepare their children to compete in a global context, thereby increasing their own value in the society. In line with Bourdieu's theory of languages (1991), families viewed English language as a medium to conquer social and economic power, "as a set of resources having economic value, indeed as a set of commodities with exchange value" (Heller, 2017, p. 20).

Along with the socioeconomic drive, parents ascribed additional symbolic values to English and imagined this language would open a whole world of opportunities for their children, including leisure and academic development. English proficiency is associated with not to breaking down limitations and broadening horizons:

> "I consider essential to learn a second language, especially English, and even more so nowadays when we are citizens of the world. English opens a lot of doors when it comes to travelling, communicating, studying…. It is an essential and fundamental language" (Marta).

In their imaginaries, families construct the ideal of their children having a native-like level of English. This aspiration is concurrent with the beliefs of families in other countries such as China, Japan and Korea (De Costa et al., 2016; Gao & Park, 2015; Nakamura, 2023), who invest a great deal of resources for their children to attain their linguistic goals. Along with the aspiration to obtain a native level, the allusion to the term "bilingual" is common among families. The acquisition for their children of a new bilingual identity would justify their efforts and symbolizes their perfect culmination. Parents desire for their children to be a part of a "bilingual elite" which would facilitate them to have new experiences, and better financial and social opportunities in the future.

5.2. Subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship and intensive parenting

Parents claimed their role as linguistic actors and entrepreneurs, as well as their right to direct and supplement the education of their children to fill the gaps in the educational system and guide them towards the acquisition of tools that they consider valuable. Thus, families interviewed expressed that second language learning should not only be in the hands of schools or high schools, but parents should be involved in one way or another during the process. Therefore, parents explored ways to improve their children's language skills, starting assuming that "school is not enough":

> "The family must also be involved; I think school is not enough" (Gloria).
>
> "I think that school does not produce the progress that I am seeing in my children by taking them to an academy (…) I think that the school falls short … (Alma).

Hence, families felt they had the moral imperative to act as linguistic entrepreneurs and perceive their responsibility (Chavez, 2024) to provide relevant environments and activities for their children to expand their English learning opportunities. This endeavour was deemed to be a part of their parental commitment as "good parents" (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas & Alarcón Utrera, 2022). Thus, families were determined, no matter what, to offer their children the necessary tools and knowledge to equip their adulthood:

> "We have spent a lot of money on education (…) we will do everything they need (Silvia).

This way, these parents become "subrogated linguistic

entrepreneurs", given that they establish an English learning itinerary for their children and push them through it. The ideology that underpins subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship and the strategies implemented may be interpreted as a manifestation of the intensive parenting culture (Hays, 1996). Participants' discourses transpire the idea that "parental intervention determines the future fate of a youngster" (Furedi, 2002, p. 45), and high proficiency in English is seen as an instrument to guarantee more opportunities for their children to thrive in their adulthood. The three components of this parenting style enunciated by Berstein & Triger (2010) are present in our families' mindset: 1) they gathered information to identify what was in their children's best interest, 2) they deploy a series of extracurricular strategies to enhance and cultivate their children's skills (in line with Lareau's concept of "concerted cultivation"), and 3) they supervise and control. Our respondents claim their prerogative, as a family unit, and over educational institutions, to control and direct their children towards what is considered a valuable acquisition to compete in the global market:

> "On the one hand, there is the education at school, but within the interests of each family unit there is what you want to propose to them or where you want to direct them" (Nerea).

Intensive parental intervention seems to play a role in shaping their own parental and personal identity, and "this job" allows them to view themselves and be viewed as entrepreneurs, decisive, and proactive. Parents are proud of their elections and decisions regarding their children. In line with Furedi (2002), in intensive parenting culture "adults do not simply live their lives through children, but in part, develop their identity through them … parents are also inventing themselves" (Furedi, 2002, p. 107). Thus, they feel they have the opportunity and power to go back in time, correct past mistakes through their children's lives and spare them the difficulty they experienced in learning English:

> "…it has been so difficult for us to learn this language…" (Margarita).

For this reason, they do not want that English became a barrier that prevents their children from achieving their goals in this global and competitive world. They want better prospective for them:

> "… thus, they will not end up like their mother, at my age and still hard-pressed studying English" (Nerea).

Thus, data collected indicated that parental past experiences as English learners determined their actions. Parents started to learn English at school when they were 10-11 years-old, and they think that that was the reason why it was so difficult for them to acquire this language. As a result, they exposed their children to English since they were toddlers or even before and seek immersion environments. "Early start" and "immersion" was associated in parental mindsets with a more natural and effortless way of learning English, capable of providing a stress-free acquisition of the language. This was particularly important for parents, since for most of them, learning English was a hard process, which entailed attrition and emotional suffering. Therefore, their main shared aspiration was to prevent their children from experiencing these negative feelings, long with ensure English learning and preserve their self-esteem and self- assurance to face any challenge in their personal and professional life.

5.3. Families as consumers in an instrumentalised and stratified language market

To respond to parental demands, a prosper market has emerged around English language learning, as evidenced by the diverse offerings and the wide array of private initiatives highlighted by the participants of the study (Table 2).

Frequently, charter and public schools acted as brokers, and,

together with private language academies, offered full-immersion programs for a fee. These included (1) after-school classes with native or local teachers, (2) immersion camps in Spain and in English-speaking countries, and (3) academic years abroad. Families particularly valued activities that provided "immersion" experiences and promised the acquisition of "bilingual" levels of English. In fact, these two words "immersion" and "bilingual" are consistently used as a marketing strategy by companies. Families, in turn, echoed these concepts and considered them as key ingredients when choosing English language learning services. Thus, English becomes a desired consumer good, a commodity (Cameron, 2012). Families invest in this language learning market to maximise future benefits, and, consequently, they acquire the role of consumers.

Table 2: *Services used by families to supplement English learning*.

Pseudonym	Local Immersion Camps	Stays abroad	Extracurricular English classes	Bilingual education
Gracia	X	X	X	X*
Damián	X	X	X	X*
Verónica	X		X	X*
Sara				X**
Gloria			X	X*
Isabel			X	X**
Alejandro		X		X**
Marta	X		X	X**
Nerea			X	
Rosa		X	X	X*
Alma			X	X*
Silvia	X	X	X	X*
Rosana			X	X**
José			X	X**
Amanda				X**
Margarita	X		X	X**
Mar	X			X**

* Bilingual Public School

* French Bilingual Public School

** Bilingual Charter School

The most popular strategy implemented by the participants of the

study was enrolling their children in charter and public bilingual schools. The election of bilingual education was experienced by the participants as fundamental for the future of their children. They viewed bilingual education as a means to reap the great benefits of mastering English from childhood and be capable of using it in academic contexts.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that many families were dissatisfied with the results of bilingual education, mainly because they expected their children to become fully bilingual. However, in this context, bilingual "outcome" does not refer to the learning outcome of the program. Rather, the term "bilingual" refers to the methodology, which consists of teaching some content subjects in Spanish and others in English. The ambiguity of the term seems to underlie families' dissatisfaction, along with the need to improve program quality. In this vein, parents expressed concerns regarding both language proficiency and content acquisition and questioned teacher training and methodologies.

Therefore, families supplemented their children's language learning by hiring additional services. Among these, it was common to pay for after-school private lessons at the so-called "academias," which are highly popular private institutions in Spain. To estimate the size of this market, a search was conducted on Google in the city where half of the respondents lived. According to this search, in this city of 75,000 inhabitants, there are 20 registered "academias" - as many as supermarkets. This data gives us an idea of the dimension of this phenomenon in central Spain.

Language academies are diversified and offer a wide range of products, with the marketing strategy that they provide "immersion" environments during the classes, thanks to the sustained use of the target language. Among these products, early English learning is offered even for babies, along with preparation to get language certifications, and reinforcement classes focused on the school needs of primary, secondary, and tertiary education students, among others:

> "The academy provides her with feedback and immersion; it also helps her prepare for the B1 exam and practicing all the skills helps her at the school level" (Marta).

In regular programs, children attend the academia for two hours a week, divided across two alternate days, and fees are paid monthly. Most parents complained about the cost of the classes, as well as the time spent taking their children to these after-school activities, effectively becoming their children's "taxi drivers." However, they accept the situation as part of their parental duties and do not hesitate to continue with the activity despite the economic and personal costs.

Local English immersion camps are becoming another thriving business. Camps were originally offered to take care of children during school holidays (Christmas, Carnival, Easter, summer…) in case parents worked during those days. In recent years, the competing market has led companies to offer attractive options, such as painting, music, cooking, sports, and horse-riding, among others. Within this framework, English immersion camps have becoming increasingly popular. This was considered by our participants to be a good option and a less expensive activity than sending their children abroad. In some cases, parents enrolled their children in these local camps as a previous and preparatory step before a stay abroad.

In many cases, it was the school that contacted companies to offer the service to families. This practice was more common in charter schools and families considered it as a prestigious service, and even as a strength of the school, a sign of distinction. These camps are not cheap, but families viewed them as good opportunities for children's linguistic development as they allow them to live in an environment of immersion in English. As one of the parents explained:

> "The school offers week- long English camps, where everything is spoken in English, and they do outdoor activities.

> My eldest daughter participated in them in the fourth year of primary education, and it was a very enriching experience that brought her much closer to the language" (Margarita).

This kind of activities is highly valued by parents and considered to be "enriching" (Margarita) and very effective to lowering the affective filter (Amanda). Additional benefits parents highlighted were that they offered the possibility of learning in motivating and ludic scenarios (Mar) and provided improved communication skills (Gracia). According to Verónica "the experience brings them positive things such as getting rid of fear and embarrassment about speaking English", and in the same vein, Marta explained that "every year we repeat it, because she is happy and because she tells me that there is a great deal of communication in English". Thus, even if most of the parents declared that the activity entailed an important financial investment, they sent their children to these camps year after year, thereby considering the investment to be worthy, since "they are not very long experiences, but they can get a lot out of it" (Mar).

For all families, the language immersion practice par excellence was staying in English- speaking countries. Parents considered that these stays abroad are a great opportunity for their children to get to know not only the language, but also the culture of the country. Some of them were planning to bring about this experience as a family trip or to send their children alone abroad "We would like to go back to USA for him to take part in a camp there (…) or send him there at some point" (Rosa).

This option was regarded as the "best one" and suitable even for little children. Silvia's family lived in USA for work for more than a year. She explained that "I wanted my children to do language immersion before primary school in an English-speaking country and not merely in local camps in Spain" (Silvia). This statement distilled the need for this family to distinguish themselves from those who were not able to carry out so "elitist" practices and only could pay for local immersion camps. For Silvia, her family had made a difference with their long stay in USA, and she wanted to

highlight the fact that they were able to afford that genuine linguistic and cultural experience. This parental mindset is fully in line with neoliberal conceptions that "see everything as economic, ourselves included" (Heller, 2017, p. 251), and draws upon an instrumentalization of bi- multilingualism, along with its construction as a tool for establishing social boundaries (Barakos & Selleck, 2019).

In contrast to this "success" story, most participants struggled to provide stays abroad for their children. For example, Gracia regretted that the high cost of this activity prevented her children from extending their stay: "I would have liked them to have gone (to Ireland) for longer, but we could not" (Gracia). Other families lacked the means to afford stays abroad and longed to offer their children this enriching experience, which is not accessible to everyone. This finding aligns with previous research examining how parental socioeconomic status mediates family language policy (FLP), and how families adapt and optimize their resources to create the most favorable conditions for their children's English language learning (Wang & Liddicoat, 2025).

All in all, parents become consumers in a linguistic market in which languages are seen as consumer goods. Against this backdrop, strategies and activities for English language learning that families can afford are viewed as markers of elitism and social stratification. This is especially true when it comes to stays abroad, a consumption practice that not all families can manage to pay for.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the motivations, practices, and efforts undertaken by families to foster a high level of English language competence in their children. It explores how these approaches are shaped by the logic and practices of hegemonic intensive parenting culture, the perception of English as a component of individual capital, the influence of neoliberal discourses, and the rise of a

thriving English learning market.

This study shows how families implemented an intensive parenting style and spared no expenses, time, and energy to provide efficient environments to boost their children's English learning. This way, parents did their best to guarantee that their children did not suffer the difficulties themselves endured when learning this language in their childhood and youth. These family efforts are related to the symbolic value they assigned to English, which was considered, in parental narratives, as a lever to climb the socio-economic ladder, in keeping with the dominant neoliberal ideas. The need to increase one's own individual worth in a competitive environment is highlighted by families, who, in turn, act as subrogated linguistic entrepreneurs, thereby assuming their children's agency. This way subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship is constructed as a modality of linguistic entrepreneurship, with the parents, and not the children, as the protagonists of the process.

The aspirations and desires of parents can be encapsulated in three key concepts: early start, bilingualism, and immersion. Early start is perceived as the most effective strategy for achieving native-like proficiency. It is associated with natural acquisition, ease of learning, and the elimination of language attrition. Crucially, it represents the ideal learning scenario that most parents themselves did not experience. Their own delayed or fragmented exposure to English contrasts sharply with the immersive, early-start pathways they now design for their children—an effort to compensate for their past limitations and to secure a more privileged linguistic future for the next generation.

Parents aim for their children to become bilingual, a term that carries symbolic weight and reflects a complex parental imaginary in which their children are positioned within a bilingual elite, associated with cosmopolitanism, social success, and enhanced economic and professional prospects. This bilingual identity is not only the result of the children's efforts but, even more so, of the parents' strategic planning and implementation of a learning pathway, regardless of the personal and financial sacrifices involved. This endeavor becomes part of the parents' own identity

construction as "good parents" and grants them access to a social elite composed of those who know, want, and are able to offer the best to their children. In this context, the English language is commodified and redefined as a consumer good, becoming a new arena for neoliberal competition.

While the objective of subrogated linguistic entrepreneurship is raising bilingual children, the prevailing methodology that guarantees this outcome is immersion in the target language. Precisely around the concept of immersion, the instrumentalization of the English language as a means of social stratification is constructed in a more evident and transparent way. This stratification is reflected in the hierarchy of the diversified offer of the language market, which ranges from immersion classes in the "academias" of English (within the reach of most middle-class families), to local immersion camps, and short stays abroad (one week, one month). At the top of the pyramid emerges the academic year abroad in the USA, Ireland, or the United Kingdom, an aspiration for many families and a practice gaining extraordinary momentum in Spain, despite the emotional, logistical, and financial challenges it entails.

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