



Aneta Kamińska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4612-6464>
Ignatianum University in Cracow, Poland
aneta.kaminska@ignatianum.edu.pl

Parents' perspectives on bilingual childrearing: Challenges and strategies in bilingual families

Submitted: 06.06.2024

Accepted: 20.05.2026

Published: 30.06.2026



Keywords:

bilingualism,
bilingual children,
parents' isolation,
OPOL model,
cyclical management
of bilingualism

Abstract

Research objectives and problems: The aim of this article is to present the parental perspective on raising bilingual children in Polish-European families. It focuses on problems of parents' experiences of the bilingual development process and identifies two new contributions: the bilingualism management circle and parental isolation in the Polish context.

Research methods: A qualitative, interpretative paradigm was applied. Narrative interviews with parents of bilingual families (10 families: Polish mothers and European fathers living in Poland) were analyzed using Schütze's methodology to capture their unique perspectives on the challenges they face.

Process of argumentation: The analysis reveals how parents navigate raising bilingual children, including their emotions, attitudes, and strategies. New categories emerged, such as children's fatigue from language switching, persistent parental anxieties despite using the "one parent, one language" (OPOL) model, and fathers' difficulties in providing school support.

Research findings and impact on educational sciences: Parents perceive bilingualism as a family value and a form of socio-cultural capital. However, a gap exists between this ideal and reality, causing concerns about child development. As for the impact on educational science, parents apply a cyclical management process: setting priorities, implementing strategies, engaging in reactive problem-solving, and evaluating outcomes. There is thus a clear need for institutionalized support for the development of advanced skills and professional training.

Conclusions and recommendations: Systematic support for parents should be organized, including peer support groups and teacher training to recognize typical phenomena in bilingual development. Raising bilingual children should become a priority in Poland. The findings also show that even consistent OPOL application does not eliminate parental anxieties – a novel contribution to Polish literature.

Introduction

Bilingualism is an increasingly common phenomenon, intensifying due to numerous human migrations and intermarriage. Many specialists are interested in it, which makes it interdisciplinary. The framework of this article can be classified as social and pedagogical. It shows the parental perspective. There have been studies on this phenomenon across various fields, such as pedagogy, neurology, cognitive psychology, and sociolinguistics. Raising a child to be bilingual is often presented in public discourse and literature as an unquestionable asset. For most researchers, it is an investment in cognitive development (Bialystok, 2011). However, beneath this optimistic paradigm lies the daily, complex reality of parents who directly experience the consequences of their children's bilingualism (De Houwer, 2015). Currently, there is a discussion surrounding family language policy (FLP). For instance, Curd-Christiansen (2013) analyzes the family's conscious and unconscious language policy, including its ideology, practices, and management. Studies have also shown the enormous effort mothers of bilingual families make to develop their children's languages (Melo-Pfeifer, 2015). Another line of research identifies gaps in parents' knowledge of bilingual development (Little, 2020). This article focuses on multidimensional challenges and identifies several innovative or particular in-depth aspects. It depicts specific categories and subcategories, such as bilingualism as a value, wealth in the emotional experience, and the in-depth analysis of responsibilities and actions for the development of bilingualism. Bilingualism is a lifelong project for the family, not merely a feature or disposition of the children.

The definitional placement related to the topic of bilingualism

The basic definition of bilingualism assumes the presence of two separate languages in one person, with a distinction between the national language, the dominant language, called the first language, and the second language (Schelletter, 2019). The second language is not classified as a foreign language (Baker, 2011). It is acquired spontaneously, subconsciously, and naturally, usually early in life and within the family (Mahootian, 2019). Consistency in parental language input reduces the risk of speech delays in bilingual children (De Houwer, 2007). Bilingualism is determined by attitude, origin, and competence related to its use. In the case of bilingualism, we speak of a relatively equal use of two languages in both speech and most language abilities (e.g., speaking and reading). A person alternates between two languages (Gafaranga, 2016). For some researchers, the level of language use need not be the same, but it is important to ensure a smooth transition between them (Field, 2011). It is possible to call younger schoolchildren bilingual, even though they have not mastered all language skills.

As for the criteria, there are, for example, balanced bilingualism, unbalanced bilingualism (with the dominance of one language), and passive bilingualism (Wilson, 2016). Sustainable bilingualism is when the level of competence in both languages is the same, and full bilingualism is when linguistic and communicative competence are developed in both languages, both orally and in writing. Moreover, an innovative approach posits that bilingual children have a single, consolidated language system rather than two separate languages (Garcia, 2009). The literature on the subject also divides language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition takes place without formal instruction; it is not a process that occurs automatically and spontaneously, based on natural needs and the human ability to use the symbolic system, through free access to language expression in the child's natural environment (Rocławska-Daniluk, 2020).

Other terms associated with children's bilingualism include submersion and immersion. The former refers to the absorption of the mother

tongue into the second language, also known as impoverishing or subtractive bilingualism. Immersion occurs when language competencies in the first and second languages are fully developed and appropriately applied (Kurcz, 2005). Another important term is bilingual education and upbringing, which encompasses institutionalized and non-institutionalized activities aimed at achieving bilingualism in a child. The acquisition of a second language occurs naturally when the mother's and father's mother tongues differ, exposing a child to both languages from birth (Wilson, 2016).

To summarize the relevant definitional considerations, children from the surveyed families can be approximately classified as bilingual. They speak two languages in a relatively balanced way. Their bilingualism cannot be described as complete, as they are not yet able to write at this stage of development. According to the definition, children have acquired a second language. This was done mainly spontaneously through immersion in the language rather than through instruction or formal learning. In this case, we are dealing with immersion. The surveyed parents come from different countries and speak different languages.

The challenges of raising bilingual children

Bilingual parents create a bilingual learning environment for their children long before they enter kindergarten and school. This affects his/her cognitive, emotional, and social development, creating both great opportunities and some challenges. Children learn by imitation, thanks to mirror neurons. The proper acquisition and use of speech in various situations and social interactions depends on the efficiency of this process (Bialystok, 2001).

Parents should be aware of certain phenomena that occur when their children acquire two languages simultaneously, as this awareness will help them better understand the process. In bilingual children, code-switching occurs, involving the use of elements from both languages during conversation (Kecskes, 2007). Parents should not hastily abandon using a second

language at home, even if children mix languages, especially if the second language has already been established in the household. Failure to use the second language can lead to confusion in children (Winsler, 2009). Regarding the social and emotional aspects of learning two languages, parents should support their children's language development and foster a supportive environment. It is important to show respect to all family members and to appreciate their national language. There should be no situation in which one language is more glorified or admired (Kinging, 2013).

In addition, language proficiency and perfect mastery of a language do not always correlate with achieving appropriate communicative efficiency and appropriate language use in a given social context (Pavlenko, 2006). As a result, the communication process is not always successful. The role of parents of bilingual children is to explain cultural contexts, model appropriate communication rules, and create social situations where children can successfully learn and apply these rules (Wilson, 2016). To conclude, parents are role models in speaking first and second languages. They should be aware of their role and organize a learning environment that is friendly and supportive (Cummins, 2000). The more aware they are of the principles of second-language learning, the better they will support their children's learning.

Research method

The research was conducted within the interpretative paradigm and employed qualitative methods. Non-standardized interviews were conducted, then transcribed and analyzed by the author. The analysis was based on Schütze's (1977) methodological framework to develop research categories. This procedure consisted of six steps: (1) audio recording and verbatim transcription, (2) extraction of narrative sequences, (3) structural analysis, (4) processual analysis, (5) condensation of categories, and (6) verification by the researcher two weeks later.

The approach focuses on the inherent processual structures of narrated life experiences and involves a sequential reconstruction of the

interviews, allowing in-depth conclusions. The research focuses on parental perspectives on the challenges of raising bilingual children. The main research question is: How do parents experience and see the challenges of rearing bilingual children? Interviews were conducted with 10 bilingual families. A purposive sampling method was applied based on the following inclusion criteria: the mother is of Polish nationality; the father is a foreigner (from Europe); the family has been living in Poland for at least two years; and at least one parent declares conscious bilingual upbringing. Both parents were also required to consent to the interview being recorded and transcribed. The sample size was considered sufficient due to theoretical saturation – after the eighth interview, the categories began to repeat. The interviewer was a Polish-speaking researcher with no personal experience of raising bilingual children. This outsider perspective may have limited the depth of empathy during interviews, but it also reduced the risk of over-identification with the mothers' narratives. All interview questions were formulated neutrally.

Results of the research

Categories could be developed based on the research results. The first, which is very common among parents, can be described as a view of bilingualism as a valuable phenomenon. This is connected to the knowledge they derive from their observations. Two further aspects can be distinguished in this category, somewhat like subcategories: intrinsic value and family. All parents recognized their children as bilingual, appreciated their children's bilingualism, and were proud that they spoke two languages.

I am happy that our family functions like that. Children can communicate with our multilingual family. (Mother, family 1)

Speaking two or more languages gives more possibilities. (Mother, family 2)

I appreciate bilingualism. (Mother, family 3)

I like the fact that my son speaks two languages. (Father, family 4)

My children speak both Spanish and Polish, and they will get better job opportunities. (Father, family 5)

Bilingualism in our family is a wonderful tradition. (Mother, family 6)

Bilingualism is a great thing. (Mother, family 7)

Bilingual children have greater access to cultural richness. (Mother, family 8)

The ability to speak two languages is very valuable. (Mother, family 9)

Thanks to foreign languages, children learn about traditions and customs. (Mother, family 10)

In the first category, bilingualism is recognized as a resource for effective communication. This can be observed as a second subcategory. Indeed, some parents have noticed that learning a foreign language makes children more open to social interactions.

I believe that my daughters, thanks to their skills in a second language, have become more tolerant. They are accustomed to interacting with children of different nationalities and even skin colors. When we travel, they communicate easily. (Mother, family 3)

It's amazing how [well] my girls interact with children of other nationalities. Their ability to communicate in multiple languages helps them make friends. (Mother, family 8)

The second category is connected to the emotional aspects of parents' perceptions of bilingualism. At the emotional level, they face some challenges. One of the most important is the fear and anxiety connected to bilingualism that occurs in some families. Parents are afraid that their children will not be understood by their peers and teachers. Some children also mix up words, accents, and conjugation rules.

We speak to our children in our national languages. I've noticed that our children use words freely while they are playing. They use words that they remember better. They inflect them according to the rules of

another language. I'm worried that they will do this in the older grades and have problems at school as a result. (Mother, family 3)

My daughters use the words they know better, no matter if they're from another language. (Mother, family 2)

Sometimes, I don't know whether they don't remember Polish words or if they prefer English words. (Mother, family 8)

Both sons mix languages; they do it very often. Will they ever use one language at once, and then another and another in a different context? (Mother, family 6)

I don't know whether this ease of switching between languages is appropriate. What consequences does it have at school? (Mother, family 10)

Some parents are also concerned about their children's ability to write correctly in both their first and second languages.

Now, my daughters haven't got any problems, but in the future, they will have to write a lot. Sometimes, even in the evening, I wonder if they can cope with spelling. (Mother, family 2).

I hope that their writing skills will develop as well as their speaking abilities. Writing is, after all, more challenging. (Mother, family 9)

Unfortunately, my children are reluctant to write. I encourage them, but it is challenging. (Mother, family 10)

Parents also noted that children can feel emotionally and mentally drained from constantly switching between languages.

I notice that he sometimes gets tired from switching between languages. It requires a lot of concentration, and he becomes irritable. (Mother, family 7)

The girls fall asleep quickly, sometimes on the couch or a mattress. They are very active, always jumping and dancing, I but believe that constantly deciding which language to use is exhausting for them. (Mother, family 1)

The third category, which is the most extensive, is connected to perceiving their responsibilities for developing their children's bilingualism and taking actions toward achieving certain goals.

This category has also been divided into some subcategories, the first of which is parental goals and priorities, which shows that balancing the use of two languages can also be challenging. Some parents choose to maintain a balance between using Polish as their first language and introducing other languages.

My husband and I aim to maintain a balance between the three languages to ensure his native language is not neglected. While we live in Poland and primarily speak Polish, we make an effort to include his language as well. (Mother, family 3)

It is important to nurture the language that is used less frequently. (Mother, family 10)

If we use the second language less frequently, it will not remain as active as the first. (Mother, family 7)

Now that we are in Poland, I notice that Polish has become the dominant language. (Mother, family 6)

The second subcategory connects proactive strategies and methods. These show that the families represent different approaches to bilingualism. Some of them have chosen a specific system of action, often supported by knowledge obtained from specialists and the relevant literature. Others pursue the goal of educating about bilingualism spontaneously (Mother, family 2), intuitively, and without preparation. Some parents do not agree on what this upbringing should look like.

In our family, we follow one rule, and it works. I speak to the children only in Polish, and my husband only in Spanish. When we talk as a group, my husband, two children, and I speak Spanish, and everybody understands. The children communicate with each other in Polish. Polish is their first language. (Mother, family 1)

In the above quote, the mother presents the “one parent, one language” (OPOL) model. They do it scrupulously and observe that it benefits their children. There is a kind of order. Parents speak to their children in their native languages, which they speak very well and without significant mistakes.

Parents also underlined the importance of using only correct language patterns in a given language, preferably in their native language or a foreign language in which they are fluent. Most often, this was English. They highlighted how they did not want to pass on bad habits to their children.

I find the Hungarian language very challenging, even though we have lived in Budapest for many years. I avoid speaking to my sons in Hungarian to prevent them from learning incorrect language. (Mother, family 6)

The third subcategory relates to reactive challenges and problem-solving. There are some differences in their approaches to their responsibilities and actions in this respect. Some parents were not initially aware of the importance of applying effective rules to organize communication. In addition, the circumstances of life were not conducive to such activities.

Our son started speaking very late. We were worried about this fact. Of course, we went to the speech therapist many times, and we followed the recommendations. We did a lot of exercises with him at home. (Mother, family 7)

Another challenge of raising bilingual children is the difficulty of helping the child at school due to insufficient proficiency in Polish.

At work, I mainly speak English and occasionally German, though not as often. My native language is Czech. Since my wife is fluent in English, I don't have to speak Polish. I understand it, but I lack the grammatical knowledge to help my son with his homework. (Father, family 4)

My husband is Italian, we live in Poland, and he runs his own business. He works long hours and hasn't had time to learn Polish. I support our children at school, while he teaches them Italian. (Mother, family 9)

Mothers often feel responsible for providing overall educational assistance and support to their children.

Recently, I had to leave my family for a few days due to a business trip. My daughter needed help with her homework, and my husband assisted her. However, they used words with incorrect inflections, which have since become a humorous part of our family vocabulary. (Mother, family 5)

The fourth subcategory relates to evaluation and future directions. Some parents noted that a superficial knowledge of two languages, rather than a deeper mastery of one, can be a disadvantage of bilingualism.

I've noticed that my sons, especially the younger ones, have a limited vocabulary. They struggle to discuss certain topics freely. (Mother, family 6)
It seems my older daughter has a superficial grasp of both languages. She also associates each language with specific family members and topics. For example, she only speaks English with my brother. (Father, family 3)

Some parents wish to improve their children's language skills more consciously and systematically.

I realize that we don't spend enough time formally teaching our children a second language, or even Polish. They pick up language from daily interactions. (Mother, family 6)

I've been considering teaching my son spelling for a while, but I haven't started yet. (Father, family 4)

I wonder how much of what we say sticks in their memory. They speak fluently and are communicative. We discuss many topics, and I know

a lot about children in the second and third grades. (Mother, family 10)
I don't teach my children myself, but they attend additional Polish lessons with a teacher. They enjoy those lessons very much. (Mother, family 8)

The final category concerns how parents perceive themselves and their bilingual children in the community. According to parents, their bilingual children's environments are generally favorable.

During the four years of our son's life, we changed our place of residence four times, but we haven't had any social problems. (Mother, family 7)

My children have been in many different environments, with international company, and they liked it. (Mother, family 3)

Our family is truly multinational. Our girls have had the opportunity to speak at least three languages and hear five languages. (Mother, family 9)

Their grandparents – I mean my husband's parents – are very understanding of children; they listen to them patiently, even when they talk too much. (Mother, family 6)

Only two girls from the same family experienced some unpleasantness because of the use of their national language in kindergarten.

The kindergarten teacher didn't like my daughters communicating in Polish and often reprimanded them. I think she was angry with their behavior. She couldn't understand what they were saying to each other. (Mother, family 8)

Despite the generally favorable environments, some parents want support from others with similar problems.

I initially struggled to find other mothers facing similar challenges in raising bilingual children. Eventually, I connected with an online group,

and now we meet once or twice a month to share observations about our children's progress and ongoing challenges. (Mother, family 1)

Conclusions

The analysis of parental perspectives reveals that raising bilingual children is a complex, multidimensional process characterized by a dynamic interplay of pride, strategic planning, emotional challenges, and continuous adaptation. Firstly, parents unanimously regard bilingualism as a significant value. This perception operates on two levels as an intrinsic family value fostering identity, pride, and cohesion, and as instrumental socio-cultural capital promising future educational, professional, and social advantages. This positive framing is the foundational motivation for their efforts.

However, this valued goal is pursued amidst considerable emotional and practical complexities. Parents navigate a landscape of anxiety, fearing linguistic confusion, academic deficits, and the cognitive-emotional burden on their children. These fears highlight a gap between the ideal of balanced bilingualism and the messy reality of its development. To bridge this gap, parents employ a spectrum of parental management strategies that form the core of their daily practice. This process is cyclical. It begins with establishing goals and priorities, which inform the adoption of proactive strategies. The implementation of these strategies inevitably encounters reactive challenges, such as difficulties providing academic support or adapting to life circumstances. This cycle culminates in ongoing evaluation and reflection, in which parents assess outcomes and express a desire for more systematic, formalized instructional support.

Finally, the communal context emerges as a crucial moderating factor. While the broader social and extended family environment is generally perceived as supportive, negative institutional experiences underscore the need for wider societal awareness. Furthermore, parents' expressed need for peer support groups indicates that the journey, though rewarding, is often experienced as isolating, pointing to the importance of

community-building among families on similar paths. In summary, parental experience is not linear but iterative, moving between valuing bilingualism, managing the emotional and practical challenges it entails, strategizing and adapting actions, and constantly evaluating results within a specific social context.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations, particularly the predominance of mothers' perspectives (8 women, 2 men) and the lack of older children (aged 12 or above). The research is based solely on parental declarations, with no further verification. There is also cultural homogeneity among the fathers, who were all from Europe. In terms of directions for future research, longitudinal studies spanning at least five years or comparative studies involving other parent groups, including monolingual children, could be conducted. Future research could also incorporate fathers' perspectives. It might also be important to consider which method is better: one parent, one language, or a mix. However, this needs broader longitudinal research.

Interpretation and contributions

Parents see bilingualism as both a family value and a form of socio-cultural capital, aligning with Curdt-Christiansen's (2013) FLP framework. However, this study extends her model by revealing a cyclical management process (value–goals–strategies–reactive-challenges–evaluation) that has not been documented in research on Polish bilingual families.

Emotional challenges, especially anxiety about language mixing, reflect De Houwer's (2015) concept of "harmonious bilingual development." However, even OPOL families report significant worries, contradicting earlier claims that OPOL reduces anxiety (De Houwer, 2007). Anxiety appears driven not only by input inconsistency but also by external pressures (school expectations, peer understanding). Parental loneliness and the demand for institutional support echo Little's (2020) findings, but, unlike her focus on immigrant heritage maintenance, this isolation occurs among European families living in one parent's country of origin.

Proactive strategies (OPOL, avoiding second-language use due to fear of errors) align with Kurcz's (2005) immersion/submersion distinction. Parents intuitively avoided submersion, supporting Cummins' (2000) claim that L1 proficiency underpins L2 development. Mothers remain primarily responsible for academic support when fathers lack Polish proficiency, confirming Melo-Pfeifer's (2015) findings on gendered burdens, now documented in Poland for the first time.

To sum up, this study makes four kinds of contributions. Empirically, it is the first systematic qualitative study of parental perspectives in Poland. Theoretically, the bilingual management cycle extends FLP theory beyond ideological continuity. Methodologically, Schütze's narrative analysis reconstructs processual structures. Practically, identifying parental loneliness as a distinct category leads to recommending peer-support networks – a novel priority for Polish policy.

Recommendations for future practice

For educators, we should implement training programs on typical bilingual developmental paths to reduce misinterpretations of learners' behavior. For schools, we should establish clear communication protocols with parents and facilitate access to supplemental literacy classes in the heritage or second language. For healthcare professionals, we should provide evidence-based guidance to expecting and new parents on bilingual acquisition strategies and normalize code-mixing and variations in speech pace. Regarding community and policy initiatives, we should actively help create peer support groups for parents through local centers, libraries, or online platforms. We should also develop practical resources, including workshop templates for teachers, observation forms for monitoring fluency and mixing, monthly language-activity plans, and family language agreements for parents (especially fathers), as well as checklists for educators to differentiate typical language mixing from pathological patterns.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (5th ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Bialystok, E. (2001). *Bilingualism in development: Language, literacy and cognition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bialystok, E. (2011). Reshaping the mind: The benefits of bilingualism. *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology / Revue canadienne de psychologie expérimentale*, 65(4), 229–235.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025406>
- Curdt-Christansen, X. L. (2013). Family language policy: Sociopolitical reality versus linguistic continuity. *Language Policy*, 12, 1–6.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-012-9269-0>
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the cross-fire*. Multilingual Matters.
- De Houwer, A. (2007). Parental language input patterns and children's bilingual use. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 28(3), 411–424.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716407070221>
- De Houwer, A. (2015). Harmonious bilingual development: young families' well-being in language contact situations. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 19(2), 169–184.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006913489202>
- Field, F. (2011). *Key concepts in bilingualism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gafaranga, J. (2016). *Bilingualism as national practice*. Edinburgh University Press.
- García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kecskes, I. (2007). Synergic concepts in bilingual mind. In I. Kecskes & L. Albertazzi (Eds.), *Cognitive aspects of bilingualism* (pp. 29–61). Springer.
- Kinginger, C. (Ed.). (2013). *Social and cultural aspects of language learning in study abroad*. John Benjamins.
- Kurcz, I. (2005). *Psychologia języka i komunikacji*. [Psychology of language and communication]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Little, S. (2020). Whose heritage? What inheritance?: Conceptualising family language identities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(2), 198–212.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1348463>
- Mahootian, S. (2019). *Bilingualism*. Routledge.
- Melo-Pfeifer, S. (2015). The role of the family in heritage language use and learning: Impact on heritage language politics. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 18(1), 26–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2013.868400>

-
- Pavlenko, A. (2006). *Bilingual minds: Emotional experience, expression, and representation*. Multilingual Matters.
- Rocławska-Daniluk, R. (2020). *Dwujęzyczność i wychowanie dwujęzyczne z perspektywy lingwistyki i logopedii* [Bilingualism and bilingual education from the perspective of linguistics and speech therapy]. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego.
- Schelleter, C. (2019). *Introduction to bilingualism*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Schütze, F. (1977). Die Technik des narrativen Interviews. In Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen (Eds.), *Kommunikative Sozialforschung* (pp. 164–190). Fink.
- Wilson, C. (2016). *Bilingualism: Cultural influences, global perspectives and advantages/disadvantages*. Nova Science.
- Winsler, A., Fernyhough, C., & Montero, I. (Eds.). (2009). *Private speech, executive functioning, and the development of verbal self-regulation*. Cambridge University Press.