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**Parental Experiences and Decision-
making in Mixed Russian-Italian Families:
Fostering Simultaneous Bilingualism
while Safeguarding Cultural Heritage**

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Abstract

Bilingual education has gained great significance in the modern world of cultural integration, highlighting the increase in its relevance and importance. In today's globalized society, the matter of bilingualism has become particularly acute, as people are often exposed to a multitude of languages due to the prevalence of multiculturalism and multilingualism. This is especially relevant for children from migrant background, mixed families, and those whose parents prioritize their multilingual development.

In the context of mixed Russian-Italian families, the endeavour to foster simultaneous bilingualism implies a complex interplay of parental choices, cultural influences and institutional attitudes. This thesis seeks to comprehensively explore parents' experiences within these families, paying particular attention to a detailed analysis of their decision-making processes. By delving into the specific conditions, challenges, and successes encountered by parents, this study aims to vividly describe the paths chosen to foster bilingual proficiency in children acquiring Russian and Italian from birth. Furthermore, it endeavours to critically analyze the effectiveness of these decisions, elucidating the outcomes and implications for both children and parents.

This study, featuring 61 native Russian mothers of bilingual children who reside in Italy, employed a mixed approach, using an online Google Forms questionnaire to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data. Conducted in Russian, the participants' native language, the survey facilitated natural and genuine responses. Moreover, the questionnaire included various question types, such as short answers, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions, that were affiliated with an interpretivist/constructivist framework to capture participants' views comprehensively. In addition, the research featured a combination of voluntary response sampling and snowball sampling in order to recruit participants, thus, allowing for diverse perspectives and fostering trust among respondents.

The study revealed that most mixed Russian-Italian families adopt the "One Parent, One Language" (OPOL) approach, in order to foster bilingualism and preserve cultural identity. However, some families incorporated the mixed approach in conversations with their bilingual child.

The study documented challenges faced by immigrant mothers in maintaining their heritage language. Specifically, these challenges include the overwhelming influence of the local Italian environment, a lack of a Russian-speaking community, and societal pressure to utilise only Italian. Consequently, some participants found it difficult to sustain consistent use of Russian around non-Russian speakers both at home and in public settings. Additionally, the research highlighted that many children showed the features of code-mixing and delayed speech onset, although parents generally viewed these as natural stages in bilingual development rather than critical issues.

To address the aforementioned challenges, parents referred to a variety of strategies. For instance, the following techniques were abundantly used to safeguard the heritage language of the children: the use of the target language at home; conscious correction of language mixing; and fostering language exposure through media, literature, songs, and travel to Russian-speaking countries. Many parents also engaged grandparents, siblings or nannies in the language-learning process to create a richer linguistic environment.

Despite the difficulties, the majority of parents remained satisfied with the chosen approach and their children's results. Thus, over 75% of the participants reported adhering strictly to their language strategy without change, while other respondents had changed their methods over time to adopt those that suited their family dynamics better. Importantly, more than half of the participants observed that with time, their children successfully overcame initial language development challenges.

Overall, the research findings highlighted the importance of implementing flexible language strategies that would meet individual family needs, ensuring strong family involvement and maintaining a supportive and culturally enriching environment. By adopting such approaches, parents would be able to effectively navigate the complexities of raising bilingual children and help young bilinguals develop proficiency in both languages while preserving their cultural heritage.

Introduction

ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) reported that in 2021, there were almost 18,000 mixed marriages, where one spouse was Italian and the other was foreign. Of these, 13,703 family

units involved an Italian husband and a foreign wife, accounting for three-quarters of the total number of mixed marriages. Furthermore, the survey indicated that 20,3% of the marriages in question featured a native Russian-speaking wife. It is crucial to emphasize that these figures considered only citizens of Russia and Ukraine. The article omitted the statistics regarding the number of marriages involving wives from other post-Soviet nations where the Russian language is still prevalent, i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Consequently, the real number of marriages between Italian and Russian native speakers may be considerably higher than the figure indicated in the provided statistics.

This study proves that there is indeed a great number of Russian-Italian families. Therefore, their kids are most likely to be Russian-Italian bilinguals. This is why it is significant to investigate the tendencies in bilingual upbringing and analyze their effectiveness in order to bring plurilingualism in Italy to a higher level.

In order to provide a meaningful contribution to the research in this particular area, this thesis will commence by conducting a comprehensive examination of the current body of literature pertaining to bilingualism. The Literature Review section will specifically examine prominent ideas, definitions, and models of bilingualism, encompassing the cognitive, social, and linguistic aspects.

In the Study section, the study objectives will be established after conducting a literature analysis. These objectives will aim to comprehensively investigate the particular factors that impact bilingualism in mixed Russian-Italian families. This encompasses comprehending how parental behaviors and linguistic tactics are influenced by their cultural backgrounds, the reasoning behind these choices, the difficulties parents and children face, and the practical guidance obtained from their own encounters. By explicitly defining its objectives, the study seeks to give a focused and in-depth analysis that will address the current gaps in the literature and contribute to a deeper knowledge of bilingualism in culturally diverse family situations.

The subsequent part will describe the methodologies utilised in the study, delineating the application of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The methods section will additionally cover the criteria utilized for participant selection, the analytical tools employed for data analysis, and the ethical considerations entailed in conducting research with multilingual families.

A thorough examination of the linguistic methods, experiences and parental reflection on the issue of raising a bilingual child will be provided in the Results section. Additionally, the section

will investigate the patterns of language usage, code-switching, language preferences, and the factors that influence these behaviors.

The Discussion section will offer an analysis of the experiment's findings. Moreover, it will also examine the consequences of these findings for comprehending bilingualism in mixed cultures.

In conclusion, the thesis will provide an overview of the key findings and their impact on the field of bilingualism studies. Next, the conclusion will also address the study's limitations and provide relevant areas for future investigation.

Chapter 1

Bilingualism

In order to establish a comprehensive theoretical framework, this chapter will first report some major definitions of bilingualism (Paragraph 1.1) and then consider this phenomenon from three distinct perspectives: that of bilingual children (Paragraph 1.2), that of bilingual parents (Paragraph 1.3) and that of society as a whole (Paragraph 1.4).

1.1. Defining bilingualism

For Weinreich (1979, cited in Souto Silva, 2000, p. 1), bilingualism is “the practice of alternately using two languages”. Since bilingualism is a complicated phenomenon, it is important to take into account a number of factors in which bilingualism has developed, as well as the degree of proficiency in a foreign language. Some of the most common classifications of bilingualism are listed below.

Firstly, depending on the degree of relatedness of the languages an individual speaks, scholars distinguished between closely related (for example, Russian-Belarusian) and non-closely related (English-Chinese) languages (Gooskens & Van Heuven, 2022). Konovalova (2011) wrote that when two individuals who speak related languages communicate, communication will be possible, even if neither of them is bilingual. In this regard, the philologist proposed to consider the knowledge of two genetically close languages beyond the phenomenon of bilingualism. Therefore, according to Konovalova, bilingualism is possible only if the languages are non-closely related.

Secondly, depending on the level of language proficiency and the characteristics of a person’s thinking, bilingualism is classified into direct and indirect. The classification, which is based on the connection between speech and thinking, was proposed by Belyaev (1965, cited in Zalevskaya, 2016, p. 40), and the direct and indirect types of bilingualism were proposed by Vereshchagin (1969, cited in Zalevskaya, 2016, p. 72). Direct bilingualism refers to the ability of an individual to think and make judgments equally fast in two languages. Instead, with indirect bilingualism, a native speaker first constructs a phrase in the language that he/she knows better (usually his/her native language), and then translates it into his/her

second language. Direct bilingualism is also called coordinate (or complete), that is, bilingualism in which all mental transactions can be carried out in two languages. On the other hand, it is opposed by subordinate (incomplete) bilingualism. There is no sharp boundary between coordinative and subordinative bilingualism as engaging in language practice and immersing oneself in a language-rich environment helps accelerate the progression from incomplete to complete bilingualism.

Continuing the matter of language proficiency, another distinction was made between equilingualism and semi-bilingualism (Chirsheva, 2012). Equilingualism is when a person is ideally fluent in both languages to the same extent and can use them in all life situations. On the contrary, the speakers whose competencies are not sufficiently developed are proposed to be considered semi-bilinguals.

It should be noted that for modern applied linguistics, the question of the degree of proficiency in different languages of a bilingual is debatable. Some theorists insisted that bilingualism should be studied only in those cases when “the perfect acquisition of a foreign language is not accompanied by the loss of the native language”; in other words, bilingualism consists of “equal proficiency in two languages” (Bloomfield, 1933, cited in Grosjean, 2022, p. 10). Similarly, according to Avronin (1972, cited in Dinevich, 2021, p. 604), bilingualism can be defined as the point at which someone's proficiency in a second language is almost equal to their proficiency in their native language. However, skeptics of the stated classification questioned whether only individuals who possess exceptional proficiency in several languages may be accurately labeled as bilinguals (Bialystok, 2021; Tiv et al., 2021). The term "perfectly" may not be totally precise, as not everyone is capable of achieving complete mastery even in their original language.

To continue, Starichenok (2008) distinguished between receptive bilingualism (when a bilingual can only understand when reading or listening in a foreign language, but does not produce any language) and productive bilingualism.

Expanding Starichenok's theory, Vereshchagin (1966, cited in Stepanova, 2019, p. 2) proposed a three-level classification: receptive (when a bilingual is able to perceive speech in a language other than his native language); reproductive (when a bilingual is able to reproduce what he heard and read); and productive bilingualism (when a bilingual is able to express themselves well in both languages). The existence of these varying degrees of linguistic notions implies

that researchers categorize individuals as bilingual not just if they speak a non-native language flawlessly, but also if they have only a basic knowledge of languages other than their native. If it is agreed that bilingualism can include not only those cases when the speaker is equally fluent in his/her native and non-native languages, it is rational to distinguish different degrees of mastery of using different communicative systems. Thus, according to Zhukova (2013), bilingualism can be considered balanced, when a person is equally proficient in two languages, and unbalanced, when a speaker communicates in two languages with varying degrees of success. In the second case, one language is dominant, i.e., it represents a support system to which the speaker refers to in cases where he/she has difficulty choosing a word in the target language. It is interesting to note that the language that a bilingual has mastered as a foreign language can become dominant – this is a common occurrence for individuals who have been living in a foreign country for an extended period, consistently enhancing their fluency in a foreign language but rarely engaging in communication in their native language.

Next, it is possible to differentiate between pure and mixed bilingualism (Vereshchagin, 1969, cited in Stepanova, 2019, p. 3). In the context of pure bilingualism, individuals employ distinct language in different language contexts. For instance, they may only utilize their native language at home and rely on a second language in the professional environment. In contrast, mixed bilingualism is defined as the transition between codes within a single conversation.

Depending on its formation, bilingualism is divided into natural and artificial (Ognevaya, 2010). With natural bilingualism, mastery of different languages occurs in childhood, when children unconsciously adopt both languages from their primary caregivers or other members of their immediate environment. Artificial bilingualism occurs in a situation where a person purposefully learns a second language, for example, in order to move to another country or to manage a multilingual workforce.

Researchers have also recorded contact bilingualism, which occurs when different language groups communicate, and non-contact bilingualism, when a bilingual is not in direct contact with native speakers of the target language (Zherebilo, 2010). Depending on the type, one has to use significantly different methods for learning a second language.

Another distinction present in literature regards autonomous bilingualism, which occurs when an individual acquires multiple languages without a clear and consistent connection between them, and parallel bilingualism, which refers to the acquisition of a new language using the framework of a previously acquired linguistic system (Sapir, 1993).

Age is another factor used to characterise different types of bilingualism. In particular, Chirsheva (2012) identified infant bilingualism, in which a child finds himself in a multilingual environment before the age of one year; children's bilingualism, the formation of which occurs between the ages of 1 and 12 years; adolescent bilingualism, in which the study of a second language starts from 12 to 18 years; and adult bilingualism.

Infant bilingualism, as well as individual cases of childhood bilingualism, when the development of a second language occurs before the age of three, are considered by researchers as simultaneous bilingualism, that is, bilingualism in which the acquisition of two languages occurs in parallel (the remaining cases within this classification refer to sequential bilingualism). Thus, simultaneous bilingualism is always natural. (Patterson, 2002)

Chirsheva (2012) proposed to distinguish between conscious and spontaneous bilingualism. The criterion of consciousness of children's bilingualism is studied in three aspects. First and foremost, it is crucial to take into account the parental views on the upbringing of a multilingual child. For example, there are cases when the bilingual upbringing of a child follows a meticulously devised algorithm. For instance, the mother refers to the child only in one language, while the father communicates only in another language. When parents strategically determine the language and whether it will be influenced by a situation or remain fixed, bilingual individuals initially develop an awareness of distinct languages as independent and separate communication systems, which makes this learning method more efficient. Undoubtedly, in order to foster children's bilingualism in a conscious and controlled manner, parents should choose a specific methodology that they should adhere to without deviation.

The issue of awareness in the formation of bilingualism leads the research to profound study of the opinions, strategies and experiences of bilingual children's parents that will be regarded in Paragraph 1.3.

In conclusion, the presence of various classifications of bilingualism indicates, on the one hand, the complexity and versatility of the linguistic phenomenon; on the other hand, that bilingualism is a phenomenon studied in different scientific fields (psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, neurolinguistics, applied linguistics and cognition), each providing a different interpretation. As a consequence, the classification of the types of bilingualism still remains a controversial issue, and there is a considerable need to create a generalized classification that takes into account its most important aspects.

The summary of the classifications of bilingualism is represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classifications of bilingualism

Typology	Characteristics of L2 acquisition
Direct (coordinate) and Indirect (subordinate)	- Direct: the ability to think and make judgments equally fast in two languages; - Indirect: constructing phrases in the native language and subsequently translating them into the target language.
Equilingualism and Semi-bilingualism	- Equilingualism: equal fluency in both languages; - Semi-bilingualism: insufficiently developed competencies in one or both languages.
Receptive, Reproductive and Productive	- Receptive Bilingualism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to comprehend speech in a non-native language; • Focus on understanding and perception of the language. - Reproductive Bilingualism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capability to reproduce what is heard and read in a non-native language; - Productive Bilingualism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency in expressing oneself effectively in both languages.
Balanced and Unbalanced	- Balanced: equal proficiency in two languages; - Unbalanced: Varying degrees of proficiency in two languages.
Pure and Mixed	- Pure: one, distinct language in different contexts; - Mixed: transition between codes within a single conversation.
Natural and Artificial	- Natural: unconscious adoption of languages in childhood from immediate environment; - Artificial: purposeful learning of a second language.
Contact and Non-contact	- Contact: language acquisition in a communicative environment; - Non-contact: acquisition without direct contact with native speakers.
Autonomous and Parallel	- Autonomous: no clear connection between acquired languages; - Parallel: acquisition of a new language through a previously acquired language framework.
Infant, Child, Adolescent and Adult	- Infant: exposure to multilingual environment before the age of 1; - Children's: formation between 1 and 12 years; - Adolescent: learning a second language from 12 to 18 years; - Adult: language acquisition in adulthood.
Simultaneous and Sequential	- Simultaneous: L1 and L2 acquisition occurs in parallel; - Sequential: L2 is acquired after L1.
Conscious and Spontaneous	- Conscious Bilingualism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberately devised algorithm for bilingual upbringing; • Strategic determination of the languages spoken by parents; • Awareness of distinct languages as independent and separate communication systems; - Spontaneous Bilingualism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingual upbringing without a meticulously devised algorithm; • Languages spoken based on situational influence or fixed patterns; • Learning through exposure and situational influence rather than deliberate planning.

1.2. Child bilingualism

The current section will focus on children's bilingualism. For a deeper understanding of children's bilingualism advantages, the following important topics will be presented: the critical period hypothesis (Paragraph 1.2.1); the influence of early bilingualism on cognition (Paragraph 1.2.2); the influence of early bilingualism on communicative development

(Paragraph 1.2.3); and the influence of the language form use on the early bilingualism development (Paragraph 1.2.4).

In agreement with Chirsheva (2012, p. 58), this study will consider child bilingualism as “the child’s mastery of two languages to such an extent that ensures the success of communication in accordance with his age characteristics.”

The present study focuses on natural bilingualism, therefore, its characteristics will be thoroughly analysed. Thus, in natural bilingualism, each language, learned from birth, acquires the meaning of a native language for an individual. If a child learns two languages from infancy, he/she actually has no sense of the uniqueness of his native language. However, the ratio of languages according to their level of proficiency can vary significantly depending on the environment and the specifics of communicative situations, from native-like proficiency up to the complete oblivion of one of the languages. Thus, research described examples where a bilingual child at different periods of life mastered one language more than another (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). That inspired modern linguistic research to analyze several options for the transformation of bilingualism. Among these possibilities, there are language attrition (the process of decreasing proficiency in a language) (Gallo et al., 2021); fossilization (stopping the development of one language) (Chen & Zhao, 2013); language switch (Tarłowski et al., 2012); language death (absolute oblivion by an individual of one system) (Crystal, 1999) and revitalization (which refers to the revival of language use) (Pine & Turin, 2017).

Finally, one notable characteristic of natural bilingualism is the potential for a more nuanced understanding of the world compared to individuals who acquire a foreign language throughout adulthood. Natural bilingualism is characterized by the absence of a dichotomy between "us" and "alien" in terms of languages and cultures. It encompasses a cognitive framework, perspective, and self-perception (Bazhenova, 2016).

This leads the research to the description of the benefits of early bilingualism, as it enhances problem-solving abilities, increases proficiency in concentrating attention and ignoring distractions, fosters greater communication sensitivity and expands linguistic competencies.

1.2.1. Critical period hypothesis in acquiring languages

For a more complete understanding of the topic of early bilingualism development, a popular phenomenon of a critical period (CP) should be taken into consideration. A critical period is “a time during the life span of an organism in which the organism may be affected by some

exogenous influence to an extent beyond that observed at other times. Simply, the organism is more sensitive to environmental stimulation during a critical period than at other times during its life" (Colombo, 1982, p. 261).

As outlined in Colombo's article, the critical period comprises five key components:

- 1) Onset of the critical period: The critical period is characterized by a distinct and identifiable onset, marking the commencement of a specific developmental phase during which an organism becomes particularly sensitive to environmental stimuli.
- 2) End of the critical period: Similarly, the critical period has a clearly defined terminus, signifying the conclusion of the heightened sensitivity to environmental influences and the subsequent reduction in plasticity or adaptability.
- 3) Critical system: The critical period is associated with a specific biobehavioral system or pattern that is particularly susceptible to the influence of environmental stimuli during this developmental phase. This system plays a pivotal role in the observed developmental changes.
- 4) Intrinsic factor: The intrinsic factor pertains to the neurobiological characteristics responsible for the acquired sensitivity to environmental influences during the critical period. These characteristics contribute to the organism's heightened receptivity to specific stimuli.
- 5) Extrinsic factor: The extrinsic factor refers to the external stimuli or experiences that interact with the organism during the critical period, thereby creating observable developmental changes. These external influences play a crucial role in shaping the developmental trajectory during this sensitive phase.

These components collectively define the critical period and elucidate the intricate interplay between intrinsic neurobiological factors and extrinsic environmental stimuli in shaping the organism's developmental outcomes. If these five components are applied to language development, then CP can be defined as a function of the age at which the child's language system (that is, the critical system) is formed, and how this child is influenced by language (external factor). The end of CP will be marked by the age after which the child loses sensitivity to external stimuli.

According to the CP hypothesis, the ability to acquire language is limited by the onset of puberty, after which, most likely, as a result of the formation of the human brain, this ability decreases (Mosckovsky, 2001). The idea of CP was that language acquisition occurs most effectively before the age of 9, after which the human brain loses its plasticity (Penfield &

Roberts, 1956, cited in Buzila, 2019, p. 193). A few years later, researcher Lenneberg came to the conclusion that language acquisition should occur from the age of two to puberty – this period coincides with the beginning of changes in the functions of the maturing human brain. (Lenneberg, 1967).

Importantly, the concept of CP can be implemented not only for L1 but for L2 acquisition as well. In this respect, Long (1990) examined the relationship between foreign language learning and differences related to the age of the learner. He derived multiple results pertaining to CP:

- 1) Both the pace of learning a foreign language and the final level of the language learned depend partly on the age at which learning began;
- 2) There are certain strategically important periods that govern the development of both native and foreign languages, during which language acquisition can be successful and after which this acquisition cannot be full-fledged;
- 3) The decrease in the ability to learn languages is cumulative and not immediate.

The scholar primarily focused on highlighting the limitations of previous research that asserted the absence of age-related obstacles in achieving native-like proficiency in a foreign language. Contrary to the previous findings, the researcher argued that there was growing evidence indicating the presence of age limitations in foreign language learning. Contrary to certain beliefs, Long argued that the decline in linguistic proficiency throughout the acquisition of a foreign language is not linked to cognitive ability, instead, it is attributed to a certain brain function that is innate to individuals prior to reaching puberty.

The prevailing consensus among scholars is that the CP theory is valid in the context of acquiring proficiency in one's mother tongue. However, when it comes to acquiring a foreign language, divergent perspectives emerge, encompassing a broad spectrum of viewpoints ranging from absolute acceptance to complete refusal. Thus, simultaneously with the approval of the CP theory in the context of foreign language acquisition, a significant number of academics expressed skepticism regarding the existence of CP and its influence on foreign language learning. For instance, Bruer (1999), the author of “The Myth of the First Three Years”, highlighted that one of the dangers of focusing on the critical period is that it forces us to pay too much attention to the age of language acquisition and too little attention to how it can best happen. Other researchers agreed with him, arguing that early learning of a foreign language is not “a magic wand that creates excellent speakers of a foreign language” (Marshall, 2000, p.39).

In conclusion, while the critical period theory has advanced the understanding of language acquisition, especially for early second language learning, it is essential not to concentrate solely on age. The creation and implementation of effective language acquisition strategies must also account for individual differences and various learning trajectories. Employing a comprehensive approach that considers cognitive, socio-cultural, and pedagogical elements can enhance the understanding of language acquisition and provide more successful language learning procedures for individuals across diverse age groups.

1.2.2. The influence of early bilingualism on cognition

The examination of the cognitive advancement of bilingual children constitutes an important aspect within the field of bilingualism research. During the 1920s, scholars expressed concerns about the potential negative impact of early bilingualism on children's cognitive development (Nagy, 2013). However, it has been established that bilingual individuals typically exhibit a greater proficiency in one of their languages due to either personal preference or social and environmental pressures, and, therefore, have a more developed linguistic grasp of that language (Grosjean, 1985, cited in Sanches de Oliveira & Bullock Oliveira, 2022, p. 6).

The first studies on bilingualism were conducted during the period of major immigration to North America. According to Bialystok (2010), Gould's (1996) research revealed the procedure of English IQ tests that were used to assess immigrants upon their arrival to the country. The results, often extremely low, were affected by the failure to take into consideration mental and physical conditions in which children of immigrants who had just arrived in a new country were in. Specifically, the immigrant families often were of lower socioeconomic status than the native families, and the children were tested in a language they often did not speak well, but it was their bilingualism that was blamed for their poor test performance (Hakuta, 1986, as cited in Hoff, 2021, p. 3) Thus, bilingual immigrants were negligently labeled as mentally unfit and inferior. Bialystok further noted that research publications, based on the Stanford-Binet exam, argued that bilingualism threatened intellectual development (Bialystok, 2010). Also, Saer (1923) described bilingualism as causing "mental confusion" and claimed that bilingual children had lower IQ scores compared to their monolingual counterparts (Kassian & Esmae'li, 2011, p. 967).

Nonetheless, contrary to the prevalent idea that bilingualism negatively affects children, certain studies offer an alternative perspective. Vygotsky (1962) claimed that bilingualism could benefit a child's cognitive development. His work on the relationship between language and thought emphasized the significance of language in influencing cognitive development, specifically highlighting its role in mediating thought processes. Vygotsky claimed that bilingualism might augment cognitive capacities and presented it in an advantageous manner, opposing the contemporary assumption that bilingualism harmed individuals' cognitive development.

Following this line, other researchers have identified several cognitive development advantages associated with bilingualism. These advantages include the ability to form concepts, draw general conclusions, solve problems involving verbal transformation and replacement, and employ complex analytical strategies when addressing nonverbal problems (Leikin, 2013; Bialystok et al., 2012). For example, Leikin (2013) presented empirical evidence supporting the notion that bilingual individuals exhibit superior performance in terms of verbal originality, flexibility, and fluency, as compared to individuals who are monolingual. Moreover, the researcher conducted a study investigating the impact of early bilingualism and bilingual education on the development of children's mathematical creativity. His findings indicate that bilingualism has a significant impact on creativity with regard to solving mathematical difficulties. Furthermore, notable distinctions were observed between bilingual children attending a bilingual kindergarten and their monolingual counterparts.

Furthermore, bilingual children seem to exhibit a higher level of proficiency in directing their attention and ignoring irrelevant signals when engaging in mathematical problem-solving tasks compared to their monolingual peers (Bialystok & Craik, 2010). Additionally, Bialystok (2010) conducted a study to investigate the developmental characteristics of bilingual children in relation to control processes and the processing of complex information. The findings indicated that bilingual children exhibited higher levels of proficiency in tasks that required meticulous information processing, such as those focused on dispute resolution.

In their experiment, Kovacs and Mehler (2009a) showed that bilingual individuals, who are unable to talk but can only listen to their parents' discussions, have higher intelligence compared to their classmates as early as 7-8 months of age. In their study, children were instructed to mentally solve a problem derived from the domain of structural linguistics. The study comprised three sets of tasks involving distinct signals, which were nonsensical three-

syllable words such as "boo-boo-ga" or "boo-ga-ga," and visual reinforcement. The visual reinforcement was delivered either on the right or left side, depending on the specific type of signal word. After the newborns established a connection between a given signal and the assigned side, the researchers changed the rules, introducing a new association between the signals and visual reinforcements. The study revealed that bilingual children exhibited greater proficiency in relearning, i.e., the ability of bilingual infants to adjust their responses when the rules or patterns of the task change, when presented with novel signal words throughout all experimental series, as compared to their monolingual counterparts.

It is noteworthy that in the following research, Kovacs and Mehler (2009b) observed that bilingual individuals possess a more advanced cognitive control system that allows them to use the skills that are necessary at the moment and block those skills and aspirations that are currently undesirable. These studies revealed that bilinguals develop executive functions at the age of three, in contrast to monolinguals, who develop at 4–5 years.

Among the cognitive advantages of bilinguals, Wei (2000) reports their greater communication sensitivity. According to the author, bilinguals have two or more words for one object or idea. Sometimes the corresponding words of different languages can have different connotations, therefore, bilinguals are also able to expand the range of meanings and images. Children not only know in which language to answer questions, but also initiate conversations. Bilinguals master the mechanism of switching language codes, so they give answers faster and are able to correct their own mistakes. As a result, bilinguals have a higher level of linguistic competence.

In the field of neurophysiological research, a number of works confirm that bilingualism fosters an increase in the number and density of neural connections (Novitskiy, 2016).

For example, Mechelli et al (2004, p.757) discovered that acquiring a second language enhances the “volume of gray matter in the angular gyrus of the left parietal lobe of the brain, namely the area of the brain responsible for speech.” Thus, the process of learning a language in childhood occurs more easily due to changes occurring in the brain. In addition, researchers found a connection between increases in gray matter and the level of language acquired. It was found that bilinguals have a greater number of neural connections in the areas of the brain that are responsible for linguistic operations and cognitive abilities.

In conclusion, the evidence extensively supports the view that bilingualism confers substantial cognitive and communicative advantages to children. Bilingualism has been demonstrated to

positively impact multiple facets of children's development, including the enhancement of problem-solving abilities, the cultivation of linguistic proficiency, and the promotion of neurophysiological adaptations. The examination of bilingualism reveals that fostering multilingualism in children provides numerous cognitive and communication advantages, hence enhancing their general development and well-being.

1.2.3. The influence of early bilingualism on communicative development

The presupposition about a delay in bilingual children's lexical development still exists. This assumption claims that the simultaneous acquisition of two or more languages is a reason for a speech delay (Nagy, 2013). This theory stemmed from linguistic research conducted in the late 20th century that demonstrated a significant delay in the language development of bilingual children, suggesting potential future developmental impairments. Later, bilingual primary school children were tested in both of their languages. As a result, the scientists came to the conclusion that bilingual children demonstrated lexical skills inferior to those of monolingual children (Ben-Zeev, 1972; Rosenblum & Pinker, 1983; Pearson, 1993, cited in Nagy, 2013, p. 8). However, in his recent article, Grosjean reinforced this theory and claimed that the reason bilingual children perform more poorly on vocabulary tests is that they are affected by the complementarity principle. Grosjean's hypothesis suggested that bilingual individuals employ their languages in various life settings, which leads to the acquisition of vocabulary that adapts to each specific environment. Consequently, bilinguals do not achieve the same level of proficiency in both languages, and this leads to insufficient test results (Grosjean, 2010).

Nevertheless, many researchers opposed the belief that early bilingualism leads to delays in lexical development. Thus, Groba et al. (2019) argued that the skills of bilinguals and monolinguals develop in a similar manner. Similarly, two previous investigations conducted by Ronjat (1913) and Leopold (1939-49) provided similar results, affirming the absence of speech delay in bilingual children and identical timelines in language acquisition for both bilinguals and monolinguals. (Hamers & Blanc, 1989, cited in Nagy, 2013, p. 5). Furthermore, research demonstrated that early exposure to many languages improves cognitive abilities and gives bilingual children an advantage in activities like classifying and identifying objects, as compared to infants who only speak one language (Marian et al., 2009).

Later, Bialystok (2011) agreed with De Houwer's findings but noted that it may not be entirely accurate to assume that bilingual and monolingual children go through completely identical

patterns of grammar development. Thus, after evaluating 1700 children, Bialystok concluded that the relatively lower test results observed in bilingual children, as compared to monolingual children, should not be interpreted as evidence of inferior vocabulary. Alternatively, she claimed that "their vocabulary is distributed across two languages" (Bialystok, 2010, p. 3).

In addition, Doyle, Champagne and Segalowitz (1977) found that bilingual children's vocabulary knowledge varies greatly. According to their research, bilingual toddlers at the age of two had a smaller vocabulary compared to monolingual children, however, bilingual children showed higher proficiency in speaking fluently (Hamers & Blanc, 1989, cited in Nagy, 2013, p. 9).

Research done by Singleton and Ryan's (2009) presented an alternative perspective, claiming that bilingualism influences children's abilities in morphosyntax and the acquisition of specific components of grammar positively. Although the researchers acknowledged the limitations of previous studies and the possibility of bilingual children to experience a delay in their vocabulary development due to their environment and language acquisition process, the researchers highlighted that these studies focused on the language proficiency of sequential bilinguals. In contrast, the scientists argued that the previous research on the topic failed to present simultaneous bilinguals adequately (Singleton & Ryan, 2009, cited in Nagy, 2013, p. 9).

As the literature review demonstrates an extensive amount of research conducted on the topic of early bilingualism, it is understandable that there is general confusion surrounding the lexical development of bilingual children. For example, when monolingual individuals possessing a strong command of one language, are compared to proficient in two language systems bilingual individuals without ensuring that the subjects have similar backgrounds, the obtained results cannot be considered valid data. Instead, children who have been exposed only to one language and raised within their language surroundings should be reasonably expected to have a more advanced vocabulary and understanding of their mother tongue compared to children who have been exposed to the same language for a shorter period or whose L2 is a minority language. Therefore, every test is likely to lead to the same conclusion: the lexical development of bilingual individuals is delayed compared to that of monolingual individuals. However, comparing simultaneous bilinguals to monolinguals is likely to show a more accurate outcome than comparing monolinguals to individuals who learn two languages sequentially, or comparing sequential bilinguals to simultaneous bilinguals.

1.2.4. The influence of the language form on the early bilingualism development

One additional factor that is suggested for consideration in the analysis of child bilingualism is the manner in which two languages are utilized. The language can only be spoken, written, and has two distinct aspects. G.N. Chirsheva categorized several forms of bilingualism in this context. In addition to equilingism (see 2.1), she distinguished bilinguals who can read two languages but write in only one of them. Such bilinguals are called receptively biliterate. Additionally, it is conceivable that an individual who is bilingual possesses two languages solely for oral communication while achieving proficiency in reading and writing solely in one language.

It is crucial to highlight that in order to foster the natural growth of a bilingual child, it is imperative to cultivate not only their listening skills, but also their reading and writing skills. In the context of bilingualism, reading in both languages facilitates a substantial augmentation of one's lexicon. This is mostly attributed to the utilization of abstract vocabulary, which is employed less frequently in daily interactions compared to concrete vocabulary (which tends to be more prevalent in written communication). Furthermore, reading enables a bilingual individual to acquire proficiency in a diverse range of intricate grammatical and syntactic frameworks. A bilingual individual who engages in reading in other languages acquires a comprehensive understanding of the diverse stylistic variations, whereas an individual who just focuses on the spoken aspect of the language primarily retains colloquial and frequently condensed expressions (Protasova, 2020).

1.3. Family influence on the development of bilingual children

The present section will provide a detailed analysis of what role the family plays in the young bilinguals' identity formation and language acquisition. First, the preservation of parental languages within the familial unit to uphold the bilingual child's linguistic heritage will be considered from the point of Fishman's Reversing Language Shift Model (Paragraph 1.3.1). Next, language beliefs and ideologies shaping the shared views about the appropriate use of language within the multicultural and multilingual context will be explored through the prism of Spolsky's theory (Paragraph 1.3.2). Finally, an analysis of five primary principles for bilingual upbringing methodologies, including "one person - one language" (OPOL), the local

principle, the temporal principle, the subject-thematic principle and the principle of an external listener will be provided.

1.3.1. Fishman's Reversing Language Shift Model as a means of ethnic languages preservation within a familial context

The function of the family in shaping a child's linguistic environment is of utmost importance, rendering it a prominent subject of investigation in language policy study. Moreover, in the field of proactive language maintenance research, Fishman (1991) introduced a conceptual framework known as Reversing Language Shift (RLS), which places significant emphasis on the preservation of ethnic languages within both the familial and communal contexts. According to the scholar, the family functions as an inherent barrier, providing protection from external influences. This happens primarily due to the intimate and private characteristics of the family environment, which make native language preservation resilient to external pressures. Furthermore, despite the diminished role of the modern urban family in socialization, it remains the primary and essential foundation for the spread, cohesion, use, and preservation of indigenous languages. Fishman (2001) provided evidence to support the notion that the desire to maintain and transmit the indigenous language within the household does not contradict modernity; rather, it presents a desirable alternative to the widespread process of globalization. According to Fishman (1991), intergenerational language transmission plays a significant role in preserving the home language. Specifically, the use of the ethnic language between the mother and the child at home is identified as crucial for this purpose. Thus, both the family and the community are essential components in a child's language socialization and immediate language environment.

Below, Table 2 shows how RLS is reflected in the context of Russian-Italian families raising a bilingual child in Italy.

Table 2. RLS in Russian-Italian Families

Aspect	Description
Language Preservation	The model places significant emphasis on the preservation of both the Russian and Italian languages within the familial unit to uphold the bilingual child's linguistic heritage.
Family Environment	Fishman's model underscores the importance of the family environment in sustaining and conveying both the Russian and Italian languages to the bilingual child, establishing an environment where both languages are valued and employed.
Role of Family and Society	Both the family and the society are considered integral elements in a child's language socialization, thereby highlighting the importance of both the family and

	the wider community in nurturing the bilingual child's language proficiency in both Russian and Italian is essential for the cultivation of equilingualism.
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1.3.2. Family language policy

The research thoroughly examines the issue of family language policies, as they form children's developmental paths, contribute to children's school success and safeguard minority languages. By determining a definite language policy, parents help young bilinguals achieve success in the use of languages within and outside the home.

Parental beliefs are proposed as influential factors in shaping parenting practices and impacting children's development across various domains. The existence of cross-cultural differences in practices, behaviors, and outcomes can be attributed to varying perspectives on the nature of the parenting image (Harkness & Super, 1996, cited in Scott, 2011, p. 2). Furthermore, language ideologies, which serve as explicit or implicit representations of the relationship between language and human beings in a social context, influence both language policy and language acquisition processes (Kulick, 1993; Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998; De Houwer, 1999; King, 2000, cited in Scott, 2011, p. 9). Consequently, it is crucial for research on family language policy to comprehensively understand the linguistic ideologies that underpin parenting practices and the processes through which these ideas are developed.

Family language policy as a special area of multilingualism research appeared relatively recently (King, 2008). King (2008) defined family language policy as an explicit and open plan regarding language use by family members in the home environment.

Additionally, Spolsky (2004) identified three components in the formation of language policy: 1) language practices – how languages are used in everyday communication; 2) linguistic beliefs and ideologies – what members of a particular linguistic community think about the use of a particular language and what ideology they adhere to; 3) language management – actions that participants in the language community take to modify or support language practices that are consistent or inconsistent with the desired language policy.

The following paragraphs will provide hypotheses on how Spolsky's theory may be reflected in the context of Russian-Italian families raising a bilingual child.

1.3.2.1. Language practices

First, the language practices within a Russian-Italian bilingual family setting involve a deliberate and conscious selection of linguistic varieties, encompassing both Russian and Italian, as integral components of the family's linguistic repertoire. These choices would extend to specific sounds, words, and grammatical structures, influencing the distinctive patterns of both languages within the family's communication dynamics. Furthermore, the language practices are expected to incorporate established norms and customs related to speech formality and language use, acknowledging the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds present in the family.

For additional exposure to the second language (L2), parents can apply diverse actions. These language exposure methods with their corresponding benefits are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Creation exposure to L2

Actions	Benefits
Consistent communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consistent use of language within the family creates an authentic language environment which naturally enhances children's language proficiency (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2017) - Regular engagement strengthens the child's linguistic confidence, reducing anxiety about making a mistake (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2011) - With consistent use of a certain language by the parents, it becomes the standard, and language no longer remains separate from the child's life (Zhang, Lau & Su, 2021).
Watching movies and cartoons in the target language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual elements and plot help children understand the content, even if their vocabulary is limited. - A wide variety of styles and topics help in expanding children's linguistic knowledge. - The engaging nature of the content aids in sustaining the motivation to acquire knowledge. (Trota et al., 2022)
Reading in the target language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books, especially those that are age- and subject-appropriate, allow children to encounter new words and phrases in context, making new vocabulary easier to understand and remember. - Reading a variety of texts shows children how language functions at different levels, from simple sentences to more complex structures (see 1.2.4). - If the choice of books matches the child's interests (adventure, fantasy, science, etc.), this can greatly increase motivation to learn a language. Reading becomes not just learning, but a fun activity. - Through literature, children are introduced to the culture, customs and characteristics of the countries where the minority language is spoken, which makes the language accessible and vivid. (Senawati et al., 2021)
Listening to songs in Russian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Music enhances memorization by utilizing rhythm and rhyme as cognitive aides. - Lyrics often reflect cultural traits, which helps develop a deeper understanding of the language. While it is possible to learn vocabulary and grammar in isolation, truly mastering a language and being able to use it effectively in real-world situations requires an understanding of its associated cultural characteristics. This cultural knowledge provides the context necessary for authentic and meaningful communication. - Songs often feature repetitive choruses and verses. This natural repetition aids in memorization without feeling tedious, unlike traditional rote learning methods. Indeed, learners often find themselves singing along without realizing they are practicing the language. (Eslit, 2023)
Calls to relatives who speak Russian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular calls provide children with exposure to authentic, native-level language use. They hear the language as it is naturally spoken, including

	<p>colloquialisms, idioms, and regional accents, which are often missing from formal language instruction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children are more likely to engage with and remember language that is associated with people they care about. The emotional connection to relatives creates a positive association with the language, enhancing motivation and retention. - Conversations occur in real-life contexts, discussing family news, daily activities, or shared interests. This helps children understand how the language is used in practical, everyday situations. - Conversations with relatives of different ages expose children to various language registers, from formal speech with grandparents to more casual talk with cousins. (Braun, 2012)
<p>Travelling to Russia or other post-Soviet countries where Russian is widely spoken</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being surrounded by the language all the time creates a fully immersive environment. This constant exposure accelerates the learning process as children are compelled to use the language for daily communication. - Children have countless opportunities to practice the language in real-life situations, from ordering food to making friends, which makes the learning process more meaningful and memorable. - Children tend to acquire language more intuitively through communication rather than formal instruction, and travel provides a great environment for this natural acquisition process. (Lu et al., 2012)
<p>Teaching writing in the target language</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing requires children's active construction of sentences, thereby strengthening their comprehension of grammar rules, syntax, and sentence structure. This direct participation aids in strengthening their understanding of the mechanics of the language. The act of writing engages multiple senses and cognitive processes. - Being a multi-sensory approach, writing enhances memory retention of new words and phrases (Flower & Hayes, 1981). - Writing tasks often require children to organize their thoughts, argue points, or tell stories. This process enhances critical thinking skills in the target language (Alidmat & Ayassrah, 2017).
<p>Language schools and tutors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language schools and tutors typically follow a well-designed curriculum that ensures comprehensive coverage of all language aspects – grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This structured approach helps build a solid foundation in the language. - Trained language teachers and tutors can identify a child's strengths and weaknesses, tailoring instruction to address specific needs. They can also explain complex language concepts in ways that are accessible to children. - Language schools often employ interactive teaching methods, including group activities, role-plays, and games. These engaging approaches make learning fun and memorable for children. - The focused and intensive nature of language schools and tutoring can accelerate the learning

	process compared to casual exposure within the family. (Dikilitaş et al., 2023)
Communication with peers in Russian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speaking with peers can be less intimidating than communicating with adults. This lower-stress environment encourages more frequent attempts at using the language, which is crucial for improvement. - Children can exchange views about their interests and experiences, which takes away the fear of making mistakes and creates support for learning. (Sato & Ballinger, 2016).

1.3.2.2. Language beliefs and ideologies

Language beliefs are likely to be shaped by the shared views about the appropriate use of language within the multicultural and multilingual context. These beliefs serve as the ideological foundation for managing language use and are instrumental in guiding language practices within the family. The language beliefs within this unique family setting are expected to reflect the perceived suitability of language choices made by family members.

It is worth noting that parents' language ideologies are closely linked to other aspects of parenthood, such as culture-specific ideas about what makes a “good” or “bad” parent. Therefore, public discussions about parenting, whether positive or negative, have the potential to impact parental views and behaviours. Okita (2002, cited in Schwartz & Verschik, 2013, p. 5) examined the experiences of Japanese mothers living in England with English spouses and how their “good mothers” identities were vulnerable to constant public advice and recommendations. These mothers received little recognition for the unacknowledged work involved in bilingual parenting, which often led to feelings of guilt, stress, and personal trauma.

1.3.2.3. Language Management

Finally, language management involves the deliberate formulation and communication of a language strategy aimed at regulating language use. In this context, language managers within the family may include parents, caregivers, and educators who wield authority over language practices in the household and educational settings.

In Russian-Italian families, language management encompasses intentional actions to interfere in, alter, and control the language environment, encompassing both Russian and Italian

languages. This may involve consciously promoting balanced language use, creating opportunities for language exposure, and establishing language routines to support the development of both Italian and Russian. Additionally, language managers may employ “simple management” techniques, such as self-correction in speech, repetition or completion of sentences after pauses and code-switching to facilitate comprehension and language development in the child.

However, it is important to recognize that, even within the family domain, language management may not consistently align with explicitly stated language learning principles and practices. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of language management within this unique family setting involves embracing the complexities of language use and development in a bilingual and bicultural context.

In summary, the language policy within the Russian-Italian bilingual family is shaped by the everyday language behaviors and choices of the family members. Parental engagement in formulating language policies not only enriches children's language acquisition but also enhances their adeptness in using language within the home environment and in social settings at school and in the community. That is why it is crucial for parents to discuss the family language policy and adhere to it.

1.3.3. Linguistic strategies of parents when raising a bilingual child

Once the family language policy has been established, parents should select the most appropriate for the chosen policy methodology.

The education of bilingual children may be underpinned by five primary principles that form the main bilingual upbringing methodologies.

The personal principle considered is "one person - one language" (OPOL). This approach primarily arises in interethnic marriages where the parents have different native languages. It is crucial to consider whether one parent's language aligns with that of the society or if the society speaks a different language, potentially resulting in the child growing up in a trilingual environment. In some cases, one of the adults may choose to communicate with the child in a non-native language, which could be the societal language in the case of a family in

immigration or a global language like English. However, if the child learns a language from a non-native speaker, it may lead to further mistakes and misinterpretations.

As Curdt-Christiansen (2013) stated in her research, OPOL has been advocated as an appropriate strategy, which was supported by earlier research showing that this approach can foster bilingual proficiency (Döpke, 1992, cited in Koelewijn, Hoevenaars & Verhagen, 2023, p. 3). Additionally, as noted by Barron-Hauwaert (2004), guidance for parents often suggests that OPOL is the “best” strategy and that it must be strictly adhered to, but she acknowledges that OPOL is not the only possible approach to (successfully) raising bilingual children.

Secondly, the local principle should be regarded. It dictates the selection of language based on the specific communication context. In migrant families, the parents' original language is spoken at home, whereas in all other instances, communication is limited to the language of society.

Next, the temporal principle suggests that there are preset intervals during which languages of communication change. This technique is far less prevalent compared to the first two due to its inherent difficulty in implementation. If a language aligns with the language of a society, then education must be based on a local principle without exception. Conversely, the temporal principle presents a limited number of cues for a child to modify their linguistic code. This poses a drawback in the context of systematic language instruction.

Additionally, there is a subject-thematic principle, which entails the deliberate exploration of a certain set of topics with the kid in one language, while simultaneously addressing another in the second language. During the initial stages of home-based language instruction, this approach is not much sought. However, it can be implemented in the school system when certain subjects are taught in one language while others are taught in another (e.g., CLIL).

The principle of an external listener posits that parents engage in communication with their child using a particular language, while simultaneously employing a different language for internal communication. The child interprets the parents' communication language as solely that of a passive listener. Indeed, this approach does not immediately result in the development of bilingualism; but it can enhance the acquisition of a second language, specifically the language of communication employed by parents, in subsequent educational settings such as

kindergarten and school. In the case of Russian-Italian families, the principle of an external listener can be implemented if each of the parents uses the “one parent-one language” principle speaking their native language to the child, but at the same time speaking a third (usually, English) language to the spouse.

Based on the aforementioned principles, parents can implement diverse language tactics to actively promote bilingual development in their children. Table 4 presents possible strategies with their description, as well as their benefits and drawbacks.

Table 4. Linguistic strategies used by parents

Strategy	Description	Benefits	Drawbacks
Pretending	The mother feigns ignorance when the child uses a language other than the expected one and refrains from replying until the child starts communicating in the preferred language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children are encouraged to switch to the desired language by helping them recognise the importance of using a certain language to interact with their mother. - Language gains greater significance and worth, hence promoting its active utilization (Reed & Lee, 2020). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children can experience frustration if they are unable to articulate their ideas or emotions in the desired language (Sevinç, 2022) - Eventual misunderstandings may occur if the child has a limited vocabulary.
Restriction	The mother exclusively employs a single language despite the child's usage of a different language. This strategy necessitates a rigorous adherence to selecting the language used for communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improvement of language skills is facilitated due to consistent and frequent practice. - Children associate their mothers with a definite language, and learning that language will be perceived as a natural, not forced process (Venables, Eisenchlas & Schalley, 2013). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If a child is already accustomed to responding in a different language, this strategy can impose psychological pressure on him. - Children may feel limited in expressing their thoughts and feelings freely, as the language that they use is disregarded.
Topic adaptation	The mother selects the language of communication based on the specific setting or topic of conversation, and is considered to be the most widely used approach. For instance, certain languages may be used at home, while others may be utilized for social interactions with friends or in an educational setting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enables the child to acclimate to diverse linguistic scenarios and cultural environments. - Promotes the development of flexibility in the use of language and expands vocabulary in various topics. - Takes into account the child's comfort level and ability to communicate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can be confusing for children if they don't always understand when and what language to use. - Requires significant efforts from the mother in managing a balanced language environment.
Skill adaptation	The mother chooses the language in accordance with the linguistic knowledge of her child, i.e.,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increases children's confidence in utilizing a language they are proficient in. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents may find it difficult to introduce a language that requires more support and practice.

	instructions may be given in Russian, while such topics as school or friends are discussed in Italian, as it is the language of the child's social life.	- Creates a more comfortable and relaxed atmosphere for communication.	- There is little to no progression in language learning, as the child constantly switches to familiar words.
Compliance with the child's language choice	The mother completely conforms to the language selected by the child. The key difference between the two previous tactics is that in topic adaptation and skill adaptation, the mother is the one who selects the language, whereas, in the current strategy, it is the child who has the privilege of choosing the language.	- Provides the child with control over the language environment, which can have a positive effect on his motivation. - Helps develop confidence in using the language.	- Leads to possible underdevelopment of the target language as the emphasis shifts more to the language the child prefers to use. - Parents may find it difficult to maintain a balance between two languages.
Correction of language confusion	The mother actively notices and corrects moments when the child mixes languages or responds in a language that is not expected in the context of the conversation. This can happen in formal and informal settings, and parents can use a variety of feedback methods, including verbal and nonverbal cues, to show the child that he or she is expected to employ another language.	- Regular correction helps children become aware of correct grammatical structures and vocabulary, which helps build stronger language skills. - Regular correction may motivate children to improve their skills and deepen their linguistic knowledge, which has a positive impact on their overall development.	- Overcorrection may be perceived by the child as a criticism of his abilities and efforts. If children feel that they are regularly judged or that they are doing something wrong, this can lead to a decrease in their confidence in their language skills (Ellis, 2009, as cited in Martínez Agudo, 2013). - If a child feels pressured by constant control of his language, he may begin to avoid using the language, especially in everyday situations. This may reduce his overall desire to engage in conversation and express his thoughts (Sevinç, 2022).

The research findings on the child outcomes resulting from different family language policies exhibit a wide range of results, indicating both relatively successful (Taeschner 1983; Harding & Riley 1986; De Houwer 1990, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 909) and less successful (Arnberg 1987; Yamamoto 1995; Lanza 1997, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 909) bilingual development among the children under study. These diverse outcomes in bilingual language proficiency have often been attributed by scholars to family-specific implementation factors, particularly, the consistency with which the stated policy was upheld. It was highlighted that the lack of adherence to the specified language policy is frequently noted by researchers as a significant factor contributing to poor outcomes. For instance, Pan's (1995, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 914) research on Chinese families residing in the

United States revealed that parents frequently switched to English when their children spoke in English. This observation led the researcher to predict this family's language shift towards English. Similarly, Lanza's (1997, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 915) research on Norwegian-English bilingual families indicated that the way parents responded to their children's usage of the majority language played a significant role in the success of promoting the minority language in some families practicing the OPOL approach. In Lanza's investigation of bilingual families in Norway, parents who employed the minimal grasp strategy by pretending not to understand when their child opted to speak in Norwegian (the dominant language) rather than English (the non-dominant language) were successful in encouraging increased usage of English by the child.

According to Lanza's (1997, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 915) parental discourse hypothesis (PDH), the way parents communicate with their children using specific tactics plays a crucial role in determining how successful children are in maintaining a minority language. Similarly, Takeuchi (2006, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 914) discovered in a study of Japanese families residing in Australia that the proficiency of children's bilingual language acquisition is connected to the mothers' regular use of Japanese, rather than their visits to Japan or interactions with other Japanese speakers. Research showed that the quality of language contact, namely how focused it is on the kid, is more significant than the amount of time spent with the child (Döpke, 1992, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 914). In general, these and other research papers (Taeschner, 1983; Arnberg, 1987; Juan-Garau & Perez-Vidal, 2001, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 914) emphasized the significance of parents consistently using the same language for their children to achieve healthy bilingual development.

How families utilize and distribute language throughout the household has consequences for cognitive growth and academic success. Regarding the formation of a first language in individuals who only speak one language, there is strong empirical data that shows how the language spoken by parents has an impact on the development of the child's language skills (Hoff-Ginsberg 1998; Hoff & Naigles 2002; Hoff 2003, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 916) Additionally, this parental language use is also positively associated with subsequent assessments of intelligence quotient (IQ) (Hart & Risley 1995, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 916) There is evidence suggesting that the choice of language by parents plays a role in influencing relationships in homes where many languages are spoken.

In a study conducted by Dolson (1985, cited in King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 916), two groups of Latino children were examined. Approximately half of the children belonged to households that were originally Spanish-dominant but had transitioned to speaking English, while the other half continued to use Spanish as their primary language. Despite having similar family economic status and the amount of time spent in the US schools, children from Spanish-speaking homes outperformed those from homes that had transitioned to English in various areas, such as mathematics skills, Spanish reading vocabulary and academic grade point average.

An alternative explanation for the notable correlation between academic achievement and the use of Spanish in the household is that when parents persist in utilizing the language of the society (in this instance, English) for communication at home, children are less exposed to their heritage language. Consequently, this has an adverse effect on their linguistic and cognitive growth. This assertion is corroborated by Snow's research (1990) conducted at the United Nations International School in New York City. She discovered that children whose parents communicated with them in their native language achieved better results in terms of linguistic and academic performance.

Hence, family language policy not only plays a crucial role in the development of each child but also serves as the basis for preserving a language.

1.4. The connection between society and bilingualism

The present section will examine the societal perception of migrants and their efforts to preserve their indigenous language and cultural heritage; discuss the scrutiny and challenges faced by families communicating in a language unfamiliar to their surroundings (1.4.1); study the issue of language hierarchy (1.4.2) and examine the issue of biculturalism and its association with natural bilinguals (1.4.3).

1.4.1. Societal perception of bilingual individuals

Nowadays, a great number of individuals around the world are bilingual, which is why, usually, it is not considered a burden or novelty. Moreover, in a world that is becoming more interconnected, being proficient in several languages can be extremely useful (Dolgenko & Kosyreva, 2020). Furthermore, societal attitudes transform over time just as much as individual

ones do. However, societal attitudes change at a different pace; it is usually a slower and more gradual kind of change that goes hand in hand with shifts in political ideology (Baker, 1992, cited in Papapavlou & Mavromati, 2017, p. 168).

Currently, there are still misconceptions surrounding the upbringing of bilingual children. One such misconception is that acquiring two languages simultaneously has a negative impact on children's development (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). Conversely, there exists a prevailing societal perception of migrants, particularly those who, subsequent to their relocation, endeavor to safeguard their indigenous language and cultural heritage (Canoy et al., 2006). Frequently, families who engage in communication using a language that is strange to their surroundings tend to attract significant scrutiny from neighbors or friends (Slavina et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, some factors may positively affect societal perception of bilingual individuals. This occurs especially when the cultural, political, social, and economic environment actively promotes bilingualism and the utilization of minority languages.

1.4.2. Linguistic prestige

Another important social factor to consider is the status of a language, or, in other words, its prestige. Thomas and Wareing (1999, cited in Gyamera, 2019, p. 68) claimed that attitudes towards bilingual individuals differ greatly, because languages are ranked hierarchically. For instance, if a person has a command of what society considers to be prestigious languages, bilingualism will be met positively and with a certain degree of admiration. On the contrary, when the languages spoken by a bilingual person have a lower social status, bilingualism is often disregarded or seen as less valuable (Thomas & Wareing, 1999, cited in Gyamera, 2019, p. 68).

Often, institutions are able to influence language attitudes. Thus, when a language is elevated to a specific status and employed in formal institutional settings such as the government, the media or schools, it is likely to cause a positive change in societal views on the language (Ó Murchadha, 2021). A number of studies proved that schools can be regarded as the most influential institution that has a significant impact on language prestige. Thus, researchers concluded that similar students are influenced differently depending on which school they

attend (Mortimore et al., 1988; Reynolds, 1985; Rutter et al., 1979; Smith & Tomlinson, 1989, cited in Sammons, 2007, p. 56).

The concept of language prestige enables the categorization of bilingualism into two distinct forms, namely additive and subtractive. The concept of additive bilingualism refers to the development of bilingualism within a societal context where both languages are held in equal high regard by the community. Simultaneously, the child's bilingual speech activity is conducted under conducive circumstances, thereby exerting a beneficial influence on his cognitive development. As one of the consequences of early bilingualism, linguists pointed out that, as bilingual children grow up, they begin to mindfully respect different languages and cultures. According to Shelestyuk (2022), additive bilingualism refers to the situation where a child acquires knowledge of a foreign language and culture alongside their native linguistic and cultural systems. On the other hand, subtractive bilingualism occurs when the study of a foreign language and culture negatively impacts the child's language and cultural understanding.

1.4.3. Ethnolinguistic criterion

Mastering a language inevitably entails acquiring proficiency in the linguistic aspects associated with the specific ethnic group to which the language belongs. From this, it may be inferred that individuals who are naturally bilingual can be considered bicultural, meaning they cannot be ascribed to only one culture (Chirsheva, 2008). The occurrence of biculturalism may be characterized by parents who possess diverse nationalities. Moreover, it is possible for bicultural children to be raised in migrant households, as long as the language and culture of the parents have equal importance to the child's own cultural background, alongside the culture of the nation where the family resides (Schwartz & Unger, 2010). The equitable significance of two cultures for a developing bilingual individual is arguably an ideal scenario, which is rather uncommon in reality. Typically, a bilingual individual tends to have a dominating culture. It is important to acknowledge that the significance of cultures for individuals who are bilingual, particularly those who are natural bilinguals, may vary over different stages of life (Chen & Padilla, 2019).

Biculturalism is deemed unattainable solely in cases where a child exclusively acquires one of the languages from an adult who lacks fluency in the language selected for communication

with the child. As an illustration, a preschool-aged child is being nurtured in Russia by individuals of Russian descent, however, one of the parents has accumulated extensive experience in teaching the Italian language and exclusively engages in communication with the child in Italian. Undoubtedly, the second adult in this scenario can play a role in developing a child's linguistic skills. However, in this case, it is impossible to completely impart to the child a distinct culture and national mindset.

Thus, according to Wiegel (2017), there is a correlation between a person's language proficiency and their understanding of cultural stereotypes. Specifically, individuals with stronger language skills tend to have a greater awareness of cultural stereotypes, whereas those with inferior language abilities are less likely to adapt to different cultures.

Chapter 2

The Study: Parental Experiences in Mixed Russian-Italian Families

2.1. Aim and Objectives

The existing literature offers valuable insights into bilingualism and cultural heritage preservation; nevertheless, there is a clear gap in research that focuses specifically on the experiences and decision-making of parents within mixed Russian-Italian families. The present research aims to contribute to filling this gap.

Therefore, the objectives of the present research are summarized as follows:

- 1) to gather illustrative examples of the actions that parents take, such as the languages they speak to their children, approaches and the linguistic strategies they employ (Parental Actions and Linguistic Strategies).
- 2) to explore the underlying reasons for the parents' decisions, whether they are based on intuition or conscious adherence to specific techniques (Reasons Behind Parental Decisions).
- 3) to investigate the difficulties faced by parents and their bilingual children in maintaining and developing simultaneous bilingualism within the context of mixed Russian-Italian families (Challenges Faced by Bilingual Families).
- 4) to collect insights into the advice that parents are willing to give based on their experiences, as well as recommendations they have received themselves regarding fostering simultaneous bilingualism and safeguarding cultural heritage in a mixed Russian-Italian family setting (Advice and Recommendations).

2.2. Research Methodology

The current study adopted a mixed research design through the administration of a questionnaire that combined both qualitative and quantitative data.

The questionnaire was held online, in a Google Forms format. This method has a great number of advantages as Google Forms enable researchers to obtain more responses and, therefore,

provide a more detailed, reliable and multifaceted analysis of the issue. Moreover, online questionnaires, unlike interviews, do not require scheduling meetings, making it easier for busy parents to participate when and where it is most convenient for the respondents. Additionally, due to the anonymity of online questionnaires, parents may feel more comfortable providing honest feedback anonymously, which can lead to more accurate data. Finally, without an interviewer present, parents might feel less pressured and more relaxed, which potentially leads to more thoughtful and genuine responses.

The questions of the survey were written in the Russian language, i.e., L1 of the participants. This was done in order to facilitate the process of giving answers so that participants would share their thoughts in a more natural and genuine way. The questionnaire included a wide variety of question types: Short Answer questions, Paragraph questions, Multiple Choice questions and Checkbox questions. The questionnaire followed the interpretivist/constructivist approach (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), taking a holistic and comprehensive look at the parental views and experiences from the participants' point of view.

This study differentiates itself from previous studies in two ways. First, this research used voluntary response sampling due to which the participants contributed their insights willingly. This sampling method proves to have a great number of advantages as participants who decide to take part in the research, hold a genuine interest in the research subject, facilitating the gathering of diverse perspectives and accurate insights into the topic.

Moreover, the study utilized snowball sampling, i.e., a non-probability sampling technique that explores social networks, where initial participants refer to others within their circles (reference). The method allows for the establishment of trust between participants and the researcher, as initial participants refer to subsequent respondents, leading to a network of interconnected individuals who are more likely to be open and forthcoming in their responses. This study includes 61 female respondents. The aim was to recruit at least 50 participants. This baseline was chosen because it includes enough responses to allow for some quantitative data collection and varied perspectives, while the sample size is still small enough to ensure that the analysis provides rich and detailed analysis. The two types of information, quantitative and qualitative, are included in this study for a rich description of experiences while also looking at the percentage ratio between certain choices.

2.3. Participants

Parents

Out of all the respondents who had participated only those meeting the research criteria were selected with a total number of 61. Thus, each respondent was a female, a native Russian speaker, currently residing in Italy and raising a simultaneous bilingual child whose father is a native Italian speaker. The participants were recruited through Telegram, WhatsApp and Facebook chats of Russian-speaking parents in Italy, personal Instagram accounts, Russian Saturday schools located in Milan, Rome and Genoa, and by word of mouth.

First, the participants answered the following additional questions about their background:

- 1) What other languages do you speak (also dialects or variants are admitted)?
- 2) Your age.
- 3) Your occupation.
- 4) Your educational stage.
- 5) What foreign languages does the other parent of your bilingual child speak?

The parents' background information is presented below:

1) Foreign languages and dialects spoken by the participants.

97% of the participants speak Italian; 74% speak English; 11% speak German; 10% speak French; 10% speak Spanish. 5 participants separately distinguished Italian dialects among which there were Venetian, Tuscan and Neapolitan. Additionally, Ukrainian, Slovak, Portuguese, Belorussian and Tatar were mentioned. Also, it is important to note that 70% of the respondents spoke more than 2 foreign languages and, therefore, had extensive language skills and knowledge.

2) Participants' age.

The age range of the participants is 28-54 with a mean age of 35,5 years and the median age of 41 years. Mode ages are 36, 42 and 43 as they appear 6 times each. Therefore, the responses were predominantly obtained from women in their late 30s to mid-40s.

3) Participants' occupation.

Teachers/linguists and housewives are noted to be the most common professions comprising 23% and 13% respectively. Secondly, tourist guides and managers represent 5%. Next, such occupations as engineers, cosmetologists, psychologists, translators, marketing specialists and secretaries are represented by 2 participants each. Finally, other, less common professions,

represent the following fields: sales, finances, creative arts and media, beauty sphere and health sphere.

Thus, the presence of professionals from various fields indicates a diverse set of skills among the respondents, with a notable predomination in teaching and homemaking.

4) Participants' education level.

According to the data provided, the majority of the respondents, 59%, held a Master's degree. Next, 18% of the participants had a Bachelor's degree, 13% attained a PhD, 8% had technical or professional education and 2% completed upper secondary education (11 years of school, starting at 7 and finishing at 18 years). Thus, the data indicates that a significant portion of the respondents were highly educated, with the majority holding advanced degrees (Master's and PhD).

5) Foreign languages and dialects spoken by the other parent of the child.

The responses illustrated that a significant majority, comprising 57%, are monolingual and only speak Italian. Then, the most common foreign languages spoken were English (25%) and Russian (7%). Finally, other languages like French, German, Portuguese, and regional dialects (Comasco and Neapolitan) were mentioned as well.

Children

The participants were asked to provide the following information about their bilingual children:

- 1) Child's L1.
- 2) Child's L2.
- 3) Child's age.
- 4) Child's gender.
- 5) If they have siblings and if yes, whether the siblings are bilingual as well.

Thus, all the children were Russian-Italian simultaneous bilinguals, 59% female and 39% male (2% preferred not to indicate the gender) in the age range 1,5-22 (with a mean age of 8,3 years; median age of 8 years). 52% of the children had multilingual siblings, 43% were an only child and 5% of the bilinguals had monolingual siblings.

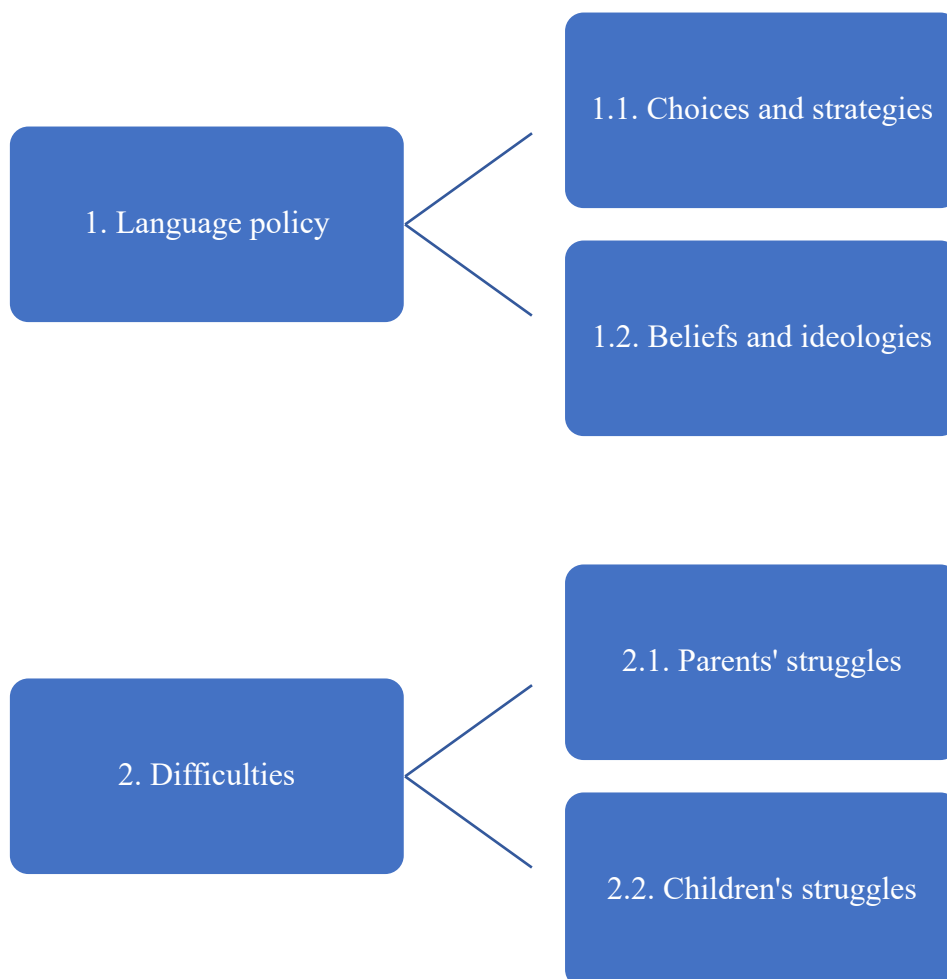
The summary of the parents and the children's backgrounds is presented in Appendix 1.

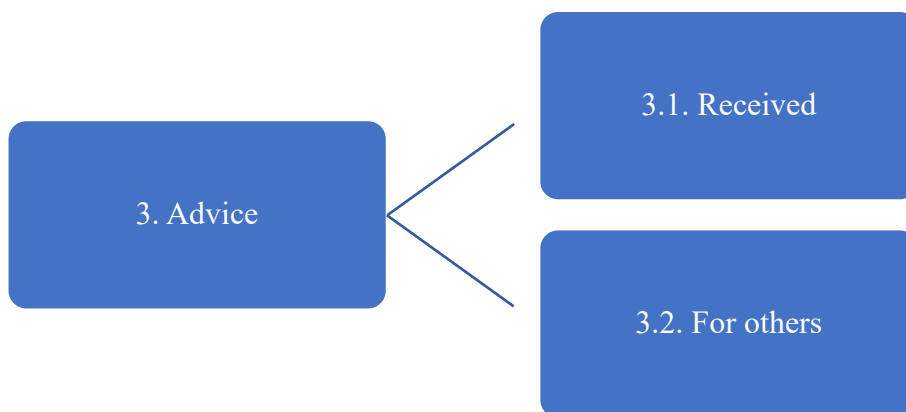
2.4. Data collection

The participants completed a questionnaire comprising 15 questions. The questions examined the primary issues regarding the language preferences parents have for their children, the reasons behind these preferences, the utilization of specific activities or strategies to achieve language goals, the challenges faced by parents in raising bilingual children, any developmental issues experienced by the children and what advice the parents may have sought or been given and what advice they would give to other parents.

The identified ideas were grouped into three main categories: actions/choices, outcomes and advice. The complete breakdown is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Categorization breakdown.





The questions, divided by the abovementioned categories, are presented below.

Questionnaire for bilingual parents

1. Language policy

1.1. Choices and strategies:

- 1) What language(s) does each of the parents speak to the child? What are the factors influencing this decision?
- 2) Do other members of the family (grandparents, cousins, etc.) speak to the child in Russian? If yes, please, specify who and how frequently.
- 3) Have you and the other parent always spoken the same language to your child or have you and/or the other parent changed/added another language with time? If you changed/added the language, what were the reasons behind this decision?"
- 4) Do you and the other parent adhere to OPOL or the mixed approach?"
- 5) Do you implement the abovementioned strategy consciously or does it naturally come up in different situations?"
- 6) What language strategies listed below do you use?
 1. I pretend not to understand unless the child speaks the target language.
 2. I consistently employ the target language when communicating, even if the child responds in a different language.
 3. I adapt my language choice based on specific situations or topics.

4. My language preference is influenced and adjusted according to the child's linguistic proficiency, such as providing instructions in the language that the child comprehends most effectively.
 5. I conform to the child's preferences in terms of language selection, engaging in conversation using the language of their choice at any given moment.
 6. I actively correct my child when they begin code-switching.
 7. Other...
- 7) How do you create your child's exposure to the target language?
1. I read to the child in the desired language.
 2. The child visits countries with the target language being an official language.
 3. The child attends weekend language schools or after-school language classes/a tutor.
 4. I try to find peers speaking the same language.
 5. The child uses video calling (Skype/Facetime) with relatives.
 6. I speak in the desired language all the time.
 7. I teach my child to write in the target language.
 8. I show my child films and cartoons in the target language.
 9. The child listens to songs in the target language.
 10. Other

1.2. Beliefs and ideologies

- 8) In your opinion, does age matter when it comes to learning languages? If yes, would you say that it is better or worse to start earlier? Please, explain your answer.

2. Difficulties

2.1. Parents' struggles

- 9) What difficulties, if any, have you faced raising a bilingual child?
- 10) If you could go back in time, would you do anything different in raising your child as bilingual? If yes, what?

2.2. Children's struggles

- 11) Has your child faced any developmental challenges (language fluency delay, mixing languages, etc.)? If yes, please, specify them.

12) If you answered yes to the previous question, is your kid still experiencing these issues or have they been resolved?

3. Advice

3.1. Received advice

13) Have you received any guidance or recommendations from professionals regarding the upbringing of your bilingual child? If so, which professionals? Did you actively look for advice from professionals or have they offered it unsolicited?

14) Have other family members offered advice regarding the upbringing of your bilingual child? What was that advice about? Do you agree with it? If not, why?

3.2. Advice for others

15) If you were asked to give advice to parents about raising a bilingual child, what recommendations would you give?

Additional:

16) Would you like to add anything else regarding your bilingual child's upbringing or elaborate on the previous answers? (optional)

2.5. Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data were analysed through a content analysis methodology (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Specifically, for each question, emerging themes and sub-themes were identified and discussed. As for the quantitative data, percentages were calculated by dividing the number of participants selecting a certain response by 61 and multiplying the result by 100. The research used the quantitative data in combination with the qualitative data to give a more detailed and complete understanding of parents' perspectives.

From ethical considerations, participants were anonymized using the code "participant" followed by a number.

3. Results and Discussion

This section provides the parents' responses. The responses were grouped together according to three aspects regarding raising a bilingual child (see 2.5).

3.1. Language policy

Parents' linguistic choices and strategies

Question 1.

The first question in the questionnaire was “*What language(s) does each of the parents speak to the child? What are the factors influencing this decision?*”. The analysis showed that in most families (78%), the mother spoke Russian and the father spoke Italian to the child. In 15% of the families, while the primary languages remained Russian and Italian, there were minor variations, when mothers switched to Italian while speaking to their children. Finally, 7% of the families added other languages such as English, Portuguese, and German in their communication with children, in addition to Russian and Italian.

Analysing the responses, two main motives for choosing certain languages may be observed. The first motif is the desire to preserve linguistic and cultural identity. Mothers usually made a deliberate choice to teach their children Russian, which not only maintains children's unique cultural identity but also fosters stronger interactions between different generations. Participant 10 observed, “*I consistently communicate in the Russian language with my child in order to ensure that he is aware of his cultural heritage and the customs that are important to our family.*” Nearly 75% of the participants highlighted that employing Russian within the household served not only as a mode of communication, but also as a means for imparting cultural traditions, stories, and customs. Thus, participant 13 shared, “*I wanted my child to know and appreciate the culture of his roots.*”

The second motif is the practical convenience of bilingual education. It can be noted that adoption of the One Parent One Language (OPOL) approach among 68% of mothers indicated a desire to develop full language skills in the child in both languages. “*I speak only Russian*

with my daughter, and my husband speaks Italian. Due to this, she can freely communicate with relatives from both sides,” said one of the respondents. This approach not only ensures practical knowledge of both languages but also helps develop a multicultural perception of the world in children.

Thus, language becomes not just a means of communication, but also an important element of the child’s cultural identity, which is confirmed by the opinions and experiences of mothers of bilingual children. By creating a multilingual environment, parents not only develop children’s communication skills but also transmit to them a deep respect for different cultures and languages.

Question 2.

The second question of the first category was: *“Do other members of the family (grandparents, cousins, etc.) speak to the child in Russian? If yes, please, specify who and how frequently.”*

The responses revealed that there is a wide range of frequency of communication in Russian among various family members:

- *Everyday communication:* some mothers emphasized that grandparents actively communicated with children in Russian: *“My daughter’s grandparents speak to her in Russian every day”*. (Participant 27)
- *Less frequent communication:* some participants indicated that communication via video or telephone occurred 2-3 times a week or less often. For some, interaction occurred only during visits to the Russian-speaking country, which entails a limited time frame for practicing the language.
- *Isolated cases:* in some families, relatives communicated in Russian extremely rarely or did not communicate at all, which reduces the opportunities for the development of the Russian language for children.

Participants often mentioned that grandparents play an important role in maintaining the language context. As can be seen from the answers, grandmothers are most often key figures in the language socialization of children. For example, some mothers note that grandmothers speak Russian very often, regardless of location (in Russia or Italy). Moreover, a significant number of mothers mention that communication with grandparents takes place over the phone, which helps children maintain language practice, despite geographical distance.

Additionally, some mothers note that siblings also participated in language practice.

Finally, some responses indicated that the nanny might also play a role in supporting the Russian language. Thus, the nanny becomes an important figure in language education along with family members (Weizman & Snow, 2001).

Typically, the role of relatives in Russian language interaction among bilingual homes in Italy is diverse, with significant engagement from grandparents and the inclusion of older siblings. However, despite the positive aspects, there are various obstacles, including irregular communication, linguistic isolation and the influence of the local language.

Establishing an optimal language environment requires a comprehensive strategy that encompasses the involvement of family members, as well as arrangements for visiting Russian-speaking countries and active utilization of contemporary technologies (such as video communication and messengers).

Question 3.

As a third question the participants were asked: *“Have you and the other parent always spoken the same language to your child or have you and/or the other parent changed/added another language with time? If you changed/added the language, what were the reasons behind this decision?”*

75% confirmed that they adhered to the chosen language(s) and never changed it(them). It is worth noting that some mothers were so dedicated to the chosen linguistic strategy that they would rather repeat themselves two times – in Russian for their children and in Italian for the surroundings. However, other participants indicated that they changed the language of communication with their children over time, e.g., *“At first we spoke English with the child, but then we decided that each parent should speak their native language with him”* (Participant 17); *“Since we live in Italy, it is almost impossible for me to speak only Russian, therefore, I have to switch to Italian when I speak to my child outside”* (Participant 28).

Question 4.

“Do you and the other parent adhere to OPOL or the mixed approach?”

Remarkably, the number of families who implemented or aspired to the OPOL strategy was nearly equivalent to the number of families who employed the mixed approach. What is more, a lot of parents expressed their firm opinion that OPOL is better for bilingual development: *“I*

think that OPOL is better because children immediately develop an understanding of the language” (Participant 17). It is worth noting that 8,2% of respondents expressed regret that they could not retain OPOL and had to mix languages when speaking to their children: *“Although I would want to use the OPOL method, sadly it does not always work out.”* (Participant 22); *“I would like to use OPOL, but I cannot always apply it in its pure form. When we go out, I have to switch to the language of the environment”* (Participant 30); *“In his early years, I used only OPOL but now, unfortunately, I mix languages”* (Participant 54); *“Sadly, I mix languages”* (Participant 56).

However, many of those who chose the mixed approach did it willingly. Some participants highlighted that they did not establish restrictions regarding the language used: *“We do not make strict language rules”* (Participant 24). Moreover, some mothers specified that they mixed languages in the presence of the father or other native Italian speakers as a sign of respect: *“The mixed approach as the other parent does not speak Russian”* (Participant 15); *“When there are other people around, I switch to Italian because it would be disrespectful of me to speak a language they do not understand”* (Participant 30).

Thus, it can be stated that while the OPOL strategy is favorable and has its benefits, its implementation in real life necessitates significant flexibility and adaption to individual conditions. Therefore, a mixed approach may become a more realistic choice for many mothers, reflecting their desire to provide comfortable and effective language learning for their children. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the concerns of many parents regarding the mixed approach, it is reasonable to ask the following questions: should parents avoid mixing languages? What impact does exposure to code-mixing have on the linguistic development of bilingual children?

There is currently a scarcity of research on the effects of code mixing on the development of multilingual children. A study conducted on children aged 18 and 24 months revealed that parents who frequently engaged in code-mixing had children with smaller vocabulary sizes (Byers-Heinlein, 2013). Contrarily, Place & Hoff (2011) discovered that there is no correlation between code-mixed language and the early development of language. Regrettably, the verdict is still uncertain regarding whether exposure to code-mixing has any developmental implications for bilingual kids, therefore, there is no clear evidence that parents should follow only the OPOL method.

Question 5.

The participants were asked: *“Do you implement the abovementioned strategy consciously or does it naturally come up in different situations?”*

The results showed that 43% of the participants chose a conscious position in the language of communication with their children which included active efforts to preserve and maintain the Russian language. Some respondents elaborated on their answers explaining the reasons behind the conscious approach: *“If you stop speaking your native language while living in Italy, young children will lose the desire and understanding of why they should learn their mother’s language if she already understands Italian anyway”* (Participant 2); *“I want my daughter to know Russian culture.”* (Participant 6). Additionally, Participant 44 shared how she implemented the chosen strategy: *“I chose the mixed approach consciously: I switch to Italian when we discuss ‘the Italian world’ of the child (school, friends, etc.), and in other cases, I speak Russian”*.

Nevertheless, a significant part of the participants noted that the use of the Russian language occurred naturally. This phenomenon can be attributed to either habitual behaviour or particular life situations:

- *“It seems natural to me to speak my mother tongue to my child”* (Participant 5);
- *“Naturally, mainly due to long trips to Russia”* (Participant 8);
- *“Naturally, sometimes out of consideration for the other people involved in the conversation”* (Participant 13).

Interestingly, some viewpoints also highlighted the existence of both deliberate and instinctive decisions. This provides a structured and, at the same time, a not forced strategy that gives parents a sense of reassurance and confidence in their choices (e.g., *“On the playground and other public places – consciously, everyone speaks Italian, and I’m Russian. At home – naturally, Russian is my native language.”* (Participant 9)

What is more, Participant 34 shared, *“At the beginning, there was a conscious choice, but now everything is mixed up.”* This suggests that the process of raising a bilingual child can develop dynamically, and parents may constantly adapt to changing circumstances.

Overall, the findings illustrate that, in order to foster bilingualism, the parents in the sample implement a variety of strategies, from deliberate to instinctive. As can be seen from the

findings, some parents refer to a conscious approach. It allows for meticulously planning and implementation of language use within the household by establishing specific rules and routines, therefore, ensuring balanced exposure to both languages. Contrarily, some parents rely more on instinctive strategies, allowing language use to flow naturally based on context and convenience. These parents, depending on the situation, might switch between languages, the topic of conversation or the people involved. Finally, there is a combined approach, where parents unite deliberate and instinctive methods. This method ensures that the child is exposed to both languages in a balanced way, fostering a deep and more intuitive understanding of each in a way that does not put pressure on the parent or the child.

Question 6.

The participants were inquired about the language strategies they employed. Table 5 presents the strategies used (see 1.3.3.) and the percentage of the participants adhering to each strategy. It should be noted that one participant could identify multiple strategies.

Table 5. Linguistic strategies and their percentage usage

Strategy	Percentage, %
Pretending	13,1
Restriction	27,9
Topic adaptation	49,2
Skill adaptation	18
Compliance with the child's language choice	6,6
Correction of language confusion	36,1

Additionally, the respondents provided the following comments regarding the correction of the language confusion method:

- 1) *"I praise my child a lot for using the Russian language."* (Participant 24)
- 2) *"If my child switches to Italian, I do not correct him, I just remind him that we speak Russian."* (Participant 30)
- 3) *"For example, I explain mathematics in Italian, like his "maestra", and then in Russian. I don't pretend that I don't understand, I just ask: 'What is 'merenda' in Russian?' I often don't correct her mistakes, because it reduces the child's motivation."* (Participant 51)

The comments showed that mothers understood how important motivation is in learning languages. Therefore, they tried not to criticise but praise their children for using the L2.

Indeed, this approach is confirmed by Swenson et al. (2015). Applying this research to the problem of raising a bilingual child, there are several important reasons why parents of bilingual children should focus on praising their children's language efforts rather than only correcting mistakes or language switching:

- 1) *Praise as a positive parenting behavior*: for bilingual children, praise can reinforce their efforts in using both languages and motivate continued learning (Lou and Noels, 2017).
- 2) *Criticism's potential negative impact*: the study notes that criticism can undermine children's self-esteem and potentially lead to behavioral problems. For bilingual children, excessive correction and criticism for language mistakes or switching could discourage them from using both languages freely (De Houwer, 2009, as cited in Sevinç, 2022).

Thus, children's language efforts must be acknowledged. Even when mistakes are made or languages are mixed, creating a more supportive environment for bilingual development is more effective than focusing solely on corrections.

Question 7.

The actions parents take to expose their bilingual child to a minority language are crucial for establishing equilingualism, preserving and enhancing the child's connection to their cultural heritage and keeping strong family ties. The participants were asked: “*How do you create your child’s exposure to L2?*”

Table 6 presents the actions parents take to expose bilingual children to L2 (see 1.3.2.1) and the percentage of the participants engaging in each action.

Table 6. Language exposure actions and their percentage usage

Actions	Percentage, %
Consistent communication	91,8
Watching movies and cartoons in the target language	86,9
Reading in the target language	80,3
Listening to songs in Russian	80,3
Calls to relatives who speak Russian	78,7
Travelling to Russia or other post-Soviet countries where Russian is widely spoken	70,5
Teaching writing in the target language	59
Language schools and tutors	54,1
Communication with peers in Russian	54,1

In addition, participant 9 reported that she used the Russian version of Siri to create immersion into the target language. Finally, participant 13 added that every year her child lives 6 months in Italy and 6 months in Russia attending two kindergartens.

Parents' beliefs and ideologies

Question 8.

The participants were asked whether, in their opinion, age matters when it comes to learning languages.

The respondents' answers regarding the preferred age to introduce a second language can be divided into two groups: those who believe that an early start of education is advantageous, and those who doubt the importance of age as a factor of success.

First, answers that support the idea of an early start to education were analysed.

Among 49 respondents who supported early learning of a second language, many explicitly emphasised that learning from birth has many advantages. The subsequent paragraph presents the advantages along with illustrative examples of such arguments.

- *Natural language perception:* Participant 2 noted, “*Language acquired from birth is perceived as part of life.*” This remark signifies that introducing language early into a child's daily life makes language learning less forced and more organic.
- *Brain flexibility and ability to differentiate:* participant 9 stated that “*the brain is more flexible and gets used to several languages at once, and a child learns to differentiate the languages and pronounce different sounds.*” This statement is supported by scientific research (Li, Legault & Litcofsky, 2014) that shows the high neuroplasticity of children's brains, which makes the possibility of mastering multiple languages more realistic.
- *Automatization of the learning process:* according to Participant 25, one of the advantages of early bilingualism is that “*the child does not even notice that he is learning*”, i.e., learning at an early age occurs in the form of a game, which greatly facilitates the process.
- *Sense of authenticity:* along with the opinion “*it is better to start early so that it becomes a natural environment for the child, and not something from the outside*” (Participant 52), respondents emphasised that early learning helps the child perceive languages as an integral part of his life, and not as subjects to be studied.

Nevertheless, some parents questioned the necessity of initiating language instruction at an early age. They supported their opinion with the following statements:

- *Frequency of use:* Participant 20 claimed, “*Age does not matter but frequency of use does.*” This highlighted the importance of practical language use in everyday life, regardless of the age at which learning begins.
- *Motivation and awareness:* the comment “*Age is not important. What is crucial is understanding what a second language is useful for.*” Participant 29 suggests that awareness and motivation can play a larger role than simply the child's age. This opinion states that even if learning begins later, its effectiveness may depend on the learner's intrinsic motivation.

Difficulties caused by bilingualism

Struggles faced by parents

Question 9.

Raising a bilingual child may create many difficulties for parents. Indeed, only 23% of the participants reported not having any struggles raising a bilingual. On the contrary, 77% of the respondents acknowledged a variety of experienced challenges. These issues can be broken down into several categories that reflect both systemic issues and the individual challenges of each family:

1) Problems in maintaining the heritage language

Many mothers observed significant challenges in preserving their children's proficiency in the Russian language. Several participants emphasised the necessity of continuing, non-terminating efforts to ensure the use of Russian:

- “*The main difficulty for me is to get my child to communicate with me 100% in Russian.*” (Participant 19)
- “*I’ve faced difficulties of various kinds, but the most important thing is not to be lazy and be persistent. Sometimes, you should ‘swim against the tide.’*” (Participant 23)

2) The influence of the environment on language preservation.

Some respondents highlighted the influence of the Italian language environment on children and their tendency to switch to this language:

- *"Sometimes my child refuses to speak Russian."* (Participant 10)
- *"When my son goes to kindergarten or visits his Italian relatives, the Russian language begins to 'lose' to Italian."* (Participant 22)
- *"The child often replaces Russian words with Italian ones."* (Participant 4)
- *"At some point, it seemed that my daughter did not want to communicate in Russian."* (Participant 6)

Indeed, language environment plays one of the most important roles for a child's linguistic development. There are several factors why the Italian language environment may affect Russian-Italian young bilinguals greatly:

- When children are in a predominantly Italian environment, be it kindergarten, playing with peers or communicating with relatives, they naturally begin to perceive the Italian language as more familiar and comfortable. This results in them being able to communicate more easily in the language that is most common around them (Hoff et al., 2012).
- Children, especially at a young age, tend to adapt to the context of communication (Hoff & Naigles, 2002). If they regularly hear Italian speech and see that many people around them speak this particular language, then their brain will strive to simplify communication, which, in turn, can result in abandoning the Russian language or replacing Russian words with Italian ones.
- Children tend to want to be part of a group, so they may choose the language that is most common among their peers (Lee et al., 2021). This desire to fit into a social circle can lead to the fact that the Russian language loses its significance in their lives.

3) Lack of time and fatigue

Effective bilingual communication is more than just spending time together; it involves actively participating in conversations in both languages, reading literature, and discussing a wide range of subjects. This necessitates continual engagement and participation from parents, particularly when it relates to the use of a less prevalent language. However, 10% of those who reported experiencing struggles related to raising a bilingual child noted that often they did not have enough time for thorough teaching. Moreover, maintaining a minority language is greatly energy consuming which leads to parents' fatigue. The respondents shared that, raising a bilingual child, they had to find a lot of time for quality communication (Participants 17, 38).

Participant 10 even confessed that she feels “*like a radio*” because in order for her child to remember Russian vocabulary, he has to repeat everything many times.

4) Lack of Russian-speaking surroundings

A crucial element for achieving success in bilingual education is the regular opportunity to engage in communication with native speakers of the target language (Andreou & Galantomus, 2008). Ideally, children should have access to a social circle in which the Russian language is actively used, so that they can not only hear and repeat words but also learn linguistic nuances, cultural characteristics and authentic manner of speech. When there is no environment where a child can use the language in practice, the process of language acquisition becomes significantly harder. This results in the deterioration of the child's linguistic skills and their lack of enthusiasm to communicate in a language that they perceive as “unnecessary”. Thus, Participants 35 and 56 noted the lack of a Russian-speaking social circle in Italy for their children to have a greater linguistic exposure.

5) Lack of support and pressure from society

As described in Paragraph 1.4.1, even nowadays there are numerous stereotypes and myths surrounding the upbringing of bilingual children that can shape society's views on multilingualism as well as proper parenting. These prejudices come from a lack of awareness and outdated views on the development of language.

Sometimes, Russian-speaking mothers are the only people who can pass on their cultural and linguistic heritage to their children. However, immigrant mothers often find themselves in a frustrating situation, as their hard work is devalued and the society not only leaves the mothers without help but sometimes even forces them to stop teaching their child a minority language. Thus, Participant 45 talks about the “*incomprehension and hostility of the Italian primary education system towards bilingual children*” meaning that she received “*strong advice to completely abandon any non-Italian language*”. Another case of bilingual upbringing non-acceptance is reported by Participant 29, however, in this situation, the hostility came not from the school system but from the family: “*Rejection of a second language by Italian grandparents. They categorically refuse to understand why this is necessary.*”

Question 10.

Taking into consideration the fact that the majority of parents faced difficulties raising a bilingual child, the question “*If you could go back in time, would you do anything different in*

raising your child as bilingual? If yes, what?” invited them to reflect on their decisions and the changes they would or would not make.

Interestingly, 78,7% of the participants would not change anything in raising their bilingual children. This indicates overall satisfaction with the chosen method of education and a positive experience of bilingual education within the Italian environment. Nevertheless, some mothers would change something in the upbringing of their bilingual children. It is worth noting that their reflections mostly focused on linguistic tactics and cultural integration.

Firstly, regarding language approaches, the OPOL method was prominently mentioned by multiple participants (68%). This suggests that some mothers, in hindsight, would consider adopting a more structured approach to language distribution between parents. Moreover, it can be concluded that generally, parents consider OPOL as “the right” linguistic approach and the mixed approach as an inferior one. Additionally, many expressed a desire to increase the time devoted to the Russian language in various forms. This includes incorporating more Russian cartoons and literature, as well as encouraging more active use of the Russian language in everyday activities.

Furthermore, some mothers emphasized the importance of early introduction to writing and additional language learning. This focus on a more structured approach to language acquisition indicates a recognition of the benefits of formal language instruction, even at a young age. Moreover, cultural aspects were not overlooked in these reflections. Notably, Participant 61 highlighted the significance of frequent trips to Russia. Such visits, she believed, were crucial for maintaining both linguistic proficiency and cultural connections. This perspective underscores the importance of cultural integration alongside language training in raising bilingual children.

Struggles faced by children

Questions 11, 12.

Out of the total number of respondents, 42,6% claimed that their children did not experience any challenges in linguistic development. At the same time, more than half of the participants reported the existence of certain problems.

Thus, the issue of language mixing is the most prevalent among all challenges. (39,3% of the total number of respondents and 68,6% of those having difficulties). However, many parents did not consider this a critical problem, considering it a natural stage in the process of mastering two languages: “*Language mixing is inevitable.*” (Participant 31); “*He mixed languages but I don’t consider it a problem.*” (Participant 35) The fact that parents do not consider mixing languages a serious developmental impairment is a positive trend as mixing two languages or changing rapidly from one to another in the same utterance is the normal practice of bilingual speakers and is not an indicator of a language problem. (Wei et al., 2005)

Another common developmental problem was a delayed speech start (26,2% of the total number of respondents and 45,7% of those having difficulties). However, it is crucial to remember that there is no scientific evidence between speech delay and early bilingualism. According to Lowry (2016) who recounted Meisel’s (2004) book *The Handbook of Bilingualism*, bilingual children may exhibit a minor delay in their acquisition of first words compared to monolingual children, however, this delay falls within the typical range of 8 to 15 months. Another important thought that Lowry (2016) added to her article belongs to Paradis et al. (2011): “Bilingualism itself does not cause language delay”. Therefore, a bilingual child, similar to a monolingual child, who is showing notable delays in language development may have a language impairment and should be evaluated by a speech-language pathologist.

Additionally, some mothers signaled a subconscious transfer of grammatical and lexical structures from Italian to Russian and vice versa done by their children. Thus, Participant 30 shared that sometimes, when her daughter speaks Russian, she calls her grandparents “дедушки [dedushki]” (Eng. “grandfathers”) which is a calque from the Italian “nonni” and is a mistake in Russian. Wei et al. (2005) highlighted that bilinguals, particularly young children, have the ability to use their languages in a creative and playful manner. For example, they may incorporate sounds from one language into words from another language, or arrange words from one language in a grammatically acceptable order from the other language. At an early age, such creative use of the language often indicates the child's linguistic awareness and competence rather than a disorder.

It is important to note that 75,4% of the mothers reported that their children did not have any linguistic development issues at this point in time. The majority of young bilinguals successfully overcame the aforementioned difficulties as they grew older.

Another notable characteristic is that the participants whose children successfully resolved the existing issues frequently reported that this occurred at a specific age. Participants 32 and 46 stated that it was 6 years, while participants 7 and 54 indicated that it was 14-15 and 10-11 years respectively. Simultaneously, the mean age of children who continue to confront metalinguistic challenges (excluding speech delay) is 6,9 years which corresponds to the first year of primary school in Italy. Thus, it may be inferred that simultaneous bilinguals may encounter challenges in their linguistic development throughout their early years, but these issues can be surmounted as the children grow up.

Advice

Advice received

Question 13.

In the journey of raising bilingual children, parents often seek guidance from various specialists and employ different methods to ensure the best outcomes for their kids. The parents were asked: *“Have you received any guidance or recommendations from professionals regarding the upbringing of your bilingual child?”*

Participant 10 illustrated the dedication and comprehensive approach to enriching her and her spouse’s knowledge on bilingualism, *“I constantly read literature on bilingualism. I even took my husband to seminars on the benefits of bilingualism.”* This demonstrates how she involved her family in understanding the importance of their bilingual journey.

Moreover, Participants 6, 22, 23, 24 and 28 reported to have sought assistance from speech therapists, paediatricians and neuropsychologists, both Russian- and Italian-speaking. Generally, the mothers were supported by the professionals. For example, participant 24 received reassuring advice from her paediatrician, who confirmed that *“it is correct to speak to a bilingual child two languages from birth.”* The doctor also prepared the family for potential challenges, explaining *“that my son might start speaking later and that's normal.”* This information, as reported by the mother, helped the family feel “ready” for the bilingual journey ahead. However, the Italian speech therapist of Participant 23 insisted that the mother stop speaking Russian to her child. Nevertheless, the mother chose not to follow this recommendation, understanding that maintaining both languages was essential for her child's development.

Furthermore, some respondents benefited received support and advice from professionals working in Russian Saturday schools. Noteworthy, these participants highlighted the exceptional quality of assistance they received from teachers in such institutions. As Participant 45 enthusiastically shared, *“Teachers in a Russian school were incredibly helpful. Their recommendations were always timely and to the point.”*

While some parents were actively looking for professional help, a significant majority (70,5%) preferred to overcome the challenges of raising bilingual children without expert guidance. Such participants relied on their own knowledge and intuition when handling the complexities of bilingual child-rearing. Thus, several respondents emphasized their professional or educational experience as the foundation for their self-assurance. For instance, Participant 6 confidently stated, “I am a philologist. I relied on myself.” Furthermore, 11,5% of the respondents reported studying the issue of bilingualism independently through literature and Internet resources, highlighting a proactive approach to self-education.

Luckily, nowadays every parent can benefit from a wealth of resources adapted to their specific needs. These additional materials not only enrich the strategies already employed by parents of bilingual children but also provide valuable support for those seeking further guidance.

One such resource is the PEaCH Project¹ (Preserving and Promoting Europe's Cultural and Linguistic Heritage Project) that offers a great number of materials for parents and educators of bilingual children in European countries, including Italy.

Moreover, Multilingual Parenting² is worth noting, as it is a great resource supporting the efforts of Russian-Italian families. It offers an extensive collection of over 500 informative articles and Q&A posts on bilingualism, a Facebook community for connecting with other multilingual families, and the option to book sessions with family language coaches. This resource can be particularly beneficial for parents like Participant 10, who actively looks for information and involves her partner in the learning process.

For bilingual families residing in Italy, MammaPrada³ would be a good resource that contains articles on raising bilingual children and gives a possibility to book personalized consultations.

¹ <https://bilingualfamily.eu>

² <https://multilingualparenting.com/coaches/>

³ <https://www.mammaprada.com/bilinguallanguagedevelopment>

This could be especially useful for parents who want to be well-prepared for the challenges and milestones of bilingual development.

Supporting bilingual families undoubtedly necessitates a multifaceted professional approach. This includes the ongoing creation of specialized resources, the cultivation of community support networks, and the enhancement of understanding of the advantages and problems of bilingualism. By doing so, it can be guaranteed that Russian-Italian families, as well as all bilingual families, possess the necessary resources and assistance to effectively traverse the enriching experience of raising bilingual children.

Question 14.

Relatives play a great role in supporting bilingual children by sharing cultural traditions, providing authentic language environment and creating a wider social network that inspires children to practice their languages. Often extended family members have their own views and opinions on raising a bilingual child. Thus, the study offered the question “*Have other family members offered advice regarding the upbringing of your bilingual child? What was that advice about? Do you agree with it? If not, why?*” in order to see what convictions regarding raising a bilingual child extended family members have, what actions they propose and how these differing perspectives influence the language strategies adopted by parents.

The majority of mothers (62,3%) reported that neither their family nor their partner’s relatives provided any advice on raising their bilingual child. This suggests that the topic of parenting multilingual children is either not a subject of conversation inside the family, or that relatives accept and respect the decisions and approaches of the parents. However, almost 40% of the respondents indicated that they received guidance, which can be categorised into two distinct groups:

- 1) To speak only Italian to the child.

Some mothers were advised to restrict the use of the Russian language based on the belief that since the child lives in Italy, the second language (Russian) would interfere with the development of the Italian language and confuse the child. This advice was given to Participants 7, 10, 11, 13, 24, 28, 38, 40, and 41, which accounted for 14,8% of all responses and 39,1% of those who received advice. Every mother unequivocally dismissed this advice, considering it crucial to maintain both languages. The mothers provided justifications for their

answers, either based on personal convictions or by referencing professional practices, e.g., “*I get stupid advice all the time, but this is due to ignorance of the matter. I showed my husband and his mother specialized literature and advice of professionals, but I ignore opinions of other people.*” (Participant 4); “*At the beginning, the Italian grandmother was worried that speaking two languages would be difficult for the child, and because until the age of 3 he spoke Italian worse than Russian, she suggested that I speak only Italian with the child. I explained why I did not do this and reassured her that the language of the environment would prevail.*” (Participant 10)

2) To read more literature on bilingualism and seek professional help.

Participants 11 and 25 were advised to seek guidance from a speech therapist and read more books about bilingualism. This advice was well received, and the mothers considered it valid. It can be noted that there are some common traits in the mothers’ reactions to the advice given by their relatives. Some mothers directly stated that the advice was incompetent due to the lack of knowledge of those who provided it. (Participants 3, 55, 57). The mothers found it absurd to suggest that studying Russian should only begin at the age of five or that giving up on a second language entirely was reasonable. In these situations, parents either sought guidance from professionals or disregarded superfluous advice. In addition, several participants asserted their expertise in raising a multilingual child due to their qualifications or personal experience (Participants 3, 15, 36, 52, 57). These mothers firmly defend their methods and disregard the advice of non-expert relatives.

Indeed, most of the advice provided is incorrect from the point of view of bilingual education. Encouraging the child to only use one language (Italian) may negatively affect their proficiency in both languages. Multiple research papers demonstrate that for bilingual children, it is important to consider the quantity of their exposure to each language. While a bilingual’s two languages do influence each other to a certain degree (Döpke, 2000), in many ways they travel on independent developmental paths. Bilingual children who hear a large amount of a particular language, learn more words and grammar in that language (Hoff et al., 2012) and show more efficient processing of that language (Conboy & Mills, 2006). Bilingual parents thus need to ensure that their children have sufficient exposure to the languages they want their children to learn.

However, specialized advice, such as reading books in a second language or consulting a speech therapist, may be helpful, particularly, when facing unique challenges.

In general, most mothers take a professional approach and adhere to practical multilingual parenting methods, often ignoring unsolicited or incompetent advice from others.

Advice for others

Question 15.

The participants were asked to share their personal recommendations and advice for other parents on how to effectively raise a bilingual child: “If you were asked to give advice to parents about raising a bilingual child, what recommendations would you give?”

The parents' comments reveal numerous important recommendations for raising and educating bilingual children. For example, most participants (54%) recommended constantly communicating with their children in their parents' native languages. The advantages of adopting this strategy include not only the opportunity to enhance children's language proficiency, but also the chance to broaden their cultural horizons, as Participant 29 highlighted, *“Your child has a chance to be part of two cultures, and this is wonderful. Both cultures should be equally important!”*. Additionally, the respondents advised speaking one's native language regardless of what others may say (Participant 39: *“Mothers should always speak her language with their children, regardless of the situation, even if someone around is against it.”*). The participants also gave advice to actively seek opportunities to develop the language, such as traveling to one's homeland and maintaining contact with relatives and friends who speak the target language.

Limitations

Several notable limitations of this research should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was based on a sample size of 61 participants. This narrow scope cannot be reported as ground truth for all the mixed Russian-Italian families raising a bilingual child in Italy. Moreover, the study focused only on mixed Russian-Italian families residing in Italy, which reflected its own unique social, cultural and linguistic peculiarities. These specific conditions may limit the applicability of the results to mixed families speaking other languages, living within different cultural settings and experiencing varying societal attitudes towards bilingualism.

Additionally, the study sample lacked diversity in some aspects, especially in the age and the education level of the participants. Due to the recruitment methods (voluntary response and snowball sampling), there happened to be no participants younger than 28 and older than 54 years which limits the range of their experience. Moreover, 98% of the participants had post-secondary education, and many parents worked in areas related to linguistics or education. Education levels have often been mentioned as affecting decisions regarding bilingual children's upbringing which may have influenced the study results.

Finally, the data collected in this study was obtained from self-reported answers, which introduces the potential for biases. Thus, responses may have been affected by memory recall issues or the participants' subjective interpretations of their actions and experiences, all of which could compromise the accuracy and objectivity of the findings.

Conclusion

In the present study, a detailed analysis of the experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by parents in mixed Russian-Italian families is provided. Concentrating on the subtleties of decision-making processes and language practices within bilingual families, the research contributes to a more profound understanding of how parents, especially immigrant parents, manage the challenges of raising bilingual children while preserving cultural heritage.

The findings reveal that most families adhere to the "One Parent, One Language" (OPOL) strategy, wherein each parent consistently speaks their native language to the child. OPOL is seen as the most effective approach to fostering equilingualism (see 2.1) and maintaining cultural identity by exposing children to the linguistic and cultural heritage of both parents. Nevertheless, the questionnaire results also highlighted that some families implement a mixed approach, showing flexibility about their linguistic choices and switching languages depending on situational contexts, individual child preferences, or the presence of other people nearby.

Despite the numerous benefits of bilingualism, the study reveals several significant challenges faced both by bilingual children and mothers who fight for maintaining the heritage language, Russian, in a predominantly Italian-speaking environment. The most frequent problems experienced by children are delayed speech development and code-mixing. However, parents generally perceived them as part of natural processes in bilingual development rather than

serious impediments. Additionally, key challenges faced by Russian-speaking mothers include the strong influence of the local Italian context, a lack of Russian-speaking peers or community support, and societal pressures that often prioritize the dominant language. Regular practice of Russian outside the home, especially in public settings, caused struggles for many parents.

To address these challenges, the study highlights a range of strategies that can be used by parents in order to foster bilingual development. These comprise the consistent use of the target language at home, adequate efforts to correct language mixing and fostering exposure to the minority language through various tools, such as literature, songs, cultural activities, and travel to the target language-speaking countries. Moreover, extended family members play an important role in reinforcing the heritage language and, therefore, may influence greatly the child's development. Additionally, some parents refer to nannies or tutors who speak the target language, further enriching the child's linguistic environment.

Interpreting the research findings, it is crucial to take into account its limitations. Utilization of a relatively small sample size consisting of 61 participants, all of whom are native Russian-speaking mothers living in Italy, might restrict the applicability of the results to different settings or types of families. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data entails inherent biases, which may affect the credibility of the results.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations, the study makes several contributions to the field of early bilingualism research. It provides a critical analysis of how family dynamics, cultural influences, and societal contexts affect bilingual development and offers practical insights into the methods that parents refer to in order to support their children's engagement in their heritage languages. The research also highlights the importance of maintaining a supportive and culturally enriching environment that motivates children to enhance proficiency in both languages without stress and anxiety.

This study suggests several directions for future investigation. Expanding the sample to include families with more diverse background, developing longitudinal methods to track the development of bilingual children over an extended period of time and providing not only parents' but also children's perspectives would enable a more holistic view of bilingual upbringing. Additionally, exploring the impact of external factors, such as educational settings,

peer interactions, and community resources, could further enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics involved in raising bilingual children.

Overall, this study contributes to the wider discussion on heritage language preservation, cultural integration, and the promotion of plurilingualism in multicultural societies by discussing the experiences and decisions of Russian-Italian bilingual families regarding safeguarding both languages while adapting to societal pressures and cultural differences, thus offering practical insights and recommendations for fostering bilingualism in analogous contexts.

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Appendix 1

Summary of participant information

Participant's number	Parents										Children				
	L1	Age	Gender	Other languages spoken	Occupation	L1 of the other parent	Other languages of the other parent	Educational stage	Country of residence	L1	L2	Age	Gender	If the child has siblings	
1	Russian	42	F	Italian, English, Tatar	Manager	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	1,5	F	No	
2	Russian	42	F	Italian	Film director	Italian	Russian	Bachelor's degree	Italy	Russian	Italian	22	F	Yes	
3	Russian	36	F	Italian, English	Translator	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	2	F	No	
4	Russian	39	F	Italian, English	Marketing specialist	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	3	M	Yes	
5	Russian	44	F	Italian, English	Housewife	Italian	French	Bachelor's degree	Italy	Russian	Italian	6	M	Yes	
6	Russian	54	F	Italian, English	Office worker	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	20	F	No	
7	Russian	48	F	Italian, German, French, Spanish, the dialect of Verona	Teacher	Italian	No	Bachelor's degree	Italy	Russian	Italian	8	F	Yes	
8	Russian	43	F	Italian, English, Spanish, French	Salesperson	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	9	F	Yes	
9	Russian	43	F	Italian, German, French, Spanish, English	Secretary	Italian	No	Upper secondary education (11 grades of school)	Italy	Russian	Italian	8	F	No	
10	Russian	38	F	Italian, French, German, Spanish	Linguist	Italian	No	PhD	Italy	Italian	Russian	6	M	Yes	
11	Russian	37	F	Italian, English	Teacher	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	10	F	Yes	

12	Russian	43	F	Italian, English	Translator	Italian	Neapolitan	Technical and vocational education	Italy
13	Russian	34	F	Italian, Slovak	Psychologist	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
14	Russian	28	F	Italian, English, Ukrainian, Portuguese	Teacher	Italian	Portuguese	Bachelor's degree	Italy
15	Russian	38	F	Italian, English, German	Marketing specialist	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy, Russia
16	Russian	44	F	Italian, English	Teacher	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
17	Russian	46	F	English	Finance	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy
18	Russian	41	F	Italian, English, Veneto	Hairdresser	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
19	Russian	32	F	Italian, Ukrainian, English	Graphic designer	Italian	No	Bachelor's degree	Italy
20	Russian	39	F	Italian, English	Cosmetologist	Italian	English	PhD	Italy
21	Russian	39	F	Italian	Engineer	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
22	Russian	33	F	Italian, English	Housewife	Italian	Comasco	Master's degree	Italy
23	Russian	41	F	Italian	Fitness coach	Italian	No	Technical and vocational education	Italy
24	Russian	40	F	Italian	Economist	Italian	Russian	Bachelor's degree	Italy
25	Russian	40	F	Italian, English	Architect	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy

Russian	Italian	7	F	No
Russian	Italian	7	M	No
Russian	Italian	4	F	No
Italian	Russian	4	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	9	M	No
Italian	Russian	4	F	Yes but monolingual
Italian	Russian	7,5	F	No
Italian	Russian	9	F	No
Russian	English and Italian	12	F	No
Italian	Russian	3	M	No
Italian	Russian	3,5	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	12	M	Yes
Russian	Italian	12	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	7	F	Yes

26	Russian	46	F	German, English, Italian	Teacher	Italian	German	Master's degree	Italy
27	Russian	45	F	Italian, English	Housewife	Italian	No	Bachelor's degree	Italy
28	Russian	36	F	Italian, Spanish	Teacher, translator	Italian	English	PhD	Italy
29	Russian	36	F	Italian, English, Spanish, French	Housewife	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy
30	Russian	42	F	Italian, French, English	Teacher, translator	Italian	No	PhD	Italy
31	Russian	42	F	Italian, Belorussian, Neapolitan	Accountant	Italian	No	Bachelor's degree	Italy
32	Russian	41	F	Italian, English	Engineer	Italian	Russian	Master's degree	Italy
33	Russian	47	F	Italian	Housewife	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
34	Russian	36	F	Italian	Nutritionist	Italian	No	PhD	Italy
35	Russian	40	F	English, Italian	Housewife	Italian	English	Bachelor's degree	Italy
36	Russian	41	F	English, Italian, Tuscan dialect	Hairstresser	Italian	English	Technical and vocational education	Italy
37	Russian	36	F	Italian	Tourism	Italian	No	Technical and vocational education	Italy
38	Russian	42	F	Ukrainian, English	Psychologist	Italian	English	PhD	Italy
39	Russian	33	F	Italian, English	Housewife	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy

Italian	Russian	10	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	5	F	Yes but monolingua 1
Italian	Russian	1,5	F	No
Russian	Italian	7	F	No
Italian	Russian	8	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	10	M	Yes
Italian	Russian	13	M	No
Italian	Russian	8	F	No
Italian	Russian	6	F	Yes
Italian and Russian	English and Russian	6/4/2	Препри очта но не указыв ать	Yes
Italian	Russian	6	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	5	M	No
Italian	Russian	8	F	Yes
Russian	Italian	6	M	Yes

40	Russian	44	F	Italian, English	Journalist	Italian	Russian and English	Master's degree	Italy
41	Russian	40	F	Italian, English, German	Linguist	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy
42	Russian	50	F	Italian, German, English	Teacher	Italian	No	PhD	Italy
43	Russian	36	F	Italian, English	Hotel business	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
44	Russian	50	F	Italian, English	Teacher	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
45	Russian	43	F	Italian, English	Manager	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy
46	Russian	33	F	Italian	FL teacher	Italian	Russian	Bachelor's degree	Italy
47	Russian	49	F	Italian, English	Manager	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
48	Russian	40	F	Italian, English, Spanish	Translator	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
49	Russian	40	F	Italian, German	Secretary	Italian	No	PhD	Italy
50	Russian	50	F	Italian, English	Bank employee	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
51	Russian	33	F	Italian, Veneto dialect, English, German	Housewife	Italian	No	Bachelor's degree	Italy
52	Russian	36	F	Italian, English	Tourist guide	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
53	Russian	48	F	Italian	Tourist guide	Italian	No	Technical and vocational education	Italy
54	Russian	41	F	Italian, English, French	Tourist guide	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy
55	Russian	43	F	Italian, English	Teacher	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy

Italian	Russian	11	F	No
Italian	Russian	8	M	Yes
Italian	Russian	18	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	12	M	Yes
Italian	Russian	12	M	No
Italian	Russian	17	M	Yes
Russian	Italian	9	M	Yes
Russian	Italian	13	M	Yes
Italian	Russian	4	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	7	M	Yes
Italian	Russian	10	F	No
Italian	Russian	6	F	Yes
Italian	Russian	4	M	Yes
Italian	Russian	20	M	Yes but monolingua 1
Italian	Russian	9	M	No
Italian	Russian	5	F	Yes

56	Russian	44	F	Italian, English	Teacher	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	English, German and Russian	13	M	Yes
57	Russian	41	F	Italian, English	Teacher	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy	Russian	Italian	3	M	No
	Russian	43	F	Italian, English	Teacher	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	10	F	Yes
59	Russian	33	F	Italian, the regional dialect of Italian, Ukrainian, English	Event planner	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	1,5	M	No
	Russian	47	F	Italian, English	Cosmetologist	Italian	English	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	18	F	No
60	Russian	45	F	Italian, English	Sleep consultant	Italian	No	Master's degree	Italy	Italian	Russian	6	F	No
61	Russian													