

FAMILY DYNAMICS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN MULTICULTURAL HOUSEHOLDS: A CROSS-COUNTRY ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Multilingual households are rapidly expanding worldwide, yet most research still focuses on monolingual or bilingual families, leaving the dynamics of multilingual households underexplored. Guided by Coleman's Family Capital Theory, this study investigates how multi-ethnic families in Canada, Pakistan, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia negotiate heritage language transmission alongside English acquisition. Using a cross-country ethnographic design, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, video reminiscences, and archival research were conducted with 40 families (Canada 12, Pakistan 10, Jordan 9, Saudi Arabia 9), including children aged 5–18. Sample sizes were tailored to cultural access and feasibility rather than equal national quotas. Findings reveal that storytelling, moral teaching, and religious rituals are central to preserving heritage languages, while English is prioritized for education and employment. Families experienced accent-related identity issues, reduced heritage language proficiency among younger members, and intergenerational communication gaps. Children's incidental exposure to digital platforms (e.g., educational apps, YouTube, online religious classes) and the challenges of displacement among migrant families were observed but not systematically measured. The study underscores that English supports integration and mobility but risks weakening cultural and linguistic identity. It recommends that educators and

policymakers design pluralist, culturally responsive strategies—such as embedding family-driven literacy practices into curricula and fostering additive bilingualism through community and school partnerships—to sustain heritage languages alongside English. The comparative ethnographic approach offers a replicable framework for future cross-cultural studies. Longitudinal research and systematic examination of digital technologies and displacement contexts are proposed as key directions to advance understanding of intergenerational language maintenance and identity resilience.

Keywords: Multicultural families; English language acquisition; Heritage language retention; Multilingual households; Family communication patterns; Cross-cultural ethnography; Family language policy (FLP)

INTRODUCTION

The statement by UNESCO (2023) revealed that more than 40 percent of the global population now lives in multilingual households, where children are routinely exposed to two or more languages. This figure is rising in regions shaped by migration and globalization, including Canada, the Middle East, and South Asia. While multilingualism encompasses a broad spectrum of languages, this study specifically investigates the tension between heritage languages and English acquisition within multi-ethnic households. This focus reflects English's global status as a language of schooling, employment, and upward mobility, juxtaposed with families' efforts to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage. By foregrounding this tension, the research moves beyond generic multilingualism to explore how families actively negotiate competing language priorities across generations. Multilingualism can be an asset for cognitive development and social integration, yet it also introduces tensions between maintaining heritage languages and acquiring global languages such as English (OECD, 2023). These tensions become especially visible across generations, as parents, grandparents, and children adopt different language practices that can generate communication gaps, identity struggles, and inconsistent acquisition trajectories.

Despite this demographic shift, research still offers limited evidence on how multicultural families negotiate English acquisition and heritage language retention within everyday family interactions. Existing studies focus mainly on bilingualism in schools or communities (King & Fogle, 2022; Tannenbaum & Berkovich, 2021). Overlooking the family as the first and most influential site of language socialization (Guardado, 2022). Without systematic evidence from diverse family contexts, educational policy risks undervaluing the role of parental attitudes, intergenerational dynamics, and cultural practices in shaping children's language development. The existing gap is twofold. First, most studies emphasize monolingual or bilingual households, with limited comparative ethnographic research on multilingual families that must simultaneously manage more than two languages. Second, cross-cultural investigations remain rare, even though globalization ensures that immigrant and multi-ethnic families in places like Saudi Arabia, Canada, Pakistan, and Jordan increasingly face shared dilemmas in negotiating language use (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2022). Addressing this gap matters because effective family language policy not only impacts children's English proficiency but also determines whether heritage languages survive across generations, with consequences for cultural continuity, social equity, and educational success.

This study, therefore, applies Coleman's (1990) theory of family capital to investigate how family communication patterns, parental attitudes, and cultural practices shape English acquisition and heritage language retention in multi-ethnic households. Coleman's Family Capital Theory was selected because it explicitly links family-level social, cultural, and religious capital to children's educational and linguistic outcomes, making it especially suited to analyzing heritage English tensions. While sociocultural and ecological models (e.g., Bronfenbrenner (1979) address broader environmental influences, Family Capital Theory by

James S Coleman (1990) foregrounds the micro-level intergenerational transmission of norms, practices, and values that directly shape language acquisition. By using a comparative ethnographic approach across four countries, the research provides nuanced insights into how everyday interactions, storytelling, religious rituals, and moral teaching influence language trajectories.

The study pursues three specific objectives:

1. To examine how family communication patterns and parental attitudes influence English acquisition and heritage language retention.
2. To identify the similarities and differences in language practices across multicultural households in Canada, Pakistan, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.
3. To analyze how intergenerational interactions contribute to or hinder children's bilingual and multilingual development.

From these objectives, three guiding research questions are posed:

1. How do family communication patterns and parental attitudes affect children's English language acquisition and heritage language retention?
2. What similarities and differences exist in intergenerational language practices across multicultural households in different cultural contexts?
3. What strategies within families most effectively support English learning while preserving heritage languages?

Accordingly, the study hypothesizes that across all four national contexts, families that integrate cultural practices such as storytelling, moral instruction, and religious rituals into daily communication will exhibit stronger heritage language retention alongside English proficiency compared to families prioritizing English exclusively. This hypothesis anticipates both within-country and cross-country variation and positions family practices as the decisive factor rather than demographic context alone.

Based on prior research, the guiding hypothesis is that families that actively integrate cultural practices such as storytelling, moral instruction, and religious rituals into daily communication will demonstrate stronger heritage language retention alongside English proficiency than families that prioritize English exclusively.

The significance of this research lies in both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends Coleman's family capital theory by situating it within multilingual, cross-cultural contexts, highlighting how cultural and religious capital influence language practices beyond economic and social dimensions. It also enriches family language policy (FLP) literature by foregrounding intergenerational dynamics in diverse cultural environments. This study primarily applies established FLP principles to new cultural contexts while also extending the framework by integrating intergenerational, religious, and digital dimensions that are underexplored in existing models. In doing so, it moves beyond descriptive application to offer theoretical refinements that recognize heritage-English negotiations as dynamic rather than static policies. At the macro level, Hornberger (2006) similarly emphasizes how language policy frameworks must account for family, school, and societal forces simultaneously, reinforcing the need for integrative models like the one applied here. Practically, the findings provide educators and policymakers with evidence-based strategies for promoting English proficiency without marginalizing heritage languages. Recommendations such as integrating family-driven literacy practices into curricula and encouraging additive bilingualism through pluralist policies can strengthen equity and inclusion in education.

The novelty of this work stems from its comparative ethnographic design that includes households across four distinct regions with children aged 5–18. This methodological breadth allows the study to capture both commonalities and context-specific dynamics in family

language practices. Furthermore, by triangulating observation, interviews, and archival data, the study offers replicable insights that can inform interventions in other multilingual societies. Ultimately, this research contributes to scholarly debates on globalization, language acquisition, and intercultural education while offering practical solutions for sustaining heritage languages in an era dominated by English.

Building on this theoretical and empirical gap, the following literature review examines how family language policy (FLP), intergenerational communication, and cultural practices shape English acquisition and heritage language retention across diverse contexts. By situating this study within FLP and sociocultural perspectives, it highlights the need for cross-national, ethnographic evidence to inform educational and policy interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interplay between family dynamics and language acquisition in multicultural households remains a critical yet underexplored area of sociolinguistics. While the Family Language Policy (FLP) framework has been widely used to examine heritage language maintenance, relatively few studies investigate how English, as a dominant societal and global language, is strategically acquired and negotiated within families across diverse cultural contexts. Recent reviews conceptualize FLP as a continuum that ranges from rigid monolingual practices to flexible multilingualism, showing how parental ideologies shaped by socioeconomic background, migration history, and cultural identity affect family language choices (Sanjani et al., 2025).

Despite a growing body of FLP research, evidence from Middle Eastern and South Asian contexts remains limited. Studies from Saudi Arabia by Al-Ahdal (2023) and Jordan (Abu-Rabia & Maroun, 2022) show that family attitudes toward English are shaped by state curricula and migration histories, yet few have examined heritage–English negotiations ethnographically. In Pakistan, emerging research highlights how urban multilingual families use English as a marker of social mobility while maintaining Urdu or regional languages for identity continuity (S. Khan & Malik, 2024). This study addresses this gap by bringing ethnographic evidence from these underrepresented regions into direct comparison with Canadian households.

Recent work has begun to address these gaps. For example, Al-Ahdal (2023) documents how Saudi families balance English schooling with Qur’anic Arabic at home, while Guba et al. (2021) show how Jordanian families negotiate Arabic–English tensions in international school settings. Similarly, Khan & Malik (2024) highlight how urban multilingual families in Pakistan use English as a marker of social mobility while maintaining Urdu and regional languages for identity continuity. These studies provide a regional backdrop and underscore the need for ethnographic research like the present study.

Emerging scholarship from the Middle East underscores the distinct language practices of families in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. For instance, Al-Ahdal (2023) documents how Saudi households balance English instruction with Qur’anic Arabic in home settings, while Guba et al. (2021) highlight Jordanian families’ efforts to maintain Arabic alongside English in international school contexts. These studies show that heritage language maintenance is deeply tied to religious and educational systems, providing a regional backdrop for the present research. The evidence can be found in research by Hua and Li (2016) documented how Chinese transnational families in Britain prioritized Mandarin for cultural maintenance, often relegating English to a secondary role despite its societal dominance. While these studies illuminate ideological motivations, their narrow focus on heritage language preservation limits our understanding of how English functions within family communication as a resource for mobility and educational opportunity.

Emerging scholarship further highlights the significance of intergenerational dynamics and child agency in shaping household communication patterns. Ethnographic studies reveal that children are not passive recipients of parental decisions but active participants who often resist or reshape language policies. Lanza and Lexander (2023), for instance, found that Nigerian-Norwegian children code-switched to English as a means of asserting independence from parental expectations. In contrast, Asian contexts reveal different power dynamics. Raj (2024) showed that Indian families in Northern Ireland adhered more strictly to parental authority, with children's resistance to heritage language mandates often sparking conflict. These findings underscore the importance of examining cross-cultural variation in how parental authority and child agency interact to shape language acquisition.

At the societal level, institutional and policy frameworks exert powerful influence on family practices, though such influences are often treated as static backdrops rather than dynamic interactions. In Japan, institutional monolingualism has pressured multicultural families to prioritize Japanese at the expense of both heritage languages and English (Capobianco, 2022). By contrast, Canada's official multilingualism provides families with a more supportive environment to sustain flexible FLPs (Curdtt-Christiansen, 2023). Yet relatively little is known about how families navigate schools, digital platforms, and media in ways that actively mediate English acquisition. For instance, language apps, YouTube, and gaming platforms are increasingly part of children's daily linguistic landscape, but their role remains underexamined in FLP research. In our fieldwork, children's incidental use of digital platforms, including educational apps, online religious classes, and YouTube, was noted as part of their daily routines. While these observations were not systematically quantified, they provide preliminary evidence that digital environments act as an informal yet influential site of bilingual and heritage language socialization.

This observation aligns with findings from Pakistan showing how bilingual users express identity online, such as Pashto-English bilingualism on social media, and complements studies of technology-enhanced language learning in ESL classrooms (H. Khan et al., 2025; Zafar et al., 2025). These works suggest that digital spaces are rapidly becoming informal arenas of language socialization.

Comparative approaches to FLP remain rare and largely siloed within specific cultural or geographic groups. Studies on East Asian or European families dominate, while research across Global South contexts is sparse. Hatoss (2024), in a study of Sudanese refugees in Australia, contrasted first-generation parents who prioritized heritage language with second-generation children who gravitated toward English, thereby exposing the tensions that arise across migration generations. However, most cross-cultural studies rely heavily on self-reported survey data rather than ethnographic observation, limiting insight into the nuances of daily family interaction. This methodological gap is significant because it constrains our ability to understand the lived experiences of families negotiating multiple languages simultaneously.

To address these limitations, scholars have called for more integrative theoretical frameworks that can account for both micro-level practices and macro-level structures. FLP offers a foundation for understanding ideological and practical choices in language planning, yet combining it with Vygotsky's social-cultural theory (1978) brings attention to the role of social interactions and cultural tools, including digital technologies, in shaping language development. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital further highlights how English proficiency operates as symbolic capital, opening pathways for educational and economic mobility. Taken together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional lens to capture the competing cultural, social, and economic pressures that shape English acquisition within multicultural households.

Despite advances in the field, several gaps remain. First, research has tended to prioritize heritage language maintenance while neglecting English, even though English plays a crucial role in children's academic and social trajectories. Second, cross-cultural ethnographic comparisons remain limited, restricting our ability to identify commonalities and differences across contexts such as Asia, the Middle East, and North America. In this study, the three frameworks are treated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Family Language Policy (FLP) explains micro-level decisions and practices within households; sociocultural theory situates these practices in broader social interaction and cultural tools, including digital platforms; and Bourdieu's cultural capital concept highlights how English proficiency operates as symbolic capital for mobility. By triangulating these perspectives, the analysis captures both agency and structure recognizing that tensions between them may arise but can also yield richer interpretations of heritage–English negotiations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative comparative ethnographic design to investigate how multicultural families navigate the acquisition of English alongside the preservation of heritage languages. A qualitative approach was chosen because it captures the depth and complexity of interpersonal and intergenerational dynamics that cannot be reduced to numerical measures alone. While quantitative approaches can measure proficiency levels or frequency of language use, they cannot adequately account for the nuanced negotiations, cultural tensions, and social meanings embedded in family communication. Ethnography, in contrast, situates language learning within everyday contexts and enables the researcher to examine how family members negotiate multiple languages across generations. The comparative design, involving families from Canada, Pakistan, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, further provided opportunities to analyze both commonalities and variations across cultural settings.

To strengthen reliability and reproducibility, the study used triangulation by combining three distinct data sources: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival research. This multi-method approach ensured that findings were not dependent on a single type of respondent data and allowed non-respondent evidence—such as documents and historical records—to corroborate family narratives.

Selection of Participants

Forty families were purposively sampled to represent cultural and linguistic diversity. The sample size of 40 families was determined by balancing three considerations: (1) feasibility and access across four countries, (2) the need for sufficient variation to identify cross-country themes, and (3) qualitative saturation, which was reached as recurring patterns emerged after approximately 30 families but was extended to 40 to ensure representation from each context. The distribution of families was as follows: Canada 12, Pakistan 10, Jordan 9, and Saudi Arabia 9. Although the sample was not evenly divided across countries, this distribution reflects practical access and recruitment feasibility. Comparative analysis, therefore, emphasizes cross-cutting themes rather than statistical equivalence, positioning this study as an exploratory qualitative comparison rather than a quantitatively balanced one.

The inclusion criteria were that families used both English and at least one heritage language in daily life and included children aged 5–18 years. This age group was prioritized because children often act as mediators, negotiating between heritage language practices at home and English use in school and peer networks. Families from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds were included to capture how access to resources shaped language acquisition opportunities. Some households were nuclear, while others were extended families in which grandparents lived with grandchildren, offering intergenerational perspectives on heritage language retention.

Participants were drawn from four distinct contexts: migrant families in Canada, established and migrant families in Saudi Arabia, multi-ethnic families in Jordan, and urban households in Pakistan. This diversity allowed the study to examine how cultural, economic, and institutional factors influenced family language practices across global North and South contexts.

Data Collection Methods

Participant Observation

Ethnographic observation placed the researcher directly in family environments, allowing natural interactions to be observed with minimal disruption. Fieldnotes documented verbal and non-verbal communication, cultural practices, and instances of code-switching. Audio and video recordings were also used when permitted. Long-term engagement, ranging from two weeks to three months, ensured that both routine and extraordinary interactions were captured. Particular attention was given to how families supported children's English learning while maintaining heritage languages, and how challenges such as accent differences or grammar difficulties were negotiated. Researcher positionality and reflexivity were actively managed throughout the study. Field researchers maintained reflexive journals documenting their assumptions, emotional reactions, and cultural interpretations during observations. Cross-cultural debriefings among team members were conducted to surface implicit biases and standardize interpretations across the four contexts. This approach enhanced credibility and minimized the influence of the researcher's background on data collection and analysis.

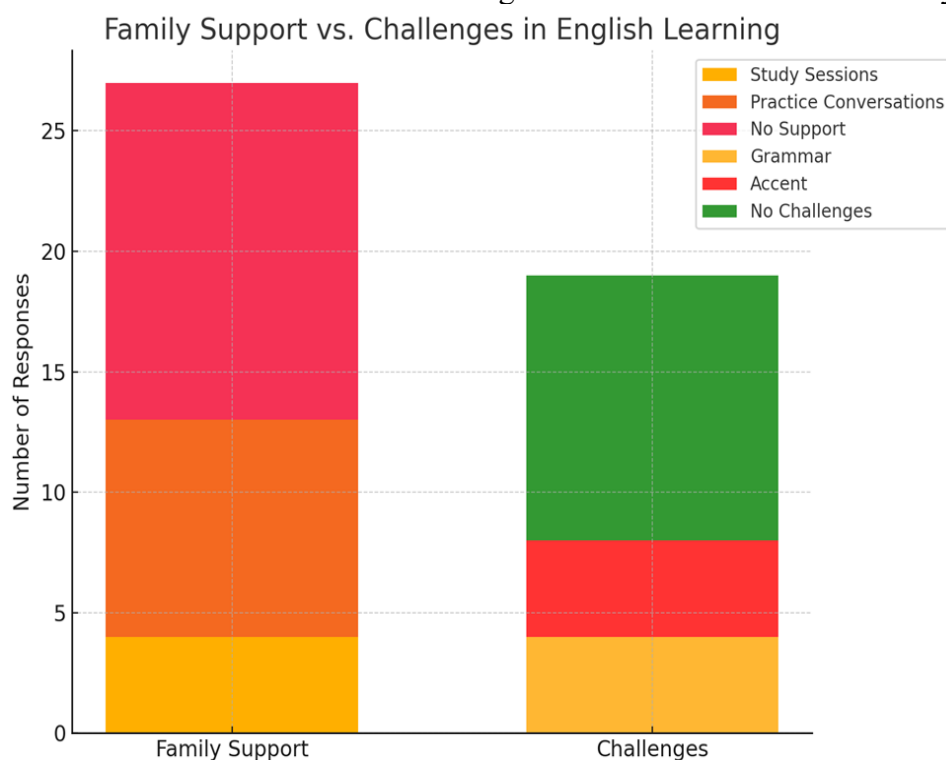


Figure 1: *Family Support vs. Challenges in English Language Learning.*

In Figure 1, a bar chart compares types of family support (study sessions, practice conversations, and limited support) with children's reported challenges (grammar issues, accent difficulties, or no significant problems). This figure illustrates the relationship between parental involvement and children's specific language learning barriers (N = 40 families, children aged 5–18).

Semi-Organized Interviews

Eight interview protocols were designed for parents, children, and grandparents. These semi-organized interviews combined a structure for comparability with flexibility to probe emerging themes. To ensure cross-context comparability, interview protocols were collaboratively developed by multilingual team members familiar with each country's cultural norms. Questions were translated into Urdu and Arabic where needed, then back-translated to check accuracy. Interviewers received standardized training on tone, neutrality, and ethical practices, with country-specific adaptations (e.g., gender norms, privacy expectations) documented in a shared field manual. This process enhanced both cultural sensitivity and data reliability. Parents were asked about their attitudes toward English and heritage languages, the strategies they employed to support learning, and their cultural or religious motivations. Children reflected on their experiences balancing heritage language with English in school and peer contexts. Grandparents described their role in maintaining cultural identity through language. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked by two researchers to ensure accuracy. Follow-up interviews clarified ambiguous responses, increasing reliability.

Archival Research

Archival sources complemented live data and provided non-respondent evidence. These included family letters, photographs, school assignments, government policy documents, and language education materials. Analyzing these documents revealed long-term patterns in language use and the institutional contexts shaping family practices. This method added credibility by reducing reliance on memory and offering verifiable records of language transmission across generations. In several households, children's exposure to English via digital platforms (YouTube, educational apps) was noted during observations, though this was not systematically measured.

Although the form of archival materials varied across countries—for example, family letters and school assignments in Canada and Pakistan versus government policy documents and language education materials in Saudi Arabia and Jordan—core categories were pre-defined (heritage-language use, English-language exposure, intergenerational communication). This ensured that, despite contextual differences, each site contributed comparable evidence on the same themes. All archival data were catalogued using a standardized coding sheet shared across the research team. As illustrated in Figure 2, English dominates educational/peer contexts, while heritage languages prevail in cultural and intergenerational exchange.

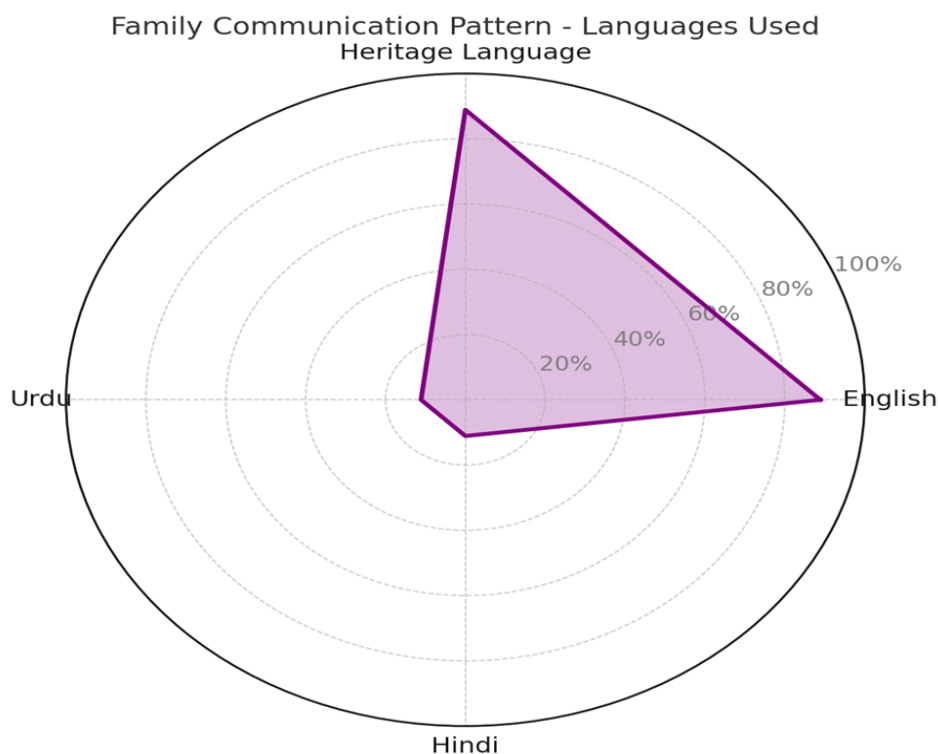


Figure 2: *Family Communication Patterns in Multilingual Households.*

The radar chart in Figure 2 shows the proportion of heritage languages (e.g., Urdu, Arabic, Hindi) and English used in family communication. It demonstrates how English emerged as dominant in educational and peer-related contexts, while heritage languages were maintained in cultural, religious, and intergenerational exchanges.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic coding and comparative analysis. Open coding of transcripts and fieldnotes identified recurrent patterns such as parental attitudes, child agency, and intergenerational tensions. Axial coding connected these patterns with broader themes, while selective coding refined them into explanatory categories. Archival data were used to cross-check and contextualize findings.

Comparative ethnography allowed analysis across households and countries, identifying both shared challenges such as the dominance of English in education and unique dynamics, such as the stronger intergenerational transmission of heritage languages in extended families. Triangulation across three methods (observation, interviews, archives) enhanced credibility, while maintaining a transparent coding protocol ensured replicability. As Figure 3 maps the intersecting themes shaping language acquisition discussed below.

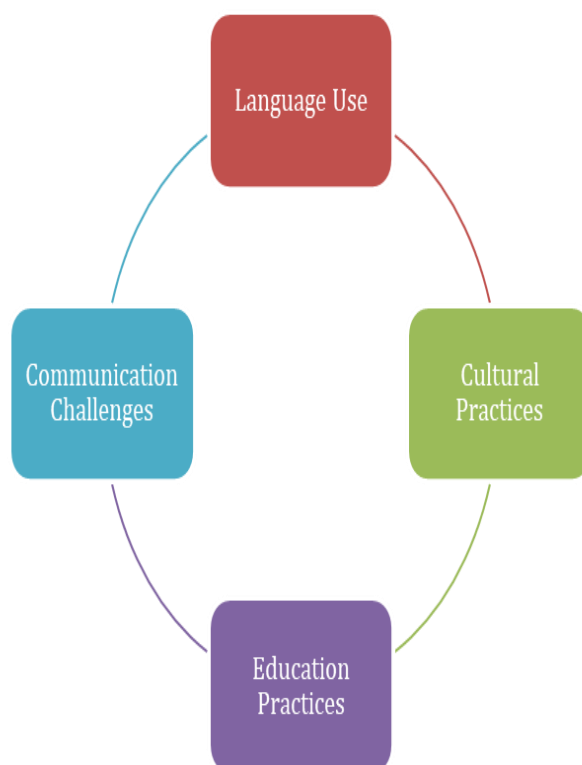


Figure 3: *Key Factors Influencing Language Acquisition in Multicultural Families.*

Figure 3 shows the thematic map illustrating how language use, cultural practices, educational expectations, and communication challenges intersect. It highlights the overlapping influences that shape English acquisition and heritage language retention, providing a holistic view of family language dynamics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was coordinated through the lead investigators' home institutions, with each participating country granting the necessary permissions according to its legal and institutional requirements. This multi-site approach ensured that all procedures adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research with children and families, including informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity.

Ensuring Reproducibility

Detailed research logs were maintained, including observation protocols, interview guides, and archival document checklists. Data transcription and coding were conducted independently by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through consensus, ensuring inter-rater reliability. By documenting sampling criteria, observation schedules, and coding frameworks, the study established a transparent blueprint that can be replicated in future research on multilingual families.

Table 1: Research Design Matrix

Research Question	Approach	Sample	Tools/ Techniques	Data Type	Reliability Measure
How do family communication patterns and parental attitudes affect	Comparative ethnography	Parents and children from 40 families	Observation, interviews	Fieldnotes, transcripts	Triangulation, coder agreement

English acquisition and heritage language retention?

What similarities and differences exist in intergenerational language practices across multicultural households?	Ethnography with archival triangulation	Parents, children, and grandparents	Interviews, archival records	Generational narratives, family documents	Cross-check with archives, prolonged engagement
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What strategies within families most effectively support English learning while preserving heritage languages?	Ethnography with cross-cultural comparison	Families across four countries	Observation, educational materials	Notes, curricula, homework samples	Multiple-source verification, audio
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RESULTS

The results highlight complex dynamics of language acquisition in multicultural families, balancing heritage language maintenance with the practical need for English proficiency. Families that prioritized heritage languages maintained strong cultural practices through religion, storytelling, and moral teachings, while grandparents were key transmitters of intergenerational language. In contrast, children in school-based environments relied heavily on English, resulting in weaker heritage language proficiency. Across families, communication problems were recurrent, with children struggling with pronunciation, accents, and formality in both English and heritage languages, underscoring the need for targeted educational support. Vignettes were selected through a transparent, criteria-based process. Cases were chosen to reflect the most common patterns observed in each national context rather than extreme or atypical cases. Selection was guided by the frequency of themes in coded data and verified by at least two researchers to minimize individual bias. This approach ensured that vignettes serve as illustrative exemplars of broader trends rather than anecdotal exceptions. As Figure 4 summarizes observation durations across families and sites.

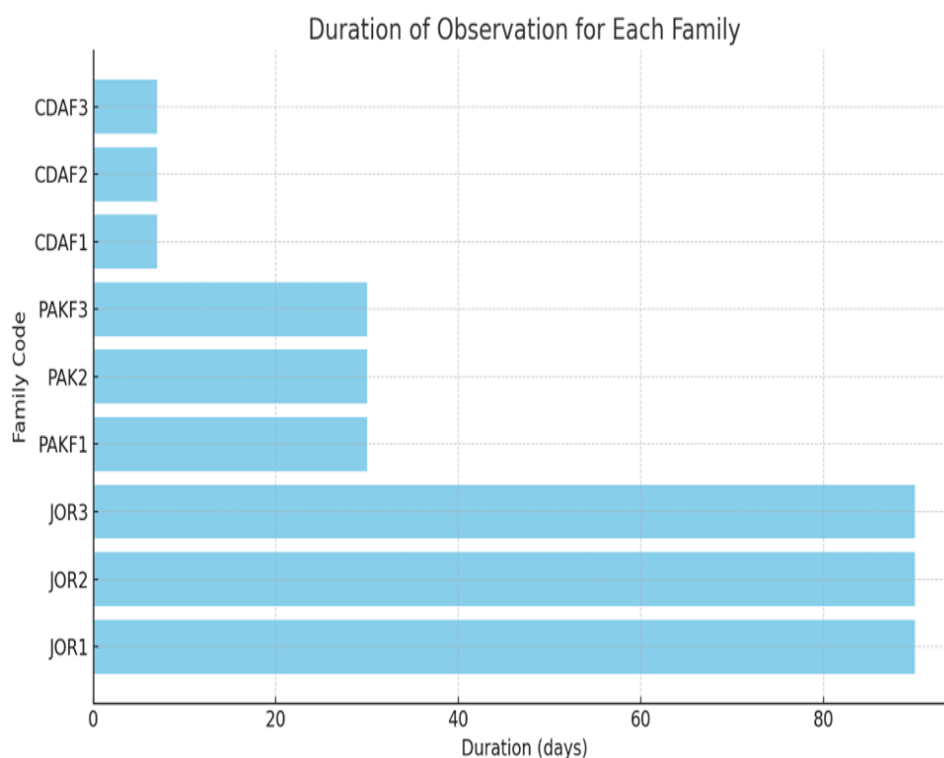


Figure 4: *Observation Durations Across Multicultural Families.*

Figure 4 shows a horizontal bar chart showing the duration of ethnographic observations for each family, measured in days. Families are represented by codes on the y-axis; the x-axis shows observation spans ranging from one week to three months, reflecting varied engagement and depth of data collection across contexts. Following the Research Design Matrix presented in Table 1 (Methodology section), Table 2 summarizes the observed language dynamics and practices across the sampled families, highlighting elders' roles and children's English proficiency.

Table 2: Observations of Language Dynamics and Practices in Multicultural Families

Code	Elders' Role	Children's Use of English
CDAF1	Grandparents speak only the heritage language, connecting family to cultural identity.	Children use English fluently for school and peer activities.
CDAF2	Grandparents use Rajasthani only, creating communication gaps with the grandson.	Child is a native English speaker; they uses English for all daily purposes.
PAKF1	Grandparents use Punjabi with each other, Urdu with children, and mix Urdu and English with grandchildren.	Children vary from minimal to proficient English, influenced by schooling and peers.
PAK2	Grandparents use Urdu with occasional English; children are inclined toward English but retain some Urdu.	Children are proficient in English, though grammatical errors appear in formal contexts.
JOR1	Parents promote English for children's schooling; the family is registered in an international English-speaking school.	Children display strong English proficiency, broad vocabulary, and accurate grammar; they use English in play and study.

Note. The table provides an overview of the linguistic roles of elders and children's English proficiency across sampled families. Codes indicate family groups by country: CDAF = Canadian Family, PAKF = Pakistani Family, JOR = Jordanian Family.

Table 2 highlights the role of elders and children in shaping everyday language dynamics. Across households, grandparents were the main custodians of heritage languages, while children shifted toward English, especially in school-related activities. While CDAF2 illustrates a particularly clear case of intergenerational communication gaps, similar patterns were observed in four of the twelve Canadian families in this study. This indicates that such gaps are not isolated incidents but represent a recurring challenge within the Canadian subsample, especially in households where grandparents speak only a heritage language. This generational split illustrates how family language policy is negotiated rather than imposed, and sets the stage for the patterns visualized (As illustrated in Figure 5).

Age-related differences were examined qualitatively across the sample. Children in the younger age group (5–10 years) tended to exhibit stronger heritage language use in home contexts but less English confidence in formal settings, whereas older adolescents (15–18 years) showed the reverse pattern, with higher English proficiency but weaker heritage language retention. These trends were consistent across all four countries and were coded as an emergent theme during analysis.

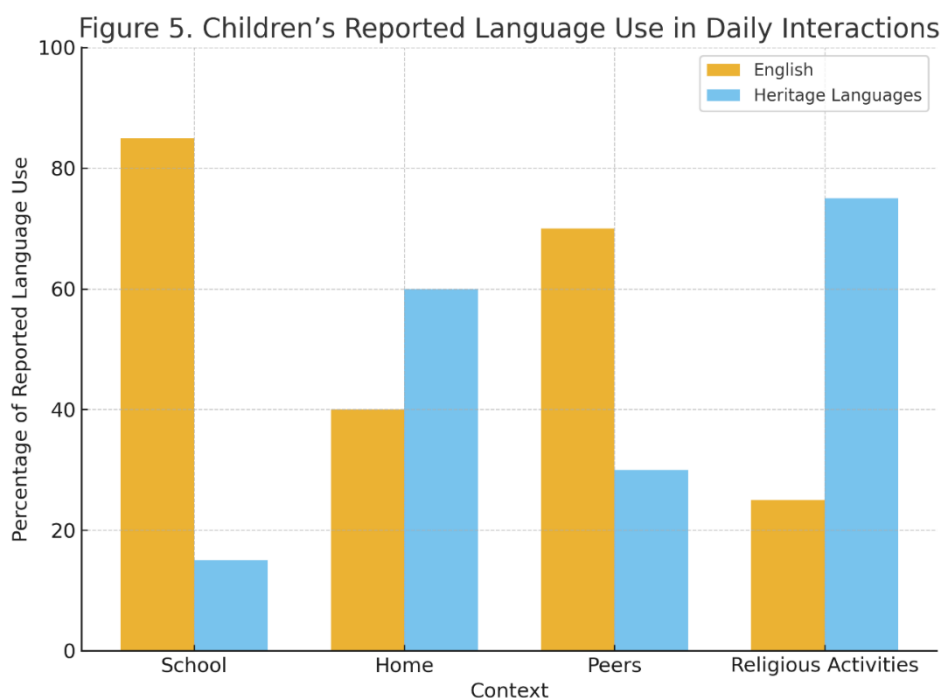


Figure 5: *Children's Reported Language Use in Daily Interactions.*

They used English in the Bar chart in Figure 5, English was dominant in school and peer interactions, whereas heritage languages were more frequently used at home and during religious activities. This pattern reflects the broader trend observed across the 40 participating families (children aged 5–18) of English being prioritized for academic and social mobility while heritage languages remain tied to cultural and intergenerational practices. The proportions reported in Figures 2 and 5 were derived from a combined measure of structured observation coding and self-reports. During ethnographic sessions, researchers coded the frequency of English versus heritage language use in ten-minute intervals across typical family interactions. These observational tallies were then cross-checked with parents' and children's

self-reports collected during interviews to validate patterns and avoid overreliance on a single data source.

Overall, results revealed a contradiction between cultural preservation and practical adaptation to new environments. Families varied in success depending on parental attitudes, cultural traditions, and intergenerational influences. Older generations favored heritage languages, while younger generations leaned toward English for education and future opportunities. These findings underscore a multifaceted relationship between family functioning, cultural practices, and speech patterns.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that language acquisition in multicultural families is not a linear process but a negotiation shaped by cultural identity, educational demands, and generational dynamics. This study advances the concept of FLP as a negotiated praxis by showing how families actively adapt their language practices in response to institutional pressures and intergenerational needs across multiple national contexts. Unlike single-country studies, the comparative design reveals how similar negotiation strategies, storytelling, religious rituals, and moral teaching manifest differently depending on policy environments and migration histories. This cross-country perspective extends FLP theory beyond static household models to a dynamic framework of transnational adaptation and cultural agency. Children's struggles with heritage languages reflect reduced exposure and reinforcement, consistent with Guardado (2022), who found heritage language attrition to be common in immigrant households. Families such as PAK2, where children displayed strong English but weaker heritage language skills, mirror earlier studies showing English dominance in contexts with formal schooling (King & Fogle, 2022). This confirms the broader trend that institutional settings promote English proficiency at the expense of heritage language continuity. These patterns are consistent with the distributions shown in Figures 2–4, where English use dominates educational and peer contexts while heritage languages persist in religious and intergenerational settings.

Parental attitudes emerged as decisive in shaping language trajectories. Families that intentionally preserved heritage languages through religious practices and storytelling (e.g., CDAF1, JOR1) demonstrated stronger intergenerational transmission, aligning with Lanza & Lexander (2023). Overall, these findings largely confirm Lanza & Lexander's (2023) emphasis on children's agency in shaping family language policy but also refine their model by showing that agency operates within different institutional and religious contexts in the Global South. Whereas Lanza and Lexander (2023) observed code-switching as a form of independence, our data suggest it can also serve as a strategy for maintaining intergenerational ties when heritage languages are less reinforced by schools. This nuance highlights a context-dependent variation that expands the original framework. However, in households where English was prioritized for academic or economic mobility (PAKF1, PAK2), heritage languages weakened.

While reduced heritage language proficiency is often viewed as a deficit, our findings also reveal its potential as a resource. Bilingual shifts allowed some adolescents to develop hybrid cultural competencies—navigating English-dominant school environments while retaining selective heritage-language practices at home. This suggests that rather than a linear 'loss,' bilingual transitions can produce new, additive identities and skills, aligning with the concept of 'translanguaging' in multilingual education. These findings suggest that FLP is not static but adaptive, balancing competing goals of cultural preservation and social integration.

Cultural practices such as religious rituals, storytelling, and community celebrations were critical in embedding heritage languages. These practices are consistent with findings by Curdt-Christiansen (2023), who noted that faith-based activities are powerful vehicles for sustaining heritage languages. Children's participation in cultural and religious activities not only

reinforced heritage language use but also allowed them to become active agents in cultural transmission. Nevertheless, their role was double-edged: while they helped sustain heritage practices, they also navigated globalized contexts that required English dominance, reflecting the tension of dual identities (Kovács, 2015).

The results challenge simplified models of bilingualism by showing the complexity of code-switching, accent shifts, and inconsistent reinforcement across family members. Hoffmann and Ytsma (2004) argued that inconsistency in family language environments hampers proficiency; the current findings support this, especially in cases where grandparents spoke only heritage languages while parents and children prioritized English.

Implications

Theoretically, this study extends FLP frameworks by demonstrating how English functions not only as an external societal pressure but also as an internalized family choice linked to aspirations of mobility and education. It also highlights the role of intergenerational interactions, bridging sociocultural theory and cultural capital perspectives. Practically, educators should develop bilingual curricula that integrate family practices, such as storytelling and moral teaching, into formal education. For teacher education, these findings suggest the need for training modules that help educators recognize family-based bilingual resources and integrate them into classroom practice—such as inviting parents or grandparents to share heritage-language stories or moral lessons as part of literacy instruction. Curricula in all four contexts could incorporate bilingual texts and culturally relevant examples to support additive bilingualism. Community interventions might include after-school language clubs, partnerships with local religious institutions, and online family-literacy programs, tailored to each country's institutional context (e.g., Canada's multicultural policies vs. Saudi Arabia's bilingual school reforms). Such initiatives would reinforce family-school partnerships and sustain heritage languages alongside English. Policy-wise, governments should encourage pluralist approaches that recognize both English and heritage languages as resources, for example, by supporting bilingual textbooks or community-based language programs.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to four national contexts and relied on observation and interviews within selected families, which may not capture broader demographic variations. Because this study employed qualitative, purposive sampling rather than statistical representativeness, its findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable. Nonetheless, the cross-country design identifies recurring patterns—such as the intergenerational gap between heritage and English—that may resonate with other Global South contexts, including parts of Africa and Southeast Asia. Future research should test the applicability of these patterns in additional regions to evaluate their broader relevance.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to track language shifts over generations, capturing how children's bilingual trajectories evolve as they move through schooling, adolescence, and early adulthood. Such designs could reveal not only changes in language proficiency but also shifts in identity, intergenerational relationships, and the influence of new digital tools over time. This temporal dimension would deepen our understanding of how family language policies adapt or erode across life stages and policy environments. Although children's use of digital platforms such as educational apps, YouTube, and online religious classes was observed during fieldwork, systematic measurement of digital practices was beyond the scope of this initial ethnographic study. This decision reflected feasibility constraints and the priority placed on capturing in-person intergenerational interactions. Future studies will include a dedicated digital ethnography to quantify and analyze these emerging practices more fully. Expanding comparative studies to refugee and displaced populations

would further illuminate how instability shapes family language practices. Such recommendations resonate with call for a unified, inclusive language policy for Pakistan's multilingual landscape, which emphasizes embedding heritage-language recognition into mainstream curricula. By linking family practices to formal schooling, these approaches can operationalize national language policy at the classroom level.

Conclusion

The experiences of multilingual families highlight the complex and often fragile balance between preserving heritage languages and adapting to dominant global languages such as English. This study revealed that intergenerational language transmission is mediated by cultural practices, religious rituals, storytelling, and moral teaching, yet is challenged by generational gaps, inconsistent language use, and societal pressures to privilege English. Children frequently displayed strong proficiency in English, particularly in academic and peer contexts, while struggling with heritage languages that were less reinforced outside the home. Grandparents played an essential role in maintaining cultural and linguistic continuity, but younger generations often shifted toward English, underscoring the tension between cultural preservation and global integration.

The key findings suggest that families adopt varied strategies to manage this dilemma. Successful households deliberately foster bilingualism through heritage-based practices while simultaneously supporting children's educational needs in English. However, family efforts alone are insufficient without broader institutional and policy support. Schools, community organizations, and governments must recognize the value of heritage languages as cultural resources, not obstacles, and adopt inclusive policies that support additive bilingualism. Among these stakeholders, schools and teacher-training institutions are positioned as the most immediate actors capable of implementing change. By embedding heritage-language awareness and family-driven practices into curricula and teacher preparation programs, they can directly influence children's daily learning environments. Governments and community organizations play supporting roles by funding, policy-making, and facilitating partnerships, but classroom-level practices remain the critical leverage point. Such recognition can help mitigate the risks of heritage language attrition and cultural loss, while also equipping children with the linguistic tools to thrive in multicultural societies.

In practical terms, these findings point to concrete classroom strategies. For example, bilingual curricula can integrate heritage-language storytelling sessions, cross-language reading circles, and collaborative projects where students interview parents or grandparents in their heritage language and then present findings in English. Such practices not only validate children's home languages but also cultivate additive bilingual skills, creative thinking, and intergenerational awareness.

The broader implications of these findings extend to theory, practice, and policy. Theoretically, this research contributes to Family Language Policy (FLP) by reframing English not only as an external societal force but as a negotiated internal family choice shaped by aspirations for mobility and identity formation (King & Fogle, 2022; Lanza & Lexander, 2023). Practically, the results underscore the importance of embedding family-driven practices such as storytelling, creative writing, and religious rituals into bilingual education frameworks. At the policy level, pluralist approaches that integrate heritage languages into curricula, community programs, and digital platforms can strengthen intergenerational cultural transmission (Curd-Christiansen, 2023).

The study's contributions lie in offering a comparative ethnographic perspective across diverse cultural settings, Canada, Pakistan, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, demonstrating both common patterns and contextual variations. By triangulating participant observation, interviews, and

archival research, the study provides a replicable model for exploring family language dynamics across global contexts.

Future research should build on these insights by conducting longitudinal studies to trace how linguistic practices evolve across generations and how they shape children's identities, relationships, and career trajectories. Digital technologies such as language-learning apps, social media, and online religious education should also be examined as new mediators of language acquisition in multicultural households. Additionally, research with refugee and displaced families can shed light on how instability and forced migration affect language continuity and identity resilience. While this study offers valuable cross-country insights, it does not assume uniformity across the four national contexts. Differences in policy environments, migration histories, and educational systems inevitably shape family language practices. Rather than presenting a single narrative, our comparative ethnography highlights both convergences and divergences, encouraging future research to treat each context as distinct while still exploring transferable principles.

In conclusion, multilingual families demonstrate resilience and adaptability as they navigate the competing pressures of heritage preservation and global integration. Yet, their success depends not only on family practices but also on supportive educational systems and inclusive policies. A call to action is needed: educators must design curricula that honor heritage languages, policymakers must support equitable language policies, and researchers must continue to investigate the lived experiences of multilingual households. By strengthening families' capacity to nurture both heritage and global languages, societies can ensure that future generations grow up linguistically equipped and culturally grounded.

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