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Maintaining Heritage Language Through Migration: Investigating Language And Literacy Practices Among Pakistani Families In Oman

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Abstract

Drawing on insights from the new literacy studies, social theory, and multilingual literacies, this study explores the multilingual practices of Pakistani families residing in the Sultanate of Oman. It investigates what extra efforts parents and children make for the maintenance of their heritage language i.e., Urdu at home in a milieu where formal schooling requires the children to learn English, Arabic and Hindi, but they do not have any option to study their home language in a formal context which adds to the cognitive load on students. It further investigates the challenges faced by Pakistani families while engaging their children in Urdu literacy practices and how far these practices put the children to an advantage or disadvantage. Moreover, it also examines how these practices transformed during the lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 outbreak when children had to stay at home. Recommendations for future action and research are offered.

Keywords: *Literacy practices, literacy strategies, multilingual literacies, home literacy, heritage language, New literacy studies, language maintenance.*

1. Introduction

The present study sets out to investigate the literacy practices of the children of Pakistani families residing in Oman with a focus on the pa[1]rents' efforts at home in order to maintain their mother tongue/heritage language i.e., Urdu, in a context where formal schooling requires the children to study three other languages that are English, Arabic and Hindi. Moreover, it explores the similarities and differences between their formal and informal literacy practices at home. Further, the extent to which these practices put them to an advantage or disadvantage in their context was also explored. It also investigated how far staying at home throughout the day impacted these practices during the lockdown and social isolation enforced due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The present study is a sociolinguistic investigation of the language and literacy practices of the children of Pakistani families residing temporarily in Oman. The families have

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migrated there temporarily for work purposes and intend to come back to their home country as their children grow up because there are very few opportunities for children's quality higher education when they finish secondary school. This gives rise to all the parents' concern for maintaining their home language i.e., Urdu. Moreover, they also want their children to keep in touch with the culture of their home country and keep their identities intact which would facilitate their resettling back in their home countries. The children are getting formal education in an Indian school where three languages are taught as compulsory. These are English, Arabic and Hindi. However, the families' home language is Urdu and for academic purposes, too, parents are concerned about the maintenance of Urdu for several reasons. First, it gives them a sense of identity. Secondly, owing to their stay being transitory, they want their children to be familiar with formal Urdu literacies to be able to adjust to the schooling system when they come back to Pakistan. This fact increases the efforts required on the part of parents as well as increases the load on children of having to learn another language besides the three formally taught languages by the school. In this scenario, parents compensate for the absence of Urdu in the curriculum with informal literacy practices at home.

2. Literature review

2.1. Literacy and literacies

Street (2000) clarifies the distinction between multiple literacies as proposed by the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee 1991; Street 1993a) and the multi-literacies put forward by Courtney Cazden and others in the 'New London Group' (NLG) (New London Group 1996). The term multiple literacies takes into account literacy practices associated with different cultures, whereas multi-literacy only takes into account different forms of literacy associated with channels or modes, such as visual literacy, computer literacy and the like.

Multiple literacies focus on the social practices that give meaning to visual media, computers, and other kinds of channels, thus creating an impact. Before the introduction of the New literacy skills, literacy was referred to as a separate entity regarding 'deficit', 'falling standards', 'illiteracy', skills or lack thereof without much consideration to its 'social' aspect. (cf. Freebody 1998). In the US, this notion of literacy was challenged by the proponents of 'Critical Literacy' (Freire,1972, 1985, 1987; McLaren, 1992, 2018; Lankshear,1997) which is a 'socially sensitive', and less skill-based approach. In the UK, teachers arrived at a new understanding of literacy, as opposed to the utilitarian, autonomous model of literacy, taking insights from Critical Language Awareness (CLA) (Fairclough, 1992) (National Association for Teachers of English (NATE).

"New Literacy Studies" (NLS) (Gee, 1991,2005; Street, 1996) focuses on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985) instead of merely on the acquisition of skills (Street, 1985, 2003). It recognizes that multiple literacies vary according to time and space, and are contested in relations of power. With this come the notions of dominant literacies and marginalized or resistant literacies.

This new understanding calls for interventions in teacher education, curriculum, and measurement criteria (Street,2000). In an international and multicultural milieu, literacy practices have come to be considered as social remittances involved in the circulation of ideas, practices, identities, and social capital between destination and origin countries (Capstick, 2019). The metaphor social capital refers to people's mutual advantage. It considers society as a market whereby people exchange a huge variety of ideas and goods for their interests (Coleman, 1988). Putnam (1995) takes the concept further by defining social capital as the features of social organization like trust, norms and networks that have the capacity to improve

the society's overall efficiency by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam, 1993) or as features of social life that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1995). All these insights call for an investigation into multiple literacies of expatriates in a foreign environment.

2.2. Heritage Language Maintenance

The extant literature has explored the importance of family language policy and practices for heritage language maintenance and development (e.g., Hollebeke et. al., 2023; Huang & Liao, 2024; Inan et al., 2024; Liang, 2018; Nesteruk, 2010; Song & Wu, 2024; Tseng, 2020; Yu, 2013). In this context, parents' role in heritage language maintenance in diaspora contexts has long been established and widely researched. Tran et al. (2021), for example, found parents' language use with their children to be significantly linked with their language practices. Similarly, parents' language use in social gatherings was significantly linked with the frequency of attendance at community events. Moreover, parents' attitudes towards home language maintenance were found to be significantly linked with language ideology factors, that is, perceptions regarding cultural identity, belief in the importance of heritage language maintenance, the belief that home language strengthens the ties with relatives and widens career options, and income. Romanowski (2021) contends that in the absence of parents' reinforcement and establishing the heritage language as a means of communication at home, children display lower productivity. Their study is about the second generation of a diaspora community in a place where the dominant language is different from their heritage language. However, in our study, the families are the first generation of settlers in Oman and the home language is by default Urdu hence they do not face this issue at present. But, like Romanowski's (2021) participating community, ours is also a small community with no or limited institutional support.

Identity perceptions are also important in determining families' preferences for heritage language maintenance. In a study on second-generation Chinese-Australian children, Shen & Jiang (2021) found a strong relation between children's heritage language proficiency level and their perceptions of identity. Children achieving higher scores in a Chinese proficiency test aspired to attain high levels of Chinese literacy and identified themselves as being half Australian half Chinese. Shen & Jiang (2021) recommend the availability of ample support and access to various resources, and opportunities for learning the heritage language like a community center, library and online resources to children at family and community levels for proper heritage language maintenance and cultivation of a bicultural identity. Otherwise, families encounter challenges like limited energy and time; and decreased motivation among children to learn the heritage language despite valuing its maintenance (Liang & Shin, 2021; Shen & Jiang, 2021).

In recent years, the importance of digital media and resources is being increasingly acknowledged by researchers and immigrants for the challenging task of heritage language maintenance for diaspora communities worldwide. Guskaroska & Elliott (2021) emphasize the need to develop technology-mediated heritage language maintenance tools for the purpose of facilitating the task. They found Macedonian parents interested in using educational apps, and they emphasized the need for more engaging and interactional resources that can compensate for the lack of exposure to heritage language.

The realization of added efforts and extra cognitive load on diaspora communities' children due to the need for having to maintain the heritage language raised concerns about students' overall academic performance. The extant literature has addressed this, too, and found

positive impacts of multilingual literacies on students' academic performance and language acquisition process. In a study comparing monolinguals' and bilinguals' reading comprehension performance, Peet et. al (2019) found that despite having lower language proficiency, bilingual children's reading comprehension was comparable to monolinguals and the bilinguals' reading rate was found to be higher than that of the monolinguals. Oral language and home literacy practices played a role in the success of the bilinguals.

Little (2017), however, contends that in the absence of a national policy clearly outlining the perks of multilingualism, and the 'family literacy' highlighting the advantages of reading at home in the heritage language, families and practitioners will remain confused which would prevent children from getting benefit from their linguistic heritage. She studied the attitudes of Pakistani children's families towards reading literacies at home transferred from generations since the 1960s when their ancestors migrated to the UK. The families in her study had a positive attitude towards reading throughout the generations except for the first-generation children who got little parental support into their early English reading experiences. For them, reading took place in school. Little (2017) finds that English schooling system occurs at the expense of the heritage language. The participants of our study are different from Little's study as they are the first generation of immigrants to Oman with children studying in an Indian school and the focus is the heritage language literacy practices.

Similarly, digital literacies have been found to be an effective source in maintaining the heritage language of immigrant children and helping them keep in touch with their home culture. In a study on the impact of electronic literacy practices on Korean-American students' heritage language development, Lee (2006) found that these practices provide the students with authentic opportunities for heritage language use and help develop a social network of Korean speakers, thus providing them the opportunity to be linked to the Korean culture along with language. Moreover, it can be as informal as the users like. The nonstandard forms they deliberately use, due to them being a norm in computer-mediated communication, enable them to interact online without the fear of being judged for the correctness of spelling. In an ethnographic study of the home literacy practices of young children learning three or more languages in Qatar, Savage-Shepherd (2012) found that the use of technology, media and popular culture generates interest and enthusiasm in literacy. Moreover, very young children are familiar with their different writing systems and participate in distributed communicative practices utilizing new technologies.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out causing lockdowns worldwide, researchers have been studying its impact on the literacy practices of diaspora communities. Though many studies worldwide (e.g., Bao et al.2020; Burgess & Sievertsen 2020; Letzel et al.2020; Pozas et al.2021; Thorell et al.2021) have found that the forced homeschooling due to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted children's literacies and also added to parents' and children' stress in most cases, the participants of this study found that home language literacies were practiced at homes as before and the COVID-19 triggered closures rather invested the children with more opportunity to stay at home and practice more of Urdu literacies formally through parents' coaching; and informally through digital media and family communication as pointed out by the participants.

2.3. The Sultanate of Oman and its Language Education Policies

Oman is known for its rich linguistic diversity owing to the multi-ethnic groups communicating in Arabic as well as ethnic languages (Al Jahdhami, 2016). A majority of Omanis are thus

simultaneous bilinguals. However, language attrition is also taking place, especially among the younger generation who are losing proficiency in their ethnic languages.

As for the education system and language policies, Oman is one of the developing countries of the Gulf region demonstrating rapid development in education systems in recent decades (Wyatt, 2013). When the Sultan Qaboos came to accession in 1970, English was declared as the only official foreign language and hence, huge budgets were allocated for its implementation through education, with the purpose of national development (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). Consequently, a reform plan viz., Basic Education System (BES) was introduced to replace General Education System (GES) implemented previously.

Owing to the diverse and multicultural population of Oman constituting a great majority of Indian immigrants too, there are two types of schools in the Ibri region of Oman. i.e., Indian schools and Omani schools. Omani schools offer all courses in Arabic except English so expat children/students can't study in Arabic from Grade 1 whereas Indian schools in Oman offer all science and arts subjects in English which is easier to study for immigrant children. As there are not any international schools from other countries in the Ibri region. Hence, they have only one option left i.e., to join Indian Schools. Indian schools start teaching English and Hindi from KG before Grade 1 and Arabic is introduced first time in Grade 5.

English language teaching (ELT) has been an important global activity and a large industry for the past five decades or so (Al Issa, 2006). However, owing to the lack of human and physical resources, it has to depend on North America (USA and Canada), Britain and Australia (NABA) for its development. With this, Omani parents as well as teachers have recently become enthusiastic about bilingual education for young children (Tekin, 2016). As Al-Issa (2005) contends, the education system of Oman is rigidly centralized and hegemonic. Hence, there can be no flexibility in integrating the languages of minority residents in the formal school curriculum.

3.Methodology

The current study is a qualitative sociolinguistic investigation of language and literacy practices involved by Pakistani parents and their children residing in Oman for Urdu language maintenance. In Oman, parents like to engage children in home language and literacy practices besides the three languages taught at school formally viz., English, Arabic and Hindi because the home language is not offered in the formal school curriculum. This study explores the efforts put in by families at home for the maintenance of Urdu. Semi-structured interviews with the parents were conducted to explore the phenomena.

For the present study, data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with parents of Pakistani children residing in Ibri, Oman and studying in an Indian school. The participating parents are the first generation migrated to Oman for work purposes and unlike the participants of Little's (2017), they are well versed in the language whose literacies practices we want to explore. They are confident enough to guide their children. 168 students are studying in the Indian school (other than Indians). They are taught three languages formally at school. For this study, the researchers decided to stop collecting data when informational redundancy and data saturation was achieved as suggested by De Gagne and Walters (2010). Hence, the participants were parents from five families having ten children residing in Oman.

The children range in age from one and a half years to fifteen years. Since there are a few Pakistani families in Ibri, Oman, the age range of participating children is diverse. They also vary in the length of time that they have been in Oman, from birth to seven years. One common factor among them is the children have more than two written and spoken languages within their communicative repertoire and their parents are concerned about the maintenance of Urdu as it is not included in the school curriculum. Moreover, all fathers are from the university teaching profession so they are well versed in Urdu and English as well. All languages carry the social structures and language ideologies of the country of origin (Martin-Jones & Jones, 2001). Hence, such multilingual literacy practices pose special challenges for the children and their parents and are thus worthy of investigation in order to inform practices and policy. While reporting the findings, pseudonyms have been used to maintain the confidentiality of the participating families.

The data for the study were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with parents from five Pakistani families residing in Oman whose children are studying in a school run by the Indian administration.

The criteria for selecting the participants were:
(1) Participants must be expats in Oman
(2) Each participant must be a parent/father of at least one child
(3) the student must be studying in an Indian school where three languages (other than the home language) are taught.

The snowball sampling method was used. The participants were selected based on references provided by the previously interviewed participants who knew other people facing similar problems related to language(s) at school.

Initially, 30 interview protocols were prepared and the opinions of two experts (one academician from the Department of Psychology and one from the Department of Education) in the field were sought as regards their validity. Through the exclusion method, they reduced them to 25 so that they contained only those items that were directly related to and valid for finding answers to the questions and the essential demographic details. Experts examined all the questions and excluded less relevant, ambiguous, directive and unclear questions. They also suggested and rephrased questions to ensure content validity.

Due to the international nature of the study and the COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted online via IMO. Participants were asked about the time that suited them for the interview. The purpose of the interview was explained to each participant for their psychological comfort. The interviews lasted around 18 to 24 minutes (on average 21 minutes). Interviews were ended when participants had nothing to add significantly.

Interviews were transcribed for analysis afterward. The researchers analyzed all transcripts individually and then sorted out commonalities and differences across all the responses (transcripts). Wording from each transcript under the specific question was examined and the process was repeated until a distinctive theme emerged under each question. The data were analyzed through the method of similarity principle and commonalities (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initial codes were created from all the responses. Similar codes were sorted and organized into categories. Then these categories were further analyzed to consolidate under possible headings informed from the questions that serve as themes. Finally, these themes were

reviewed and written under each area/question of the study. Important answers by the individual participants are also quoted as they were in the paper for further clarity wherever needed.

To maintain ethical aspects, informed consent was obtained from all the participants before the interview. They were also told that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were ensured that their identities would remain confidential and pseudonyms would be used to represent them. Participants were ensured that this data will be used for academic purposes only. It was also explained to them that if they have some privacy issue, they can refuse to answer any specific question.

The study seeks to find answers to the following main research questions through this investigation:

1. What extra efforts do parents make for Pakistani children's heritage language maintenance?
2. What Urdu language and literacy practices are children engaged in for the purpose?
3. How do these practices help or hinder the formal literacy practices of other languages the children are learning formally at school?
4. How do these practices impact the children's overall achievement at school?
5. How did these practices change during the COVID-19 Lockdown?

The present study bases its methodology on insights from the New literacy studies in combination with social theory and the conceptualizations of multilingual literacies since it is a study about children living in a multilingual and multicultural environment having different expectations for and from children and they are learning multiple languages formally and informally. Multilingual contexts, like that of Omani families under investigation, add more dimensions to the diversity and complexity of literacies through different languages, language varieties and scripts (Hornberger 1989, 1990). New literacy studies contend that literacy practices vary from one context to another (Street, 2003), and the context of this study is a country where expatriate Pakistani children and families are struggling with the maintenance of their home language when living away from their home country.

New literacy studies consider literacy as a social practice, not a technical or neutral skill. The ways people approach reading and writing are rooted in their conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. Children studying in a multilingual environment carry different conceptions from home to school and school to home. This poses another challenge for literacy practices. Specific versions of literacy are "ideological", and rooted in a "particular world-view" and in the "desire to dominate or marginalize others (Gee, 1991; Besnier & Street, 1994). Language ideologies are thus closely linked with people's everyday choices of language use for reading and writing in different public spheres and for spoken communication in the private spaces of their lives (Woolard, 1998; Blommaert,1999).

The term 'multilingual' points out that in any linguistic minority household, there are multiple paths among speakers to the acquisition of the spoken and written languages within the group repertoire and people have different degrees of expertise in these literacies (Martin-Jones & Jones, 2001) and this expertise depends upon how individuals are positioned with regard to access to different varieties of that language(s).

The term 'multilingual' also focuses attention on the multiple ways in which people draw on and combine the codes in their communicative repertoire when they speak and write. In this context, the amount of effort and time dedicated by parents and the supporting adults in organizing and delivering the educational provision, out of the formal context, and the knowledge and expertise they bring to the enterprise is worth exploring.

Interview questions for the present study were prepared keeping in view all these insights from the new literacy studies, multilingual literacies and the social theory to arrive at a viable conclusion.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table1 below provides a detail of the participating families' demographics.

Table1 Participants' Demographic details

Family name	Age of Father	Living in Oman (years)	No. of children	Children's ages and levels at school	Family language(s) spoken at home	Language(s) taught at school formally
Asim	39	7	2	Son-8 years (class 3) Daughter- 3 years (Not school going yet)	Urdu and Saraiki	English, Hindi, Arabic
Waseem	45	14	2	9 years (Class 4), 15 years (Class 10)	Urdu	English, Hindi, Arabic
Ahmed	42	5	1	3 years and 9 months (Not schooling going yet)	Sindhi, English words frequently used.	N/A
Tariq	37	3	1	1 year 6 months (Not schooling going yet)	Urdu	N/A
Saleem	41	9	1	4 Years and 8 Months (Not school going yet)	Urdu, English	N/A
Fawad	51	11	3	12ys(class7) 7yrs (class 4) 4 yrs. (Not school going yet)	Urdu, English	English, Hindi, Arabic

Table 1 shows the detail of six participants residing in Oman who were selected for the interviews. The ages of participating fathers ranged between 27 years to 51 years. The table also tells the duration of each family's stay in Oman. That ranges from 3 years to 14 years. It shows that people living in Oman with a wide range of stay were considered for the study to

reduce any bias such as belonging to Oman/new country. The number of children in each family, their ages and their level at school are also given in the table. The details of the family language and the languages taught in school are also provided in the table for a better understanding of the cohort of the study.

4.1. Efforts by parents

All the parents interviewed are conscious and desirous of maintaining the heritage language to keep their children in touch with their culture and identity and ready for mingling in their homeland when they return to their home country. When asked if they can help their children with reading, writing and speaking the languages taught by the school at home, all of the participants agreed that they could guide them in the school-related literacies at home. This must be because they are all educationists qualifying equivalent to M. Phil and above. As for the introduction of Urdu Literacies, Saleem, the father of a 4-year-old and 8-month-old daughter who has not been admitted to school yet, said, "She reads some sentences herself." This is because her parents have started providing her with practice in Urdu literacy. Being Pakistani nationals with a wish to return to their home country, especially for children's higher education and to maintain their cultural identity, each family is consciously making efforts to maintain the national language of the home country i.e., Urdu. This is in keeping with Tran et al. (2021) and Romanowski (2021) who posit that parents' language use and their attitudes towards home language maintenance are essential ideology factors and enhance children's productivity.

To keep children in touch with Urdu literacies, parents put in some extra efforts at home which according to some participants, is not an extra load. Asim, the father of 8- and 3-year-olds, said, "We brought books for Urdu from Pakistan and on weekends, there is a specific time when Urdu is discussed from those books and eventually, they are learning." Wasim, the father of 9- to 15-year-olds, said that he and the children's mother teach them Urdu at home during holidays. Otherwise, it is a working language for communication between family members and the language in which media i.e., films, dramas and news, are watched. Ahmed and his wife have dedicated an hour a day to teaching their 3 years and 9-month-old child who is not school-going yet. Saleem, the father of a 4 years and 8-month-old daughter, said they speak with her in Urdu and teach her basic alphabets, which is the traditional way in which they were taught in their childhood. Fawad, the father of 3 children aged 4, 7, and 12 says they make the children read and write, and teach them alphabets and word recognition.

4.2. Materials used for the purpose

It was found that this age of technological advancement has invested families with very valuable sources for language input as well as home cultural context in the form of television and other electronic gadgets. Though all the families interviewed use mainly books for Urdu literacy purposes, most of them use electronic media, too, as a source of valuable input for their children's Urdu literacy practices. Along with books, Asim and his wife use some Android apps, and they also speak Urdu with the children at home. Ahmed mentioned television as a source of Urdu input along with books for his child. Tariq and Saleem use online material along with books for teaching Urdu literacy to their children. Fawad and his wife use books, movies, and online resources as input for Urdu literacy practices.

As for which of these materials they find more effective for their children acquiring Urdu reading and writing, 5 out of 6 fathers consider the textbooks brought from the home country as the most effective. According to Asim, 'We found books that are textbooks used in Pakistani schools, more effective than any other input material.' Wasim, whose children are the eldest among the participants, considers online materials also useful along with books. Saleem, whose 4 years and 8 months old is not school going yet, also considers online resources

effective along with books. However, they think that even though their children find these resources engaging and interesting, there is a lack of formal academic material in Urdu in digital media. This is in line with Guskaroska & Elliott (2021) who propose the development of technology-mediated heritage language maintenance tools and more engaging and interactional resources.

4.3. Types of books chosen for Urdu literacy learning

All participants use textbooks brought from their home country. None of them mentioned simplified stories, bilingual books, or any other category/genre. It seems reading for pleasure and shared reading that was the stalwart of heritage language development (Little 2017) have been replaced by the use of media, social media, and digital literacies by the participants of the study as their responses in section 4.4 depict. However, they feel that there is a dearth of academic resources in Urdu in digital media.

4.4. Other resources in Urdu language the children are exposed to

When asked about what other resources they make use of, Asim said, "As such no other resource except books and some mobile apps." This is in line with Lee (2006) and Savage-Shepherd (2012) who found digital literacies especially beneficial in maintaining heritage language. Interestingly, Waseem mentioned the visit to his home country as a source of exposure which they pay every year during summer vacations which has been affected due to the flight operations being discontinued during the pandemic. There in Pakistan, the children experience a surrounding where Urdu is spoken as the first/native language by the majority.

Saleem mentioned television programs and Fawad mentioned "entertainment and news channels" and movies as additional resources. When asked how much time they spend watching Urdu programs on TV, Saleem said his children spend 3 to 4 hours and Fawad's children spend 2 to 3 hours watching Urdu programs on television daily during school days and 5 to 6 hours during summer vacation and weekends. According to them, examples of the typical vocabulary and expressions the children have acquired from watching television much before having to read them in the books are 'sapna'(dream), 'riwayat' (tradition), 'sazish'(conspiracy), 'ajnabi'(stranger), 'auqaat'(worth), 'haryali'(greenery),and 'maanoos'(familiar). These are words that are usually not spoken in everyday idioms at home and sounded unique to children hence they had a special appeal to them and they were stored in memory.

Waseem's son acquired a full sentence from TV that the parents came to know when he used it for the first time while not having been introduced to Urdu literacy by the parents and surprisingly, he used it in the right sense and context. The sentence was: "Aap is zanjeer ki sbse kamzor kari hain" (You are the weakest link/joint/strand in this chain) much before he learned to read and write.

4.5. Ways of making children practice writing

When asked how they make the children practice Urdu writing, Asim said, "In the textbooks, there are exercises given. Along with those, we write some sort of exercises on weekends related to the topic/s that we discuss." Waseem and his wife use dictation as a strategy for providing the children with practice in Urdu writing. Dictation is what the parents as children were also made to do at school as well as at home when they were children. Tariq uses exercise books accompanied by textbooks and gives incentives to the children for completing the written exercises. The incentives could take the form of ice cream or an extra hour for video games.

Fawad and his family have a small whiteboard at home which they use for developing children's interest in Urdu writing practice. The board is even used to prepare their home presentation videos for school assigned during online classes in the lockdown situation. Children also role-play as teacher and student and the elder child, assuming the role of teacher, teaches the younger ones Urdu orthography using the board. In this way, the children have literacy support from their elder siblings too. They are confident in giving this support since they were schooled in Pakistan in their early childhood years where they were taught Urdu formally as a compulsory subject in schools using the same textbooks that the families had brought to Oman for Home language literacy practices for their younger children who started school in Oman or are at pre-school stage. This elder sibling support is very beneficial in a milieu where there is no formal support like kindergarten, preschool or community center facility in the area where the families are living. Sometimes, the board is also used to play games like 'name, place, thing' in Urdu.

The elder children also use notebooks to compete for speed in writing by choosing to write as many words in Urdu as possible in a specified period like one minute or two. The child writing a greater number of words correctly is declared the winner. Moreover, they make use of placards for the younger children on which they are asked to write one word at a time. This is in keeping with the practices in modern English medium schools in Pakistan. This is because Fawad's wife had been the principal of a private school for 7 years before they left for Oman from Pakistan.

4.6. Frequency of Involvement in Urdu Literacy Practices

Table 2 shows how frequently each couple involves their children in Urdu literacy practices when schools are open and when the children have holidays.

Table 2 Frequency of Involvement in Urdu Literacy Practices

Family name	Frequency of involving children in Urdu literacy practices when the school is open	Frequency of involving children in Urdu literacy practices during holidays
Asim	Once a week	Every alternate day
Waseem	N/A	During the December and July holidays only
Ahmed	One hour a day	No
Tariq	Twice a week	Twice a week
Saleem	N/A	N/A
Fawad	On weekends	Not much because they are on a visit to their home country, talking to family and friends in Urdu, and watching movies.

4.7. The Effect of COVID-19 on Urdu Literacy Practices

When asked how the COVID-19 lockdown and the long break from having to go to school have affected Urdu literacy practices, Asim said, 'Due to COVID-19, there was very little time to think about it. Moreover, my son has finished all the basics of Urdu. So in short, COVID-19

hasn't affected this activity much.' Fawad said, that since they are studying online and staying home, there is more time to get them engaged in Urdu literacy. In this way, it has had a positive effect on Urdu literacy practices. However, the youngest one had to be admitted to school but they had to delay his admission due to that. Moreover, they don't start introducing Urdu to the child before starting school as according to his mother, they have to be introduced to English and Hindi in school so introduction of Urdu a little before admission might create additional cognitive load and confusion in his mind. She makes him learn the counting and English alphabet and helps him learn to recite a few English rhymes and Arabic verses. The others said there is no great effect of the lockdown as the practices are continuing as before.

4.8. Strategies used by parents when helping children read and write Urdu

When asked what strategies they use when helping their children read and write Urdu, Asim said, "The very first thing that we did was to make him understand the alphabet. We didn't experience much difficulty as learning the Quran is also going on. Afterward, sentences were the focus." Waseem said they provide them with practice and Ahmed and his wife discuss concepts and explain them through pictorials. When asked what the source of those pictorials is, they said, sometimes, they are present in the textbook, especially for younger classes and initial units and at other times, they search the relevant pictorials on the net and show them to the children for clarity. As for the reason for choosing pictorials over other aids, they think they are easily understood by the children and they can make mental connections of the words to the pictorial images easily when asked to memorize them for later use. Tariq and his wife use the strategies of explaining and elaborating, sometimes through words, and at other times, through gestures or postures. Saleem uses gestures and Fawad's wife uses questioning and elaboration.

4.9. Do you rely on story-telling or story-reading for the purpose?

Though storytelling and story reading have long been an important part of literacy practices, it seems that due to the mediatization and digitalization of lives, movies and the internet have replaced the storytelling or reading tradition. Asim and his wife use story-telling and reading and they find it useful "to some extent". Waseem and Ahmed rely just on reading and writing. Though Tariq and Saleem consider story reading a good method to teach any language, they do not use it to teach Urdu to their children. Fawad said, "Yes, but very rarely because they come across stories in the movies. We both are fond of movies, and so are the children."

4.10. Difference in home and school literacies

The school, having a multicultural environment, provides a very formal space to the children and they feel more relaxed when learning Urdu in their home environment where they have a sense of belonging to the language learned as well as the environment. This was revealed when the parents were asked how they think their home literacy practices are different from the school's practices. Asim said, "We have seen that in school, my son is exposed to English only and when it comes to Urdu, he takes more interest in puzzle solving and reading story books now." According to Tariq, they are not much different, but children learn at home more informally."

Fawad commented, "They can ask questions more frankly at home. At school, they are hesitant as the teacher is from another nationality and they think she is strict. They had this feeling especially when they were new to the school and the cultural difference with people and the environment were discomforting. Now, they are getting used to it." The families in our study are the first generation of settlers in Oman and their home language is Urdu hence they

do not face resistance from children though, like Romanowski's (2021) participating community, ours has no institutional support for heritage language maintenance.

4.11. Difficulties faced in reading and/or writing Urdu as compared to English

The complex and different orthographic patterns, pronunciation, shortage of time resulting in lack of practice, and non-availability of effective digital material in Urdu were found to be some of the difficulties in reading or writing Urdu. Asim said, "In the start, the children used to mix the words while pronouncing them but now it's completely OK." According to Waseem, less time and less practice in Urdu causes the children to lag in Urdu as compared to their progress in English. Ahmed said his children face difficulties in reading and writing both as no effective material is available in digital form. According to Tariq, there is no difficulty. Saleem finds getting familiar with the letters a difficult area for his children. Fawad, the father of 12, 7 and 4-year olds said, "They had difficulty in recognizing the orthographic pattern of Urdu initially but with practice, they are faring better. The youngest one is not school going yet so he is learning alphabets of English only."

4.12. Is it an added burden?

The feeling that the whole practice is related to maintaining their language and identity outweighs the feeling of any burden on children and parents. When asked if having to learn Urdu in addition to the three languages and other subjects at school an added burden for the children and if they think they are at a disadvantage having to read and write one other language at home, four parents believed that it was not a problem, nor do they feel burdened. Asim said, "No. My son never complained about this language especially." Saleem, however, pointed out: "To learn multiple languages will benefit them in future and they can do it with little effort." Fawad believed that as for the time required is concerned, they feel burdened at times but the feeling that it is related to maintaining their language is a relief for them.

4.13. Is it helping the children' other languages' development in any way or the other languages are helping their home language and literacy learning and development?

Asim said, "Yes indeed it is helpful for other language literacy learning. We just need to be managing. Learning ability is much higher at this stage as compared to any other in terms of language." Waseem and Ahmed thought it was a burden. Tariq and Saleem think the "Blend of multiple languages enhances the learning" and since they are interrelated, it "can be useful." Fawad said, "Yes, it does. Sometimes, they relate words having similar sounds or functions in both languages while reading Urdu."

4.14. Impact of Urdu Literacies at home on Children's Overall achievement at School

Given the extra time and effort involved in Urdu literacy learning, parents were asked if they think Urdu literacy at home is affecting the children's overall achievement at school in any way, positively or negatively. Asim said, "We found an increase in the confidence of our son after learning Urdu. So, a very positive attitude has been observed." Waseem and Tariq were of the view that they are affecting children's overall achievement at school because their comprehension level and thinking skills have improved. Fawad thinks they are affecting the overall performance of children positively as they help them understand concepts in other subjects e.g., in Science better when discussed in Urdu.

4.15. Other related challenge(s) faced by parents or children

Three participants think there is no such challenge. Waseem, however, thinks that the children's studies are affected due to a shortage of time. Often, due to the burden of other subjects, no time is left for Urdu learning. According to Ahmed, the absence of a mother tongue and reliance on English as a medium create problems in learning the languages. Saleem was of the view that it is challenging at first to learn multiple languages but with time, children and parents can cope with the situation.

Conclusion

The study found that home language maintenance is important for Pakistani families living in Oman and they are making extra efforts for the purpose. The choice of material, input and strategies used depends on individual styles and preferences of parents but the use of Urdu textbooks brought from the home country is common to all households studied. Though some of the parents and children feel burdened by Urdu literacy practices, most consider it as a contributing factor to children's other language and literacy learning and overall achievement at school. Along with textbooks, visual literacies are also being used for teaching vocabulary and word recognition. Moreover, electronic/digital literacy is also being employed as a useful source of maintaining Urdu which is in keeping with Lee's (2006) argument that electronic literacy and social networking help in heritage language maintenance and are sources of sociopsychological attachment to home language and culture. This study is the first of its kind in multilingual literacies in Oman. Further studies can be conducted by triangulating the methodologies including classroom observations and comparing the language and literacy practices of children at home and school. Children's interviews can also be added.

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