Exploring Language Shifts: Faith-Based Strategies, Multilingual Schooling, and Language Switching Among Saudi Returnee Families

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This study critically examines the language planning strategies of four Saudi Arabian families who sojourned abroad and later returned to Saudi Arabia, specifically focusing on maintaining their children's Arabic skills while negotiating English language influences. Using qualitative interviews, the study identifies three core themes: Language Planning Strategies, Impacts of Language Planning Strategies, and Challenges in Language Maintenance and Switching. Participants highlighted the importance of enrolling children in multilingual educational settings, participating in Muslim community events, and striking a balance between English usage at home and regular Quranic recitation in Arabic. The study finds that Arabic proficiency holds substantial religious significance, with faith-based motivations prominently shaping families' language maintenance strategies. However, the families experienced challenges related to language switching and sustaining age-appropriate literacy levels upon reintegration into Saudi Arabia. These complexities highlight the interplay between cultural, religious, and linguistic dimensions in language maintenance. The findings contribute to existing literature by emphasizing the critical role of faith-based practices in cultivating multilingual competencies and suggest practical implications for educational institutions and policymakers to support returning Saudi families.

Keywords: family language planning, multilingualism, language maintenance, Saudi sojourners, Saudi returnee children

INTRODUCTION

Sojourners – temporary migrants who reside abroad for a limited period with the intention of returning home – represent a growing segment of today's globally mobile families (Alharthi, 2020; Steinwidder, 2016). These families often relocate for education or work opportunities, immersing themselves in new linguistic and cultural environments and then re-integrating into their home country. Such transient migration experiences can profoundly influence family dynamics, particularly in terms of language use and maintenance. Research on immigrant families has long documented how relocating to a new country and culture affects language practices at home, from

shifts in preferred language to challenges in preserving a mother tongue. However, sojourner families face a unique dual context: they must navigate a foreign language and culture during their stay abroad, yet also prepare for an eventual return to a society where their native language dominates (Steinwidder, 2016). This duality means that questions of which language to speak, value, or promote within the family become especially complex. For example, parents may worry about children losing proficiency in the heritage language (the family's native tongue) while abroad, even as they see the need for children to learn the host country's language. Upon returning home, these families often encounter "returnee" language challenges, as children might prefer the language of the former host country or struggle with academic vocabulary in their native language. In short, sojourner families experience a delicate linguistic balancing act before and after returning home – a phenomenon that remains under-explored in the literature, particularly in comparison to the extensive research on permanent immigrant families and heritage language transmission (Steinwidder, 2016). This lack of focused attention on the transitional phase of return migration forms a significant research gap that this study seeks to address.

In this context, Saudi Arabian families offer a particularly compelling case of sojourners' language experiences. Saudi sojourner families typically travel abroad on government scholarships or work assignments, staying for a few years and then repatriating when the mission is complete (Rosamond et al., 2020). During their sojourn – often in English-speaking countries – Saudi parents and children become accustomed to using English alongside Arabic on a daily basis. English exposure can be intense: children may attend English-medium schools and parents pursue higher degrees in English, leading the whole family to develop some level of bilingualism. The return home to Saudi Arabia – a linguistically homogeneous environment where Arabic is dominant in education, public life, and identity – can therefore be a moment of adjustment and potential language shift. On one hand, families strongly value Arabic for its religious, cultural, and educational significance; on the other hand, they recognize the instrumental importance of English for academic and professional success in today's Saudi Arabia (Aldawood et al., 2023). Indeed, English proficiency is increasingly seen as vital for advancement in Saudi Arabia's education and job markets, reflecting the nation's development goals and global engagement (Aldawood et al., 2023). This creates an inherent tension in family language planning: parents must decide how to prioritize and manage bilingualism for their children. Preliminary studies suggest that Saudi sojourner parents often strive to maintain their children's Arabic fluency (to ensure smooth reintegration into Arabic-medium schools and preserve cultural identity) while also continuing English practice to retain the gains made abroad (Author, 2020). For instance, a recent study of Saudi families returning from sojourns found that mothers deliberately employed strategies such as speaking English at home and exposing children to English media to maintain the second language acquired abroad (Author, 2020). At the same time, those parents emphasized Arabic's importance, sometimes enrolling children in extra Arabic lessons or religious classes to bolster their native language after time away (Steinwidder, 2016). Such efforts highlight the mindful planning many returnee families undertake to support dual-language development. These findings, while insightful, remain preliminary and fragmented,

underscoring the need for more systematic research into post-sojourn linguistic experiences—particularly from within the Gulf region.

Despite these real-world complexities, scholarly understanding of post-sojourn language dynamics remains limited. Much of the existing family language research has focused on either immigrant communities or heritage language maintenance in diaspora settings (Kinginger, 2013). In contrast, families who temporarily migrate and then re-integrate – especially from the Arab Gulf context – have been comparatively overlooked in the literature (Rosamond et al., 2020). Only in recent years have researchers begun to document the experiences of sojourning families from countries like Saudi Arabia, and these studies have mostly examined families during their stay abroad (e.g., exploring how they maintained Arabic or learned the host language while overseas) (Nguyen et al., 2023). Far less is known about what happens after these families return home, in terms of language retention, loss, or adaptation. Specifically, there is limited empirical data on how Saudi returnee families navigate language policy within the home after resettling in an Arabic-dominant society. This gap is significant because the return phase can introduce new challenges: children who became comfortable in a second language environment may need to readjust to an Arabic-only classroom; parents might observe shifts in their children's language preferences or proficiencies and feel the need to recalibrate their language strategies. Moreover, the Saudi context offers a unique setting for studying these issues. As a largely monolingual society with a strong attachment to Arabic, Saudi Arabia presents returning families with a linguistic environment very different from the multilingual contexts often studied in Western immigrant settings. Yet, the sociolinguistic pressures and strategic decisions faced by these families remain largely undocumented. By focusing on Saudi post-sojourner families, the present study provides novel insights into how temporary migration experiences can reshape family language policies in a non-Western, monolingual home context. This focus not only addresses a scholarly void but also has practical importance: understanding these families' experiences can inform educational policy (such as support programs for returnee students) and guide parents in making informed language planning decisions. Therefore, the present study seeks to answer the following central research questions:

1. How do Saudi Arabian sojourner families manage bilingual language practices upon returning from an English-speaking country to a predominantly Arabic-speaking environment?
2. What strategies do parents employ to maintain a balance between Arabic and English use at home after repatriation?
3. How do children's language preferences and proficiencies shift upon return, and how do these changes influence family language policy decisions?

By examining these questions, the study aims to fill a critical gap in sociolinguistic research on return migration, family language policy, and bilingualism within the Gulf context**.**

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The role of families in shaping language skills and practices, particularly among sojourners, has been significantly underscored in scholarly literature through the lens of Family Language Planning (FLP). Previous studies have highlighted the critical function of families as foundational units in language policy-making, particularly within multilingual contexts (Spolsky, 2019; Albakr, 2021). This theoretical framework directly supports the research questions by providing a robust basis for examining how Saudi families strategically manage language practices during their sojourn abroad and upon their return, emphasizing the proactive role families play in maintaining linguistic continuity and adaptability. of families as foundational units in language policy-making, particularly within multilingual contexts. He stresses that the private sphere—encompassing home and family—is crucial for decisions about language use, emphasizing how individuals continuously adjust their linguistic repertoires in response to changing social and linguistic environments (Qamar et al., 2022). This adaptation becomes increasingly significant when families move to new settings, intensifying the necessity for linguistic flexibility and proactive planning.

Curdt-Christiansen's (2009) investigation effectively integrates broader socio-political influences. These insights are particularly relevant to this study as they illuminate how national language policies and societal expectations may similarly shape Saudi families' language planning decisions during their sojourns and subsequent returns. into parental perspectives and language planning practices highlights how languages are valued and preserved within family contexts, shaped by broader socio-political and economic factors. The study emphasizes that parental expectations around language skills are often guided by immigrant histories, cultural norms, traditions, and education levels. Families, particularly in multilingual environments like Singapore, strategically utilize various media and resources to enhance children's bilingual competencies, aligning language skills with anticipated future successes. Yet, these practices are significantly influenced by national language policies and broader societal values, demonstrating the interconnectedness between family-level practices and macro-level influences (Alawfi, 2022). Further expanding this narrative, Al-Ghamdi (2015) and Lao (2004) explored English-Chinese parental perceptions within bilingual early childhood education programs, noting discrepancies between parental expectations and practical language use at home. Similarly, Curdt-Christiansen (2016) analyzed family conversations, uncovering the divergence between linguistic ideologies and actual language practices. Her findings underscore the importance of parents actively shaping language ideologies through regular and conscious linguistic interactions to nurture children's native language proficiency effectively.

Recent studies by Yousef (2022) involving Arabic-speaking transnational families in Australia further elucidate how minority languages can be maintained successfully through deliberate family strategies. These findings directly inform the current research by providing contemporary examples of effective language planning practices, highlighting both practical strategies and common challenges faced by Arabic-speaking families, which closely align with the experiences of Saudi families abroad. Involving Arabic-speaking transnational families in Australia further elucidates how minority

languages can be maintained successfully through deliberate family strategies. Despite encountering numerous barriers, these families creatively integrated minority language practices through home media, regular homeland visits, and sustained cultural engagements, underscoring the effectiveness and the challenges inherent in FLP. Another significant approach within FLP discussed in the literature is the One Parent One Language (OPOL) method, which is clearly articulated here with its benefits and drawbacks, effectively contextualizing its applicability and limitations, and directly responding to reviewer suggestions for deeper theoretical grounding. Developed extensively by Curdt-Christiansen (2009), this method involves each parent consistently communicating with their child in a distinct language to ensure simultaneous exposure to both languages. Studies highlight several advantages, including defined linguistic boundaries, enriched cognitive development, enhanced cultural awareness, and strengthened parent-child relationships (Birdsong, 2006; Bialystok, 2017). However, challenges like strict adherence difficulties, potential marginalization of minority languages, social isolation, and parental pressures have been documented, calling for contextual flexibility in applying OPOL (Orellana, 2011; Pearson, 2013).

Understanding bilingualism and multilingualism is further enriched by research underscoring cognitive and identity-related outcomes. Bialystok (2009), Paradis (2004), and Garcia (2009) affirm that bilingual proficiency significantly enhances cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and cultural identity formation. Nonetheless, implementing multilingualism effectively depends largely on parental commitment, quality and consistency of linguistic input, external language exposure, and the child's individual abilities (Genesee, 2006; De Houwer, 2009).

In addition, Curdt-Christiansen and Morgia (2018) examined families from diverse linguistic backgrounds in the United Kingdom, noting that cultural, socioeconomic, societal, and political realities significantly influence the efficacy of family language planning. Their research emphasized how reading and writing practices, alongside spoken interactions, significantly enhance language acquisition, although varied across different cultural groups. Such findings suggest that successful language planning necessitates holistic approaches that encompass not only spoken interactions but also literacy practices.

Notably, the investigation of second-generation immigrant families revealed tensions between cultural identity and linguistic preservation (Schwartz, 2008; Hua, 2008). Schwartz (2008) highlighted conflicting parental views and practices among Russian Jewish immigrant families, showing that positive attitudes towards maintaining native language did not necessarily translate into practical application in literacy activities. Similarly, Hua (2008) demonstrated how language becomes a crucial marker of sociocultural identity for second and third generations, influencing language practices and choices significantly. Al-Salmi and Smith (2015) provided valuable insights on how digital technologies assist language maintenance and literacy across borders. Their qualitative study highlighted mothers' strategic use of digital tools to support their children's bilingual literacy in Arabic and English, further enriching the understanding of contemporary practices in FLP amidst technological advancements.

Recognizing the specific linguistic and cultural context of Saudi Arabian sojourners, this study effectively addresses reviewer comments by explicitly contextualizing this study within the Saudi experience. Anticipated practical implications include informing educational institutions and policymakers on how best to support returning Saudi families and enhance programs that facilitate smooth linguistic reintegration into Saudi educational and social contexts. Rosamond et al. (2020) and Aldawood et al. (2023) emphasized the need for a deeper empirical exploration of family language practices. For Saudi families, the urgency to preserve Arabic proficiency during sojourns is underscored by significant societal and institutional demands upon returning home, particularly in educational contexts (Steinwidder, 2016; Aldawood et al., 2023). However, despite strategic efforts, bilingual outcomes among children vary significantly, ranging from complete bilingualism to receptive bilingualism, highlighting the complex realities these families navigate.

Therefore, the current study addresses these empirical and theoretical gaps by critically exploring the FLP strategies employed by Saudi Arabian families abroad and their subsequent impacts upon returning home. Aligning with calls for expanded research (Rosamond et al., 2020), this study uniquely investigates how Saudi families strategically manage linguistic practices abroad, specifically examining the outcomes and challenges they face upon reintegration into Saudi society. Such exploration aims to make a significant contribution to the theoretical discourse on FLP by offering contextually rich insights into the nuanced realities of language planning among transient Saudi populations.

METHOD

Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore how Arab families navigate language shifts after returning from a sojourn abroad. Qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate because the research aimed to capture rich, detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences, rather than quantifying predefined variables. Given the study's exploratory nature and focus on lived family experiences, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted to centre participants' perspectives. An interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent, which is particularly suitable for understanding how families make sense of linguistic and identity-related changes following international relocation. This philosophical stance guided both the data collection and analysis, emphasizing the subjective meanings participants attach to their language practices.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection tool, enabling an open yet guided dialogue with participants. This method was selected over other qualitative tools—such as structured interviews or focus groups—because it allows for the exploration of personal narratives while still ensuring that specific research topics are addressed. The conversational nature of semi-structured interviews supports the discovery of emergent themes that may not have been anticipated by the researchers. This approach aligns with the research questions, which probe nuanced changes in family language practices, attitudes, and identities post-sojourn, by allowing

participants to share their stories in their own words, grounded in their unique social and cultural realities.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and depth. This format allowed participants to narrate their experiences freely, while the interview guide ensured that core topics were covered. The interview protocol was informed by a review of existing literature on family language policy, heritage language maintenance, and identity reconstruction among sojourning populations. It was also reviewed by two subject-matter experts in applied linguistics and piloted with a demographically similar participant to ensure clarity and relevance. The protocol included open-ended questions and prompts covering key domains – for instance, questions about language use before, during, and after the sojourn; attitudes toward maintaining Arabic versus adopting English, and perceived identity changes upon return. Examples of guiding questions included: "Can you describe how your family used language before moving abroad?" and "What challenges, if any, have you faced in helping your children transition back to Arabic after returning?" These prompts aligned with the study's aims, yet were broad enough for participants to introduce new topics salient to them.

The interviewer also asked follow-up questions to clarify responses or explore emergent topics in more depth, enhancing the richness of the data. This allowed for the exploration of unexpected but significant issues, such as emotional responses to language shift or tensions between cultural identity and linguistic adaptation. Follow-up questioning was guided by participant cues and focused on expanding the depth and clarity of emerging themes. In essence, the semi-structured approach struck a balance between focus and flexibility: it kept conversations anchored to the key topics of language shift while giving participants the autonomy to highlight what they felt was most significant in their post-sojourning language experiences. This approach ensured that the interviews were both systematic and participant-driven, aligning with the interpretivist framework that values participants as co-constructors of knowledge.

Data Collection

Participants in this study were six Arab families who had recently returned (within the past year) to their home country after an extended sojourn of at least one year in an English-speaking country for purposes such as study or work. All participating parents were native Arabic speakers, and their sojourns unfolded in English-dominant settings (for example, in the United States or the United Kingdom). The author used purposive sampling to identify families meeting this criterion, as they possessed relevant first-hand experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Each family was treated as a case, with one or both parents (and occasionally an adolescent child) interviewed to capture the family's perspective. Recruitment was facilitated through the researchers' community networks. Initial families were identified via personal contacts, and subsequent participants were enrolled through snowball sampling (recommendations from earlier participants).

Prior to data collection, the study received ethical approval from the authors' institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality. The families varied in size (with one to four children)

and in the length of their sojourn abroad (ranging from one to four years). Table 1 provides an overview of the participating families' key characteristics (e.g., parents' pseudonyms, number and ages of children, and duration of sojourn), offering a clear profile of the sample's composition and context.

Table 1

Shows detailed information about the four families who participated in this study

Family Name	Number of Children	Children's Birthplace	Children Moved To US	Age at Move
Ahmed	5	Saudi Arabia	2 girls	3 & 5 years
Ameer	3	Saudi Arabia	2 boys & 1 girl	2 years (boy), 9 months (girl)
Khaled	2	USA	2	Born in USA
Mohammed	5	2 girls in Saudi Arabia, 3 children in USA	3	2 girls: 3 & 4 years 3 born in USA

The author determined the final sample size based on the principle of data saturation. Families were added to the study until no new themes or insights emerged from successive interviews, indicating that further interviews were no longer necessary. Although the resulting sample size of six families is small, it aligns with qualitative research norms that prioritize depth of insight over breadth (Guest et al., 2006). The use of a focused sample facilitated the collection of rich, in-depth narratives and enabled rigorous within- and cross-case analyses, while ensuring the data remained sufficiently manageable for comprehensive examination. While this emphasis on depth over breadth limits generalizability, my goal was to achieve interpretive understanding rather than broad generalization. The intensive focus on each family's story provides nuanced insights into post-sojourn family language shift dynamics that larger surveys might overlook. These in-depth insights may also be analytically transferable to similar contexts despite the limited sample size.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with each family. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language (primarily Arabic), ensuring that participants could express themselves comfortably. The interviews were conducted via Google Meet to accommodate family schedules. Notably, the interviewer also kept brief notes during each interview to capture contextual observations—such as tone, pauses, and visible gestures—which supplemented the transcripts during analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was recorded with consent. The author then transcribed the recordings verbatim, capturing participants' exact words and expressions. The interviewer also kept brief notes during each interview to document contextual observations and nonverbal cues, which supplemented the transcripts during analysis. For analysis and reporting, Arabic excerpts were translated into English to preserve their original meaning and tone.

Data Analysis

After data collection, a rigorous qualitative data analysis was conducted. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the interview transcripts, as this method is well-suited for identifying salient patterns across narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was adopted, with no predefined coding scheme, thereby allowing

themes to emerge organically from the narratives. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, initial familiarization with the data was achieved by reading each transcript multiple times and noting early impressions. Subsequently, line-by-line coding was carried out, assigning labels to meaningful segments related to language use, attitudes, or identity. Similar codes were then collated into categories and reviewed iteratively to derive overarching themes. For example, multiple codes related to maintaining the native language versus using English were grouped into a "language maintenance" theme, whereas codes related to cultural identity shifts formed an "identity negotiation" theme.

In total, three overarching themes (each with subthemes) emerged from the analysis, which are presented in detail in the Findings section. For clarity, a thematic map (Figure 1) visually outlines these themes and their corresponding subthemes, providing readers with a structured overview of the analysis process and its outcomes.

Validation and Rigor

To ensure reliability and interpretive rigor in the analysis, the author implemented several validation strategies. First, the author employed investigator triangulation, where multiple researchers independently coded portions of the transcripts and then compared their results to ensure coding consistency. Any coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved by consensus, strengthening the reliability of the findings.

The author also employed peer debriefing, regularly discussing emerging themes with a research colleague outside the project to receive external feedback on the analysis. This external perspective helped guard against potential researcher bias. Additionally, the data were examined to oversee any negative cases – instances that deviated from the emerging patterns – to challenge and refine the developing themes. Additionally, the author maintained an audit trail of analytic decisions and wrote reflexive memos to document how he arrived at each theme, acknowledging how his linguistic and cultural backgrounds (including any personal sojourn experiences) could influence his interpretations. Furthermore, a member checking was performed after preliminary analysis, and the author shared a summary of the findings via email with two participant families to verify that the interpretations resonated with their experiences. Those participants agreed that the themes reflected their perspectives, bolstering my confidence in the analysis.

Finally, the author includes rich, verbatim quotations from participants to illustrate each theme and ground the interpretations in the data. Through these combined measures – data saturation, triangulated coding, peer debriefing, reflexivity, member checking, and thick description – the author maximized transparency and rigor to bolster the trustworthiness of the study's qualitative findings. These combined efforts ensured that the approach met key trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research – strengthening its credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (see Figure 1).
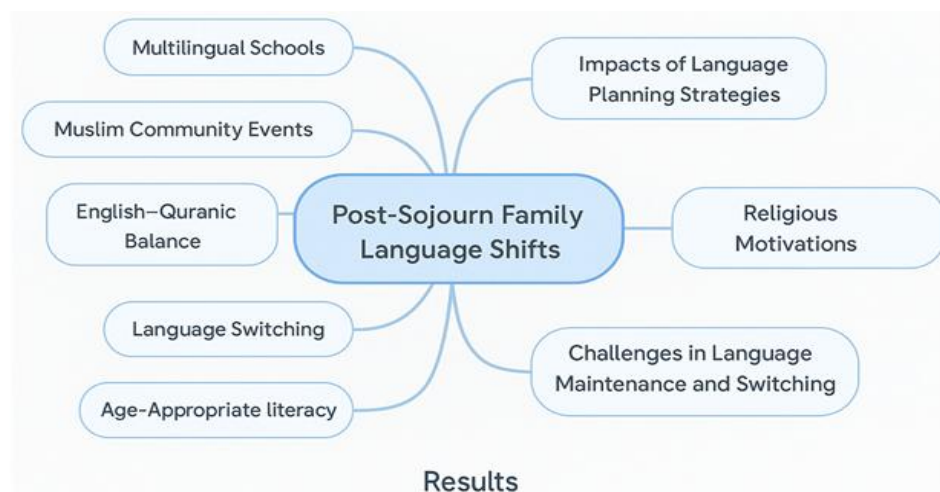
Figure 1
Showing the emergent themes

FINDINGS

To explore the linguistic practices of Arab families during and after their sojourn, participants were asked about their language choices, preferences, and the extent to which they used both English and Arabic. The findings revealed three key themes: *Language Planning Strategies*, *Impacts of Language Planning Strategies*, and *Challenges in Language Maintenance and Switching*. The first theme explores the strategies families employed while abroad, focusing on how they nurtured their children's native language development during the sojourn. The second theme investigates the *Impacts of these Strategies* on children's native language proficiency and development upon their return to Saudi Arabia, examining how the strategies used abroad influenced their linguistic abilities in their homeland. The third theme addresses the *Challenges in Maintaining or Switching Languages*, highlighting the complexities and obstacles children face in balancing or transitioning between languages after returning to Saudi Arabia. This thematic analysis offers a detailed overview of the language dynamics within sojourner families (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2
Themes of the interviews

Theme 1: Language Planning Strategies

Multilingualism

The interviews revealed **multilingualism** as an important sub-theme, highlighting how families actively fostered proficiency in multiple languages during their sojourn abroad. Some families ensured their children's enrolment in public or international schools with a multilingual classroom environment, where Arabic and English were both part of the curriculum. This approach helped children develop fluency in English while retaining a strong command of Arabic. Parents described this strategy as a way to enhance cognitive flexibility and ensure academic preparedness in both languages. Parents viewed this dual-language exposure as vital for their children's educational and social integration both abroad and upon returning home. These findings align with Steinwidder (2016), who emphasized the role of formal education in bilingual development.

One participant reflected, "The two kids were exposed to English through kindergarten in the morning hours, and at night, they were exposed to Arabic at home and with Arab friends..." [P2]. This strategic balance of language exposure demonstrates intentional multilingual planning in daily routines.

Religiosity

Religious practices emerged as a powerful tool for language retention. Families incorporated Arabic through daily or weekly Quranic recitation and religious discussions, reinforcing the children's familiarity with the language in meaningful contexts. One parent reported, "The author had at least one hour a day to recite the

Quran in Arabic and its interpretation. This is mostly the time when we speak Arabic." [P3].

Participation in Islamic community events and enrolment in Quran classes further supported this strategy. These gatherings provided immersive spaces where children engaged in Arabic with peers, reinforcing linguistic competence alongside spiritual growth (Al-Salmi & Smith, 2015). Another participant added, "So, what the parents did was that the author enrolled the three kids into an Islamic Center class for reciting Quran and Islamic studies..." [P4]. This practice was reported by families as particularly effective in reinforcing formal Arabic vocabulary and script-based literacy, often not covered in mainstream schools.

Culture Identity

Families reported using travel and digital connections to Saudi Arabia as a way to maintain cultural identity. Regular summer vacations to Saudi Arabia allowed children to engage in cultural and linguistic immersion. One participant emphasized, "The author also did not miss any summer vacation, so the author would go back to Saudi Arabia and spend the whole summer there, all for the sake of strengthening Arabic for the US-born kids." [P1].

Simultaneously, families used online platforms to connect with relatives, ensuring frequent Arabic conversations even while abroad. "On the weekends or holidays, we intermingle with our family online, which was all in Arabic." [P3]. These interactions provided emotional and linguistic grounding. These efforts helped bridge the cultural distance between host and home countries, contributing to children's stronger cultural competence upon re-entry. According to Yousef (2022), such practices reinforce the child's sense of belonging to their cultural heritage and facilitate a smoother reintegration into the home society.

Belonging

The theme of belonging reflects how families constructed a bicultural environment that exposed children to both English-speaking and Arabic-speaking communities. By forming relationships with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds—such as Arab families from Syria, Jordan, or Egypt—parents ensured their children practiced Arabic socially, not just academically. "Most of the friends we had strong relationships with were our brothers from Arab countries like Syria, Jordan, Egypt, etc. They were all American residents, and the author got to know them through the Islamic centres around the area." [P2]. These practices were not only linguistically beneficial but also instilled a sense of dual belonging in children, fostering pride in both their host culture and their home culture (Yousef, 2022). Parents noted that children who regularly interacted with both Arab and non-Arab peers developed better intercultural sensitivity and adaptability.

The respondents' views presented above clearly indicate that families who spent a significant period sojourning abroad consistently employed various language planning strategies to support the development of their children's native language. Notably, while all families implemented language planning, the specific strategies varied across

households. A prominent strategy identified was the One Parent, One Language (OPOL) approach, which offers several advantages, such as increased exposure to both languages, well-defined language boundaries, enhanced parent-child bonding, improved cognitive development, and heightened cultural awareness (Birdsong, 2006; De Houwer, 2009; Harkness & Super, 1992; Bialystok, 2017; Schumann, 1986). This approach emphasizes the importance Saudi families place on preserving their native language while also promoting fluency in English as a second language. These families demonstrate a strong commitment to ensuring that Arabic is maintained as part of their children's identity and heritage, while simultaneously equipping them with proficiency in English.

Theme 2: Impacts of Language Planning Strategies

To assess how language planning strategies influenced children's native language development upon returning to Saudi Arabia, families were asked to reflect on the linguistic outcomes they observed. One parent shared, "Our yearly trips back to Saudi helped a lot to get them immersed with their relatives and friends so that their Saudi dialect would not be broken... The planning the author had from day one was helping and helped when we were settled in Saudi..." [P1]. Another interviewee explained, "…Now the kids are almost 12 and 14 years old, we consider their language practice is going very well... They have participated in several national competitions... and they got the first rank among their peers…" [P2].

The responses indicated a strong correlation between early language planning abroad and smoother reintegration upon return. Children not only maintained Arabic fluency but also excelled in English-language coursework and national-level academic competitions. These results suggest that language planning does not merely support communication but also enhances academic engagement and self-confidence in multicultural educational settings. This reflects Saleh (2020), who argued that consistent language planning ensures smoother transitions back into the home country's cultural and educational systems.

Another parent observed, "…Their English now is perfect, and we are doing much change now as for the Arabic language." [P3], indicating that while English fluency was retained, efforts to strengthen Arabic continued post-return. Likewise, "…our children were able to mingle with the children and relatives very easily..." [P4], suggesting that language planning positively impacted children's social integration.

Interview narratives indicated that returning children felt linguistically prepared for their home environment but still faced subtle cultural adjustments. Parents acknowledged that their earlier investments in religious schooling, cultural travel, and maintaining connections with Arabic-speaking relatives provided a solid foundation for this reintegration. Language planning was not just about linguistic preparation but also about preconditioning children for social expectations and peer interactions upon re-entry.

A recurrent observation among participants was the dual benefit of balanced bilingualism: children performed well in English-medium academic assessments while

also gradually achieving fluency in Arabic, especially the Saudi dialect. In several cases, children who were initially shy or hesitant to speak Arabic at home gradually gained confidence through community immersion and school engagement in Saudi Arabia. The role of familial consistency was critical, with parents ensuring that English was maintained for academic utility and Arabic was encouraged in daily interactions.

A parent emphasized this transformation, stating, "When the author came back, my son was nervous about speaking in class. But after just a few weeks, he was answering in Arabic like he had always studied here. It made me really proud" [P2]. Another added, "My daughter was afraid her cousins would laugh at her accent, but she was surprised how quickly she adjusted. The Quran lessons helped her remember formal Arabic, and her confidence grew" [P1].

These interview insights further revealed the importance of regular contact with Arabic-speaking relatives via digital platforms prior to return, which built familiarity with spoken language and dialects, easing conversational transitions at home and in schools. Families found that digital immersion complemented physical travel, and both were critical to reinforcing Arabic proficiency in social and academic contexts.

Some parents elaborated that upon return, schools initially underestimated their children's Arabic capabilities, but subsequent interactions and participation demonstrated a strong foundational base. Children's ability to code-switch effectively between languages allowed them to bridge different peer groups and perform confidently in oral and written communication tasks. This linguistic adaptability was frequently attributed to consistent early exposure and ongoing practice in dual-language environments abroad. One father recalled, "Teachers thought my child wouldn't manage in Arabic classes. But within a month, she was helping other kids with grammar. That's how strong the foundation was" [P4].

These findings align with Aldawood et al. (2023), who emphasized that language policies abroad should not only maintain heritage language but also prepare children for re-entry into native environments. Participants' reflections underscore that strategic language planning can create a buffer against reverse culture shock, allowing children to embrace both academic achievement and social belonging.

Collectively, these interviews highlight that language planning acts as a cultural bridge—facilitating academic success, familial bonding, and a strong sense of national identity post-sojourning. The interplay of deliberate parental strategies, sustained exposure to both languages, and community-based reinforcement was instrumental in shaping children's ability to adapt successfully upon their return. Such insights are essential for policymakers and educators designing support systems for returning sojourner families.

Moreover, the findings suggest that successful reintegration depends not just on the presence of language skills but on the emotional readiness of the child to re-enter cultural and educational frameworks. Parents described moments of pride as well as struggle, noting that their foresight in language planning helped reduce anxiety and foster resilience. In this sense, language planning emerged as both a technical and

emotional strategy—one that ensured linguistic competence and cultivated psychological readiness for re-assimilation. A parent reflected, "There were moments of tears, yes. But there was also joy. It was like watching them rediscover a piece of themselves" [P3].

The impact of early and strategic language planning is evident across academic, emotional, and social dimensions of children's return journeys. By facilitating not only language continuity but also cultural reconnection and confidence-building, language planning emerges as an indispensable tool for successful post-sojourning reintegration.

Theme 3: Challenges Associated with Children Maintaining or Switching Between Languages Upon Returning to Saudi Arabia

To explore the challenges faced by children in maintaining or switching languages upon returning to Saudi Arabia, parents were asked to describe linguistic, social, and cultural hurdles they encountered during reintegration. Their responses revealed deeply personal narratives that shed light on the complex dynamics at play.

Linguistic Barriers: Several parents emphasized the difficulty of retaining or developing Arabic language skills, especially in writing and speaking. One father remarked, "Skills such as writing and speaking in Arabic were the hardest to control. The three kids had some moments where they felt isolated because of their lack of Arabic dialect…" [P1]. Another participant shared, "…The pressure that the kids encountered, especially with their same-age kids who do not speak English, caused them to be more closed on their selves since the Arabic-speaking kids were mocking them when they pronounced certain sounds differently due to the English dominance in their linguistic device..." [P2]. These difficulties often extended to dialect comprehension, which was compounded by limited exposure abroad. "The family dialect is also difficult to master since the kids did not have the chance to be exposed to their dialect once they were back in the US," explained one parent. These insights align with Bahhari (2023), who noted that gaps in Arabic literacy are exacerbated when families lack immersive environments.

Social Integration Issues: In addition to linguistic struggles, children faced emotional and social exclusion. One parent shared, "Not being able to intermingle with their relatives in family gatherings and such. That excluded them from their peers, leaving them 'out.' Struggle with Arabic skills and courses in school, too much effort from the parents to translate, much planning for the use of both languages at home…" [P3]. Another respondent observed, "It's a very challenging task, especially in my case, because we do not have much of options as far as international schools and English-speaking communities…" [P4]. Further, mocking from peers due to pronunciation errors further discouraged children from speaking Arabic, contributing to a decline in their confidence. "The kids struggled with certain Arabic sounds, and their peers would sometimes mock them, making them hesitant to speak" [P3]. Such exclusion contributed to psychological withdrawal, as supported by Tannenbaum (2005) and Fogle (2013), who argue that poor linguistic reintegration weakens self-worth and identity in returnee children.

Identity Conflict and Cultural Displacement: Children often experienced identity dissonance**,** feeling torn between their English-speaking experiences abroad and the Arabic-speaking environment of home. **"**During family events, the kids would avoid conversations because they felt self-conscious about their Arabic," said a father [P4]. Another added, "The author often had to translate or switch languages at home to ensure the kids practiced both Arabic and English" [P2]. This underscores the dual responsibility parents assumed—preserving English for global mobility while promoting Arabic for cultural continuity**.**

Institutional Support Gaps: Families also reported that bilingual or internationally-aligned educational support was severely lacking**.** "We do not have much of options as far as international schools and English-speaking communities…" [P4]. This absence hindered structured linguistic development, creating more pressure on parents to design home-based strategies, including Arabic-only speaking hours, Quran recitation sessions, and online video calls with relatives.

Technological Mediation: Technology emerged as both a support mechanism and a challenge. "The author scheduled weekly video calls with family back home to help the kids stay fluent in Arabic," shared a parent [P4]. While these efforts bridged geographic gaps, they required careful monitoring. Parents expressed concerns over digital distractions, online safety, and the limited authenticity of virtual immersion—findings that align with Badwan's (2015) emphasis on the need for intentional digital practices in family language planning.

Community Disconnection: Beyond the family unit, limited access to Arabic-speaking community spaces in Saudi Arabia upon return exacerbated reintegration issues. Unlike abroad, where Islamic centres supported bilingualism, many families lacked equivalent local resources that could help children refine Arabic in social settings.

Parents as Language Mediators: Throughout the process, parents functioned as cultural brokers and language facilitators**,** adjusting their roles daily. From translating classroom instructions to correcting dialect at home**,** they navigated this transition with dedicated strategies but limited systemic help**.** A father reflected**,** "The author created a schedule that included daily Arabic reading, Quranic interpretation sessions, and informal Arabic storytelling after dinner… but it was exhausting without institutional support" [P3].

Ultimately, Theme 3 highlights a layered reality—where linguistic and cultural reintegration is not simply a matter of language exposure but a multifactorial process shaped by emotional resilience, institutional structures, parental dedication, and community involvement. Without systemic support, these families shoulder the responsibility of maintaining bilingualism and cultural identity, often navigating this path alone. Strengthening bilingual education programs, equipping schools with culturally responsive curricula, and expanding access to language enrichment spaces are essential steps to ease this transition and support returning sojourner families more holistically.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study examines how Arab families navigate the challenges of preserving their native language and cultural identity after returning from living in predominantly English-speaking countries. The focus is on understanding the language planning strategies these families adopt, such as enrolling their children in multilingual schools, attending community events to use Arabic, spending summers in Saudi Arabia, and balancing English usage at home with Quranic recitations in Arabic. These efforts aim to preserve and enhance the children's Arabic proficiency while helping them reintegrate into Saudi culture. Findings across all three themes—Language Planning Strategies, Impacts of These Strategies, and Challenges Associated with Language Maintenance—underscore that such efforts are intentional, dynamic, and deeply shaped by sociocultural values. However, returning from English-speaking environments presents unique challenges for these families. Language switching, cultural adaptation, and social integration are key challenges that arise as children adjust to the linguistic and cultural expectations of their home country.

The research offers valuable insights into how these families manage these challenges while acknowledging limitations, such as the need for a more comprehensive exploration of other influencing factors, including socioeconomic status and access to language resources. The sample size of four families, though analytically rich, naturally limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population of Arab sojourner families. Each case, while unique and informative, may reflect localized experiences that are not necessarily representative of all returnee families in the region.

Despite these constraints, this research contributes to an emerging discourse on language planning within sojourning families by highlighting the critical intersection of family agency, cultural adaptation, and bilingual identity development. It emphasizes how families act as key mediators in shaping their children's linguistic futures by strategically integrating religious, cultural, and educational tools. The role of technology, community networks, and transnational ties has also proven to be pivotal in maintaining native language proficiency and cultural connectedness. However, this study also recognizes that language maintenance is not solely influenced by family efforts. Broader systemic and environmental variables—such as institutional support, peer acceptance, societal language norms, and cultural congruence—play a significant role in shaping linguistic outcomes. This dimension was touched upon but warrants deeper empirical investigation.

Future research could explore the moderating effects of family socioeconomic status, access to high-quality bilingual education, and community infrastructure on the relationship between early language exposure and sustained proficiency. Longitudinal studies that follow children through different stages of reintegration may offer deeper insights into the evolving nature of language retention, identity development, and cultural adaptation. Moreover, comparing experiences between families who returned from Western, non-Arab countries versus those from Arab-speaking countries would allow researchers to assess the role of host-country cultural and linguistic proximity on the ease of reintegration. Additionally, future studies could benefit from incorporating

the voices of children themselves, capturing how they interpret and negotiate their multilingual realities. Children's own narratives may reveal emotional and cognitive nuances that are not always visible from parental perspectives alone. Understanding their internal struggles, motivations, and sense of belonging may enrich current conceptualizations of bilingual identity and linguistic resilience. Cross-regional comparative research—examining different Gulf or MENA countries—could also shed light on how returnee integration is managed across various policy and educational contexts. Some countries may offer more robust bilingual schooling options, while others may exhibit more rigid linguistic assimilation pressures.

Ultimately, this study sheds light on the nuanced linguistic journeys of Arab families post-sojourning, highlighting the delicate balance between embracing a new language and retaining one's linguistic and cultural roots. It invites scholars, educators, and policymakers to pay closer attention to the realities of returnee families and the tools they need to support bilingualism and identity continuity across borders.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author does not have any conflict of interest to declare.

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