Language Practices in the UAE: Perspectives of Arab Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract

This study investigated the language practices of 4 Emirati bilingual Arabic/Emirati mothers with their children with autism spectrum disorder. The study aimed to explore (1) the nature of the language practices (2) their limitations and (3) the mothers' perceptions on bilingualism and home-language. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with thematic and narrative analysis to produce themes. Participants reported that they perceived English to be valuable for their children's education and future. Arabic was valued for its direct connection to the Quran and Islamic teachings and it was perceived as essential in maintaining familial relationships. The mothers had high aspirations for their children and believed that adopting a bilingual approach would facilitate their success and acceptance in society. These beliefs were reinforced by professionals. Although all of the participants valued Arabic, they did not pursue teaching it. Furthermore, they believed that their children would acquire and maintain Arabic solely through family interactions and unstructured Islamic teachings. The language practices of Emirati parents with children with ASD are influenced by the recommendations of professionals and recent rapid changes in the country's linguistic environment. More Professionals should be better educated about matters related to home-language and its impact on the children and their families. Future research should include parents with older children and more complex language. Additionally, future research should target professionals in the UAE and their perceptions about bilingualism.
Keywords: *Bilingualism; Autism spectrum disorder; Home-language; Family;*

Cultural and Linguistic Maintinance

Context of the Study

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has a diverse population of 9.7 million (World Bank, 2019), of which 11.5% are UAE nationals and the majority remainder of 88.5% is made up of expatriates (Federal Competetivness and Statistics Authority, 2005). While the government official language is Arabic; English is widely used, particularly in big urban cities like Abu Dhabi and Dubai in which non-Emiratis make up 81% and 92% of the population, respectively (Dubai Statistics Center, 2018; Statistics Centre Abu Dhabi, 2019). These unique cultural and linguistic characteristics of the UAE influence the parents' choice for language use with their children, particularly parents of children with language impairments such as children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder which is characterized by social and communication deficits with repetitive, restrictive, and stereotypical behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD is amongst the most common neurodevelopmental disorders as it transcends race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US estimated the prevalence of ASD to be 1.65% for 8 years-old children (Baio *et al.,* 2018). Similarly, a recent study in Qatar (Alshaban *et al.,* 2019) presented a consistent prevalence. One study in Dubai, UAE estimated that 1 out of 146 children is diagnosed with ASD (Al Abbady, Hessian, & Alaam, 2017).

An estimate of 20-50% of individuals with ASD will not develop functional speech (Kim, et. al., 2014) however, these estimations are influenced by how functional speech is defined and the children's characteristics. Furthermore, children who do develop speech often present language difficulties (Kjelgaard & Tager-Flusberg, 2001).

Language Practices in the UAE

Since the UAE was founded as a federation of seven emirates in 1971-1972, citizens of UAE identify as Emirati. On a larger scale, they identify as Gulf citizens and part of the Arab and Islamic world. The locals communicate using the local Emirati Arabic, which is a variety of Gulf Arabic. As an Arab Muslim nation, Standard Arabic (SA) is essential as

it is the form of Arabic used in literature and the media. Furthermore, SA plays a vital role in connecting the Arabic speaking nations with one another (Kennetz & Carroll, 2018). While, Arabic[1] is the first language of the UAE and the only language mentioned in its constitution (Gallagher, 2011), English functions as a second language in business. Furthermore, English is used as the country's lingua franca, as 90% of the UAE workforce are expatriates (Boyle, 2011), from more than 200 nationalities (Al-Khouri, 2012). In educational settings, English has been made the medium of instruction in major higher institutions in the country (Gallagher, 2011), which adopted an English minimum cut-off for university eligibility (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015). Moreover, the majority of government schools in the UAE teach Arabic and English starting from kindergarten (Gallagher, 2011).

These unique conditions of the UAE have recently led researchers to question the impact of English on the home language practices and Arabic identity of UAE children. Al-issa & Dahan (2011) documented the importance of preserving Arabic as an engine of cultural and heritage maintenance and asked educational policymakers to revisit the role of English in educational settings. Furthermore, the parents' bilingual language practices towards their children and attitudes toward the increased use of English was discussed with concern. However, these concerns were not supported by research. On the other hand, a more recent research encouraged the use of English as a medium of education (Dahan, 2013).

Although to this date, there are no studies on how Emirati parents view and value the use of Arabic and English, and research within the field is scarce, findings from one qualitative study on Emiratis language practices may help us make sense of our participants' views and language practices. In the Kennetz and Carroll (2018) study, almost 100 anonymous responses were collected from 20-29-year-old Emiratis by sending bilingual Arabic/English e-surveys across the UAE. The survey included 35-items that collected data on language use preferences in multiple domains which included ~~such as~~ family, education, religion, and the community. Findings indicated that Emiratis value both languages, however, Arabic is favoured when interacting with locals and in cultural

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[1] *Unless otherwise specified, when the language Arabic is mentioned, the author is referring to both Standard Arabic and local Emirati Arabic.*

events, while English is used more often with non-locals and in educational settings (Kennetz & Carroll, 2018).

Bilingualism and Communication Development in Children with Autism

Bilingualism, a global phenomenon, is defined as the regular use of two or more languages (Grosjean, 1997). It is becoming a common practice in the UAE (Gallagher, 2011). Recent studies on the language development of typically developing (TD) bilingual children did not report that these children fall behind their monolingual peers on their language development milestones when adequate exposure to both languages is provided (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2006; Holowka, Brosseau-Lapr & Petitto, 2002). Furthermore, studies are reporting cognitive benefits of bilingualism in TD children (Barac & Bialystok, 2011).

To date, a limited number of studies have compared bilingual and monolingual children with ASD on their communication performance. In their research, Hambly & Fombonne (2012) studied and compared the language and social abilities of 75 monolingual and bilingual children with ASD ages 36-78 months old. The bilingual group included eleven bilingual children who were exposed to more than 2 languages and seven children with a vocabulary of fewer than 10 words, of which two are nonverbal. The researchers included nonverbal children to explore if bilingualism had negative effects on the language development of nonverbal children with ASD. Based on their language history exposure, the children were divided into three groups: monolingually exposed children, bilingually exposed children before the age of 12 months, and bilingually exposed children after the age of 12 months. The language and social abilities that were studies and compared included social responsiveness, joint attention, point initiation, total conceptual vocabulary (i.e., the combined number of unique vocabulary items from the two languages), word count in the dominant and second language, and early language milestones. The findings suggested that the social and language abilities of bilingually exposed children with ASD did not present with further delays when compared with monolingually exposed children. Additionally, there were no significant differences in these abilities in the 2 groups of bilingual children:

sequential bilinguals and simultaneous bilinguals. The study also documented that about 60% of the bilingually exposed children were acquiring vocabulary in both languages.

A study by Ohashi et al. (2012) echoed the findings from the study above. In this study, the communication abilities of 20 bilingually exposed and 20 monolingually exposed children with ASD (ages 24-52 months) were compared. The children were able to say 30 words at a minimum. The bilingual children were all simultaneous bilinguals that had on-going home exposure to two languages, English or French. The monolingual children were exposed to one language, either English or French, from birth to the time of the assessment. The researchers matched the children from the two groups by their chronological age and nonverbal IQ scores. The children were compared by their severity in communication impairments associated with autism, age of the children's first words, age of the children's first phrases, their receptive and expressive language scores, and the children's functional communication scores. The findings presented no significant differences between the language abilities of the bilingual group and the monolingual group.

Petersen, Marinova-Todd, & Mirenda (2012) found similar results in preschool-age children with ASD. The researchers investigated the language abilities of 14 monolingual and 14 age-matched bilingual children with ASD ages 43 to 73 months and compared their vocabulary skills and linguistic skills. The bilingual children were all exposed to Chinese and English simultaneously before the age of three and had a conceptual vocabulary of at least 30 words. Assessments showed that there was no significant difference in the conceptual vocabulary size of the two groups. A more recent study compared the language development of monolingual and bilingual children with ASD in seven studies. The studies had mixed results, though the difference between the measures of the two groups was not substantial. Furthermore, the review illustrated that bilingual children with ASD may have a slight advantage in developing their vocabulary over monolingual children with ASD (Lund, Kohlmeier & Durán, 2017).

As in the aforementioned studies, Valicenti-McDermott et al. (2013) investigated the language abilities of bilingual and monolingual children with ASD and found that the bilingual children did not lag in their language development when compared to their age-matched peers. Additionally, the research found that bilingualism may improve

communication social skills in children with ASD, as bilingually exposed children with ASD in the study used communicative gestures and took part in pretend play more than their monolingual peers. The findings are consistent with a study that compared communicative gestures of TD bilingual and monolingual children which concluded that bilingualism facilitates non-verbal communication in TD children (Yow & Markman, 2011).

Unfortunately, there is little available information on the language abilities of bilingual Gulf Arabic speaking children with ASD and more specifically Emirati Arabic speaking children. In a recent exploratory longitudinal study, Shaalan et al. (2019) investigated the effect of bilingualism on 29 Emirati Arabic/English speaking children with ASD ages 44 to 77 months. The participating children were enrolled in an intensive bilingual intervention program in the UAE. The children's receptive and expressive vocabulary was assessed in Arabic and English biannually for two years. Results from the study presented a significant increase in both Arabic and English vocabulary skills in the participating children. Although this study lacked control groups, due to the unique program these children were enrolled in, the results supported the finding that bilingualism does not have a negative impact on language development.

Bilingual Children with ASD and their Families

Recent studies investigating concerns of bilingual parents of children with ASD reported that parents were concerned that their decisions on introducing two languages to their children would negatively impact their language development (Hampton *et al.*, 2017; Kay-Raining Bird *et al.*, 2012). These concerns may have been influenced by the professionals' recommendations to parents to use one language at home (Jordaan, 2008). In their study, Kay-Raining Bird et al. (2012) reported that the majority of parents with children with ASD were advised to choose one language to communicate with their child, which convinced a few parents to abandon one language and raise their child in a monolingual environment (Kremer-Sadlik, 2005). Adopting a monolingual approach may negatively impact the quality of the parent-child interaction (Kremer-Sadlik, 2005)

and restrict child's interactions with family members and isolate them from social and cultural events in the community (Baker, 2011).

The literature discussed presents findings that support families raising bilingual children with ASD, due to the lack of negative evidence associated with bilingualism on the communication and language development of children with ASD. Despite that, attitudes of the majority of parents of children with ASD from North America and the UK seem unchanged. There is a general dearth in the studies of the experiences of parents of bilingual children with ASD and there are no studies in the UAE. The current study will attempt to understand the practices and concerns of Emirati mothers of bilingual children with ASD that are living in the UAE, which encompasses a unique linguistic environment. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the Emirati mothers' language practices with their bilingual children with ASD?

2. According to these mothers, what facilitates or limits their language practices with their bilingual children with ASD?

3. What are these mothers' perceptions on bilingualism and home-language maintenance?

Method

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study, which involved semi-structured interviews with bilingual mothers of children with ASD. The interviewer was guided through general themes by an interview guide (see Appendix D) that was created to provide open-ended questions. This approach was chosen because it encourages the interviewees to have more control over the topics and allows the interviewer to follow their lead and develop follow-up questions around the topics they raise. The interview guide was arranged into three sections (1) Focused History: which allowed the mothers to talk about their experiences since their children's diagnosis, the impact on their lives and their decisions about their language practices after consulting with the professionals.

(2) Current Experience: this section focused on the mothers' current experiences with their children's daily routine, school-home relationships, family roles and language patterns in these different contexts. (3) Reflections: the last section explored the mothers' educational and language expectations for their children. One interview of 40-60 minutes was conducted with each participant. Several strategies were employed to ensure the participants' comfort through the interviews. The participants were encouraged to use the language they were most comfortable with and to code-switch if they wanted to. They choose the time of the interviews and if they wanted to be interviewed alone or with their partner (see details below). Ethical approval was granted by the university prior to recruitment and data collection.

Recruitment of participants took place in one school which is a well-maintained school for children with autism and in which the researcher is employed. The school offers a bilingual curriculum for children with ASD and accepts children who are diagnosed with ASD by a registered physician in the UAE. Upon admission, the children are screened to confirm their ASD diagnosis. The recruitment was facilitated by the school's professional development department; it sent out emails and hard copies of the study information sheet and a copy of the consent form (Appendices A & B) to the potential participants' children.

Participants and procedure

The study targeted mothers of children with ASD. The mothers were recruited from one school which all of their children attend. The study inclusion criteria were: (a) participants had at least one child with a documented ASD diagnosis, (b) children must be between the ages of 3-8 years old (c) participants spoke Emirati Arabic as their primary language (d) participants used English in the community without an interpreter. The children's age range , 3 to 8, was chosen to ensure that they are old enough to have received a diagnosis of ASD and young enough for their parent to contemplate their language practices with their children. The reason for focusing on bilingual mothers was that they were most likely to interact and socialize in bilingual environment. Therefore,

they were more likely to make conscious decisions about their language practices with their children.

Five mothers agreed to participate in the study, however, only four were able to attend the interviews. Three mothers were interviewed independently, and one mother chose to be interviewed with her spouse. On the day of the interview, a background questionnaire (Appendix C) was completed by the participants to collect demographic data. All four participating mothers were Arabic speaking Emirati citizens residing in UAE. They spoke English with high proficiency. The participants' level of education varied as one mother held a Master's certificate, one held a high school certificate and two mothers held diploma certificates.

The participants' annual household income ranged from lower than average to average, ranging from AED 150,000 to 240,000 a year which is equivalent to USD 40,840 to 65,345 a year to higher than AED 250,000 which is equivalent to USD 68,067 (Gulf News, 2008). All mothers reported that they use both languages: Arabic and English at home, except for one mother that reported she exclusively uses Arabic at home. All mothers had access to help at home, whether it was a live-in housekeeper or a family member that lived with the family. The four participants had at least one child diagnosed with ASD. The children were between the ages of 3 and 8 and had been diagnosed with ASD for at least 1 year.

Table 1

Participant and child pseudonyms, child's age and family language practices

Mother	Child and child's Age	Mother-child language use	Language use with other family members
Sara	Zayed (7)	Arabic/sometimes English	Arabic with spouse and close family, Arabic/English with Zayed's siblings
Aisha	Mohammed (5)	English/Arabic	Arabic with spouse and close family, Arabic/English with Mohammed's siblings
Mariam	Hammda (7)	English/Arabic	Arabic with spouse and family members, Arabic/English with Hammda's brother
Salama	Hamdan (8)	Arabic	Arabic with all family members

The children's communication levels varied. One of the children was non-verbal and communicated using an Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) device, two of the children were at the single-word level and one child was able to participate in extended exchanges. All the children were enrolled in an applied behaviour analysis (ABA) base day program, which provides bilingual Arabic/English services in a school setting. The services are provided by native speakers. The participants' pseudonyms and their children with ASD, the children's ages, and the language patterns between the mother and child and the mother and the rest of the family are presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted by the researcher who had experience in working with families of children with ASD and interviewing them. They were audio recorded on the researcher's password-protected phone and then transferred to a password-protected hard-drive. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim in their entirety by the researcher. The transcriptions were completed in Arabic. The pseudonyms were used through the transcripts for anonymity. Two methods were used during data examination: thematic analysis and narrative analysis. They were both applied to explore the data for recurring and prominent themes. The thematic analysis was used to process the data through an inductive approach rather than a deductive one (Thomas, 2006). Inductive analysis is suitable for under-researched topics as themes emerge from examining the data rather than making assumptions and imposing theories on them. This method was appropriate for the exploratory nature of this study. First, the transcripts were thoroughly examined for coding using a complete coding approach, which included coding all relevant transcripts (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Then, the codes and accumulated data related to each code were checked for similarity and overlap by splitting, removing, or combing data, if necessary. This data analysis led to the identification of main themes and subthemes. In the last stage of analysis, the entire data was reviewed again, and the initial themes and subthemes were categorized into four themes.

The transcripts were also explored through narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is used to gain insights into how participants connect events and how they feel about them, which allows the researcher to view the data as an interpretation of the participants' lived experiences, rather than factual reporting. A narrative profile was

created for each participant. A narrative profile is a collection of the participant's words that are constructed into coherent stories (Siedman, 1998). Both methods were essential for data analysis as thematic analysis puts emphasis on concerns that impacted all participants, while narrative analysis highlights the personal experiences of each participant.

Validity

To increase the validity of the study, several strategies were employed. First, feedback on data analysis was requested from colleagues (peers) in different stages of coding and theme identification. In the initial stage of coding, 50% of the codes were checked by colleagues for agreement. They were given the codes and a list of groups of quotes and were asked to match the codes to a corresponding group of quotes. The initial stage coding agreement was approximately 70% and the final stage coding agreement was over 90%. Since all the mothers chose to use Arabic in the interviews, the transcripts were all in Arabic. After arranging the groups of quotes into themes, they were translated by the researcher, and a bilingual colleague was asked to review the translations. Second, sections from the written analysis were sent to the participants for their feedback. The participants agreed with the analysis and had no comments or objections. Finally, using thematic analysis and narrative analysis allowed for data triangulation. Triangulation is a systemic process of arranging the data to find shared themes and removing overlapped information. This may be employed by collecting the data through multiple methods, sources, and investigators and analysing the data using multiple approaches (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Results

Four themes were identified to influence the mothers' language practices towards their children with ASD. These were (a) the mothers' views on the importance of both English and Arabic in their children's lives, (b) the implications of living in multicultural society on the language practices of Emirati families (c) the mothers' attitudes towards the preservation of Arabic, and (d) the mother's beliefs about bilingualism.

Theme A*: Both Languages, Different Roles*

The mothers' responses shared a common theme which was their emphasis on nurturing both Arabic and English. They perceived both languages to play important, though different roles in integrating their children into society. For education, the mothers prioritized English over Arabic. According to the mothers, English proficiency is essential for higher education. For example, Aisha said:

> *Most things require English now… for example, in the future when he attends university or pursue higher education or continue his studies in the future, it will mostly be in English.*

The participants also believed that English proficiency would give their children an advantage in future employment opportunities. For example, Salama said:

> *I would like for him to excel in English. That way, people will not look at him as a person of determination[2], instead they will be impressed by his use of language…I believe English might be better to learn for future work opportunities where English will be used for communication: spoken and written.*

Similarly, Sara said:

> *I will support my son in learning English. It will help him manoeuvre school, university and his job in the future…English has become a global language.*

While English was perceived as a necessity for their children's education and future, Arabic was highly valued and critical in maintaining family bonds. For example, Salama said:

> *Our family environment, which is our main social circle, is an Arabic one, it is completely Arabic. We do not use a single word of English in our conversations…therefor Arabic is essential for him, to be part of the family. It is important to be fluent in Arabic.*

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[2] People with special needs are referred to as people with determination in the UAE as per the national policy for empowering people with special needs (Ministry of Community Development, 2017).

Arabic was also associated with maintaining tradition, Islamic values, and Quranic teachings. For example, Sara explained:

> *In an ideal world, I would like my son to perfect Arabic…what would be more ideal than a child who is capable of reading and reciting verses from the Quran? I put a lot of effort with all of my children to get them to listen to the Quran recitations…I say "okay, you can speak to each other in English, but you have to listen and recite the Quran". I don't expect perfect recitations…Every morning and later in the evening, I turn on the supplications and prayers for Zayed...sometimes I sit with him and recite the prayers. I know I am exposing him to Arabic this way as well.*

When the mothers spoke about Arabic, Quranic teachings were mentioned as a matter a fact with no elaborate explanations. For example, Salama said, "*we have to be fluent in Arabic, in a Muslim community…of course we focus on the Quran, at least reciting the Quran which we use in our prayers and religious practices*". In the previous example, Salama used "we" repeatedly referring to the collective society.

Likewise, Aisha said:

> *Arabic is our language, it is our tradition, it is our Quran. For him to learn Quran, he must know Arabic. He must learn how to read Arabic, which will definitely benefit him…my son could be gifted in writing Arabic poetry…who knows?*

Theme B: *Language Demands in a Multicultural Society*

The participants spoke about choosing English as the academic language for their children as if it was an optional choice, however, sometimes they expressed their helplessness in making that decision due to the multicultural nature of the society. For example, Aisha said,

> *I want his English to be solid…because if you look at the nationalities in our society, mash-Allah [praise the Lord], we have people from all nationalities…when he gets older and leaves the house to buy or get something, even a simple thing I want him to be capable of speaking to everybody…if he gets lost, God forbid, most of the security guards speak*

English…knowing English, now in this society, will make his life a little easier…when dealing with the society, mash-Allah, most people understand English.

Similarly, the same feelings were expressed about the educational settings. For example, Sara said:

If you get out of your house, to the mall, for example, you will have to use English. English has dominated our daily routine… it has become compulsory; it was forced on us. Nowadays it is part of the nursery curriculum in private and public nurseries…all of our interactions have become in English. It is an English-speaking environment.

The mothers spoke on how their feelings and opinions toward English have changed since they had children. They also reported that close family members and members of their community adapted their mindset toward English when their children started attending school. Maryam spoke about her experience, she said, *"Honestly, in the past, before having children I spoke only in Arabic. I used to watch parents speak to their children in English and think to myself 'this is silly, it is ridiculous to speak English with your children, you should teach your children about the Arabic Snaa'* [Arab tradition and etiquette]. *But after having Hammda and seeing how she speaks in English, I am required to [speak English] my perspective has changed or I've developed a new perspective, we have to catch up with the new generation"*. Likewise, Sara said:

I noticed that his [Zayed's] cousins, the younger generations, ages four and five, are speaking English. My son is eight now, so my children are older than their cousins and we were the first to start using English at home…before, the adults in our family would look at my children like they were aliens and say 'look at their children, they speak English' and now the same people, the ones that used to judge us, they are talking in English with their children…and if you ask them, "Why did you change your minds?" they will say, "well, this is how the new generation is."

A clear priority for all the mothers in the study was to highlight their multicultural and multilingual society and express their appreciation of the fact that their children are exposed to English through multiple mediums. They also spoke about the significance of teaching their children both Arabic and English from the right source where the quality

of the language was more important than the quantity or time spent practicing the language. For example, Aisha said:

> *If a teacher is an English speaker, then I want her to speak to my son in English because if she spoke in Arabic it will probably be Pidgin Arabic…I prefer Arabic speakers to speak to him in Arabic only and English speakers to speak to him in English*

Similarly, Sara said:

> *I am against English speakers teaching in Arabic…ultimately my son will gain vocabulary but in broken-Arabic.*

Although all the participants in the study completed their higher education in English and used English in the society with ease and comfort, as conveyed by the participants and observed by the researcher, none of them used English in their households before having children. The previous examples demonstrate the rapid change observed in the UAE linguistics practices and its consequences on the Emirati families' language practices.

Theme C: *Perceptions on the Preservation of "The Mother Language", Arabic*

Even though all the mothers valued and acknowledged the role of Arabic in their lives and their children's, they did not pursue Arabic academic teachings or structured Arabic classes for their children. Instead, the mothers tried to incorporate Arabic into their lives, which varied from one family to another. Salama spoke about the value of Arabic as the language of "*Islamic teachings*" and her efforts in teaching it at home. For example, she said:

> *I focus on Arabic at home. I ask him questions and expect answers in Arabic. I help him formulate sentences in Arabic…of course we focus on Arabic because we focus on the Quran.*

Aisha spoke highly of Arabic whenever she mentioned it, she used words like "the mother language" and "our identity". Aisha said that her son is learning Arabic through family interactions, but they are focusing on teaching him English. She said:

My son uses English, but he understands Arabic. He will sometimes answer me in both Arabic and English…I want him to focus on learning English because he already hears us speak Arabic at home and he understands Arabic.

The mothers spoke about their conviction that Arabic will always be the children's first language with or without direct teaching, although there were direct and indirect statements about the difficulties of learning Arabic and its complexity. For example, Sara said:

The children prefer speaking in English. English is easier it doesn't have the grammatical complexities of Arabic. Arabic is a very difficult subject in school, and it is one of the most difficult languages…eventually the child will speak in his mother language. Whether he grew up learning English or another language, in the end the child will return to his mother language…his older brother started talking in English first, he used English until he was satiated with it and then returned to Arabic.

Similarly, Maryam said:

I believe English is easier than Arabic. It is an easy language…Hammda is free to use whatever language she wants, she uses English with her brother and cousins…some members of our family find it odd that she doesn't respond in Arabic…but she understands Arabic, my daughter understands Arabic.

One mother spoke about being once alarmed by the general decline of the quality of Arabic teachings in UAE schools, however, she is now convinced that her children will *"naturally"* acquire Arabic. Because of their conviction that their children will eventually learn Arabic, some mothers spoke about focusing on English in the meantime and delaying Arabic for later. However other mothers asked family members to speak in Arabic only with their children.

Theme D: *Beliefs about Bilingualism*

The language practices of the mothers with their children were directly influenced by their positive beliefs on bilingualism. All of the mothers in the study expressed their

strong belief that their children are capable of learning more than one language. For example, Salama said:

> *When he was first diagnosed, I couldn't comprehend that my son would be able to learn more than one language…after a while I accepted the fact that he must learn more, if I could, I would teach him a third language…my son is clever, and he is capable of learning two languages just like the typically developing children.*

There were no concerns expressed regarding bilingualism. On the contrary, the participants perceived bilingualism to be an advantage for their children in the future. Aisha said, "*I should prepare my son for his future, so when he goes out there, he has the vocabulary he knows how to deal with people in English and Arabic*". Similarly, Salama said, "*Even if my son was categorized as a person of determination, language plays a vital role, priority will be given to people that are capable of handling their jobs using both languages.*"

Ultimately all of the mothers agreed that language was a tool that facilitated their children's communication and that their children would benefit from having two languages, which would enable them to use English and Arabic vocabulary or both at the same time, if they needed to. They spoke about the significance of being flexible with their language practices with their children with ASD and following their children's lead instead of enforcing a specific language. For example, Sara said:

> *I would advise parents to follow their child's lead. Do not impose a language…expose your child equally to both languages, and if you noticed that he is better in English expose him more to Arabic, don't demolish his English…let him be, encourage him and follow his lead and expose him equally to both.*

Likewise, Aisha said:

> *I use both [English and Arabic] with my daughter, since she started using both languages. As long as she is capable of expressing what she needs, and she wants…I have no problem with either language…I would advise parents in my situations to use both languages for their child's best interest.*

The mothers' beliefs about bilingualism were in line with the advice they received from professionals such as physicians, psychologists, and speech and language pathologists (SLP) regarding their language practices with their children. All of the mothers received the same advice which advocated the use of both languages with their children. Two of the mothers spoke about seeking advice from special education teachers and other parents initially, who advised them to pick one language, however, both mothers decided to consult with either a physician or SLP before making any decision on their language use. The mothers were mainly advised to keep the home language, Arabic, and include English which the professionals suggested would benefit the children later in school. For example, Aisha said:

> *A teacher asked me about our home language, and I told him its Arabic, but I also told him that my son is picking up English from the community and T.V.- so I told him I use English sometimes at home. He advised me to pick one language, I honestly didn't listen to his advice and consulted a couple of speech therapists after, they explained to me that children on the spectrum are capable of acquiring more than one language at a time…I see it with my son and other children with ASD, they are using two and sometimes three languages.*

Salama spoke about her experience when she asked an SLP and a psychologist about bilingualism, she said:

> *They explained to me that children in general are able to acquire more than one language. They said your child can comprehend and use both Arabic and English…in school, he can practice English and in his Arabic environment, at home, he can practice Arabic.*

Similarly, Maryam said:

> *I asked professionals and they preferred I use both languages with Hammda, the home language, you know, our Emirati dialect and English. They said she is very smart, and English would benefit her in school and in society.*

The impact of the professionals' recommendations could be observed in the mothers' language practices with their children and their positive attitude towards them. This may suggest that families' attitudes may be highly influenced by professionals' opinions and recommendations.

Discussion and Conclusions

The study aimed to understand the Emirati mothers' language practices with their children with ASD. The study focused on a small group of Emirati bilingual mothers who choose a bilingual approach in communicating with their children. The mothers' main focus was to ensure their children's well-being, success, and acceptance in the society. The language practices adopted by the mothers in the current study echoed the preferred language practices of bilingual English/Arabic Emirati university students in a recent study which prioritized English in educational settings and with non-Arabic speakers and preferred the use of Arabic with family members and in religious and cultural contexts (Kennetz & Carroll, 2018). Similarly, the findings in this study confirm that both Arabic and English play vital roles in the lives of Emirati children with ASD and their families. The mothers prioritized the use of English in education settings and the community due to their belief that English is a requirement for academic and career success. They prioritized the use of Arabic with family members and in cultural and religious settings. These uses are significant in shaping the Emirati identity.

The Emirati mothers had positive attitudes about incorporating English into their daily lives, unlike recent studies that showed that parents had concerns about bilingualism and feared its impact on their children's language development and learning (Kremer-Sadlik, 2005; Yu, 2013). However, the previous studies focused on bilingual parents of children with ASD in environments where English was the dominant language and home language was limited to family and members of the same community. Furthermore, prior literature showed that the child's verbal ability may influence parents' language practices with their child with ASD (Hambly & Fombonne, 2014; Hampton et al., 2017), however this theme did not emerge in this study; on the contrary the participants were confident of their bilingual practices with their children. These decisions could be attributed to the bilingual nature of UAE, which requires bilingualism for social and academic success.

Even though the mothers occasionally felt that English was "forced" onto the Emirati society, due to recent restructuring of the government and private sectors in the UAE which placed English as a priority language (Al-issa & Dahan, 2011; Gallagher, 2011), their practices with their children and their attitudes toward English did not show

any concerns toward the maintenance of their home language. Moreover, the mothers believed that their children will always return to their "mother language", Arabic, with or without structured instruction.

The study shows that the mothers' decisions about bilingualism were influenced by the professionals' recommendations, which encouraged them to raise their children bilingually. However, the professionals disregarded providing specific guidelines on home language maintenance or its significance, which leads the families to presume that their children will retain Arabic solely through family interactions and unstructured Islamic teachings. These perceptions confirm previous findings that families with children with disabilities depend on therapists and healthcare providers as their main source of information (Pain, 1999). This emphasizes the need for providing trainings for professionals to better support and educate the families about matters concerning bilingualism and home language maintenance, as recommended in recent literature (Beauchamp & Macleod, 2017; Howard, Gibson, & Katsos, 2020; Lim et/ al., 2018).

Although the participants were mothers of children with different language levels, their positive attitude towards bilingualism and their children's future was also influenced by their high aspirations for their children to succeed in a bilingual environment. These findings show that parents will adjust their language practices with their children, if that ensured the children's language growth and participation in the community. The findings also revealed that changes in a community's language practices do not have to diminish its appreciation of its religious and traditional values.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, although the researcher sought to recruit mothers from various backgrounds and educational levels, the mothers recruited were all highly educated. Second, all the mothers were bilingual and could carry on conversations in English without interpreters. This is common in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi where the participants were recruited from, and a few other Emirates. However, English is less commonly used in other Emirates, where mothers of children with autism would have different experiences with bilingualism. Third, the participants' children were all attending a program which offers bilingual services. This may have facilitated their

decisions about adopting a bilingual approach towards their children. Finally, information about mother-child language practices was reported from the mother's point of view and observational data was not collected for these practices.

To our knowledge, this was the first study of its kind to consider the perceptions of Emirati mothers of children with ASD regarding bilingualism. This study highlights the need for more research on the language practices of Emirati parents of children with ASD. More research should be explored on the practices of Emirati parents having older children to understand if the findings are sustainable for longer periods of time. Future research should explore the consequences of the parents' language practices and their influence on the children's well-being and their families. Lastly, there is limited information on the practices and education of SLPs, healthcare providers, and teachers on bilingualism and home-language maintenance in the region. Further research should target service providers and professionals to explore their beliefs about bilingualism which will help families make better decisions regarding bilingualism and their home-language.

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Appendix A: Participant Consent Form
Participant   **Consent**   **Form**

Language Practices: Perspectives of Arab Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Please tick the appropriate boxes	**Yes**	**No**
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 05/02/2020 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include: • being interviewed • being audio recorded		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of participant [printed]   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher [printed]   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____

Project contact details for further information:
If you have questions related to the research project or for more details please contact Manar Bakhsh at mbakhsh1@sheffield.ac.uk or by calling +971 50 404 1046 or Dr. Thompson at j.m.thomson@sheffield.ac.uk or by calling +44 114 222 2440. You can also contact Dr. Thompson by writing to: Division of Human Communication Sciences, University of Sheffield, 362 Mushroom Lane, Sheffield, S10 2TS, UK
If you wish to contact a faculty member that is not part of this research, you can contact Dr. Clegg at j.clegg@sheffield.ac.uk.

Appendix B: Information Sheet
Information Sheet

Investigator: Manar Bakhsh, B.sc.

Study Title: Language Practices: Perspectives of Arab Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

I am a student at The University of Sheffield of Human Communication Sciences. This study is being conducted as part of my dissertation requirement for a master in Speech Difficulties.

I am asking you to participate in a research study. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a Bilingual, Arabic/ English, Arab mother of a child with autism between the ages of 3-8 years old. Please take time to read the information below and feel free to ask any questions before signing this document.

Purpose: The United Arab Emirates has a very diverse population. The official language in the UAE is Arabic; however, English is widely used in business, universities and in the community. The majority of government schools in the UAE teach Arabic and English starting from kindergarten. Because of this, it is important to understand how these unique cultural and linguistic characteristics of the United Arab Emirates influences the language practices of mothers with children with autism. There is very little research that addresses this topic. This purpose of this research is to explore Arab mother's language practices with children with autism in the United Arab Emirates. Through this research, I hope to better understand the factors that impact the mothers' decision in their language practices with their children with autism. Understanding this will help us to treat children with autism more effectively.

Procedure: If you choose to participate in the study, your participation will include one private interview with me. This interview will last for about 1 hour to 2 hours. The interview will include questions about your language practices with your child with autism. After your first interview you may be asked to participate in a follow up interview. This interview will last for about 1 hour. At any point during this process, you will be encouraged to ask me any questions, as well as add additional information you want.

Risk to Participate: the risks of participation in this study are minimal and are no more of a risk to you than regular daily activities.

Benefits to Participants: No direct benefit to participants is guaranteed. Research of this nature most often contributes to the field of study and its body of knowledge, but non-intervention studies rarely provide direct benefit to participants. It is expected that the information learned from this study may benefit the international society in relation to best educational and treatment practices for individuals with autism.

Alternatives to Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from study participation at any time.

Confidentiality: During this study I will collect some information about you. The information will include your name, email address and telephone number. I will not collect other personal information such as medical information or academic information. I will not collect identifying information about your child. Information about your child's age, gender, and number of brothers and sisters will be collected. Audio recording of the interviews will be used if you give permission. All audio recordings will be destroyed after transcribing them. All interview data will be kept in a protected location for five years and then deleted.

Legal basis for processing your personal data: According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further

information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

Data Controller: The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the university is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Questions and Concerns: If you have questions or concerns related to the procedure described in this document please contact Manar Bakhsh at mbakhsh1@sheffield.ac.uk or by calling +971 50 404 1046 or Dr. Thomson at j.m.thomson@sheffield.ac.uk or by calling +44 114 222 2440. You can also contact Dr. Thomson by writing to: Dr. Thomson, Division of Human Communication Sciences, University of Sheffield, 362 Mushroom Lane, Sheffield, S10 2TS, UK.

Appendix C: Background Questionnaire
Language Practices: Perspectives of Arab Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders
Some questions about you

In order for us to learn about the range of people taking part in this research, we would be grateful if you could answer the following questions. All information provided is anonymous.

Please either write your answer in the space provided, or circle the answer, or answers, that best apply to you.

1	How old are you?	Under 20	20-30	30-40	40-50	Over 50
2	Where do you live?	Abu Dhabi	Al Ain		Other: _____	
3	Level of education:	High school	Diploma		Bachelor's degree	
		Master's degree	Doctorate/PHD		Other:_____	
4	I am:	Full-time employed	Part-time employed		Full-time student	
		Part-time student	Other: _____			
4a	If you work, what is your occupation?					
5	Your annual household income:	AED 100,000 to AED 140,000			AED 150,000 to AED 190,000	
		AED 200,000 to AED 240,000			Over AED 250,000	
6	Marital status	Married			Divorced	
		Separated			Widowed	
7	How many children do you have ?					
8	How many of your children have an autism diagnosis?					
9	What language(s) do you speak in at home?					
10	What language(s) do you commonly use at work?					
11	Do you have help at home?					

Thank you!

Appendix D: Interview Guide
1: **Focused History**
• Did you have any experience with autism prior to your child's diagnosis?
• How did your child become diagnosed with ASD?
• How has your child's diagnosis affected your life?
• What have teachers or other professionals told you about your child's learning of English or Arabic?
• Have teachers or other professionals recommended you speak to your child in English or Arabic?
• Did you have any specific plans for your child's language learning?

2: The Details of Current Experience
• What is a typical day for your child?
• What services is your child receiving now?
• Are your child's current services what you wish for them to be?
• How do you feel about your relationship with your child's school and school team?
• How do you feel about your child's current development in communication?
• What languages do you use in a typical day?
• What languages does your child use in a typical day?
• What roles do you and other family members play in your child's language learning?
• What roles do teachers and professional play?
• Do you feel your child's school offers support of home language?
• How do you feel about communicating in English now?
• What is a priority for you right now regarding your child?

3: Reflection
• Does it matter to you what language(s) your child speaks in the future?
• What do you feel would be the benefit of speaking that/those language(s)?
• What advice do you have for your child's teachers or therapists for how to work with your child to promote his or her communication?
• Do you have any advice for non-Arabic speaking teachers and therapists for how to work with Arabic speaking families?
• Do you have any advice for other parents in your situation?
• What do you think would be the ideal education program for your child?
• What do you think would be the ideal language situation for your child?
• What do you think would be the ideal educational outcome for your child?