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To cite this article: Fatma F.S. Said & Nadine Jaafarawi (07 Jul 2025): UAE Bilingual children's early linguistic environments: nannies and maids as embodied agents of parental language ideologies, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2025.2527358](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2527358)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2527358>



Published online: 07 Jul 2025.



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UAE Bilingual children's early linguistic environments: nannies and maids as embodied agents of parental language ideologies

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ABSTRACT

Children's early social environments are crucial for their emotional, social, cognitive, and, most importantly, language development. Parents and caregivers design environments through deliberate and non-deliberate choices and actions that contribute to creating unique home linguistic environments. This first-of-its-kind paper is based on a common, yet complex, phenomenon of Emirati parents deliberately hiring domestic staff to help their children acquire English or Arabic in the preschool years. It employs a family language policy and thematic analysis lens to increase understanding of how linguistic environments are formed and the effect hired help may have on children's language development. Data were collected through researcher field notes, maid conversations, and parental interviews. The findings suggest that language ideologies, practices, and management strategies are intertwined with parental desire to offer their children as much cultural capital as early as possible through acquiring symbolic resources by hiring maids and nannies who possess them. This evidence may offer important reasons for individual differences in children's bilingual language development outcomes. The data offer a rich account of how Emirati parents enact agency to ratify their beliefs about what constitutes family, child-rearing, and language learning in a society often viewed as homogeneous, passive, and completely dependent on domestic help.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 October 2024

Accepted 25 June 2025

KEYWORDS

Family multilingualism;
family language policy;
linguistic environment;
power; symbolic resources;
Arabic

Introduction

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the broader Gulf region, the employment of domestic workers, particularly nannies, has been extensively scrutinised, mostly in media outlets and research, based mainly on reviews of openly available data and less on empirical enquiries (cf. Al Jarf 2005; Roumani 2005; Taha-Thomure 2022). The studies underscore concerns about over-reliance on nannies, suggesting it may hinder children's independence, emotional, and language development. A Gulf News article titled 'Raised by Maids: How UAE's Nanny Culture Could be Harming Our Children' (England 2020) offers anecdotal evidence from residents in Dubai who discuss the often-negative aspects of nannies and the need for parents to play a fundamental role in their children's upbringing. Regularly, newspaper articles, blog posts, and increasingly social media videos portray parents as passive or unaware of the effects of hiring maids and nannies for their families. While acknowledging the potential challenges associated with employing domestic help, this paper emphasises that parents are active, not passive, agents in shaping their children's developmental environment. Through empirical data, it illustrates that the decisions parents make, beginning with the hiring process, play a pivotal role in influencing outcomes within

the household. By recognising and embracing their central role, parents seem to navigate the complexities of integrating domestic workers into their homes, ensuring that their children's well-being and development remain paramount.

This first-of-its-kind empirical study demonstrates cases in which parents needing help with domestic duties (cooking, cleaning, washing) or conforming to social norms of hiring nannies, as is typical in the UAE, are deliberate in their hiring choices and are active actors in the possible outcomes of their choices on their children's overall development. This deliberateness in hiring maids with specific linguistic profiles is usually absent from discussions of maid/family research in the Gulf region. The data also demonstrate that where parents did not necessarily choose domestic staff, they still held views about the role of such staff and how they wished to engage their services in ways deemed beneficial to their children's linguistic and cultural development.

This paper highlights that mothers proactively seek to employ well-spoken English or Arabic-speaking maids and nannies to support them in the caring and educational support of their children. First, we describe parental awareness of the possible effects, their management of any effects, and cooperation with their hired help to boost children's early development. This paper is the first to directly ask nannies and maids about their role in children's language development. The information contributes towards building a clearer picture of the roles played by hired help in children's linguistic environments and, by default, their language development. Second, the data presented here challenge current conceptualisations of what constitutes 'family' in family language policy (FLP), and we argue that maids should be incorporated in any such framing in the UAE, wider Gulf region and other contexts where maids or nannies are hired (Table 1).

In what follows, we first survey the literature on children's early linguistic environments in contexts where nannies or maids are hired based on their linguistic skills. It looks closely at FLP, parental beliefs and family language practices as they shape the home's linguistic and cultural environments. This is followed by a description of the UAE context, the methodology and then data analysis and its implications for FLP and children's early language environments.

Hired domestic help and the home linguistic environment: when language meets labour

Previous research on children's language development emphasised the critical role of social interaction, language input and use in shaping children's language development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007; De Houwer 2011; Hoff 2006; Mustonen, Torppa, and Stolt 2024). Empirical studies have shown that individual differences in children's language development were partly due to the linguistic environment they experienced at home (Justice, Jiang, and Strasser 2018; Rowe and Snow 2020; Sorenson, Duncan, and Paradis 2020). Following Kanto, Huttunen, and Laakso (2013), the linguistic environment is understood to mean 'the amount and nature of linguistic exposure, the parents' educational level, their beliefs and concerns related to the child's linguistic development, and the cultures the child was frequently exposed to' (p.13). This definition encompasses not just the characteristics of input and output of the language and home interaction, but also soft features such as parental beliefs and elements of their background that contribute to the formation of said linguistic environment. The hiring of maids is part of the *cultures* the child is frequently exposed to and relates very closely to parental *beliefs* about child-rearing, socialisation, and language development, as the paper demonstrates below. The paper uses nannies or maids interchangeably to refer to domestic help because in the UAE, maids are often hired to carry out duties around the home and care for children, and nannies are hired primarily to care for children but may also have additional duties (Table 2).

One characteristic of the linguistic environment in the home is the soft characteristic, as mentioned above, of parental *beliefs*. The most advanced lens through which researchers can adequately capture parents' beliefs and their possible consequences for children is the Family Language Policy (FLP) paradigm. FLP is family members' explicit, overt, implicit, and covert language planning regarding language usage and literacy practices in their homes and among themselves (Curdt-

Christiansen and La Morgia, 2018; see King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry 2008). As a field, it bridges the study of child language acquisition with that of language policy studies. FLP allows researchers to understand how parental language ideologies shape and are shaped by family members and how those micro-level ideologies interact with broader macro-level and socio-political ideologies that affect family decisions about the language(s) they learn and use. As primary caretakers, parents are seen to shape language beliefs within the home and determine ways in which those languages are used (practice) and by whom (management) in their families. Parental decisions are, however, also impacted by their children's agency (Fogle 2012; Said and Zhu 2019; Smith-Christmas 2022) and the circumstances in which they reside (Léglise 2023).

Vessey's (2019) compelling study highlights that often, domestic labour, such as nanny and au pair positions, is, in fact, also language work. Parents hire workers for their linguistic skills, offering parents a practical way to enact those beliefs (practices). In a later study, Vessey and Nicolai (2023) investigated the language ideologies of multilingual nannies in London, in which they explored how multilingualism has become a 'symbolic resource' (Norton 2000) through which families can maximise their competitiveness. They found that multilingualism was viewed as a symbolic resource among middle-class parents who hired nannies for their Spanish or French. What they found most intriguing was that although possessing this symbolic resource was useful, it was, in fact, the nannies' verbalisations (Woolard 2020), or how they talked about language, that granted them 'an advantageous position in the market' (p.221). Vessey and Nicolai (2023) make a critical observation that although these nannies were hired for their multilingualism, their verbalisations about it were all in English, thus outperforming those whose English was not as proficient. These realities present the complex nature of language ideologies, their relationship to broader macro-level discourses about multilingualism, and the hierarchising nature of English, as will be discussed shortly.

In non-Western settings, English and not multilingualism is viewed as a symbolic resource, and parents seek out English-speaking nannies and maids. Reden and Wolf (2014) conducted a study about Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong who, in addition to their domestic duties, were hired by their families to be informal language teachers for their children. Filipinas were chosen above other foreign domestic workers because of their better knowledge and perceived proficiency in English. Parents wanted their children to be exposed to English in the home in informal contexts so they would excel in school and develop their bilingualism. The findings of the project, taken from an extensive survey offered to the maids, reveal that the maids were aware of the expectations placed upon them to act as informal language teachers. They deemed using English with the children as 'very important' because they knew that they were looked upon as 'linguistic models' for them (879).

More recently, Wolfaardt (2021), in his thesis on the impact of Filipina domestic workers on the language acquisition of bilingual primary-aged children in Hong Kong, found that the nannies and maids supported the children's emergent bilingualism. All the children attended English-medium schools and spoke Cantonese at home with their parents. Wolfaardt tested the children's English and Cantonese in receptive vocabulary, listening comprehension, reading accuracy and fluency, writing accuracy and complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Contrary to parents' concerns, he found that the domestic workers enhanced the children's linguistic environments by using English for mundane, everyday, and repetitive practices without affecting children's knowledge of Cantonese.

Maids and nannies make up the Emirati child's early linguistic environments through the language they use to communicate with the children, the language they use with adults in the home, and their own beliefs about their languages. Parental decisions to hire maids are a physical embodiment of parents' own language and child-rearing ideologies. The paper now turns to the UAE's Arabic language and sociolinguistic context.

Arabic language and the current sociolinguistic situation in the UAE

The Arabic language is unique in its sociolinguistic nature and is one of a handful of languages that are described as diglossic in nature (Badawī 1973; Ferguson 1959, 1991; Gebril and Taha-Thomure

2014; Said 2024; Trentman 2011). Ferguson (1959) defines it as ‘two varieties of a language existing side by side, each with a distinct role’ (325). This phenomenon explains the nature of the Arabic language that offers its speakers a formal form (Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)) and an informal spoken form (regional spoken dialects, see Figure 1 below). Arabic speakers acquire their local dialect at home and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) through formal education. Arabic reflects national, cultural and religious identity (Al Allaq 2014) as it is the language of the Quran (Morrow and Castleton 2007). Article 7 of the UAE constitution designates Arabic as the country’s official language, a status granted in 2008 to protect the language.

English is a lingua franca in the UAE first because expatriate workers outnumber the Emirati population, hail from over two hundred nations, and do not share a common language; hence, they use English (Randall and Samimi 2010). Second, the UAE government supports Arabic-English bilingualism and thus encourages the learning of English for UAE nationals, as demonstrated in the adoption of English as a medium of instruction in schools (Al-Issa 2017). English is incorporated into the curriculum of both public and private schools, starting from primary schools and in some private kindergarten centres (Said 2011). However, in April 2025, important new policy shifts in the form of the *Policy on Arabic Language Provision in Early Childhood* (KHDA, 2025) mandate Arabic instruction for children aged 0–6, reflecting national efforts to counter the dominance of English in early years education. Arabic and English are therefore the two main languages in children’s early linguistic environments at home and outside, at varying degrees.

Methodology

Adopting an interpretive perspective, the paper seeks to understand participants’ subjective experiences and their interpretations of them (e.g. see Mbanaso, Abrahams, and Okafor 2023). It employs a linguistic ethnographic approach, which sees language as a communicative action that functions in social contexts and can provide insights into broader social norms, institutions, and beliefs (Shaw, Copland, and Snell 2015).

The data presented in this paper are taken from a dataset of a larger project that was interested in the bilingual lexical development of young three to four-year-old emerging bilingual Emirati children in the UAE. The study was interested in their acquisition of lexical items in Arabic, Emirati Arabic, and English, focusing on the role of social interaction in such a process. Twenty Emirati

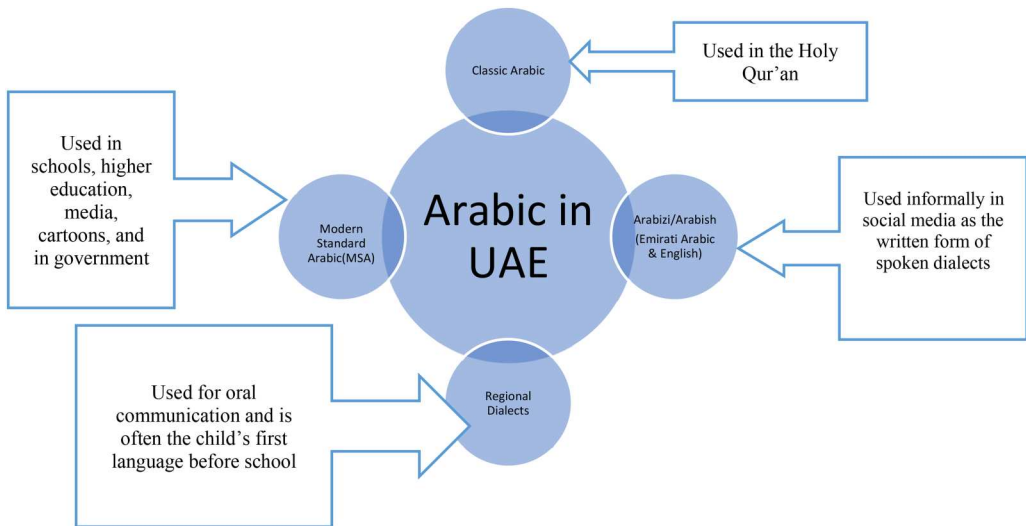


Figure 1. The sociolinguistic function of Arabic.

families participated in the project for the twelve-month period, and data were collected through interviews, recordings of interactions in the home, and language tests for the children. Families were recruited purposively with the condition that they self-identified as bilinguals and had children aged 3–4 years old.

Data collection

The data in this paper are taken from one main source: parental interviews (four mothers) and two maid interviews, and supplemented by field notes, as these assist in providing the context in the data analysis section. Parental interviews were conducted multiple times throughout the project's lifetime. Four families spoke at length about maids and nannies, and two mothers invited their maids to talk to the researchers about their roles. In all, each mother's interview totalled one hour and 30 min (F1, F2, F3) or two hours (F4), with maid interviews not lasting more than 40 min each.

Data analysis

The interview data yielded rich, detailed insights from the mothers and two maids. An inductive thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2006) was used, involving multiple readings to identify patterns in participants' multilingualism, beliefs, and concerns. Following the six-phase process, initial codes were generated separately, then candidate themes were developed, reviewed, and refined collaboratively to ensure coherence and reliability. The final themes capture both explicit content and underlying meanings in language practices and ideologies, interpreted in relation to the research questions and context.

Ethics

The project adhered strictly to the Helsinki Declaration and sought consent before collecting data. Researchers showed the utmost respect for participants' autonomy throughout the project and data collection phase. We also ensured we secured informed consent by providing answers to the many questions families had and by outlining the purpose of the project. Researchers ensured confidentiality was upheld by using pseudonyms for the participants' names and altering some of their demographic data to prevent identification.

By upholding these standards and adapting to the families' preferences, the researchers ensured that the research was carried out with the highest ethical rigour, prioritising the rights, dignity, and confidentiality of all participants involved.

Researcher reflexivity

Throughout the data collection, ongoing transcription, and analysis, the researchers constantly engaged in reflexive reflection, thinking about their social positions and how those may influence data collection. Researchers specifically engaged in interpretive reflexivity throughout this ethnographic sociolinguistic project (Lichterman 2015), constantly checking and questioning their own interpretations of the data.

Both researchers are Arabic speakers, with researcher one sharing and being familiar with the culture and cultural practices of the participants. One of the main strategies employed by the researchers to ensure rigour and objectivity in interpreting the results was the habit of constantly checking for meaning with the participants. During the visits to the home to interact with mothers or observe the families, the researchers made field notes and then asked clarifying questions to ensure they understood correctly. Although both researchers shared the language, they could not assume to understand the families' feelings, ideas or practices related to Arabic.

Finally, the researchers were aware that their positions as female researchers coming into the homes of Emirati families gave them a station of respect, and the mothers tried as much as possible to accommodate the researchers. For this reason, the research team worked to forge a bidirectional relationship; the families were thus given autonomy to record interactional data at any point in the month that suited them, and they had the flexibility to cancel and re-arrange meetings and observations to timings that were appropriate to them. This empowered the mothers to participate in the project in the way that suited them (see Gremillion 2013). These strategies helped build rapport and ensured that mothers felt they had space to volunteer data or information that was not sought after but became invaluable in building the context and further meanings of the data later. The next section presents the contexts of the study and the participants.

Participants

The project used purposive sampling (Campbell et al. 2020). Researchers specifically sought to recruit only Emirati families, including Emirati nationals married to non-Emirati partners, even if they did not share the same language(s). Eligibility required that participants self-identify as bilinguals by filling out a clearance form to express interest in participating in the project. The table below simplifies the demographics of the families:

Table 1. Family demographics & linguistic environment details.

Family (F)	Child	Age (year: month)	Languages used at home	Language of media (iPad, TV, games)	Language at nursery/ daycare	Child's living arrangements
F1 (Fatema)	Child L (Mansour) Emirati mother (College) and father (BA Business)	3:04	Emirati Arabic	Arabic, English (mostly)	Arabic, English	Shared complex with paternal extended family. Lives with parents and siblings in the same apartment.
F2 (Rahma)	Child T (Bakheeta) Emirati mother (final year of BA) and father (BA Business Admin)	3:05	Emirati Arabic, Some English	Arabic, English	Arabic, English	Lives with parents and siblings in paternal grandparent's home
F3 (Shamma)	Child K (Salem) Emirati mother (BA Counselling) Yemeni father (BSc Engineering)	4:01	Emirati Arabic, Hadrami Arabic, Some English	Arabic, English	Arabic, English	Lives a street away from maternal grandparents' home. Lives with parents and siblings in the same apartment
F4 (Rowdha)	Child E (Anoud) Qatari-Yemeni mother (high School) Emirati father (BSc Economics)	3:04	Emirati Arabic, Qatari Arabic	Arabic, English (mostly)	Does not attend	Shared complex with paternal family. Lives with parents and younger sibling in the same apartment.

All children interact with the maids in the home or from the extended family, but these maids do not spend more than ten to fifteen minutes with the children (F2) each day or during each visit. Nannies, however, and especially those hired to specifically look after the children (F4) spend upwards of ten hours on average with the children per day. Maids who are also hired as nannies (F1, F3) are additionally tasked with other house-related duties (e.g. ironing or cooking on some days of the week).

Looking closely at how the families navigate these environments holds the key to understanding children's bilingual language development among typically developing Emirati children in the UAE. This paper answers two main research questions: *'What role do nannies/maids play in*

Table 2. Maid/Nanny language profiles.

Family (maid name)	Maid's language at time of hiring	Child language use with maids	Position hired for
F1 (Anna)	English, Akan (language spoken in Ghana), basic Arabic	English and basic Arabic with Anna English with maids in maternal and paternal grandparents' homes	Nanny/maid
F2 (Amina)	Tagalog, Bicolano, English and Emirati Arabic	Emirati Arabic with Amina English with grandmother's (maternal) maid	Maid (was also maid for Bakheeta's father)
F3 (Mary)	English, Amharic, basic Arabic	English with Mary, but then after 3 months basic Arabic	Nanny/maid
F4 (Janine)	English, Tagalog, some Spanish, no Arabic	English with Jane Arabic with grandparent's (paternal) maid	Nanny

children's language development?' and 'How does the presence of a maid/ nanny contribute towards the formation of an early linguistic environment for the child within the family home?'

Findings: family language policy intersects with gender, labour and parenting

Employing thematic analysis (see section 3.2 above), the data revealed seven codes based on the themes derived from the data. This section focuses on three themes:

1. Conscious and deliberate hiring based on linguistic skills.
2. Limiting access to children so they do not use English.
3. Maid/nanny agency and its effect on the linguistic environment of the home.

Conscious and deliberate hiring based on linguistic skills

In the interviews, all mothers understood that their nannies or maids could affect their children's language and cultural development. They exploited what was positive and minimised what they deemed negative. Knowledge of English or Arabic was one characteristic that parents sought help with for their children, as multilinguals themselves living in a highly multilingual and globalising context.

The maid and nanny industry in the UAE is gendered, listing and employing only females due to religious and cultural preferences of having no non-family males within the family home. These agencies are usually headed by a female with an Arabic-speaking female workforce who communicate with mothers to understand their needs. The agencies list workers' skills (cooking, cleaning, ironing) in addition to their religion and the languages they speak because these are important symbolic resources in the Emirati domestic care market.

Fatema (F1) reports below how she hired her maid and the conditions she set,
Excerpt 1

I asked the lady Sarah at the maid place [agency] about suitable workers, but I always ask for Arabic, ... the Arabic language, and even if she cannot cook, then no problem, but she needs Arabic for my mother-in-law and me, and of course the children when she is with them ... it is difficult to get someone who speaks Arabic, I mean, good good Arabic, ... and knows something about our culture or food ... I did not want them to speak English in the house, and now, with TV and TikTok and all those English is everywhere, they need Arabic with us ... when I spoke to her [maid], I was happy (INT1:F1).

Fatema explained that the nanny agency sets up a Zoom call with the employee, and the mothers can meet, ask questions, and negotiate salary and benefits. In the excerpt above, Fatema refers to this saying, '*when I spoke to her, I was happy*', meaning at the interview. What was noticeable here was Fatema's emphasis on Arabic as a symbolic resource that overshadowed other basic skills such as cooking and cleaning. Her ideology is that children should speak Arabic at home because

English is prevalent outside and online. Fatema is able to enact her desired language policy by managing who she hires, thus creating her ideal linguistic environment and supporting her children's language development.

Similarly, Shamma (F3) describes how she hired her maid and why,
Excerpt 2

Yes, I have Mary, she is lovely; when I had Matar three years ago, I took her on because of her good English. My sister shared the agency information with me, and I was looking for someone with Arabic, but mainly English. I did not want a maid because of the accent; I liked Mary; her English was good, and her speaking was good. I wanted the children to learn English well, to acquire the accent so it would be easier for the boys in school ... (INT1: F3).

Parents deliberately employ domestic staff who speak 'good English', even though the hired maids speak English, it is usually not their first language (Cox 2011; Vessey 2019). Mothers would simply conduct interviews and judge based on their own preferences as they relate to accents and their perceived notions of what makes for 'good' English. In the domestic marketplace in multilingual contexts, foreign speakers of English are hierarchised based on how other foreign speakers of English perceive their accents. The closer their accent is to the English prevalent in TV shows and movies, the more value they seem to hold. Ivanova (2020) reports that in the UAE, English-speaking domestic maids are paid more than non-English speakers because, like the parents in Hong Kong (Woolfaardt, 2022), Emirati parents also desire for their children to learn English early on for educational purposes. In Macdonald's (2011, 67) influential work on shadow mothers, she also reports on a mother in her data who did not want to hire nannies with 'very thick accents' as she worried these would affect her children's ability to speak clearly.

In Shamma's case, the ideal accent seems to be based on her prior experience encountering speakers of a specific nationality (we have removed that here in order not to cause offence), whom she may have found less clear in their speech than, for example, this Ethiopian nanny. Cox (2011), in her significant paper on competitive mothering on display through the hiring of nannies and au pairs, identifies the choosing of nannies based on their accent as a way for parents to give their children 'cultural capital' to get ahead of their peers. In social systems (wealth, power, prestige, education, and health), cultural capital is typically understood as a collection of social attributes that allow people to move up the social ladder and alter their place in the hierarchy (Bourdieu, see Robbins 2005).

Excerpt 2 above offers an insight into Shamma's language ideology and her position as the sole decision-maker in the family about her children's language learning. The consistent use of 'I' throughout the response illustrates that she assumes the responsibility of hiring maids and deciding what is best for her children, with the support of her husband, '*he is happy for me to decide on all of that*'. Vessey and Nicoli (2023) highlight that the mothers usually take charge and decide what they deem to be linguistically superior performance of nannies, even though they are not experts in the language in question and may be less proficient than the nannies. Mothers in these families have the material resources (capital goods, real estate and money; see Norton 2000) to hire people with the symbolic resources (in this case, language) they desire their children to possess for an advantage in society.

Rowdha (F4) says that she also sought an English-speaking nanny for her children,
Excerpt 3

I hired Janine for her English; it is important, to be honest; we just agreed as a family that we needed a nanny to help us with their [children's] English ... I heard that if you let them learn it early, it will be easy for them, unlike me, nothing stays in my brain ... umm ... I want them to succeed at school and in their jobs, and now they know [English] you will see when you test her on English, she is really good ... (INT1: F4).

Rowdha, like Shamma above, views English as being associated with success in future careers and education (Siemund, Al-Issa, and Leimgruber 2021). Her '*I heard*' above refers to the macro-level discourses that are circulated in the UAE society, in which English is positioned as the key to

education and a successful future. As a result, Rowdha and her family's micro discourse have impacted the family's language practices and parental management of their children's language learning experiences by hiring an English-speaking nanny. What is also of note is that Rowdha talks about her child's (who does not yet attend school) knowledge of English, which she attributes to the nanny. The parents in this family have consciously chosen to bring in an English-speaking nanny to change their linguistic environment by increasing input in English.

Excerpt 4

Each afternoon, Janine has to sit with the children for an hour, and they watch YouTube educational shows in English, and during that time, no one disturbs her because she needs time with them

In contrast to the other mothers, Rowdha ensures time is made each day for the nanny to spend time on YouTube with the children to learn and practice their English ('has to sit' and 'no one disturbs her ...'). In this way, she ensures her children are immersed in the English language through technology (YouTube) and with the guidance of an English speaker, thus managing her children's learning through consistent language-related practices.

Limiting access to children so they do not use English 'excessively'

Parents who do not hire their own maids but have access to them due to their extended family living arrangements also decide how maids will interact with their children. Rahma (F2) lives in her parents-in-law's home (Excerpt 5 below), and they have three maids, two who speak Arabic, and the cook speaks English, but at her parents' house, the maids speak English, and she,

... minimizes Bakheeta's access to that maid at my mother's home because I do not want her Arabic to be affected. When we visit [Rahma's mother], I like her[Bakheeta] to sit with us and not the maids. My mother-in-law's maid speaks Emirati Arabic, and she reads Arabic as well, I want Bakheeta to be around her. She has been with their family for over twenty years and knows about our culture and ways ... she has to be a confident citizen, Arabic first (INT1: F2).

Rahma has chosen to limit her child's access to the English-speaking maid, which is again a decision she, as the mother, has made to determine her daughter's early linguistic experiences. This is similar to a previous study in which Al Ammari & Romanowskil (2016; cited in Ivanova 2020), in their study of Qatari families, highlighted that parents had fears about language alteration and children's reduced participation in the cultural traditions due to different socialisation patterns that may also lead to modification of children's moral and cultural values. The parents also shared concerns about delays in their children's linguistic abilities and the development of negative behavioural dispositions inside and outside their homes. Similarly, O'Neill (2016) reports that in his study, concerns included worries about children adopting 'non-Emirati' accents and incorrect grammar in Arabic and potential negative influences on their English language skills due to contact with maids who may have limited English proficiency (see also, Gallagher 2020; Said 2011). Bakheeta's Arabic is more advanced than her knowledge of English; she can speak Emirati Arabic well and watches cartoons in MSA. The idea of a '*confident citizen*' that Rahma mentions above is another macro-level discourse that circulates the UAE public, that to be confident is to have good knowledge of Arabic and to preserve Emirati culture. This view also aligns with the UAE's vision of supporting its citizens to be bilingual, preserve Arabic, and learn English.

Fatema (F1) also narrated that she limits her children's access to family maids,
Excerpt 6

In my mother's house, we have three maids and one nurse to look after my mother, and they all speak English, apart from one Ugandan maid who had worked in Dubai before coming to us. But, they do not have too much access to the children because they cook and clean and when we visit this home, I always look after the children and they spend time with the older cousins, that way they will speak less English, at least for now before school ... they ... they need Arabic first then ... then ... (INT1: F1)

The data above demonstrate that there is a concerted effort on the part of the mothers not to allow their children what they deem too much access to the English-speaking maids because they prefer their children to learn Arabic first. In both excerpts, Fatema mentions the prevalence of English outside the home because, in some schools, English is introduced as early as kindergarten and is the language of instruction in all private schools (see Gallagher 2020).

The increased use of English as a medium of instruction at the earliest stages of learning places great pressure on parents to introduce English within the home space in the children's pre-school years. It also raises the anxiety parents have in relation to their children's possible loss of Arabic. Fatema views Arabic as a symbolic resource for her children to succeed. First, they learn their language, and then they can learn English. In another response, she also mentions learning Chinese. Teachers, practitioners, and early childhood development experts in the UAE are increasingly warning against the loss of Arabic and the weak acquisition of English. Most maids or nannies in the UAE and the GCC are from South Asia, the Philippines, and Indonesia (Roumani 2005) and, more recently, from East and West Africa and do not necessarily have formal qualifications in the English language. The language management choices some parents make to decrease what they deem as negative effects on their children's Arabic is hiring Arabic-speaking maids or restricting interaction between the English-speaking maids and their children.

Maid/nanny agency and power relations in the family

This final section presents rare data in which the maid hired for her English decides after the first three months of employment to use the little Arabic she had learned in her previous position in Jeddah (R1: FN:4). Mary, the nanny, herself in the interview narrates this change when asked about how she was hired and how she cooperates with the mother,

Excerpt 7

I like this family they are kind to me; I like the boys, and I get to play football with them [laughs]; from the interview we had, I liked Madam; she asked me about children and cooking and cleaning and my English, I told her I speak it from school, and I like fun stories in English, she said she wants me to speak with the boys, I agreed, and it was good, but then afterwards I wanted to learn more Arabic, so I told her and she did not say anything. But, the boys liked it when I spoke Arabic, and I learned many new Emirati words, and I learn more Arabic on YouTube every day; it makes me happy (INT1: F3)

Mary acted agentively to communicate her intentions with the mother, thereby going against the mother's clear instructions and management efforts regarding how language should be used in the home. Mary challenged the power relationship between herself and Shamma; following Norton (2000), power is socially constructed, as is agency (Ahearn 2001), which means that social interactions, norms, and beliefs create and sustain power and agency. At the time of hiring, Mary agreed to mobilise her symbolic resource (English) '... in order to obtain and retain work' through speaking 'to the values of the families employing' her (Vessey and Nicolai 2023, 225). Mary's verbalisation of '*I like fun stories in English*' spoke to the mother's desire to introduce English to her children in the home, hence securing her position. Shamma (F3) describes this negotiation below,

Excerpt 8

... later she [Mary] came to me and said 'Madam, I want to improve my Arabic more', and so then I could not force her to speak English; she is good with my children and makes us, is with us, a part of us (INT1: F3).

Her attempt to socially construct more power for herself by agentively seeking to learn Arabic and decrease the use of her symbolic resource was successful. She could continue in her post on her terms, and the family accepted the outcome which was the increased use of Arabic. Shamma views Mary as '*part of us*' as part of her family.

Finally, in F4, Janine was given full control to select the channels she felt were helpful for the children's English learning. In one of the home visits, she says that she finds it a heavy responsibility to find the 'correct' show, and she is proud of her English knowledge. She presented to the mother a

plan (verbalisation) of how she thinks she can help the children learn English (R1: FN:2). Rowdha says that,

Excerpt 9

I trust her choices, and I do not really know what would be suitable for their English, and Janine knows, so I let her choose, and I see how they sing in English, especially Zaynah [2-year-old]; she is amazing in her English (INT1: F4).

Janine's symbolic resource and her own verbalisations about the English language to the mother seem to have negotiated more power for her in the family unit as she took on the typically assigned parental role of choosing suitable media and content for the children. The mother is pleased to share this responsibility with Janine in a bid to give her children the best chance, as she sees it, in education and later life.

In conclusion, mothers play a pivotal central role in shaping their children's linguistic environments, their early multilingual experiences and inevitably, their language development trajectories. Mothers deliberately hire maids and nannies as language management tools to implement their language ideologies so their children can be advantaged when they enter full-time education. Mothers took on these roles not because fathers did not want to. However, as Said (2022) argues in a previous study, Arabic-speaking mothers viewed language teaching and transmission as 'divinely ordained' (226) and as fulfilling their role of a 'mother' from a religious and cultural perspective. The discussion next contextualises the findings.

Discussion

The paper set out to understand the role maids and nannies play in the language development of young Emirati bilingual children in the UAE and their contributions to the child's early linguistic environment.

'Family' in family language policy

The paper has presented new sociolinguistic data about how families support their multilingualism through the defined cultural practice of hiring maids or nannies. Scholars in FLP and critical family multilingualism, most notably King (2016), have called for expanding the field by studying different family types, languages, and contexts; hence, by understanding how language is learned, used, negotiated and re-negotiated in the diverse contexts, the field can present a more realistic rendition of the central role language plays in the lives of multilingual families.

The maids and nannies the families hire are not typically considered 'family' through the sharing of DNA. Earlier, Said (2022) argued that a family systems theory (FST) should be adopted when studying the family's language uses, choices, practices and beliefs as it would make more apparent the roles and agencies of individual family members for researchers looking to understand how FLPs are established (see Broderick 1993). Watson (2012) underlines that FST is used 'to understand human functioning that focuses on interactions between people in a family and between the family and the context(s) in which that family is embedded' (p.184). The family is a social system in and of itself and has 'its own characteristics, rules, roles, communication patterns, and power structure above and beyond the individual' (McGinnis and Wright 2023, 582). The families in this study have been understood based on the 'contexts' in which they are 'embedded' and each with their own 'characteristics, rules, roles ... and power structures'. The constant presence of live-in maids and nannies, which is different from the employment of nannies prevalent in current literature, means that they, in addition to family members, also provide language input by interacting with children and other family members. They also carry their ideas and beliefs about language and child-rearing practices, some of which align, while others contradict those of the parents. The longer they remain with the family, the more impact they have on language learning and socialisation.

In other words, from an FST perspective, maids and nannies become part of the family system and affect and are affected by the family members. In the data above, Mary, the nanny/maid, refused to use English with the children even though she studied English at the college level in her native Ethiopia. Instead, she used the little Arabic she knew and continued learning Arabic through family members and YouTube in her spare time. The agentic choice the maid took affected the linguistic environment of the children and thus their development of English in the pre-school years. The children continued to learn and establish their knowledge of the Arabic language, and the parents conformed to using Arabic even though they believed that learning English early was better for the children. Mary's agentic move highlights that power is socially constructed through language. Any social actor can gain more power while another loses some as they negotiate to enact specific social actions (language learning in this case). It seems decisions related to an important matter, such as the language of communication, can be decided by a caregiver who is not necessarily a family member in the traditional sense, and the family can accept such a choice because she is a part of the family system, and the family views her as such. Similarly, Rowdha hired her nanny or maid from the Philippines, specifically for her good knowledge of English; Janine was allowed to choose educational programmes and books in English for the children. This cooperation complements the parental beliefs, the desired language practices, and the family's context.

Adopting an FST lens is useful in understanding better how FLPs are established and incorporates non-family caregivers under the umbrella of 'family' because their actions and choices affect the rest of the system and contribute to its overall characteristics. The effect can be negative or positive, but the effect is present, and by acknowledging such a reality, we begin to view maids and nannies not as outsiders corrupting the inner family but as members of a system, they have been brought into. They contribute to the formation of its way of being. They are language development tools and physically manifest parental beliefs about language learning and child-rearing.

Macro-level discourses about language affect micro home language beliefs

Although some of the findings above have been echoed in studies conducted in similar multilingual and modern cities worldwide (see Curdt-Christiansen 2009, data from Hong Kong), what sets the UAE and Gulf countries apart is the unique maid and nanny culture, which makes up the children's early linguistic environments. Children are raised with one or more maids or nannies from birth and throughout their childhood, not due to competitive reasons or sociocultural backgrounds. The constant presence of maids throughout childhood makes the Emirati or Gulf child unique in their development, especially linguistically. The presence of another multilingual within the home environment who does not share the same language (even if a shared language exists, attitudes towards it may differ, as do proficiency levels) or the same culture naturally impacts the child's experience as an emergent bilingual.

In addition to understanding language ideology and practices, the usefulness of using FLP as a lens through which to examine the hiring of maids and nannies in this paper reveals how macro-level language discourses in the larger UAE affect internal parental beliefs about languages. Some wanted English in the pre-school years because it is a medium of instruction in schools, and the national discourse promotes the English language as the gateway to prosperous careers and the advancement of the UAE. Other parents hired maids with Arabic, held beliefs aligned with nationalistic discourses that describe the modern Emirati as accomplished in their Arabic language, Emirati culture, Islamic religion, and the learning of the English language. These two distinct yet different discourses at the macro level affect families to the extent, in this case, of hiring maids or nannies as tools to enact their language beliefs. The UAE data contribute to other data in FLP and family multilingualism that argue the family as a domain, a community of practice, and a social entity, does not exist in isolation from external socio-political forces (Curdt-Christiansen and Huang 2020).

Methodological value of ethnographic work

Methodologically, the decision to conduct a project ethnographically over a period of twelve months continuously through analysis of multiple data sets (multiple interviews, conversations, field notes, and interviews with non-family caretakers) enriched our understanding of Emirati children's early language environments. It also offered insights into parental beliefs, language management attempts, and illustrated the impact of non-family member caretakers' agency on family multilingual practices. Distinct from previous studies that were based on reports, interviews seeking parental reports of their experience with maids or through other cross-sectional means, our project included, in addition to parental interviews, interviews of their maids and observations of the family. The value of ethnographic work meant that a clearer understanding of how and why maids and nannies affect the child's early language environment became apparent. By employing thematic analysis, the interviewees' responses offered insight into how they view themselves in the world and how they see the reality of their choices and beliefs. Mothers presented themselves as responsible, loving, globally aware and involved parents with aspirations for their children's success in the future. Maids or nannies saw themselves as part of the family structure and as important members supporting mothers and children to have good lives. Put together, a picture emerges of two entities who do not share the same linguistic, cultural and experiential backgrounds, yet they cooperate to support the family system and establish agreed-upon child-rearing and language practices. Thematic analysis allows researchers to focus on the meanings of individuals as they tell their stories in interviews, highlighting the nuanced aspects of the complex nature of the hiring of maids and their contribution to children's emerging bilingualism that would otherwise not be understood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has offered an unprecedented description and critical analysis of the role maids and nannies play in the Emirati child's language development process and how they contribute to their early linguistic environments at home. The paper made a case that nannies and maids be viewed as part of the family system of the homes in which they reside and not as outsiders, corruptors of family and cultural norms, or individuals completely disconnected from the decision-making processes within the home. The data have shown that language ideologies, practices, and management strategies are intertwined with parental desire to offer their children as much cultural capital as possible early on through acquiring symbolic resources by hiring maids and nannies who possess those resources.

Employing an interdisciplinary epistemology in which FLP, ethnography, thematic analysis, and family multilingualism were combined and utilised as the theoretical foundation of this paper, it became clear how maids or nannies worked with mothers to create early linguistic environments in a way that using only one theory could not have.

This paper responds to growing calls in FLP research to explore how diverse families negotiate, learn, and use languages; thus, offering a fuller account of how language is lived and managed by families worldwide. By examining the nuanced and carefully managed relationships between Emirati mothers and their domestic workers, it sheds light on mothers' heightened awareness of how hired help shapes their children's early language development. In doing so, it contributes to interdisciplinary efforts to better understand the sociocultural and cognitive dimensions of bilingual development within multilingual households. Crucially, this paper positions domestic workers as embodied agents of parental language ideologies, the living enactments of home language planning decisions. Their presence in the home reflects not only practical caregiving needs but also strategic choices about linguistic input and desired language outcomes. Parents' agentic choices around who cares for their child and in what language directly influence whether the child is more likely to develop English or Arabic first. Recognising the linguistic role of domestic workers thus offers

a more layered understanding of language socialisation and may help explain individual differences in bilingual trajectories, differences that are often not visible within nuclear family language environments alone.

Acknowledgements

We thank Zayed University for funding this study through the Research Intensive Grant (R20120) from 2021–2023.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Zayed University [grant number: Research Intensive Grant (RIF) R12020].

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