

Ambreen Javed*

Sarwet Rasul†

Multiliteracies and Multilingual Literacies of Young Children: A Study of Linguistic and Social Identities

Abstract

'Pakistan is a multilingual community where individuals communicate in more than one language for everyday communication. Literacy practices of young children in schools reflect the literacy practices of the broader social community. Same is the case with the use of literacy practices at homes. The data is collected by answering questions in questionnaires that are answered by the parents. The collected data is from three different social strata of society. The current study analyzes the literacy practices of young children at homes and the way they are associated with the broader social and cultural context. This includes the linguistic and literacy practices of young children during their playtime, their interaction with the members of the family and their exposure to the media and technology. These multilingual literacy practices that are practised at the homes constitute the social and linguistic identity of the individuals in the long run.

Key Words: Multilingual Literacy Practices, Home, Young Children, Identity.

Introduction

Language, no doubt, is the only medium of communication among human beings. But individuals in a multilingual society have to make use of different linguistic choices in different social contexts. So, literacy practices are employed by individuals to make sense of the cultural and social context. Young children are exposed to linguistic elements in the home as well as in schools. Language learning is a long process, and as children learn their first language through the interaction with their family members, the role of the immediate family and parents is vital in the development of linguistic repertoire during early years. In multilingual communities, young children are exposed to more than one language. In this way, young children learn to make use of multilingual literacy practices in their everyday life. These practices are influenced by the home as well as the school environment. Family and close-knitted social context play a very important part in developing the multilingual literacy practices of young children. This study deals with the multilingual literacy practices of the young children in their homes and the role of the parents, the exposure to the content on media/technology and the home environment in shaping those multilingual literacy practices.

Multilingual Literacies and Multiliteracies/ Social Construction of Literacy

[Barton \(1998\)](#) talks about literacy as something that people do. This implies that literacy is considered as an activity that is situated in the area between thinking and text. He further states "Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analysed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people." (p.1) This states that literacy practices are human activities that are performed by humans in a social setting. [Barton \(1998\)](#) believes that the concept of literacy practices presents a strong approach to theorize the connection between the writing and reading activities and the societal structures in which they are implanted. In this way, the literacy practices connect with broader social settings. [Barton \(1998\)](#) views the literacy practices as those forms of societal action with the help of which "people negotiate, accept and sometimes challenge their roles

* PhD Scholar, Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: ambreen.javed@hotmail.com

† Associate Professor / Chairperson, Department of English, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

and identities” (p. 41). The term multiliteracies employ the fact that it should be believed that there are many literacies that are attached to any culture. So, it can be understood that the individuals of any society make use of many literacies at any given day and time. These are called multiliteracies. These multiliteracies can be in one language, or they can be in a multilingual context.

Language Learning and Role of Family

Language learning is part of human activity. Humans socialize because of the specific trait of language that is given to them. It is also believed that there is a relation between the ability to read and write. [Wang \(2011\)](#) believes that those children who can read well have an inclination towards writing well. [Wang \(2011\)](#) further talks about the relationship between reading and writing and claims that the “progress in either can lead to progress in the other” (p.29). [Cook-Gumperz & Kyratzis \(2001\)](#) assert the need of interaction between the child and the family members as “It is also through family discussion that children first become aware of relationships in a world beyond the family” (p.593). Emphasizing on the need of the exposure to reading and writing [McBride-Chang \(2013\)](#) discusses that parental reading is important for the children as they have emphasized on the three crucial aspects in the creation of a child who is ready for the reading. Those aspects are to foster an atmosphere of literacy, to incorporate the literacy into play and to read to the children for an objective. The idea of the creation of a reading ready child was originally offered for the reading literacy of classrooms, but [McBride-Chang \(2013\)](#) states that the idea is equally relevant and useful in relation to the home environment as well and states “When a home is filled with reading activities, there may be a natural acceptance on the part of the child of literacy as a way of life.” (p.50) So, the effect of the environment of the home is much on the children. But there has to increase in the exposure as [Cook-Gumperz & Kyratzis \(2001\)](#) claim “Children require both broad cultural knowledge about social relationships and an understanding of the social identities that define their position in a social world. Yet they also need to be active producers of the linguistic practices that construct these identities” (p.591). So, in order to function in society, children learn about the use of different linguistic items and the identities and ideologies associated with them. In this way, they can be the active users of language in relation to the identity it portrays.

With globalization, technology and media have become a part of the family and children are exposed to them at an early age. [Browne \(1999\)](#) talked to the teachers regarding the effect of television and media on children in their home environment. The teachers were interviewed, and few of them were of the opinion that the potential of learning through videos or television is lost because of the fact that parents do not talk to the children about the content that they watch, so children are unable to retain what they see. But then those teachers who were also parents of the young children presented the fact that there are programmes and videos that contribute to the language and literacy development of young children. So, the role of television or media cannot be negated when the literacy practices of young children are taken into consideration.

[Wang \(2011\)](#) talks about the factors that affect the multilingual literacy development of young children. The home serves the initial platform to learn the language, but then that learning is channelled by various factors. The cultural beliefs of parents, their education and socioeconomic status, parental availability and supportive behaviour from the siblings and extended family are few factors that contribute to the multilingual literacy development in homes. The other factors include the opportunities to utilize that language in conversations and communication and the value attached to that language in homes as well as in broader social fabric. Collaboration between homes and schools also play an important part as the literacy practices are strengthened in both of these places.

Locating Literacies in Time and Space

These literacy practices are institutionalized as well according to the social context. [Barton \(1998\)](#) claims “socially powerful institutions, such as education, tend to support dominant literacy practices. These dominant practices can be seen as part of whole discourse formations, institutionalized configurations of power and knowledge which are embodied in social relationships.” (p. 10) In this way, the prominent multilingual literacy practices in any institution are visible and supported. This generates the dominant discourse across various fields and domains. [Barton \(2001\)](#) states that during

the study of various areas of everyday life it was found that the study is about a textually mediated everyday life and not about the life that was collectively organized by spoken language only. So, he claims “We concluded that nearly all everyday activities in the contemporary world are mediated by literacy and that people act within a textually mediated social world.” (p. 100) When the institutions support the dominant literacy practices, the members learn those practices automatically as [Caspi & Shiner \(2006\)](#) believe that various processes of the socialization patterns of parents are likely to relate with childhood temperament in the development of personality. Young children learn from the environment of their homes and school and are guided by their parents and teachers for the linguistic and literacy preferences. Similarly, [Barton \(1998\)](#) states “Home is a prime site for learning because it is where children are brought up, and it is the place where personal life is regulated in the most intimate ways. Both adults and children learn in the home.” (p. 190) In other words, home is the primary site where discourses and identities are made and negotiated. It is the primary institution to create identities, as well. [Berns \(2010\)](#) believes that language has the capacity to enable humans to create the ability to reason and a characteristic pattern of behavior. It is justification and behavior that allow humans to adopt the attitudes of others. So, it can be said that children mostly adopt and internalize their parents’ opinions in the form of role-taking.

Multilingual Literacy Practices and Identity Construction

Individuals of a society relate themselves to certain notions, and those notions contribute to making their identity. [Korostelina \(2007\)](#) believes “identities are formed in history and practice through collective work of evoking, confirming, or declining participation in collective practices.” (p.28) Identity and culture are part of the common process. Individuals negotiate their identities and choose to be or not to be part of a particular culture. In multilingual communities, linguistic identities are part of the broader social culture. [Pavlenko & Blackledge \(2004\)](#) believe that language ideologies are not neutral. This phenomenon is especially seen in the multilingual communities as [Pavlenko & Blackledge \(2004\)](#) claim “some languages and identity options are in forgettable Orwellian words, ‘more equal than others’.” (p.3) In other words, it can be notified that identities and ideologies are connected with the power structures in society. Linguistic identity is also associated with the prestige and power associated with a particular language in any society. It can be translated in the present scenario of Pakistan as because of the prestige and dominance attached to the English language the demand to learn and be proficient in the language is more as compared to any other language in the country.

Methodology

Multilingual literacy practices of the young learners at home and the way these multilingual literacy practices are influenced and shaped by the preferences and practices of the parents is the focus of the current study. A questionnaire devised on the Google docs was sent to the parents for the purpose to record their responses (see Appendix). However, by taking into consideration the three social strata, all the parents did not have access to the Google docs so, they filled in the questionnaire in the hard copy. The questionnaire was also translated into the Urdu language to make it understandable for everybody. Total of 150 parents filled in the questionnaires, which makes it 50 parents for each social stratum. The data is collected from the Rawalpindi region and the children up to the age of 6 are considered for this study. The social strata are determined by the fee structure of their children’s schools. So according to this following stratification is done.

1. Monthly school fee of the child below 2500 rupees: Identified First Social Stratum
2. A monthly fee between 2500 to 6000 rupees: Identified Second Social Stratum
3. The monthly fee above 6000 rupees: Identified Third Social Stratum

The theoretical framework for the current study is of [Barton & Hamilton \(1998\), \(2000\), \(2005\)](#) literacy as a social practice. The theory outlines six propositions about the nature of literacy:

1. Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
2. There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.

3. Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
4. Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
5. Literacy is historically situated.
6. Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense-making. (p. 8)

The theory has been adapted, and the data has been characterized in the following three categories for the purpose of analysis.

- a. Current Literacy Practices and Parents' Inclinations
- b. Effects of Media/Technology
- c. Interaction with friends and extended family

Data Presentation and Analysis

For the purpose of the analysis, the collected data is divided into three categories.

- a. Current Literacy Practices and Parents' Inclinations
- b. Effects of Media/Technology
- c. Interaction with friends and extended family

Current Literacy Practices and Parents' Inclinations

This category is related to the multilingual literacy practices of young children in their homes. It also deals with the parents' preference to use a particular language in the home. The data shows that bilingual literacy practices are seen in all three identified social strata. Urdu remains the common language in all the homes; however, the difference is that in the first and second identified social stratum, regional languages are spoken in a few cases. While in the third identified social stratum, the English language becomes the leading language for the purpose of communication. Connected to this practice are parents' inclination about linguistic choices. Urdu remains the basic language as 100 out of 150 parents use it at homes as the prominent language for the purpose of communication. The regional languages are also used in the first and second identified social stratum. Regional languages and English language are also utilized for the purpose of communication; however, the percentage varies in each social stratum. It is also observed that the use of the English language is increased in the third identified social stratum as in 15 out of 50 homes, the English language is used for the purpose of communication. Around 40% of the parents prefer English as the mode of communication at homes while 60% believes that bilingual mode of communication should be used with English and Urdu as the prominent languages.

The practice of storytelling also varies with the different identified social strata. 56% of parents are observed to tell stories to their children in the first identified social stratum however the language they use is Urdu and in very few cases the vocabulary items of English are added into that. The percentage of storytelling raises to 74% in the second identified social stratum with parents using bilingual discourse as the main mode of communication with English and Urdu as the prominent languages. While in the third identified social stratum, 92% of the parents tell stories to their children and out of them, a vast majority uses English as the main language for the purpose of storytelling.

Media and Tech Literacy

This category deals with the role of media in shaping the multilingual literacy practices of young children. Multiliteracies (Media and technology) are a part of the present era. The choice to watch a certain program also influence the multilingual literacy practice of the children. The data shows that the average time spent by children with gadgets and watching the television vary in each social stratum. In the first identified social stratum, more children spend less than 2 hours in watching the cartoons. Around 50% of children are not able to operate the gadgets on their own in the first identified social stratum. This shows that there is a lack of media and tech literacy in the first identified

social stratum. In the second identified social stratum, the average time children spend with the gadgets is 2-4 hours, and around 80% of the children in this stratum can operate the gadgets on their own. In the third identified social stratum, there is a mixed observation regarding the time spent by the children in interacting with gadgets and television. 48% of children spend less than 2 hours in front of the television. Interestingly in this social stratum, 49 out of 50 students can operate the gadgets on their own. Children, in this social stratum, can operate the phones, tablets and iPads independently on their own.

Regarding the familiarity with the content and language of the cartoons being watched by the children parents of the first identified social stratum have the highest ratio being not familiar with the language and content that their children are exposed to. About 30% of the parents in the first social stratum, 8% in the second and only 6% in the third-social stratum are not familiar with the language of the cartoons/programs that are being watched by their children.

Similarly, the type of cartoons being watched also vary in the three social strata. Cartoons like Jaan, Tom and Jerry, Spiderman (English Cartoons), Superman (English Cartoons), Doremon (Hindi Cartoon Series) and Mr Bean are watched. Only 1 out of 50 children plays games on the mobile phone. Since the language used in Tom and Jerry and Mr Bean is equivalent to none and Jaan is an Urdu language cartoon series with words from the English language being code mixed. There is not much use of language in the cartoons/programmes being watched by the children in the first identified social stratum. The cartoons/programmes being watched by the children of second social stratum have a variety. These are cartoons with bilingual linguistic items. The examples are Jaan (Urdu cartoon Series), Motu Patlu (Hindi Cartoon series), Oggie (Hindi Cartoon series), Doremon (Hindi Cartoon Series), Baal Veer (Hindi Television Series), Ben10 (English Cartoons), Spiderman (English Cartoons), Dora The Explorer (English Cartoons), Dexter's Lab (English Cartoons), Nickelodeon channel (English Cartoons), Masha and the Bear (English Cartoons), Peppa Pig (English Cartoons), Shaun the sheep, Paw Patrol, Tom & Jerry, Chu Chu TV (English Nursery Rhymes accessed through Youtube) and Eflashapps videos (English Nursery Rhymes accessed through Youtube). A novel literacy practice is noticed here where there are more cartoon series with Hindi dubbing as compared to the other two social strata. In the third identified social stratum, the children watch the programs that are in the English language. The examples are: Ben and holly (English Cartoons), Scooby Doo (English Cartoons), Dot (English Cartoons), Ben10 (English Cartoons), Spiderman (English Cartoons), Titans (American Animated Television Series), Peppa Pig (English Cartoons), Powerpuff Girls (English Cartoons), Five Little Monkeys (English Nursery Rhymes accessed through Youtube), Ants go marching (English Nursery Rhymes accessed through Youtube), Old Macdonald had a farm (English Nursery Rhymes accessed through Youtube), Frozen (Animated Disney Movie), Mother Goose Club (English animated series include English Nursery Rhymes, accessed through Youtube), The Lion King (Animated Disney Movie), Disney Movies, Cartoon Network, Baby TV, Jaan (Urdu cartoon Series), Harry Potter (English Fantasy Movie), Tom and Jerry, Shark tank (English Series), Hungry fish Talking Tom (animated game series, accessed through Youtube), Burqa Avenger (Pakistani animated Television Series), and Bulbulay (Pakistani Comedy Drama), Motu Patlu (Hindi Cartoon series), Oggie (Hindi Cartoon series). Temple Run, GTA, Death game, Infinity Sudoku (Gaming App) are the examples of the video games being played.

Interaction with Friends and Extended Family

The families where grandparents are alive, children communicate with them in multilingual discourse. The most variety of regional languages for the communication with the grandparents is seen in the second social stratum with the languages like Punjabi, Pothohari, Kashmiri, Pashto, Sindhi and Saraiki. There is less use of regional languages in the first social stratum and almost no use of regional language in the third social stratum. Urdu is the most prominent language that is used by the children and grandparents of third-social stratum for the purpose of communication. However, there are also examples where grandparents utilize the bilingual discourse in English and Urdu for communicating with their grandchildren.

Peer socialization is also an important part of children's daily routine. Urdu is the widely used language for peer communication in first social stratum. The linguistic choices to communicate

between the playmates in the second social stratum varies from the first one as there is more use of bilingual literacy practices. In the third social stratum, 28% playmates communicate in the English language, whereas the others make use of the bilingual literacy practices to communicate during the playtime.

Conclusion

The study investigated the multilingual literacy practices of young children as reported by the parents. The data reveals that Urdu being the national language is the most widely used medium of communication in the first and second social stratum. The use of regional languages is also seen in the first two social strata. This pattern differs in the third social stratum where the children use English and Urdu as the medium of communication in their homes. There is an interesting insight into the data where the exposure of the children to the Hindi language is also very much visible due to the programmes that are dubbed in the Hindi language. The parents also preferred the use of the English language in the third stratum. The same pattern is seen in the multilingual literacy practices of the parents while they communicate with the children either by storytelling or any other means. The parents' linguistic choices and their inclinations show their wishes and hopes for their children. Since knowing the Urdu language well is considered as crucial to moving about in the country. It also opens more opportunities in relation to knowing regional languages. English is believed to be the language of the privileged, so if the children are proficient in Urdu and English language, they have improved chances of getting a higher education and establishing careers. A similar divide is seen in the use of gadgets like phones, ipads and tablets. Children who belong to the third-social strata are better equipped with operating them as compared to the other two strata. The programmes that are watched by the children also differ in the linguistic input. Since children learn the multilingual literacy practices by the input from the school's and home's environment so the cartoon programmes that they are exposed to plays an important part in that, this linguistic input affects their linguistic repertoire and the linguistic choices the children make in their everyday life. The multilingual literacy practices, while communicating with their peers and grandparents, show a similar pattern as the literacy practices being practised by the parents. Urdu and bilingual discourse remain the dominant language while playing with the peers in the first two strata however this is being changed in the third social stratum where the English language is highly code mixed and used for the purpose of communication with the peer during the playtime. So social networking also strengthens the already practised literacy practices. English is used in the third identified social stratum as this practice can be associated with the position of the English language in the country. It can also be deduced that the parents mostly hold public offices and professional positions. They have secured the prominent status in the society and, they exercise the use of English language for the maintenance of their status while the other two strata desire to attain that place by trying to adapt the language of stature for the higher social mobility.

The analysis of the data also shows that the choice of linguistic items is directly related to the linguistic repertoire of a multilingual individual. The selection and use of certain linguistic items by the parents recognize the larger social perspectives and cultural affiliations. These choices of various linguistic items vary with various social strata of the society. The choice of language and various linguistic items by young learners are affected by the home environment. The role of media in this regard is very important as the language of the programmes being viewed affects the linguistic repertoire of the children. In a few homes, the use of regional languages shows that there are a few individuals who are still sticking to their regional identity. English is the official language of the country. It is also the language of the ruling elite in the country, so the desire for communication in the English language identifies the desire for better social status. The individuals of different social strata associate themselves with different dominant identities. Few of them maintain their regional identity while others consider the national language and national identity as important. But because of the social and educational status that the English language enjoys in the country, the desire and effort to know the language and be proficient in the language remains constant in all the social strata. So, identities are established through the multilingual literacy practices of the individuals in any social, cultural and linguistic setting.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for the Parents

Note: This questionnaire aims to analyze the language practices of young learners in their home environment. Kindly select one of the given choices. Write down your answer in detail where required. Your cooperation is highly appreciated.

Part 1: Demographic Information

1. Your child is currently studying in which of the following classes:

- a. Playgroup (2-3years) b. Junior Montessori (3-4years) c. Senior Montessori (4-5 years)

2. The fee structure per month of your child's school is:

- a. Less than 2500 rupees b. 2500-6000 rupees c. 6,000 rupees and above

Part 2: Literacy Practices at Home

1. What language do you, as a parent use with your child at home?

- a. Urdu b. English c. Others, please specify _____

2. What language do you prefer for your child to use at home?

- a. Urdu b. English c. Others, please specify _____

3. Why do you use/prefer to use that language particularly? Please give reasons.

4. For how many hours a day on average does your child watch the Television or play games on mobile phone/iPad/Tablet.

- a. Less than 2 hours b. 2- 4 hours c. More than 4 hours

5. Can your child operate Television or mobile phone/iPad/Tablet on his/her own?

- a. Yes b. No c. Yes, with some help

6. Are you well familiar with the language used in the TV programs/ Cartoons/Mobile games that are being accessed by your child?

- a. Yes, I am very much familiar with the language.
b. No, Not that much.
c. Yes to some extent.

7. If yes, please name a few games/poems/cartoons/TV programs your child often watches.

8. Do you read stories to your child? If yes then please specify the language in which you read stories to your child. Why do you read stories to your child in that language?

9. Does your child have grandparents alive? If yes, in which language does your child communicate with his/her grandparents?

10. What types of games/sports does your child play with his/her siblings/cousins/friends at home?

- a. They watch TV programmes/Cartoons together.
- b. They play physical games like cricket, dodge the ball, running, hide & seek.
- c. They play with their toys and make stories while playing with them.

11. What is the language used by your child during his/her play time with the playmates?

12. Do you encourage your child to use a specific language during his/her play time?

- a. Yes. b. No. c. Sometimes d. Often

13. Please give reasons for your answer in question no.12 stating as to why do you encourage the use of specific language or why you do not.

Also state what language do you encourage your child to use during his/her play time.

کیا آپ کا بچہ ٹیلی ویژن یا موبائل فون / آئی پیڈ / ٹیبلیٹ خود استعمال کر سکتا ہے؟

ج. جی ہاں، کچھ مدد کے ساتھ

ب. نہیں

ا. جی ہاں

6. Are you well familiar with the language used in the TV programs/ Cartoons/Mobile games that are being accessed by your child?

- Yes, I am very much familiar with the language.
- No, Not that much.
- Yes to some extent.

کیا آپ ٹی وی پروگراموں / کارٹون / موبائل کھیلوں میں استعمال ہونے والی زبان جس تک آپ کے بچے کی رسائی ہے، اس زبان سے بخوبی واقف ہیں؟
ا. جی ہاں، میں زبان سے بہت واقف ہوں
ب. نہیں، اتنا نہیں
ج. جی ہاں، کچھ حد تک۔

7. If yes, please name a few games/poems/cartoons/TV programs your child often watches.

اگر ہاں، تو براہ کرم چند کھیل / نظم / کارٹون / ٹی وی پروگراموں کے نام بتائیے جو آپ کا بچہ اکثر دیکھتا ہے۔

8. Do you read stories to your child? If yes then please specify the language in which you read stories to your child. Why do you read stories to your child in that language?

کیا آپ اپنے بچے کو کہانی سناتے ہیں؟ اگر ہاں تو آپ کو کونسی زبان میں اپنے بچے کو کہانی سناتے ہیں۔ آپ اس زبان میں ہی کہانیاں کیوں سناتے ہیں؟

9. Does your child have grandparents alive? If yes, in which language does your child communicate with his/her grandparents?

کیا آپ کے بچے کے دادا / دادی، نانا / نانی، تانی / تانی، نانی کے ساتھ کوئی زبان میں بات کرتا ہے؟

10. What types of games/sports does your child play with his/her siblings/cousins/friends at home?

- They watch TV programmes/Cartoons together.
- They play physical games like cricket, dodge the ball, running, hide & seek.
- They play with their toys and make stories while playing with them.

آپ کا بچہ گھر میں اپنے بھائیوں / اکن / دوستوں کے ساتھ کس قسم کے کھیل کھیلتا ہے؟

ب. وہ جسمانی کھیل کھیلتے ہیں، جیسے کرکٹ، بھاگنا اور چھپن چھپائی۔

ا. وہ ایک دوسرے کے ساتھ ٹی وی پروگرام / کارٹون دیکھتے ہیں۔

ج. وہ اپنے کھلونے کے ساتھ کھیلتے اور ان کے ساتھ کھیلتے کے دوران کہانیاں بناتے ہیں۔

11. What is the language used by your child during his/her play time with the playmates?

کھیل کے دوران آپ کا بچہ اپنے ساتھیوں کے ساتھ کوئی زبان استعمال کرتا ہے؟

12. Do you encourage your child to use a specific language during his/her play time?

- Yes.
- No.
- Sometimes
- Often

کیا آپ اپنے بچے کو کھیل کے دوران مخصوص زبان استعمال کرنے کی حوصلہ افزائی کرتے ہیں؟
ا. جی ہاں
ب. نہیں
ج. کبھی کبھار.
د. اکثر

13. Please give reasons for your answer in question no.12 stating as to why do you encourage the use of specific language or why you do not.

Also state what language do you encourage your child to use during his/her play time.

براہ کرم سوال نمبر 12 میں آپ کے جواب کی وجوہات بیان کریں کہ آپ مخصوص زبان کے استعمال کی کیوں حوصلہ افزائی کرتے ہیں یا کیوں نہیں کرتے۔
یہ بھی بتائیں کہ آپ اپنے بچے کو کھیل کے دوران کونسی زبان استعمال کرنے کی حوصلہ افزائی کرتے ہیں۔
