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An Evening in the Home of a Pakistani Family

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To experience a language I had never been in touch with before, I visited the home of Jamil and Rehana Tareen.

Dr. and Mrs. Tareen live with their children, Sophia (a ninth grader) and Badar (a sixth grader), in Cavalier, ND. Jamil and Rehana were born in Pakistan, but they have been living in the United States for the past twenty years; their children were born in the U.S. I had spoken with Rehana about this assignment, and she was quite cooperative. I have known the Tareens for a few years, since their two oldest children, Asmah and Basir, were my students in Spanish class before they graduated from Cavalier High School.

When I arrived at their home, they were about to have their afternoon snack. They shared a meal which consisted of samosa (a fried pastry filled with spicy meat and potatoes), kheer (a sweet creamy sauce made with sugar, cream, noodles, and almonds), cake, and tea. Later, Rehana explained to me that she likes to have the children eat a big snack when they get home from school since their supper is usually late (at around eight).

The family usually speaks Urdu at home. Their conversation, their meal, the Pakistani music in the background, and the decorations from their homeland reflected their cultural background. After a while I forgot I was in Cavalier, ND; I could easily imagine I was in a home in Pakistan.

Sophia played a tape of Pakistani music; her mother told her to turn it down (I could guess this through her gestures). Mother and daughter chatted by the kitchen counter; while Rehana did dishes, Sophia did homework. Rehana later told me that sometimes they have to do codeswitching when they talk about school, "since certain slang words only apply to English or to Urdu vocabulary; therefore, they are nearly impossible to translate into the other language without losing their special meaning."

After listening to them speak Urdu for a few minutes with hardly any silent periods, I tuned out. No matter how hard I tried to comprehend, there was no way I could understand what the conversation was about, unless they pointed or gestured.

I turned my attention to Jamil and Badar, who had been studying together in the living room. Badar recited a prayer in Arabic; then he read from the Koran while his father listened attentively and corrected his pronunciation. Amazingly, they both seemed very comfortable in any of the three languages, although I noticed the child often asked questions in English and his father answered him in Urdu.

Sophia showed Rehana a note from school; I could tell they were discussing it. Mother and daughter laughed in the kitchen (I did feel uncomfortable not being able to make out what they were laughing about). They seemed to speak very fast. Their words mixed together, and the sounds appeared completely unfamiliar to me. I felt incapable of making any sense out of their conversation. I felt overwhelmed. I was relieved if the conversation broke up for a minute or two, or if the speakers changed.

Rehana mentioned to me that she felt she was being very rude because they were speaking Urdu in front of me, knowing that I could not understand them. I assured her that my assignment was to observe them in their everyday setting, speaking the language they felt most comfortable with. She smiled and sat by her husband in the living room. Badar had finished his lesson, and sat at the kitchen counter to have Sophia help him with his school work.

When the speakers talked continuously and their dialogue intensified, I felt exhausted. On the other hand, I did not feel as guilty about invading their privacy since they could discuss their most private matters without having to worry about my understanding them.

My mind wandered away. No matter how hard I concentrated I was not able to comprehend the main point of the oral exchange between husband and wife. Were they talking about finances, the children's behavior, a future vacation? I sat at the kitchen table and wondered. I tried to think of ways I could find out the main topic of their conversation, but their faces and gestures would not reveal it. A feeling of isolation overwhelmed me; the inability to communicate with them alienated me.

Towards the end of my visit, Rehana sat at the table and seemed relieved to be able to speak to me in English. She told me that they are used to mixing Urdu words with their English "when they feel comfortable with somebody." She emphasized what I observed throughout the evening: they are most comfortable speaking Urdu at home; however, the children switch back and forth from one language to another without hesitation.

On my way home, I reflected on my experience with this warm Pakistani family. I could only imagine the frustration, confusion, and isolation a child would feel when listening for hours on end to a language he could not comprehend.

To help a non-English speaking student feel at ease in the classroom, I would make an effort to explain new words and concepts to him/her with pictures, props, gestures, etc. I would have him/her bring to school materials from his/her homeland for "show and tell" so that the other students would accept him/her and learn from him/her about his/her culture through photographs, foods, and music. I would include the non-English speaking child in games, short dialogues, and any other activities his/her classmates might be involved in. An aide who speaks the child's language would be extremely useful: he/she could help translate and teach subjects in the child's native language. Our goal should be to empower the child in the use of the English language as well as to help him/her preserve his/her first language, making him/her feel proud of his/her cultural heritage.