

Language is one of the first things you learn growing up, but when you're a first or second generation immigrant it's hard. Balancing both English and your parents' tongue usually results in the loss of one... for a lot of my friends their fluency becomes...

15:25 - Noor: Imkasar...that means broken and that's basically how I explain it to anybody before I speak Arabic so that they're not expecting me to sound like they do

That's my friend Noor Abualhawa. For her, language is a big part of how she preserves her family's culture.

31:20 - Noor: Arabic language is the one thing that will always come from back home.

In my family's house we speak Urdu and English. It was important for my mom that I learned to speak Urdu. I would hear the echo of the Pakistani news channel and repeat it back to her, mocking the fast paced Urdu language commentary. Movies, music, say the song and I would know the lyrics by heart... maybe that's how I learned Urdu. But Teaching and passing on language is hard..

My friend's family is from India, and she speaks Malayalam. When she was a kid, her mom took it one step further. She turned the dining room into a classroom.

(44:50) kids learning, repeating words out loud

When my friend was born, her mom Shadiya Manadath had to make a decision - what language would she teach her daughter first? She decided to teach her Malayalam, even though her friends thought it was a bad idea.

10:25 - Shadiya: some of them said it's not a good idea to speak mother tongue first because when they go to school it's going to be tough for them

Shadiya clearly remembers when her daughter's 2nd grade teacher called home to praise her on her excellent English skills.

(12:17) oh my god that was the moment you know... one of the most special moments in my life (12:41)

Her daughter is at college now, but her mom still teaches her friends' children every Friday afternoon.

[classroom ambi]

She wants to keep her community from losing Malayalam.

[classroom ambi]

Anna Luisa Daigneault is the program director for the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. She says language loss is common.

(49:20) I think it's a sad part of the immigrant story for a lot of people...

(37:33) When you're losing a language you are losing much more than words and sentences and terms for things...you're losing a whole worldview...you're losing a cultural treasure...a way of being...a way of encoding information...and a way of seeing yourself move through time and space...I mean it sounds almost cosmic but it's true

Zara: That's how language is beginning to feel for a lot of my friends...we are slowly but surely losing the links to our native countries and becoming disconnected from our families. At every holiday and family vacation, there are things you miss. Take my friend, Karishma Patel.

5:30 Karishma: Like my grandma actually...she was like telling me a story about how her earring got like pulled out or something like that and she started laughing and stuff...and it was just me and her there and I couldn't really understand what she was saying and I didn't want to ask her to translate so I just started laughing too but I did feel like....like I wanted to know what was happening...you know what I mean...I didn't want to ask her "wait what are you saying....you know...in English"

Zara: I understand where she's coming from - when I'm home with my family, I'll switch back to English when I can't say something in Urdu. But I never want to lose my mother tongue.

For WUNC's Youth Reporting Institute, I'm Zara Khan.