



## Imagining Spatial and Temporal Elsewhere: A Study of Transpositioning in Cross-Cultural Reception of Narratives

Imaginando la otredad espacial y temporal: un estudio del transposicionamiento en la recepción intercultural de las narrativas

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates how children engage in spatial and temporal transpositioning while interacting with cross-cultural multimodal narratives. Using the theoretical framework of transpositioning, supported by transmodalities, this research explores the dynamic processes through which children interpret geographical and temporal distances in stories from Pakistani and American cultures. Twenty children aged 8-12 from Islamabad, Pakistan, and Madison, Wisconsin, USA, participated in the study. Each participant read one narrative from each culture, followed by two in-depth interviews to examine their interpretations. The qualitative analysis reveals that children's perceptions of spatial and temporal distance were shaped by cultural familiarity, contextual cues, and the semiotic resources within the narratives. Familiar urban landscapes and modern technologies served as anchors for spatial and temporal proximity, while traditional clothing and practices reinforced perceptions of remoteness. Notably, American children often conflated spatial and temporal distance, positioning Pakistani narratives in a temporal elsewhere, despite their contemporary setting. The study highlights the adaptability of children's positioning processes and the influence of multimodal design on their narrative reception. These findings underscore the potential of cross-cultural narratives to foster cultural empathy and critical thinking, offering valuable implications for multicultural education and broader applications in bilingual learning, digital storytelling, and cross-cultural communication.

### RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga cómo los niños se involucran en el transposicionamiento espacial y temporal mientras interactúan con narrativas multimodales interculturales. Utilizando el marco teórico del transposicionamiento, sustentado en las transmodalidades, esta investigación explora los procesos dinámicos mediante los cuales los niños interpretan las distancias geográficas y temporales en historias de las culturas pakistaní y estadounidense. En el estudio participaron veinte niños de entre 8 y 12 años procedentes de Islamabad (Pakistán) y Madison (Wisconsin, EE. UU.). Cada participante leyó una narrativa de cada cultura, seguida de dos entrevistas en profundidad para examinar sus interpretaciones. El análisis cualitativo revela que las percepciones de la distancia espacial y temporal de los niños estuvieron configuradas por la familiaridad cultural, las claves contextuales y los recursos semióticos dentro de las narrativas. Los paisajes urbanos familiares y las tecnologías modernas sirvieron como anclajes de proximidad espacial y temporal, mientras que la vestimenta y las prácticas tradicionales reforzaron las percepciones de lejanía. Cabe destacar que los niños estadounidenses a menudo confundieron la distancia espacial y la temporal, posicionando las narrativas pakistaníes en una «ajenidad temporal» (*temporal elsewhere*), a pesar de su ambientación contemporánea. El estudio destaca la adaptabilidad de los procesos de posicionamiento de los niños y la influencia del diseño multimodal en su recepción narrativa. Estos hallazgos subrayan el potencial de las narrativas interculturales para fomentar la empatía cultural y el pensamiento crítico, ofreciendo implicaciones valiosas para la educación multicultural y aplicaciones más amplias en el aprendizaje bilingüe, la narrativa digital (*digital storytelling*) y la comunicación intercultural.

### Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing interest in how children engage with multimodal and cross-cultural nar-

atives, particularly in relation to meaning-making, literacy development, and identity construction. As children increasingly encounter stories that move across linguistic, cultural, and semiotic boundaries, their engagement with

narratives can no longer be understood solely through linear or text-centric models of reading (Jenkins et al., 2006). Instead, children's reception of stories involves complex interpretive processes in which meanings are constructed through the interaction of language, visuals, cultural references, and prior experiences (Serafini, 2023). Within this broader shift, understanding how children position themselves in relation to narrative worlds has become a key concern in literacy and education research.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined children's engagement with multimodal texts, highlighting how images, layout, color, and language jointly contribute to comprehension and affective response (Mills & Unsworth, 2017; Serafini, 2023; Turner et al., 2023). Studies in literacy and education have shown that multimodal resources shape how children interpret characters, settings, and events, often enabling deeper engagement than print-only texts (Serafini, 2015). More recent work has also begun to explore children's encounters with culturally diverse narratives, demonstrating how such texts can challenge assumptions, evoke curiosity, and support intercultural awareness (Zhang, 2023; Sogaard, 2024). However, much of this research focuses on comprehension outcomes, identity affirmation, or pedagogical affordances, rather than on the interpretive processes through which children imagine and negotiate where and when a story is situated. Specifically, while research acknowledges the role of critical multimodal literacy in helping young children interpret complex themes in picture books (Turner et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2025), there remains a gap in understanding how children actively construct and navigate the temporal and spatial dimensions within these narratives and position themselves in relation to the narratives' depicted environments and chronologies.

While space and time are inherent to storytelling, they are often treated as fixed narrative features rather than as interpretive constructs shaped by readers' cultural and experiential frameworks (Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020). Recent studies have pointed to the role of multimodal texts in shaping children's perceptions of social worlds and cultural difference, yet few have examined how children actively imagine spatial proximity or distance, or how they locate stories temporally in relation to their own lived present (Mackey, 2022). Considering the ways children engage with the stories they read, it seems plausible that even when narratives are set in contemporary contexts, children may interpret them as temporally distant or spatially remote based on cultural cues, lifestyles, or material conditions represented in the text and illustrations. This suggests that children's understanding of contemporaneity itself is subjective and culturally mediated.

In the field of literacy and education, the emerging research has begun to address how learners navigate difference through multimodal and translanguaging practices, emphasizing the fluidity of meaning-making across modes and contexts (Han, 2021; Aragón et al., 2024). Moreover, the theoretical work on positioning and transpositioning has been applied to the classroom setting to highlight the fluid and relational nature of identity in interaction (Tai, 2024; Cheung & Tai, 2025). Similarly, Choi and Tai (2025) explore transpositioning empirically within educational contexts, suggesting that transpositioning contributes to

multimodal meaning making and cross-disciplinary connections in collaborative learning environments. However, the application of such a theoretical framework to children's reception of multimodal narratives remains scarce. This study addresses this gap by examining children's spatial and temporal positioning during the reception of cross-cultural multimodal stories, using the concept of transpositioning (Wei & Lee, 2023), supported by the framework of transmodalities (Hawkins, 2021). Drawing on interview data with Pakistani and American children, the study explores how readers imagine spatial and temporal elsewhere while engaging with narratives from unfamiliar cultural contexts.

Rather than treating space and time as objective narrative features, the study foregrounds them as interpretive constructs shaped by cultural familiarity, semiotic resources, and lived experience. By foregrounding differences in how Pakistani and American children position story worlds, the study attempts to demonstrate that understandings of what counts as primitive, contemporary, or futuristic are not universal but are culturally mediated and learned. In doing so, the study extends the theory of transpositioning into the domain of children's narrative reception, showing how young readers dynamically reposition themselves in relation to story worlds, and draws on the theory of transmodalities to illustrate how the interaction of linguistic, visual, and cultural semiotic resources both produces perceptions of distance and enables meaning-making across cultural difference.

### **This study focuses on the following research question:**

How do children from different cultural backgrounds engage in spatial and temporal transpositioning when interacting with cross-cultural multimodal narratives, and what factors influence their interpretation of these distances?

### **Spatial and Temporal Transpositioning**

Spatial and temporal transpositioning are particularly relevant to the study of cross-cultural narrative reception. The notion of spatial transpositioning draws on the idea that individuals imagine and interpret the geographical and physical distances within narratives, often relating these to their own cultural experiences (Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020). This process is closely linked to the concept of positioning in social psychology, where individuals construct and negotiate their identities based on the discursive labels and roles available to them within specific communicative contexts (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, 2012). Spatial transpositioning thus involves a cognitive mapping of the narrative world onto the reader's own cultural and spatial context, a process that is influenced by the reader's familiarity with or alienation from the narrative setting.

Similarly, temporal transpositioning involves the interpretation of time within narratives, particularly when these narratives are set in different historical or cultural contexts (Bridgeman, 2007). As Blommaert (2012) notes, the globalization of communication has led to the emergence of truncated multilingualism, where individuals engage with fragments of different languages and cul-

tural references. This fragmentation is also evident in temporal transpositioning, where readers may perceive the narrative time as distant or disconnected from their own cultural timeline (Kucirkova & Littleton, 2020). This process is further complicated by the fluidity of identity in liquid modernity (Ibrahim, 2018), where the boundaries between past, present, and future are increasingly blurred, resulting in a more flexible and dynamic engagement with narrative time.

The implications of spatial and temporal transpositioning for cross-cultural narrative reception are profound. As children engage with stories from cultures different from their own, they are not merely passive recipients of these narratives but active participants in the construction of meaning. By imagining spatial and temporal distances, they navigate the cultural and temporal differences presented in the narratives, positioning themselves within or outside the narrative world. This process of transpositioning reflects a broader trend in contemporary communication, where identities and meanings are constantly in flux, shaped by the dynamic interplay of linguistic, semiotic, and cultural resources (Hawkins, 2021). It is therefore important to explore this aspect of cross-cultural communication in order to understand which cultural elements contribute to shaping children's perception of 'otherness' and how narratives facilitate or impede the construction of shared understandings across diverse backgrounds (Fawzy, 2023). This engagement fosters a deeper understanding of cultural products and enhances cross-cultural literary comprehension, especially amidst globalization, where diverse cultural products are increasingly accessible (Zhang, 2022).

By analyzing the responses of children from Pakistani and American backgrounds to selected multimodal narratives, this study aims to shed light on the complexities of spatial and temporal transpositioning in cross-cultural narrative reception. The findings aim to contribute to the broader discourse on transmodalities and translanguaging, providing insights into how young readers navigate the cultural and temporal distances presented in narratives from different cultures.

## Methodology

### *Theoretical Framework*

The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of transpositioning (Wei & Lee, 2023), supported by the concept of transmodalities (Hawkins, 2021). Transpositioning refers to the dynamic process of shifting identity positions in response to evolving communicative contexts. This concept is essential for understanding how children interpret and position themselves within or against the narrative worlds they encounter, particularly when these narratives originate from cultures different from their own.

Transmodalities complement this framework by emphasizing the simultaneous use of multiple semiotic resources in meaning-making. As introduced by Hawkins (2018), transmodalities refer to how various modes, such as text, images, and sound, interact to create a cohesive narrative experience. In this study, transmodalities provide the lens through which the processes of spatial and temporal transpositioning are analyzed, focusing on how

children from different cultural backgrounds engage with and interpret multimodal narratives.

### *Sample Selection*

The sample for this study was selected to ensure a diverse representation of cultural backgrounds, specifically focusing on children from Islamabad, Pakistan, and Madison, Wisconsin, USA. These locations were chosen to explore the cross-cultural reception of narratives, given the distinct linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts they offer.

A total of ten multimodal narratives were selected for this study, with five representing Pakistani culture and five representing American culture. These narratives were chosen based on their relevance to the theme of cultural exchange and their potential to evoke spatial and temporal transpositioning in young readers. The narratives are multimodal in nature, including both text and illustrations, ensuring a comprehensive engagement with the concept of transmodalities. The titles of the selected books, along with the names of the authors (verbal mode) and illustrators (visual mode), are presented below.

Book Title	Author	Illustrator
<i>King for a Day</i>	Rukhsana Khan	Christiane Kromer
<i>Night of the Moon</i>	Hena Khan	Julie Paschkis
<i>Rani in Search of a Rainbow: A Natural Disaster Survival Tale</i>	Shaila Abdullah	Bijan Samaddar
<i>Silly Chicken</i>	Rukhsana Khan	Yunmee Kyong
<i>Free as a Bird</i>	Malala Yousafzai	Lina Maslo
<i>Milo Imagines the World</i>	Matthew de la Peña	Christian Robinson
<i>The Blue House</i>	Phoebe Wahl	Phoebe Wahl
<i>Each Kindness</i>	Jacqueline Woodson	E. B. Lewis
<i>The Cot in the Living Room</i>	Hilda Eunice Burgos	Gaby D'Alessandro
<i>Small in the City</i>	Sydney Smith	Sydney Smith

### *Participant Readers*

The participant readers consisted of 20 children aged 8 to 12 years, selected from Islamabad, Pakistan, and Madison, Wisconsin, USA. This age group was chosen for their cognitive ability to engage with complex multimodal narratives and their developing sense of cultural identity. The participants from both sites present similar socio-economic backgrounds, as reported by their parents in the consent form, i.e., they identified as middle-class families.

Each participant was asked to read two stories, one representing Pakistani culture and one representing American culture. This approach not only facilitated deeper engagement with the narratives but also helped the participants develop a comparative outlook on the two cultures. The allocation of specific stories to individual participants was randomized. This approach was adopted to avoid systematic bias in the exposure to stories while allowing the analysis to capture a range of cultural representations across participants.

### Data Collection

The data collection process involved conducting one-on-one interviews with each of the 20 participants. Both the stories and the interviews were conducted in English. Given the cross-cultural design of the study, it was methodologically important to select a language that would be accessible to children in both contexts. In Pakistan, the participating children had learned English as a second language through formal schooling, and English was regularly used as a medium of instruction. Information about the children's linguistic backgrounds was collected through a demographic form completed by parents prior to the interviews. The Pakistani participants were primarily Urdu speakers, with some reporting familiarity with regional languages such as Punjabi. The American participants were predominantly English speakers; only two children reported limited knowledge of Spanish. Conducting both the reading and the interviews in English ensured comparability across groups while minimizing language-related barriers to comprehension.

Two interviews were conducted with each participant, resulting in a total of 40 interviews. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore how the children engaged with the narratives and how they interpreted the spatial and temporal distances within the stories. By focusing on individual responses, the study aimed to capture the nuanced ways in which children from different cultural backgrounds engage in transpositioning.

In order to ensure participants' confidentiality and ethical protection, all individuals in this study are identified using anonymized initials. These initials are accompanied by a suffix indicating the participants' national context (-P for participants from Pakistan and -A for participants from the United States), allowing for analytical clarity without disclosing personal identities. This anonymization strategy safeguards participants' privacy while also facilitating a clear distinction between the two participant groups in the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the data.

### Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns (themes) within data. Thematic analysis was conducted using a deductive coding method. The deductive coding of the transcribed interviews with the participant readers was guided by the theoretical frameworks of transpositioning (Wei & Lee, 2023) and transmodalities (Hawkins, 2021). Intrarater reliability was ensured by re-coding a subset of the data after a time interval to check for consistency in coding decisions, thereby strengthening the robustness of the analysis. During this phase, the theme of creative transpositioning emerged as particularly significant. This theme highlighted how children creatively navigated and interpreted the cultural and temporal elements of the narratives, positioning themselves within or outside, and closer to or further from, the narrative worlds they encountered.

### Researchers' Positionality

Being from Pakistan, the researchers have a deep understanding of Pakistani culture and children's experiences, which informed their approach to analyzing the data from Pakistani participants. However, their understanding of American culture and children's experiences is more limited, influenced by one of the researchers' 6-month visit to Madison, Wisconsin. This direct exposure to American culture provided valuable insights but also highlighted the differences in cultural contexts that were needed to navigate during the study. Throughout the research process, the researchers remained conscious of these cultural differences and their positionality, ensuring that their interpretations were reflective of the participants' perspectives rather than their own biases. Their goal was to accurately represent the voices of both Pakistani and American children, acknowledging the cultural nuances that influenced their engagement with the narratives.

### Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on how Pakistani and American children positioned themselves in relation to cross-cultural multimodal narratives through processes of spatial and temporal transpositioning. Rather than treating space and time as fixed attributes of the stories, the analysis foregrounds how children actively constructed notions of proximity, distance, contemporaneity, and remoteness during the reception of the narratives. Although all ten stories used in the study were set in contemporary contexts, children's interpretations of *where* and *when* the stories were situated were shaped by their cultural familiarity, lived experiences, and engagement with multiple semiotic modes.

The findings reveal that children relied heavily on contextual and multimodal cues, such as illustrations, material resources, language use, and depictions of everyday practices, to imagine spatial and temporal settings. These cues not only informed their perceptions of distance or closeness but also guided their overall understanding of the narratives. Two major themes emerged from the analysis: 'imagining spatial distance' and 'imagining temporal distance', each encompassing nuanced sub-processes through which children navigated unfamiliar cultural worlds.

#### *Imagining Spatial Distance*

Children's interpretations of the spatial settings of the narratives demonstrate how familiarity and difference functioned as key anchors in the process of spatial transpositioning. Participants positioned stories as either geographically proximate or remote based on the presence (or absence) of recognizable cultural, material, and environmental elements. Importantly, these spatial interpretations were not grounded in explicit geographical knowledge but were constructed through children's engagement with multimodal cues in the narratives.

The interview data revealed that when children encountered elements that resembled their own lived environments, they tended to position the stories as spatially close, even when the narratives were set in culturally

different contexts. Familiar urban landscapes, architectural forms, and everyday objects served as anchors that enabled children to situate the stories within spaces they perceived as known and accessible.

For example, HH-A identified an American setting in the story *Small in the City* based on the depiction of buildings and cars, stating: "It is probably in like probably in America. Because there were different buildings. And there were cars. And there were houses, buildings, apartment buildings. Stuff like that." Here, spatial proximity was inferred through visual similarity rather than textual confirmation, demonstrating how illustrations play a central role in shaping spatial interpretation.

Similarly, NM-A, while engaging with the story *Cot in the Living Room*, associated the narrative with New York, highlighting the modern cityscape and its resemblance to places he had seen before. This sense of familiarity led NM-A to conclude that the setting was not spatially remote, but rather closely aligned with his own experiences: "I think it's set in the United States. It looks very familiar to the similar places I have seen before." This example underscores how the recognition of familiar architectural features and urban landscapes plays a crucial role in shaping children's perceptions of spatial proximity.

In the same vein, JM-A believed that the story *Milo Imagines the World* unfolded in the United States, possibly in a city like New York, due to the architectural features and urban landscape presented in the illustrations: "... in the United States. Somewhere in, like, it kind of looks like New York. I would say because of, like, the building and, like, the opening picture and, like, the background. I don't know if it's, like, New York, but, like, it looks like a city. Just, like, the bridge in the background and it looks like their house is really high up." This example highlights how the recognition of shared elements, such as urban structures and landscapes, led JM-A to position the narrative as unfolding in a non-spatially remote location.

Another similar instance occurs when JK-A's positioning was guided by the presence of familiar elements within the narrative *The Blue House*, leading her to confidently place the story in the United States: "I think it is set in the United States. It didn't look like it was in any other country, it looks very familiar to the similar places I have seen before." The presence of familiar urban features reinforced her perception of spatial proximity, demonstrating how cultural recognition can influence children's understanding of narrative settings. These responses indicate that children's spatial positioning was grounded in recognizable visual and material markers rather than explicit narrative information.

In contrast, when some children encountered unfamiliar cultural practices, clothing, or lifestyles, they often positioned the narratives in spatially distant or ambiguous locations. This trend was mainly found in the interviews with US-based children, when they encountered stories set in Pakistan. Differences in dress, social practices, and environmental features prompted children to imagine the stories as unfolding in faraway regions, even when they could not precisely identify the location.

For example, JK-A, while reading a story, *King for a Day*, that depicted characters with distinct cultural attire

and customs, associated the setting with the Middle East or Asia, indicating a perceived geographical separation: "umm... from the pictures, they kind of looked, like their clothing and their culture and all that, it kind of looked from, like out east or something, like maybe from the Middle East or somewhere in Asia or something. And it looks like the girl is wearing like a head scarf, so...". This perception was further reinforced by the contextual cues within the narrative that highlighted cultural practices unfamiliar to JK-A, leading to a sense of spatial remoteness.

Similarly, MC-A, upon noticing cultural elements that differed from her own experiences, speculated that the story *Night of the Moon* might be set in Iran or somewhere in Asia. The perceived differences in clothing, practices, and overall context shaped her impression of spatial remoteness: "I think maybe they are from Iran or somewhere like that. I think it's probably around Central Europe or probably around Asia somewhere, if I had to take a guess." This interpretation illustrates how cultural differences can lead children to position narratives as unfolding in distant lands, far removed from their own familiar surroundings.

EN-A also expressed a sense of spatial separation when encountering unfamiliar cultural elements, further reinforcing the notion that the characters in the story *Rani in Search of a Rainbow* lived in a different part of the world: "It might be somewhere in Asia, definitely not here in Wisconsin." This sense of spatial distance was driven by the observation of distinct clothing and customs, which EN-A associated with a far-off location. These responses highlight how spatial transpositioning is closely tied to cultural recognition. The absence of familiar markers led children to position the stories within an imagined geographical elsewhere, demonstrating that spatial distance is constructed relationally rather than objectively.

While American children frequently positioned Pakistani stories as spatially distant based on unfamiliar cultural and material cues, Pakistani children's interpretations of spatial setting were shaped by cultural familiarity in markedly different ways. In contrast to American children's tendency to associate unfamiliar settings with spatial and temporal remoteness, Pakistani children did not position stories set in either Pakistan or the United States as unfolding in distant or unfamiliar lands based on visual cues such as buildings, clothing, or background settings. The depictions of urban infrastructure, domestic spaces, modes of transport, and everyday dress in the American stories were largely recognizable to Pakistani participants, reflecting their exposure to global media and transnational cultural flows. As a result, Pakistani children consistently interpreted both Pakistani and American stories as situated in the present rather than attributing them to a distant past or an imagined future.

An interesting observation surfaced during the analysis, namely that some Pakistani participants relied on linguistic and cultural naming practices as cues for locating the stories geographically. Children such as MA-P and AI-P, reading the stories *Each Kindness* and *The Blue House* respectively, suggested that these stories were set in America or England, not because the environments appeared unfamiliar or geographically distant, but because the names used for characters were not commonly

encountered in their immediate social contexts. These names were instead associated with English-language films and media they were familiar with. This indicates that Pakistani children's positioning was partially based on culturally learned associations between names, language, and place.

This interpretive move reflects a form of transpositioning grounded in mediated cultural knowledge rather than lived unfamiliarity. Rather than imagining the story worlds as remote or geographically distant, Pakistani children positioned them within recognizable contemporary global contexts, drawing on their familiarity with transnational media to make sense of cultural difference. Such responses further illustrate that children's positioning is shaped not only by what is visually depicted but also by how linguistic and cultural signs circulate across media landscapes, strengthening the role of translanguaging and transmodalities in the transpositioning processes.

### *Imagining Temporal Distance*

Alongside spatial positioning, children also engaged in temporal transpositioning, interpreting the narratives as belonging to either the present or the past based on lifestyle depictions, material resources, and technological presence. Despite all stories being set in contemporary times, children's perceptions of temporality varied significantly, revealing how understandings of the present are culturally situated and mediated.

The reception of stories set in Pakistan revealed different transpositioning processes employed by both Pakistani and American children. American children, in particular, frequently conflated spatial difference with temporal distance when engaging with stories set in Pakistan. The depiction of rural settings, traditional practices, and limited technology led many participants to position these narratives in a historical past rather than recognizing them as contemporary.

For example, JM-A, while engaging with a story set in Pakistan, i.e., *Rani in Search of a Rainbow*, associated the absence of technology with a historical setting:

I couldn't tell when this was. So, like, if this was, like, older, like back 1800s or whatever when we didn't really have much technology. But it looks like it's somewhere in the past. Yeah. Because no technology, you cannot see any technology or any car. No. So, that's why it looks like it's not in the present time.

JM-A's interpretation illustrates how the absence of familiar technological elements can lead to the perception of temporal remoteness, positioning the narrative in a time period distinct from the present.

Similarly, NM-A linked the lack of electronic devices in the story *King for a Day* to a past era, assuming that the narrative was set during a time when such technologies were not yet prevalent: "Because this was in the past, it was before us, it was in the past. Or if the author was writing this when we didn't have these electronics, so they just wrote it without mentioning any electronics." This assumption reflects the tendency to associate the absence of modern conveniences with an earlier time period, thereby imagining the story as taking place in a temporally distant context. This conflation reflects a linear understanding of development, where modernity is

equated with technological advancement. As a result, cultural difference was interpreted not only as spatial distance but also as temporal lag.

EN-A, discussing the story *Rani in Search of a Rainbow*, noted the absence of modern conveniences and the presence of traditional practices, such as cooking on wood-fire, as indicative of a historical setting: "It might have happened in the past or something. No TV or anything. And they had to make this (food) with wood under it. And they had to make all this kind of stuff because they didn't have anything." This interpretation suggests that the presence of traditional practices, coupled with the absence of modern technology, led EN-A to position the narrative in the past, which, in reality, is a depiction of contemporary Pakistan according to the producers of the story.

Similarly, JK-A associated the presence of agricultural activities and animal-drawn carts in the story set in Pakistan, i.e., *King for a Day*, with a historical period, further reinforcing the perception of temporal remoteness: "I think because it is set in the past more and so they don't have cars at this time and I think maybe there's a lot of farmers or agricultural things maybe because there's a lot of animals that pull the carts." JK-A's interpretation highlights how specific cultural practices can serve as temporal markers, leading to the positioning of the narrative in an earlier time period.

When reading stories representing Pakistani culture, Pakistani participants, although they were inhabitants of an urban area, did not interpret the depicted environments as remote or lacking, even when rural or non-urban settings were foregrounded. Instead, they drew on their own lived experiences to contextualize what was shown and what was omitted in the narratives. For instance, MA-P, while reading *King for a Day*, noted the absence of visible technological devices but did not interpret this absence as an indicator of deprivation or distance from modern life. She explained:

I don't see Malik or his sister or their brother using any devices or gadgets. Because it's the month where they are interested in Basant. I think they have these things. Their parents have. But they are more interested in Basant, and that is why they are not using them.

This response illustrates a fundamentally different spatial positioning process. Unlike American participants, who often equated the absence of visible technology with spatial and temporal remoteness, MA-P interpreted the narrative selectively, understanding the story's focus as culturally situated rather than materially exhaustive. Her interpretation reflects an awareness that everyday practices shown in the story do not represent the totality of lived experience.

Similarly, EF-P's interpretation of *Silly Chicken* demonstrates how Pakistani children contextualized rural settings without positioning them as spatially distant from contemporary life. EF-P remarked: "The setting of the story is in a village, which is like an old-fashioned village. That's where the story was like the way the story took place." While EF-P described the village as "old-fashioned," this characterization did not translate into an assumption of spatial remoteness or historical displacement. Instead, it functioned as a descriptive recognition of place, grounded in familiarity with such environments as part of the national cultural landscape.

Taken together, these responses show that Pakistani children's spatial transpositioning was mediated by insider cultural knowledge. Familiarity enabled them to interpret selective representation as narrative choice rather than as evidence of spatial distance, highlighting how positioning is shaped by proximity to the cultural context being depicted.

On the other hand, both Pakistani and American children consistently identified stories set in the United States as contemporary. The presence of electricity, vehicles, mobile phones, and modern infrastructure functioned as temporal markers that anchored the narratives firmly in the present.

JK-A noted the presence of electric wires, cars, and cell phones as indicators of a modern setting in the story *The Blue House*, positioning the narrative in the contemporary era:

It looked like it is in the modern era because they have electricity and electric wires and cars and trucks, and they have like working equipment and cell phones. But it didn't look like the 21st century, it looked like maybe the early 2000's, because they still have like record players and nowadays people don't really use record players anymore, well some people do, but yeah it looks like it is definitely in the United States.

JK-A's interpretation reflects how the recognition of modern technological elements serves as a temporal anchor, positioning the story within a time frame that is familiar and contemporary.

It is interesting to note that while the lack of, or limited representation of, technological devices played a decisive role in temporal positioning of the American children, Pakistani children did not perceive American stories, which are characterized by the presence of advanced technological devices and modern lifestyle, as futuristic, exaggerated, or temporally unreal. Rather, they consistently positioned them within the present, drawing on recognizable markers of contemporary life. For example, HW-P noted: "I think it is this time period. Because the train was very new. And he says my sister was playing games on her mobile. That shows the stories of this generation." This interpretation mirrors American children's recognition of US-based stories as contemporary, suggesting a shared understanding of modernity within these narratives. However, unlike American participants, Pakistani children did not extend this temporal logic asymmetrically by positioning culturally unfamiliar settings as belonging to the past or future.

This contrast reveals a significant asymmetry in temporal transpositioning. While American children often interpreted Pakistani stories through a developmental lens that linked cultural difference with historical distance, Pakistani children displayed a greater capacity to recognize multiple forms of contemporaneity. Their interpretations suggest an awareness that different lifestyles, environments, and cultural practices can coexist within the same temporal moment.

Overall, the findings illustrate that children's spatial and temporal positioning during narrative reception is a dynamic and interpretive process shaped by cultural familiarity, multimodal cues, and subjective understandings of contemporaneity. Spatial and temporal transpositioning were deeply intertwined, with cultural differ-

ence often triggering perceptions of both geographical and historical distance. At the same time, the multimodal design of the narratives enabled children to navigate and make sense of unfamiliar contexts, demonstrating the central role of transmodal resources in guiding meaning-making across difference.

## Discussion

This study set out to examine how children from Pakistan and the United States engage in processes of spatial and temporal transpositioning while interpreting cross-cultural multimodal narratives. The findings demonstrate that children do not passively receive narrative settings as fixed coordinates of time and space; rather, they actively construct notions of proximity, distance, contemporaneity, and remoteness through culturally situated interpretive practices. These processes are mediated by the interaction of multiple semiotic modes and are deeply shaped by children's cultural repertoires, lived experiences, and assumptions about modernity.

### *Cultural Familiarity and Subjective Conceptions of Space and Time*

A key insight of this study is that children's understandings of space and time are not universal or objective but are subjectively constructed through culturally familiar frames of reference. Although all stories in this study were set in contemporary contexts, participants interpreted contemporaneity in relative terms. What counted as 'modern' or 'present-day' differed markedly between Pakistani and American children, reflecting uneven access to resources, technologies, and cultural narratives of development.

American children frequently interpreted Pakistani stories as spatially distant and temporally past, particularly when visual and textual cues depicted rural settings, traditional practices, or limited technological infrastructure. This tendency reflects the operation of dominant global narratives that equate modernity with technological advancement and urban lifestyles (Göle, 2000). In contrast, Pakistani children did not engage in an inverse form of positioning when reading American stories; rather, they consistently recognized both Pakistani and American narratives as situated within the contemporary moment, even when settings differed markedly in terms of lifestyle, material resources, or social practices. Drawing on familiar globalized representations of Western modernity circulating through media and education, Pakistani participants interpreted American stories as part of the present rather than as futuristic or unreal. This asymmetry in interpretation underscores how children's spatial and temporal transpositioning is shaped not only by cultural familiarity but also by unequal global circulations of cultural knowledge (Wu & Li, 2019; Loh et al., 2022), in which certain forms of modernity are more widely recognizable and more readily normalized than others.

### *The Need for Cross-Cultural Literary Exposure*

Children's difficulty in recognizing unfamiliar environments as part of the contemporary world points to a broader educational concern. The findings suggest that

limited exposure to diverse ways of living in the present restricts children's capacity to imagine contemporaneity as plural rather than singular. When alternative lifestyles, resources, and cultural practices are absent from children's reading experiences, difference risks being interpreted as backwardness rather than diversity (Göle, 2000; Adam, 2021).

This study therefore highlights the pedagogical importance of producing and circulating children's literature that represents multiple contemporary realities. Multimodal narratives that foreground diverse cultural contexts can help disrupt linear and hierarchical notions of development, enabling children to understand that different forms of living can coexist within the same historical moment (Bossche & Kokkola, 2019; Alford & Yousef, 2023). From a literacy education perspective, such exposure fosters critical cultural awareness and supports the development of global empathy.

#### *Transmodalities and the Mediation of Transpositioning*

The findings also demonstrate that spatial and temporal transpositioning is fundamentally transmodal in nature. Children relied on the interplay of linguistic, visual, material, and symbolic resources to position themselves in relation to the narratives. Even when language familiarity was not a barrier, as in the case of American children reading Pakistani stories written in English, other modes introduced productive disruptions that prompted transpositioning.

For American participants, the presence of Urdu lexical items, unfamiliar color palettes, clothing styles, architectural forms, and illustrated cultural artifacts contributed to the perception of spatial and temporal distance. These multimodal elements complicated meaning-making by resisting seamless assimilation into familiar frames, thereby inviting children to imagine a narrative elsewhere. At the same time, these same semiotic resources also provided pathways into the narrative, enabling children to infer meanings despite cultural unfamiliarity.

This dual function aligns with the five complexities of transmodalities articulated in Hawkins' framework (2021). First, meaning-making emerged through the interdependence of modes, rather than through language alone. Second, children engaged in dynamic movement across modes, shifting attention between text and image to resolve ambiguity. Third, transpositioning unfolded as a relational process, shaped by children's positioning of themselves in relation to characters, settings, and cultural symbols. Fourth, the narratives enabled iterative reinterpretation, as children revised their understandings in response to new semiotic cues. Finally, transmodal engagement opened spaces for empathetic imagination, allowing children to inhabit perspectives beyond their immediate cultural experience.

The asymmetry observed between Pakistani and American children's interpretations further underscores how transmodal cues are read through culturally situated frameworks. Whereas American children often treated the absence of visible technology as a temporal marker of the past, Pakistani children demonstrated an ability to distinguish between selective narrative focus and lived reality. This suggests that familiarity with the represented

culture enables readers to interpret multimodal absence as meaningful choice rather than deficiency (Cheng et al., 2025), reinforcing the role of transmodal literacy in shaping how space and time are imagined across cultures.

Consistent with findings from collaborative multimodal composing contexts where transpositioning facilitated fluid integration of semiotic resources (Choi & Tai, 2025), our study shows that children dynamically reposition themselves across cultural narrative worlds by drawing on linguistic and visual modes to navigate unfamiliar environments.

#### *Navigating Meaning Through Semiotic Resources*

Importantly, the study shows that while multimodal complexity contributed to perceptions of distance, it simultaneously facilitated comprehension and engagement. Children were not alienated by unfamiliar contexts; rather, they actively navigated meaning through available semiotic resources. Visual cues helped compensate for linguistic unfamiliarity, narrative structure provided coherence, and recurring motifs guided interpretation.

This finding challenges deficit-based assumptions about children's capacity to engage with culturally unfamiliar texts (Yang et al., 2021). Instead, it suggests that well-designed multimodal narratives can support comprehension even in the absence of cultural familiarity. Transmodal resources thus function not only as triggers for transpositioning but also as scaffolds for meaning-making, enabling children to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown.

#### *Repositioning Children as Active Meaning-Makers*

Taken together, the findings position children as agentic interpreters who dynamically negotiate notions of space, time, and identity during narrative reception. Through spatial and temporal transpositioning, children continuously reposition themselves in relation to others, drawing on cultural repertoires while remaining open to transformation (Kucirkova & Mackey, 2020). This process reflects the fluid and dynamic nature of transpositioning, wherein identities and perspectives remain provisional and responsive.

By foregrounding children's interpretive agency, this study contributes to broader discussions in literacy studies and applied linguistics concerning reader positioning, multimodality, and cross-cultural meaning-making. It demonstrates that children's literature is not merely a site of representation but a powerful arena for negotiating difference, fostering empathy, and expanding understandings of the contemporary world.

#### **Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for literacy education in increasingly globalized classrooms. The tendency of American children to position contemporary Pakistani stories as belonging to the past highlights how children's understandings of the present are shaped by uneven cultural imaginaries and dominant associations between modernity, technology, and progress. Literacy curricula that privilege Western-centric representations of contemporaneity risk reinforcing narrow temporal frameworks.

Incorporating cross-cultural multimodal texts that depict diverse contemporary lifestyles can help disrupt these assumptions and support more expansive understandings of global co-presence. At the same time, the study demonstrates the pedagogical value of multimodal children's literature in enabling comprehension across cultural differences. Although unfamiliar semiotic resources sometimes prompted perceptions of spatial or temporal distance, these same resources, through visual cues, narrative structure, and linguistic hybridity, served as interpretive scaffolds that allowed children to navigate meaning effectively.

The findings also underscore the importance of guided pedagogical mediation when children engage with culturally unfamiliar narratives. Without critical discussion, children may rely on surface-level cues to infer temporal backwardness or temporal distance. Classroom practices that invite reflection on how space, time, and modernity are imagined can foster critical literacy and challenge taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. For authors, illustrators, and publishers, the study highlights the central role of semiotic orchestration in shaping children's spatial and temporal positioning of story worlds. Thoughtful combinations of language, visuals, color schemes, and cultural artifacts can balance cultural specificity with accessibility, minimizing unintentional othering. Overall, the study suggests that cross-cultural multimodal narratives, when carefully designed and pedagogically supported, can function not only as representations of difference but as powerful tools for cultivating intercultural awareness and flexible meaning-making within a shared present.

## Conclusion

This study examined how Pakistani and American children engage in processes of spatial and temporal transpositioning while interpreting contemporary cross-cultural multimodal narratives. Drawing on the theoretical lens of transpositioning, supported by transmodalities, the study demonstrates that children's understandings of narrative space and time are neither fixed nor universally shared but are actively constructed through culturally situated meaning-making practices. Even when stories are set in the same historical moment, children position them differently based on their lived experiences, cultural repertoires, and familiarity with particular semiotic resources.

The findings reveal clear asymmetries in how Pakistani and American children interpret contemporaneity. American children frequently positioned Pakistani stories as both spatially distant and belonging to the past, interpreting unfamiliar lifestyles, technologies, and visual environments as indicators of historical remoteness. Pakistani children, by contrast, consistently recognized American stories as contemporary, drawing on globally circulating representations of Western modernity. These patterns illustrate how children's positioning is shaped by unequal global flows of cultural knowledge and by dominant narratives that conflate modernity with specific material and technological markers.

Importantly, the study shows that such positioning does not arise from linguistic unfamiliarity alone. Even when American children encountered Pakistani stories

written in English, they experienced a sense of spatial and temporal distance due to the interaction of multiple semiotic modes. Visual representations, color schemes, cultural artifacts, and architectural forms collectively contributed to the construction of a narrative elsewhere. This underscores the central role of transmodal meaning-making in the reception of children's literature and highlights how different modes can simultaneously signal distance and support comprehension.

At the same time, the findings complicate deficit-based views of cultural unfamiliarity. While semiotic differences prompted children to imagine spatial and temporal remoteness, they also enabled children to navigate meaning successfully. Through transmodal resources, children inferred context, followed narrative progression, and constructed coherent interpretations despite unfamiliar settings. This demonstrates that multimodal narratives can function as powerful mediational tools, supporting understanding while inviting readers to step beyond their immediate cultural frames.

From an educational perspective, the study highlights the urgent need for children's literature that represents diverse contemporary realities. When children encounter only limited versions of what the present entails, difference risks being interpreted as deficiency or backwardness. Exposure to a wider range of contemporary cultural contexts through multimodal storytelling can help children develop more nuanced understandings of global co-existence and foster empathy across cultural boundaries.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size was modest, and the study focused on two cultural contexts. Future research could expand this work by including additional cultural groups, longitudinal designs, or classroom-based interventions to explore how sustained exposure to cross-cultural multimodal narratives influences children's positioning over time. Further research might also examine how guided pedagogical mediation shapes children's transpositioning processes.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the results or interpretation of the data presented in this work.

## Contribution to Authorship

Nosheen Irshad contributed to conceptualization the research framework, the literature review, data collection in both countries, and the discussion of results. Muhammad Yousaf supervised and guided the data collection, data analysis, and reporting of results.

## Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, informed consent, and responsible handling of information.

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