



Exploring Clinical and Emotional Outcomes of Language Brokering During Childhood: Experiences of Emerging Adults In Immigrant Families

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Abstract

Language brokering, the act of informal translation usually done by a child, has been known to create both negative or positive impact on children's development. Yet as common of an occurrence brokering is in immigrant families, no clear clinical outcomes, mediating factors of positivity/negativity of experiences, nor impacts on familial relationships have been thoroughly examined. This study has the goals of highlighting protective or risk factors that mediate whether brokering is a negative or positive experience for youth, learning about potential associations with self-efficacy, mental health issues, and stress tolerance, and examining whether brokering harms or strengthens family relationships. Through semi-structured interviews with 4 participants from immigrant families, no definite connections can be made between language brokering and mental health outcomes or changes in familial relationships. Supported is the idea that there may be a connection between language brokering and the development of positive skill sets along with higher retrospective reports of everyday stress.

Background

In families who have recently immigrated to the United States, it is well established that children tend to learn English and incorporate cultural norms into their lives more quickly than their parents (Martinez, 2009) through schooling. Because of this difference in language ability, children in these families tend to take on the role of language broker; defined as the practice of interpretation and translation between two parties that linguistically differ (Tse, 1995). As language barriers have been identified as an imminent stressor for recent Latino immigrants (Padilla, Cervantes, Maldonado, & Garcia, 1987), many parents inadvertently begin to depend on their children for language translation. Differently than a professional translator, a language broker is untrained and often restricted by their own communicational and linguistic proficiency. This is where the controversy of children serving as translators begins. Although language brokering most commonly occurs in everyday ways like grocery shopping, explaining single words, or relaying the message of a phone call, it can also be seen in more complex situations such as medical, educational, commercial, or legal settings (Orellana & Pulido, 2003; Tse, 1995). Language brokering is known to have various positive impacts (i.e increased responsibility, independence, maturity (Anguiano, 2017), and confidence (Kam & Lazaervic, 2014)), or negative impacts (i.e., increased depression and anxiety symptoms (Arellano et al., 2018; Rainey, 2014; Anguiano, 2017), and stress on development (Anguiano, 2017; Kam & Lazarevic, 2014)). However, some variables like academic success can be impacted both positively (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014; Anguiano, 2017) and negatively (Anguiano, 2017; Tse, 1995), and factors that mediate variables like these have only been somewhat examined. One additional area of

language brokering that lacks adequate research is its impact on familial relationships (Straits, 2010). Very few studies have directly examined the relationship between language brokering and both parent and sibling relationships, specifically looking at whether they are strengthened or weakened by an individual's experience with brokering. A more in-depth examination of how family-child relationships change across time can lead to more adequate supports for youth who are most likely to engage in brokering, along with creating a more complete prediction of how family dynamics are likely to be impacted by immigration. Overall, it has been questioned whether language brokering has a negative or positive impact on children's development, or even any impact at all. As 14.1% of the U.S. population is of immigrant status (Jordan & Gebeloff, 2022), a significant portion of children in the country have the potential to be affected by brokering, yet there are still no certain conclusions surrounding this phenomenon. As results have varied since increased interest in this topic, additional research is necessary to create a more comprehensive understanding of the act of language brokering and its potential impacts on emotional development, clinical outcomes, and familial relationships.

Present study:

This study has goals of highlighting protective or risk factors that mediate whether brokering is a negative or positive experience for youth, learning about potential associations with self-efficacy, mental health issues, and stress tolerance, and examining whether brokering harms or strengthens family relationships. These goals are to be achieved through qualitative, retrospective, semi-structured interviews with adults from immigrant families, with the hopes of looking at language brokering from multiple dimensions (i.e., brokering context, change over time, family dynamics, participant age, and cultural differences). More specifically, I would like to answer the research questions of: (1) does language brokering during childhood contribute to healthy self-efficacy or mental health issues? Which it is predicted that language brokering during childhood will be positively associated with both mental health issues and increased self-efficacy, (2) what impact does language brokering have on self-perceived stress levels during childhood? What seems to mediate the kind of experience it is? Which it is predicted that language brokering during childhood will be associated with higher retrospective reports of stress. And (3) does language broker lead to more positive or negative relationships with family members? Which it is predicted that language brokering during childhood will be associated with more negative relationships with parents but more positive relationships with siblings.

If the impacts of language brokering are thoroughly understood, mental health professionals in schools and health care settings can be better informed on how to support the youth of immigrant families, providing a more fine-tuned intervention. If possible negative effects are uncovered, there is also potential to implement resources that may decrease the need for children to broker in certain settings or create educational resources for parents of immigrant families to counteract negative impacts.

Methods

Participants:

Four adults who had partaken in language brokering in their youth or adolescence were recruited to participate in this study. A description of the study (Appendix A) was posted to the researcher’s social media and those who were interested contacted the researcher to receive informed consent and follow-up messages to schedule an interview. No incentive was provided for participation in this study. Community members tended to send the study information to those whom they thought might be interested in participation. Two respondents disclosed that they were uncertain of or had few memories of brokering as a child, hence they were excluded from the study. The participants ages ranged from 23-50 and all identified as female. One participant was Mexican American, one was Mexican, one was Korean, and the last was Chinese. Two of the participants were bilingual in Spanish (as their native language) and English, one was bilingual in English (as their native language) and Chinese, and the last was fluent in English (as their native language) and only knew some Korean (their family’s native language).

Table 1: Demographics and Descriptive Information

Participant	Age	Ethnic Background	Country Born In	Languages Known	Generation in the United States	Sibling Birth Order	Number of Parents in Household	Primary Language Broker
Jenna	48	Korean American	Korea	English, some Korean	Second	Middle of three	Two (father was American)	Yes, younger brother did some after she moved
Marcella	31	Mexican American	United States	Spanish, English	First	First of five	Two	Yes
Claudia	50	Chinese American	United States	English, Chinese	Second	Last of three	Two	No, older sister was
Karmen	24	Mexican	Mexico	Spanish, English	First	First of three	Two	Yes

Interview Process:

After recruitment, participants gave verbal consent to participate in this study and be recorded while on a Facetime or Facebook Messenger call. The data for this study was collected using individual, semi-structured, 30-90 minute online interviews, which were transcribed and coded afterwards. All participants were given a shortened copy of the interview protocol to review beforehand. This was put in place to help alleviate anxiety, as there were sensitive questions included which participants were allowed to skip at any time.

The interview protocol used was adapted from a similarly designed study (Esquivel, 2012) and aimed to address the present study’s research questions (See appendix). Four broad categories were addressed during the interview: participant background, their experiences

with language brokering, stress and mental health, and family relationships. Beginning with questions like “could you tell me a bit about you and your family?”, the researcher aimed to better understand the participant’s backgrounds and get them comfortable sharing information. To examine the experience of language brokering, questions such as “tell me about your first experiences as a language broker” and “in general, how do you feel about language brokering?”. Mental health was addressed by simply asking “do you have any mental health issues you feel comfortable sharing about?”. Familial relationships were examined using questions like “could you tell a little about your relationship with your family?” and “do you think language brokering or roles taken on during your childhood have altered the way you feel about your family?”. Depending on the type of answer the participant gave, the researcher may have probed using phrases like “how often did you broker for others?” to get further insight. As these interviews were not fully structured, the researcher typically let the participant talk about whatever they felt was relevant to their experience, only stepping in to keep the conversation going or introduce certain topics around the research questions.

Data Analysis:

Audio files from each interview were imported into the program Otter AI, where they were automatically transcribed. After review from the researcher, transcribed files in the form of word documents were imported into the software MAXQDA.

Interviews were hand-coded according to themes around the research questions that were expected to emerge: background, language brokering, mental health, family relationships, and any unexpected themes were coded as a subcategory under their larger theme (Table 2). Afterwards, data was compiled in a separate word document and divided amongst each research question and participant to get a better picture of trends.

Table 2: Code System

Code	Frequency
1 Background Information	1
1.1 RED HIGHLIGHT	55
2 Language Brokering	1
2.1 Learned skills/strengths and weaknesses	16
2.2 Impact on social/school	8
2.3 Did you understand your role	4
2.4 Kind of experience (+/-)	34
2.5 How often	2
2.6 Where did it occur	16
2.7 Age of first experience	5
3 Mental Health	13
3.1 Stress	2
4 Family Relationships	2
4.1 Parent relationship	13
4.2 Still brokering for family	4
4.3 Brokering’s impact on family	10
4.4 Sibling relationship	18

Note: Major code categories and subcategories and their combined number of occurrences in all four interviews.

Results

As this study examined the phenomenon of language brokering from multiple dimensions and across time, the results section will summarize findings from several aspects of language brokering.

Common Characteristics of Brokering:

A question asked across interviews was at what age did the participant begin language brokering; to which there was an age range from 8 to 13 years old. Additionally, brokering occurred in a multitude of settings, such as in the home (N=2), for business matters (lease contracts/utilities/bills) (N=1), educational (N=1), stores or restaurants (N=4), medical (N=2), and legal (N=2), but all participants said that it was most often “little everyday things” they would interpret and that it was not an everyday occurrence to interpret or translate in more formal settings. None of the participants mentioned having to translate every day for their family or community members.

Learned Skills:

Each participant shared diverse ways that the experience of language brokering influenced both their childhood and their life currently (Table 3). Many participants shared how influential brokering was on their public speaking and communication abilities today. Jenna shared that she has “always been extremely strong with the English language. So much that in high school, [she] actually won awards for it. So [she] doesn’t think that’s a coincidence”. Marcella mentioned that she gained self-advocacy skills, but did not elaborate on what ways. Similar to others, Claudia said, “I think I actually helped me, because, I think in communicating with people. Especially like interviewing and my first jobs and stuff like that”. All four participants mentioned in some way that brokering had enhanced their financial or life skill abilities in general, whether this was in learning early on how to pay bills (Marcella), being bilingual (Karmen), or learning attention to detail (Jenna). Lastly, Jenna and Claudia shared how their experience of translating for parents had altered their perceptions of society. In negative ways, Jenna shared that she “Dealt with some of the discriminatory things early on” and “always [felt] like she [didn’t] fit in”. But in positive ways, Marcella, Jenna, and Claudia all shared that their experiences broadened their views of the world. Each of these participants shared how growing up in a multicultural environment gave them increased awareness of “how society works”. When asked to elaborate, participants struggled to verbalize in exactly what ways their views were influenced; one participant, Claudia, sharing that she was glad she just “knows what [she] knows”. It is unclear whether the act of brokering or being raised in a multicultural environment most directly led to changes in world perception.

Table 3: Common Learned Skills

Participant	Communication/Public Speaking Skills	Influenced Perceptions of the World	Financial/Life Skills
Jenna	Yes	Yes, in negative ways	Yes
Marcella	Yes	Yes, in positive ways	Yes
Claudia	Yes	Yes, in positive ways	Yes
Karmen	-	-	Yes

Impact on Social Life or Education:

When asked to discuss how brokering impacted participant's social lives or education in their childhood, only two participants had experiences to mention. Jenna had a unique experience while growing up; as her father was actively serving in the military, she was born in Korea, raised in various cities in Europe, and then moved to the United States with her family. When talking about her middle school/high school friendships in Europe, she said "I also went to school with people that were, you know, mixed race, and they shared the same experiences. And throughout these 30 years, like we still keep in contact, and we're still unbelievable friends". Jenna shared how she valued the common experiences (whether surrounding brokering or not) that she had with other mixed-race students. Karmen was born in Mexico and immigrated to the States with her mother before the third grade, and she shared that she doesn't remember any significant negative or positive impacts that the experience of brokering had on her social life.

Mental Health:

Across all four interviews, each participant chose to share that they do have mental health issues currently. These issues were varied from person to person and anxiety was the only common issue across more than one participant. The mentioned issues were anxiety (N=3), depression (N=1), and post-traumatic stress disorder (N=1). Through discussions, it does not seem like any of these mental health issues were clearly related to the experience of language brokering. One participant mentioned that "it was more like a cultural thing rather than a translating thing", and another mentioned that she "doesn't think the language [brokering *inserted for clarity*] really affected [her] mental health".

Type of Experience Brokering Was:

This category of questions brought up the most complex answers with no clear theme either. Like other literature, it was concluded that the experience of language brokering cannot be categorized as either positive or negative. As expected, the responses of each participant varied greatly; some stated that the experience fluctuated between being negative and positive throughout their childhood, others shared that even they cannot say whether it was positive or negative, and yet others said that it depended on the situation (Table 4). Additionally, participants tended to describe their role of language broker as a duty, role, or service to their parents specifically, even though they often described the experiences as irritating, frustrating, weird, or stressful. Jenna was the only one who described her brokering experiences as clearly positive, saying "but overall, I would say it was positive, because in one aspect, it made me closer to my mom for sure". On the other hand, Karmen and Marcella described the experience in more neutral ways such as relaxed and normal (Table 4). In connection with this, all individuals interviewed shared that they felt as if they wanted to be helpful to their families through statements like "I wanted to help my parents in any way. [This] was a way I could help them", "I always like, like helping my mom understand things", and "I knew [mom] needed help and I was the only one who could do it". Overall, it seems like even though participants used negative words used to describe the experience of language brokering, these negative feelings may just exist in the moment of having to translate and not carry over to other interactions with family. It could also be that the mentality that most participants held of wanting to be helpful to their

family may have mediated or softened how negative the experiences of brokering were.

Even though it looks like experiences tended to be more positive or neutral than negative, participants still often mentioned that particular experiences were more stressful. Jenna noted that the fact that brokering was “something most people don’t have to do” contributed to her feelings toward translating. Both Marcella and Karmen discussed how they struggled with translating in legal settings due to the use of vocabulary they were not familiar with. Marcella said “the only times that it was stressful was when it came to like legal paperwork. Those are the only times I remember being [it being] stressful because you want to fill out paperwork the right way. Because every single process, it’s like another \$100 that you know your parents don’t have, so you should do it correctly”. Marcella mentioned that in a legal setting it was more difficult when she did not know the high vocab words, especially because she knew how to translate them but not what they meant. Karmen also talked about not knowing “big words” while translating for her dad and felt “it took something from [her when she was] being compared to [others], because [she] couldn’t translate to the level of somebody else”. It should be noted that this only occurred with one parent, and she said, “see for my mom, I didn’t mind as much because she was like nicer about it”. The experiences described by Karmen may hint at parent-child interactions being a mediator of the type of experience brokering is in youth. Both Marcella and Karmen shared with me that the “stress [they] experienced was one they did not want at eight years old”.

One background factor was the difference in experience that participants had when English was their first language compared to when it was not (Table 4.1). Both Marcella and Karmen learned English at a later age, and both mentioned that they struggled to translate higher level vocabulary words while brokering in a legal setting. Karmen specifically mentioned that her “mom saw how like, [she] struggled with like learning language a little bit”. This might suggest that those who are learning English at the same time as translating it in, along with being in situations that require a language competency higher than their own may lead to a more stressful brokering experience during youth.

Table 4: Type of Experience Brokering Was for Participants

Participant	Negativity/Positivity of Experience	Language Used in Equivalency to Brokering	Words/Phrases Used to Describe Experiences
Jenna	Positive	Duty, Filial Duty	Annoying, Stressful, Frustrating, Time Consuming, Caught Between Two Cultures
Marcella	Cannot define as positive or negative	Role, Service	Felt Normal, Irritating, Relaxed, Indifferent
Claudia	-	-	Felt Weird
Karmen	Indifferent, A Little Positive	-	Didn’t mind, Normal, Felt Compared to Others, Pressure, Stress

Table 4.1: Type of Experience and Mediating Factors

Participant	Negativity/Positivity of Experience	Mentality Towards Family	First Language	Age English was Learned	Sibling's Language Skills During Participant's Youth
Jenna	Positive	Wanted to be helpful	English	-	Fluent in English, Don't Know Korean
Marcella	Cannot define as positive or negative	Wanted to be of service	Spanish	6 th Grade	All Fluent Spanish, 3 of 4 Did Not Know English
Claudia	-	Was a "fixer", Grateful to Parents and Wanted to Help	English	-	All fluent in English and Chinese
Karmen	Indifferent, A Little Positive, A Little Negative	Liked being helpful	Spanish	3 rd Grade	All Fluent in English, Don't Know Spanish

Family Relationships:

Overall, all participants reported that their relationships with their parents remained positive throughout life, often becoming more positive with time. Daily communication, freedom to express personality, and feeling comfortable asking for help from parents were some of the most common aspects of supportive parent/child relationships discussed in participant interviews. Although these relationships remained strong, tough feelings in each family were not left out of conversation. Jenna shared that she felt her family was “caught between two cultures” and believed this had a negative impact on the family overall. In a family of five children, Marcella voiced feeling that she “hated how [my] parents made me a “parent” [when she was] so young”. Marcella had an authoritative role over her siblings; her responsibilities involved making sure her brothers and sisters had their homework completed and in her young adult years she was temporarily the sole guardian for two of them. This participant said “[she does not] have the perfect relationship with them” and she “didn’t want the stress that they brought”. All four participants shared that they did not have strong relationships with their siblings in the past, evidenced by “pushing away” or “distancing” self from siblings, sharing about “back and forth” relationships, or not seeing and talking to siblings for years, but are currently making efforts to repair those relationships. Through discussion with these each of these participants, it seems like the negative aspects of their sibling relationships are due to situational factors, ones that are unrelated to language brokering.

Discussion

The data collected provides direction to each of the research questions of the present study. Research question one asked: does language brokering during childhood contribute to healthy self-efficacy or mental health issues? From the data collected, nothing can be said about language brokering in connection to mental health, but perhaps there is a connection between language brokering and the development of positive skill sets. All participants mentioned feeling

strong in their communication skills, English language, and public speaking skills, which are all beneficial all throughout life. These results somewhat supported the hypothesis that language brokering during childhood will be positively associated with both mental health issues and increased self-efficacy.

Research question two asked: what impact does language brokering have on self-perceived stress levels during childhood? What seems to mediate the kind of experience it is? The data collected shows that participants did have both stressful and low-stress experiences while brokering. None of the stressful feelings shared seemed to continue outside the act of translating, which may suggest that stress in connection to language brokering is short-term and situational. Additionally, mediators of how stressful typical experiences seemed to depend on the dynamic of the participant's interactions with the parent they are translating for, whether the parent is understanding and supportive of the child; how strongly the participant feels connected to their family in terms of seeing brokering as helpful or their duty; and whether English is the participant's first language, the age they did learn English, and how confident they are in their language skills. This supports the prediction that language brokering during childhood will be associated with higher retrospective reports of stress.

Research question three asks: does language broker lead to more positive or negative relationships with family members? Data collected cannot support any trend between language brokering and changes in family relationships, both with parents and siblings. It seems like both negative and positive aspects of the relationships discussed in each interview were the result of factors surrounding the stress of immigration, living situations, or parentification associated with family dynamics.

As the sample size was only four, no conclusive connections between language brokering and mental health outcomes could be made. In relation to the connection between one's experience with brokering and personal background information though, there are likely weak connections that can have the potential to be expanded in further research.

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Appendix

(A) Interview Protocol

Background: (Adapted from Esquivel, 2012)

- 1) Tell me about yourself, your background, and your family.

Language Brokering:

- 2) Tell me about your first experiences as a language broker, that is, interpreting and translating for your family and community members.
- 3) In general, how do you feel about language brokering? (Change over time)
 - How thoroughly did you feel that you understood the role you were playing as a child?
 - How do you think these experiences influences your stress levels as a kid? How do you handle stress currently?
- 4) How do you feel that these experiences have influenced you long term?

Mental Health:

- 5) Do you have any mental health issues you feel comfortable sharing about?
 - When did you first notice those arising?
 - What sort of effect do they have on your day-to-day life?

Current Family Relationships:

- 6) Could you tell a little about your relationship with your family?
- 7) Tell me about the time your family currently spends together?
- 8) Do you still language broker for any of your family members?
- 9) Do you think specifically language brokering or roles taken on during your childhood have changed the way you feel about your family?

Conclusion:

- Do you have any other things you would like to share with me?
- Thank you for your time!
- I appreciate your openness and willingness to share personal and sensitive parts of your life with me.
- I am excited to take what I've learned from your story and inform others on the experiences that language brokers, like you, in their youth have.

(B) Social Media Post for Recruitment

Hello, my name is Cameron Merline and I am a senior psychology major at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. I am currently working on a final research project with the goal of gaining insight into the experiences of language brokers (defined as the act of translation by youth for an adult who is less fluent in the dominant language) through short interviews that can be in person or via Zoom.

I hope to learn about:

- What influences the kind of experience brokering is for people

- Brokering's impacts on self-efficacy, stress, mental health, and family relationships

All interview questions would surround these topics, and it is understood that feelings of anxiety, stress, or discomfort may arise from certain topics. Participants would have the full right to skip any questions they wish to or stop the interview at any time. Additionally, participation in this study will be kept anonymous via the use of pseudonyms.

If you are over the age of 18 and have served as an informal translator in any way during your youth, I invite you to participate in this study and have a low-stress chat with me! I would love to learn more about your experiences!

If interested and would like to learn more, send a quick email to me at merlincp4954@uwec.edu