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Language
Brokering

Child Language Brokering

Settlement Practitioner's Toolkit

Elizabeth Pando, PhD; Katerina Palova, MA; Cesar Suva, PhD (The Immigrant Education Society)
Rabab Mukred; Michelle Zak (University of Calgary)
Anusha Kassan, PhD (The University of British Columbia)



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How to cite: Pando, E. et al. (2020). *Child language brokering: Settlement practitioner's toolkit*. The Immigrant Education Society, Research and Program Development Department. [https://www.immigrant-education.ca/see-the-research/language-brokering-initiative#googtrans\(en|en\)](https://www.immigrant-education.ca/see-the-research/language-brokering-initiative#googtrans(en|en))

Contact Research and Program Development:

research@immigrant-education.ca

<https://www.immigrant-education.ca/>



INVOLVING A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON AS INTERPRETER

There can be many positive outcomes for family members when children or young people act as language brokers. However, each situation should be evaluated to determine if there is potential for affecting the young person negatively. The following are questions you can ask to make this determination:

- Is the topic to be brokered age-appropriate for the child?
- Is the topic or situation of a sensitive nature?
- Does it have the potential to become tense or embarrassing for the parent or the child?
- Could the issue potentially involve the police?
- Is the child the topic of the discussion? (e.g. a teacher providing criticism about the child to the parent).
- Will the parent require more than translation (e.g., will they need an explanation on how a system or process works, will they have to fill documents, etc.)?

If you believe one of the above is possible, then try to arrange for one of: 1) a formal interpreter or 2) a staff member or 3) a volunteer from your organization. If this is not possible, ask the parent if they know of another adult (a friend or a family member) who could accompany and interpret for them.

A child language broker might be the only option either because an adult interpreter is not available, the parent refuses, or the above conditions do not apply to the language brokering situation.



CHILDREN OR YOUNG PERSONS AS LANGUAGE BROKERS MIGHT:

- feel as if they bear the brunt of racist and xenophobic attitudes due to their role as language brokers.
- be apprehensive about being language brokers due to past negative experiences with the practice.

Situation: A girl is in an expensive store with her grandmother and the sales person approached them and asked if “she was sure her grandma wanted to be there”.

- not enjoy using their first language or showing their culture of origin due to xenophobic or racist attitudes.
- have feelings of frustration towards their parents and perceive them as incapable of acculturating.
- not be emotionally removed from the situation like a formal interpreter would
- feel awkward translating highly personal details about their parents or family members.
- feel ill-equipped to provide translation in formal settings.
- feel uncomfortable because they often do more than translation; they explain expectations, processes, culture, contexts, etc.

PARENTS OF CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERS MIGHT:

- believe the children will better understand the situation and be more capable of advocating for the family rather than a formal interpreter.
- prefer to keep the issues “within the family” and be apprehensive about sharing personal information with an unfamiliar interpreter.
- see children’s participation in language brokering as part of a collaborative family effort.
- be worried about role reversal or feel that their child is getting too much attention.
- be experiencing feelings of anxiety or frustration about their inability to speak the language and having to depend on their child for communication.



BEST PRACTICES WHEN INVOLVING CHILDREN OR YOUNG PERSONS AS INTERPRETERS

BEFORE THE MEETING

- Schedule enough time for the meeting:
 - Meetings with interpreters take longer, often double the regular time.
 - Children should have enough time to think without pressure.
 - Parents may require additional explanations beyond just translation of information.
- Arrange for a separate space for the meeting if possible.
 - The child might feel embarrassed or self-conscious if interpreting in front of other people.
 - This might also put children and parents at ease if they are feeling nervous or anxious.

Situation: A child interprets at the bank and feels pressured by the other people in line because “they were taking too long”. The parent doesn’t speak English.

- Encourage the parent to discuss in advance with the child the nature of the brokering situation and what kinds of questions they may be asked, how they might respond, etc.
- Talk to the child in advance to brief them about the situation, who will be involved, etc.
- Find out if the child is an experienced language broker or not:
 - Have they been their parent’s interpreter before?
 - In what contexts or situations?
 - How did the child do as a language broker and how did she or he feel about it?
- If the child is an experienced broker, ask if they have a preferred system to do the interpretation, as children tend to develop their own ways of doing this.
- Discuss with the parent what is likely to be accomplished so the parent does not have unrealistic expectations, blaming the child if their preferred outcome is not achieved.
- Explain to the parent that the child might not understand everything.
- Remind the child to stay calm and take their time. If the child cannot remember all the details, let them know that translating the general idea is fine, and if they don’t understand something, they can ask the other person to repeat or explain again.

DURING THE MEETING

- Start the meeting with a positive interaction or comment.
- Acknowledge the child's presence, participation, and contribution to the overall situation.

Situation: teacher sends child off, however the child stays nearby, pretends to read a book while secretly listening to the conversation between a parent and a teacher to translate later at home.

- Remind adults to avoid talking over each other and use short sentences, this is especially important if the child is a first-time language broker.
- Address the parent and ask other adults to do this as well.
 - Parents might worry that the parental role is being reversed.
 - Some parents might feel it is disrespectful for a young person to interact with other adults.
- Monitor the following:
 - Is the discussion turning into something more sensitive or delicate?
 - If so, then... (intervene and shift the conversation back? Remind the adult participants of the task? Or warn the adult participants that this is becoming sensitive and that they should be mindful?)
 - Is the child trying to calm the parent?
 - If so, then...(intervene on behalf of the child and calm the parent?)
 - Does the child seem confused or in need of help?
 - If so, then remind adults to use short sentences and simple language.
 - Ask the child if there are any concepts/words from his first language that he/she has a difficult time translating into English.
 - Sometimes there is no equivalent translation and the language broker has to create one on the spot.

AFTER THE MEETING

- Provide praise to the child; ask how they felt during interpreting, if there is anything they are unsure of, and if there was anything that made the task of interpreting more difficult.
- Debrief with the parent. Did the parent understand what was translated? Does he or she know what to do next?
- Resolve tensions (did the parent become difficult or demanding on the child during language brokering?).
- Reassure parents they are the adult...





This project was funded by The City of Calgary

i Adapted from "Child Interpreting In Schools: Supporting Good Practice, by T. Cline, S. Crafter, and E. Prokopiou, 2014. Nuffield Foundation.



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