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Language Brokering and the Acculturation of Latino Children

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Children of immigrant parents frequently language broker, translating written forms and documents for their parents and other adults in various situations. Using a paper-and-pencil survey, 36 bilingual Latino fifth graders reported their experiences and levels of comfort in language brokering, levels of acculturation, feelings of acculturative stress, and self-concepts. Those who were least acculturated reported higher frequencies of language brokering and discomfort in doing so. Boys were more English dominant than girls and reported higher levels of acculturative stress. Girls were more Spanish dominant and had lower levels of acculturative stress. High levels of acculturative stress were associated with increased social acceptance by peers. Because the previous research with college students was retrospective, this study may demonstrate that the benefits of language brokering may be an age-graded phenomenon.

Immigrants to the United States often have to quickly adapt to a new environment, a new culture, and a new language. Frequently, the children of immigrants adapt quickly, becoming proficient in English and the new culture. As a result, children who are bilingual are often asked by their parents and others to serve as cultural and linguistic brokers and to translate day-to-day transactions, documents and correspondence, and sophisticated contracts. Tse (1995) explained that language brokers “influence the contents and messages they convey, and ultimately affect the perception and decision of the agents for whom they act” (p. 180). Language brokering is a common practice, especially in minority communities; however, there is little research on how this affects children operating as language brokers (McQuillan & Tse, 1995). By acting as a language broker, children may feel caught between two cultures or be forced to mediate very stressful or difficult situations.

Birman (1998) described the acculturation process as a stressful experience, especially for Latino youth. The acculturative stress, however, may

move in stages of loss and adaptation, particularly when tied to language use (Smart & Smart, 1995). The loss and adaptation may pertain to language and cultural understanding. "Language loss has been considered by many to be part of the natural Americanization process" (Evans, 1996, pp. 177-178). However, proficiency in two languages and the added ability to translate within those languages requires higher levels of cognitive skills (Buriel, Perez, De Ment, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Harris, 1977, as cited in McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Tse, 1995). Regardless, the use of both the home and host languages does not necessarily indicate comfort with both cultures.

Biculturalism has been posited as the ideal cultural adaptation strategy for Latinos responding to competing demands of two cultural worlds on a daily basis (Buriel et al., 1998). These demands often fall on the children who assume the role of language and cultural brokers. For these children, becoming bicultural often means assuming responsibility for interpreting both language and cultural norms and expectations. These children who act as language brokers undergo heightened acculturative stress and the experience of language brokering influences their self-concept and feelings of self-efficacy (Buriel et al., 1998).

In this study, we will examine children's feelings about serving as language brokers and the circumstances in which they are translating. Amount and type of language brokering will be related to level of acculturation, self-perceptions, and measures of acculturative stress. It is expected that understanding language brokering will provide insight into the psychological effects of being bilingual and bicultural, a neglected segment of academic study. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the characteristics of children who serve as language brokers as well as to investigate the relationship between language brokering and levels of acculturative stress and self-concept. Last, this study explores the association between reported comfort in translating and psychosocial stress.

Method

Participants

Participants were 36 (19 male, 17 female) fifth graders from a Southern California elementary school. They ranged in age from 9.9 years to 11.4 years ($M = 10.53$, $SD = .40$). All 36 reported being bilingual in English and Spanish. They self-reported ethnicity as follows: 33 Mexican American, 1 African American, 1 American Indian, and 1 multiracial.

Participants were asked about their birthplace. Thirty four were born in the United States, 1 in Mexico, and 1 did not state. In addition, respondents were asked to report their mother's and father's birthplace. For mothers, 8 respondents did not know where their mothers were born, 1 respondent reported the mother was born in the United States, and 27 of the respondents' mothers were born in Mexico. Of the participants' fathers, 11 participants did not know where their fathers were born, 1 participant's father was reported as born in the United States, and 24 fathers were born in Mexico. All the respondents reported being bilingual and almost all were first-generation Mexican American students.

Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked about their age, gender, ethnicity, grade, number of siblings, birthplace, generational status, number of adults in household, and the type of parental employment.

Translating Scale. This scale was a modification of measures developed by Buriel et al. (1998) and Tse (1995). Both scales were originally retrospective measures for older adolescents or adults. We modified their translating scales by adding information deemed more relevant for the target population (e.g., simplified vocabulary). The scale asked about the circumstances under which the participants translate, the types of things they translate, and how they feel about translating.

Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanic Youth (SASHY). The SASHY was a brief measure (12 items) using Likert-type responses to assess the participants' interactions with both languages and cultures (Barona & Miller, 1994). The slightly modified version of the scale was used to measure language use with friends, family, media, and self and about interactions with people from other cultures. Responses on the items are summed and the total is converted into a *T* score for comparison with established norms (Barona & Miller, 1994).

Societal, Academic, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale: Children's Version (SAFE-C). Chavez, Moran, Reid, and Lopez (1997) developed this 36-item, Likert-type scale measuring feelings and attitudes toward self, family, school, and community from which acculturative stress can be attributed. This scale allows for assessment of the amount of acculturative stress the child feels in salient domains.

Self-Perception Profile. Harter (1985) developed this measure of self-concept and self-worth. We used 18 items that form the self-concept subscales measuring scholastic competence, social acceptance, and global self-worth. The scholastic competence items tap perception of self-competence in academic performance. The social acceptance items assess the degree to which the child is accepted by peers or feels popular. Global self-worth items assess "the extent to which the child likes oneself as a person, is happy with the way one is leading one's life, and is generally happy with the way one is" (Harter, 1985, p. 6).

Procedure

School administrators collected bilingual parental consent letters, and the survey was administered during the school day by the researchers. Students were removed from class and were given the questionnaire in a larger room. Participant assent forms were distributed, signed, and collected. The researcher answered the participants' questions as needed. The participants received a pizza party as a reward for participating at the end of the week of administration and were not told about the pizza party prior to administration. The survey took approximately 1 hour to complete.

Results

What Are the Characteristics of Children Who Serve as Language Brokers?

For whom did they language broker? All participants indicated translating in some form (see Table 1) with no significant differences between boys and girls on the translating scale items. Overall, they were most likely to translate notes or letters from school (53%); telephone, gas, electrical, or water bills (39%); and medical forms and bills (28%).

The frequency of translation for adults and in specific situations was measured by a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*always*), 2 (*a lot*), 3 (*a little bit*), to 4 (*never*). The participants translated most for their parents (lower means demonstrate higher frequency; $M = 2.66$); for other relatives like an aunt, uncle, or grandparents ($M = 2.74$); and on the phone ($M = 2.77$). They spent the least amount of time translating for strangers ($M = 3.72$), at a government office ($M = 3.73$), on the street ($M = 3.46$), and for brothers and/or sisters ($M = 3.42$).

Table 1. Responses of Items That Had Been Translated in the Past 3 Months (in percentages)

Item Translated	Yes	No
Notes or letters from school	53	47
Medical forms or bills	28	72
Credit card statements	22	78
Bank statements	19	81
Immigration forms	17	83
Rental contracts	19	81
Telephone, gas, electric, or water bills	39	61
Insurance forms	8	92
Job applications	17	83
Forms in a doctor's office	19	81
Instructions for a new appliance or piece of equipment	6	94
Other	11	89

Level of acculturation. To calculate the level of acculturation, scores on the SASHY are converted into *T* scores and compared to previous norms (Barona & Miller, 1994). Scores can range between 12 and 60, with scores below 40 indicating low acculturation, scores above 40 and below 55 indicating moderate acculturation, and scores above 55 indicating high acculturation. In terms of level of acculturation in this sample, 46% of the participants were in the low-acculturation category and 54% in the moderate category.

Family size. For this sample, the average family size in the household was 7.97 members ($SD = 2.26$). There was a positive relationship between family size and amount of translating done for teachers ($r = .37, p < .05$), at the post office ($r = .57, p = .001$), at the hospital ($r = .34, p = .05$), and at a clinic or the doctor's office ($r = .46, p < .01$).

Perspective on the language brokering experience. Participants indicated on the translating scale that they did not find the experiences of language brokering helpful or generally enjoyable (see Table 2). They did not think that helped them to care more for parents, helped the parents learn English faster, nor helped them to better understand their parents. They also did not feel good about themselves when translating, did not like translating, and did not find translating helpful to learn their other language than English.

Language preference and brokering. The participants who reported speaking more Spanish than English at home were less likely to translate for teachers ($r = .39, p < .05$), people who work at school ($r = .49, p < .01$), at the

Table 2. Means of Agreement With Affective and Attitudinal Statements From the Translating Scale

Statement	Mean
I feel embarrassed when I translate for others.	2.41
I think my parents learned English slower because I translated for them.	2.56
I think my parents know less about Americans because I translated for them.	2.59
I feel nervous when I translate for others.	2.74
I think my parents know more about Americans because I translated for them.	2.88
I have to translate for others even when I don't want to.	2.91
I think translating has helped me to better understand people who are from other cultures.	2.94
I think translating has helped me learn English.	2.94
Translating for others makes me feel more grown up.	2.94
I think translating helped me learn my other language.	3.00
I think translating has helped me to understand my parents better.	3.12
I like to translate.	3.15
I feel good about myself when I translate for others.	3.26
I think my parents learned English faster because I translated for them.	3.26
I think translating has helped me to care more for my parents.	3.26

NOTE: 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *disagree*, and 4 = *strongly disagree*.

post office ($r = .49, p < .01$), at a hospital ($r = .39, p < .05$), at a clinic or the doctor's office ($r = .39, p < .05$), at the bank ($r = .45, p < .01$), on the street ($r = .40, p < .05$), at a government office ($r = .38, p < .05$), and at church ($r = .42, p < .05$).

Do Children Who Serve as Language Brokers Report Higher Levels of Acculturative Stress?

Using the SAFE-C scale, the level of acculturative stress for this sample ranged from 0 to 106, with a mean of 63.63 ($SD = 30.26$). Based on a possible score of 180, the group mean is in the midrange for the amount of acculturative stress experienced, but without a valid comparison group from the same setting it is difficult to draw conclusions.

Boys indicated higher levels of acculturative stress than girls ($M = 70.7, SD = 24.0; M = 48.4, SD = 31.0$, respectively), $t(34) < 2.42, p < .05$, but girls were significantly more likely to be moderately acculturated ($\chi^2(1) = 8.635, p < .01$).

There was a positive relationship between acculturative stress and social acceptance ($r = .46, p < .05$). The more participants viewed themselves as

popular or accepted by peers, the more acculturative stress they experienced. In addition, the more English the participants spoke with their friends, the more stress was reported ($r = -.37, p < .05$).

Comfort in providing translation for others is further indicative of acculturative stress. There was an inverse relationship between total amount of translating and total degree of comfort in translating ($r = -.36, p < .05$). The more translating they did, the less comfortable they became. Participants were least comfortable translating for parents ($M = 1.61$), people who come to the door ($M = 1.61$), and other relatives like an aunt, uncle, or grandparent ($M = 1.46$). Specifically, on the language brokering items, there was a positive relationship between overall acculturative stress and disagreeing with the statement, "I think translating helped me to learn my other language" ($r = .45, p < .01$). In addition, there was an inverse relationship between those who agreed with, "I like to translate" and their overall level of comfort ($r = -.42, p < .05$). Those who agreed with the statement tended to be more comfortable in translating situations.

Do Children Who Serve as Translators Report Higher Levels of Self-Concept?

There are few direct relationships between the translating scale as a whole and the measures of self-concept. However, when specific attitudinal items from the translating scale are analyzed, there are significant results. There is a positive relationship between global self-worth and disagreeing with, "I think translating helped me to learn my other language" ($r = .58, p < .01$) and, "I think translating has helped me to better understand people who are from other cultures" ($r = .55, p = .01$). There is an inverse relationship between global self-worth and agreeing with "I think my parents know less about Americans because I translated for them" ($r = -.46, p < .05$). The participants who reported reading and speaking more in Spanish show lower self-worth scores ($r = -.47, p < .05$). There was an inverse relationship between those agreeing with "I feel good about myself when I translate for others" and scholastic competence ($r = .52, p < .05$).

Is There a Relationship Between Reported Comfort in Translating and Psychosocial Stress?

There was an inverse relationship between amount of translating and degree of comfort in translating ($r = -.36, p < .05$). The more translating they were doing, the more uncomfortable the experience. In addition, more language brokering was conducted by those least acculturated. There was an

inverse relationship between amount of translating and level of acculturation ($r = .34, p < .05$). More stress was reported as the participants indicated that they spoke more English with their friends ($r = -.37, p < .05$).

Discussion

Currently, there is an anti-immigrant wave of legislation across the United States. In California, most bilingual education programs were eliminated after Proposition 227. Similar legislation has been considered in Arizona and Colorado. Schools that used bilingual education to strengthen language skills in English and the other languages were forced to drop programs and change to intensive English curricula. As a society, there is a push for learning English as a means of entry into the culture, but very little is known about the psychosocial consequences of learning and balancing two languages and cultures. In fact, there is very little empirical research on how the process of balancing the home language and culture with the new language and culture affects children.

As vanguards of acculturation and language acquisition in the family, children are given tasks as language brokers. Past research had focused on retrospective accounts of language brokering with older adolescents and adults who reported beginning to language broker at 10.4 years and 10.9 years, respectively (Buriel et al., 1998; Tse, 1995). In this study, children of that target age were surveyed about their current tasks as language brokers, level of acculturation, level of acculturative stress, and issues of psychosocial adjustment.

All children in the sample indicated some degree of translating. Not surprisingly, they tended to translate more for family members and situations in the home than for people or circumstances outside the home. Furthermore, the participants were least comfortable in translating for parents, other relatives, and people who come to the door. It seems as though the closeness of the relationship as well as the intimacy of being at home makes the child most distressed around acting as a language broker. The attitudinal items indicate that the participants devalue their language brokering activities and find it hindering of their development, their parents' development, and the acculturation process in general.

The overall level of acculturative stress was positively related to social acceptance. So it would seem that children who view themselves as popular or accepted by peers may have some internal cultural turmoil about being in that position. Boys indicated higher degrees of acculturative stress and were more likely to be less acculturated than girls, even though girls were more

Spanish dominant and preferred interacting with those of Mexican American descent. This gender difference may be characteristic of girls' use of social support in stressful times and predilection toward verbal tasks and skills.

Previous studies of language brokering (e.g., Buriel et al., 1998; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Tse, 1995), which were conducted retrospectively, have demonstrated a positive relationship between language brokering and feelings of self-efficacy, grade point average (GPA), and English fluency. However, in this study, the children indicate that they are uncomfortable language brokering and do not perceive their experience doing so as advantageous. This may be because brokering requires high levels of cognitive and linguistic skills, which may be challenging for children still developing those skills. Consequently, the experience may be stressful for them, particularly when they may feel insecure in their competence to convey the information accurately. In addition, when children language broker, their role in relation to their parents and other adults is reversed; parents and other adults become dependent on them for information. Children do not choose this role reversal but are obligated by familial ties and adult authority to participate in that ascribed role and act as language brokers. At the time of language brokering, children may not like this ascribed role filled with unsolicited power and complicated status and authority. It is later, perhaps, when children become more cognitively and linguistically skilled that they develop more confidence and competence in their language brokering skills and the perceived benefits are recognized.

Although this sample is small and generalization is limited, there is evidence that children do language broker and, generally, are uncomfortable about doing so. With a larger sample, a broader perspective can be attained on the attitudes toward translating and self-concept. This may put children in a double-bind situation. At the time of language brokering, children do not want to and are uncomfortable but are cognizant that they cannot refuse to broker. A larger sample would allow us to test our hypotheses with a wider range of level of acculturation and degrees of acculturative stress. Consequently, further research into language brokering could assess the effects of the experiences in language brokering on the power relationships between parent and child. By looking at the effects of language brokering, we can see how children acculturate and move into a bicultural existence.

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