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Child language brokering in schools: a discussion of selected findings from a survey of teachers and ex-students

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Abstract

Because the children of immigrants often learn the host language much more quickly than their parents, increasing numbers of children and young people contribute to family life by acting as child language brokers (or interpreters) (CLBs) for their parents. There is well-founded professional resistance to the use of children in the LB role in sensitive or challenging meetings, but for some purposes many immigrant parents and grandparents prefer a language broker from within their own family to an external professional interpreter. In this paper we report selected findings from parallel on-line surveys of teachers in schools where there has been some use of students as CLBs and of young adults who have acted as CLBs while at school. Our aim is to explore what can be learned about the use of CLBs from analyzing the views and experiences of these two groups who bring distinctive and complementary perspectives to the topic.

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Introduction

With increasing family migration into and across Europe public services in the UK face a challenge to effective communication between professionals and some service users. There are not, and probably will never be, adequate, readily available professional interpreting facilities across the range of home languages that are now spoken in this country. Because children often learn the host language much more quickly than their parents, increasing numbers of children and young people contribute to family life by acting as child language brokers (CLBs) for their parents. This has provoked unease among professionals and commentators. For example, in 2008 the BPS Professional Practice Board issued guidelines for psychologists on working with interpreters in health settings. The advice on the use of children was unequivocal:

> "As a general rule, it is not appropriate to ask family members or other professionals to 'help out' because they appear to speak the same language as the client or have sign language skills. Interpreting is a highly skilled role and not something that any person or even any professional can just slip into… The use of family members also creates difficulties with regard to confidentiality… although some clients may insist upon it. This should be discussed with them. Children, however, should never be used as interpreters as this places them in a difficult and prematurely adult role towards their parent or relative." (BPS, 2008, p. 6)

Partly because of the limited availability of professional interpreters and partly because of family preferences this absolute position is widely ignored by other professions in health

care settings. For example, a survey of 38 GPs in East London by Cohen, Moran-Ellis and Smaje (1999) indicated that the majority had undertaken recent consultations with adult patients where a child had undertaken the role of informal interpreter. When Free, Green, Bhavani and Newman (2003) interviewed 77 young people in London, the experiences of health care interpreting that they reported included not only translating instructions on medicines and helping complete surgery registration forms but also interpreting in hospital, dental and general practice settings. Professional staff may feel that they can place greater trust in professional interpreters, but some immigrant clients may prefer to rely on members of their own family (e.g. the small sample of Bangladeshi parents interviewed by Rhodes and Nocon, 2003). In fact CLB activity has been reported in a wide range of settings, including schools, banks, shops and administrative centres.

Neither CLBs themselves nor the monolingual family members and professionals whom they broker for expect them to operate exactly as an independent professional interpreter would. They act as mediators or advocates on behalf of their own family. They may go beyond translating word for word in order to provide background for each of the adults where they can see that that is required. They may even deliberately mistranslate details on occasion in order to prevent misunderstanding. For example, Hall and Sham (2007) describe a child working in a Chinese take-away who softened "rough words" that some customers used to her mother in order to avoid conflict (p. 24). At the same time interviews with parents and children who have experienced such situations do not entirely support the assumption in documents such as the BPS Guidelines that acting as a CLB places a child in a prematurely adult role towards their parent or relative. For example, Valdés and his colleagues (2003, Chapter 3) reported that the parents they interviewed felt that they remained firmly in charge. These researchers portray the parents and children together as a "performance team", in which the parents "see themselves as retaining their parental roles", and the young people "see themselves as simply carrying out tasks that may more appropriately be thought of as analogous to specialised 'household chores'." (p. 96)

That positive picture of children and parents operating as a team focuses on situations where the interests of children and parents are aligned, as when, for example in a healthcare situation, all concerned want the best outcome for a patient. But there are situations in which their interests may not be identical. Chand (2005) reported a frightening example in which a boy of eight interpreted in a meeting with a social worker on a child protection issue concerning his two year old cousin. When language brokering takes place at school, the stakes are not normally so high, but the parents and child may still have different concerns, and the dynamics of the meeting may be relatively complex. This particularly arises when the child is translating in a meeting that concerns their own future or their own problems. In addition, their parents may have an even more limited understanding of the school setting than of healthcare settings (e.g. over the implications of different choices of GCSE subject), or they may not appreciate what is expected of them in the situation (e.g. when they have experienced schooling themselves in which parental involvement was minimal). Perhaps, for the children, the situation may be less stressful and less challenging than in a health care setting. Certainly they will be more familiar with the curricular and organisational issues that are discussed, the concepts and the language are likely to be more accessible, and the stakes may not be so high. But this is the child's territory, and they will have to go on interacting with others long after the CLB episode. The extent of their embarrassment over their parents' accents or mistakes in English will depend on how such things are viewed by those around them at school (Guske, 2010) and how the adults they translate for treat them. It is striking that there has been less CLB research relating to school settings than healthcare settings and that, to our knowledge, there has been none in the UK on teachers' views.

The data reported in this paper have been collected in a project that is planned to lay the foundation for developing a good practice guide for the use of CLBs in school settings (to be published by the Nuffield Foundation and on the project website later this year). We will report selected findings from parallel on-line surveys of teachers in schools where there has been some use of students as CLBs and of young adults who have acted as CLBs while at school. Our aim was to explore what can be learned about the use of CLBs from analyzing the views and experiences of these two groups who bring distinctive and

complementary perspectives to the topic. What issues arise when CLBs are used in routine contacts with parents (their own and those of others), in more sensitive discussions about vulnerable pupils (e.g. about SEN) and in discussions when crucial matters are being resolved (e.g. planning for subject choices in Year 10)? What conditions for language brokering maximize the perceived advantages and minimize the perceived disadvantages of the arrangements that are made in schools?

Method

The study was in two parts. Phase 1 involved a survey using the Bristol Online Survey tool which supports the collection of survey information online and makes clear provision for anonymity and confidentiality. The survey involved separate questionnaires for teachers and for adults with experience of acting as a CLB at school. We describe the latter below as ex-CLBs to indicate that the CLB activity to which they refer in this survey was in the past when they were at school. Some of them, of course, may still have been acting as language brokers for family members as adults at the time they completed the survey, but it was made clear that the questionnaires focused on their past activities while at school.

A range of question types was employed in the parallel questionnaires. For example, multiple choice questions explored the frequency of CLB use in schools and the purposes for which it is used. Some items in this section were adapted from existing scales, including the Language Broker Survey from Los Angeles (Tse, 1996) and the Culture Broker Scale from Maryland (Jones and Trickett, 2005). In addition, some new items were developed focusing on the specific situation in schools. Different question types were used to investigate participants' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of school language brokering arrangements, CLBs' alignment with family or personal interests and views on how to improve schools' policies and practices on CLB activity. For these a combination of structured vignette-based questions and open-ended questions were developed, building on our experience of the use of these question types in earlier studies (Cline et al., 2002; O'Dell et al., 2006). Examples of the vignette descriptions of how a CLB might approach the task include "Pedro believed it was important to make an

exact word for word translation of what the teacher and his parents said". Ex-CLBs were asked to rate whether 'that was very (or quite) like I used to be' and teachers whether 'that is like some (or most) of those I have observed'. For further examples see Table 3 below.

Phase 2, which will not be reported in this paper, involved extended semi-structured interviews with a smaller sample of selected individuals who volunteered following their experience of completing the survey questionnaire. The interview schedule, which was developed on the basis of initial findings from the survey, explores detailed questions about CLB activities in schools in greater depth. In both the survey questionnaire and the interview schedule parallel topics have been covered with teachers and ex-CLBs. In addition, some questions were developed for each group separately. For example, the interviews with ex-CLBs explored their experience of the process, their own agency, competence and effectiveness and how the process was facilitated or obstructed by the actions and attitudes of their teachers.

The recruitment of ex-CLBs was conducted partly through advertising to students in five English universities that have a high proportion of students from ethnic and linguistic minority communities and partly on the basis of snowball sampling through teachers in areas with a significant immigrant presence who had themselves participated in the survey. Teachers were recruited through letters and emails to head teachers of schools with a significant number of pupils learning EAL on roll (as recorded by the DfE for School Performance Tables) and through key contacts and networks with an interest in supporting CLB activity in schools.

The sample of ex-CLBs comprised 25 respondents of whom 4 were male and 21 female. Most were between 16 and 26 years old at the time they completed the questionnaire, but two were older (41 and 45 years respectively). Their countries of origin included Austria, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Iceland, Lithuania, Nepal, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Turkey, Venezuela and the UK. Just over half reported that they had translated for others before the age of 11. However, translating for their parents in school was generally more

common at the secondary stage: 60% of the young people reported that they had translated for their parents in primary school sometimes or often, a figure that rose to 88% for secondary school.

The sample of teachers comprised 63 respondents of whom 12 were male. All had at least one year's teaching experience with almost half having taught for over ten years. It may show a bias in general interest among teachers in this topic that just over a third of those who completed the survey themselves had parents who had been born overseas. 87% of the teachers reported that they had experienced pupils translating for their parents in school sometimes or often.

Findings

In what circumstances do pupils act as language brokers at school?

Both groups of respondents were asked to indicate the circumstances in which pupils had acted as CLBs in school in their experience. Table 1 shows the proportion of each group who reported that the most common situations occurred "often" or "sometimes" (and not "rarely" or "never"). It will be seen that the largest discrepancy in responses was that translating letters sent home by the school was more salient for pupils than for teachers.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In addition, individual teachers recalled pupils:

- Contributing as members of a student interview panel during the selection process for bilingual Teaching Assistants
- Translating for the parents of other children during informal conversations, e.g. explaining procedures to newly arrived parents
- Making phone calls home to parents about health, behaviour, parents' evenings, etc.
- Interpreting for a sibling during a first language assessment
- Mediating when there were playground arguments
- Translating letters for local primary schools

Both teachers and ex-CLBs reported problems arising when teachers were unable to evaluate the language skills of a pupil before placing trust in them as a translator or even, on occasion, unable to evaluate the level of parents' understanding of English. One teacher reported that, when a child's twin sister brokered for her brother during a telephone conversation, "I found out next day that parents had misunderstood the message due to sister's translation for her brother". An ex-CLB described the usual aftermath of formal meetings at school as "I would have to explain fully to my mother what it was about". There were nuanced observations on even apparently straightforward situations such as an established pupil translating instructions and key words for a newcomer in class. One teacher made it their practice to monitor such arrangements carefully, "as an overzealous interpreter can also become a barrier to the pupils with less English making progress both linguistically and socially".

It was clear that there were differences of view among teachers as to when it would be appropriate to use a pupil as a language broker. Two emphasized that they would never ask pupils to translate on sensitive issues, while others reported that pupils had translated "sometimes for behaviour issues" and "when calling home to explain about detentions or any other problems". The perspectives of the teachers and ex-CLBs differed markedly. While only 43.5% of teachers reported that their pupils had ever "translated for their parents about a very serious or sensitive matter, e.g. to do with special educational needs or moving school or planning for subject choices or a family/school problem", 60.0% of ex-CLBs said that they had done so. These young adults were not ex-pupils of the schools where the survey teachers were working. So a part of the difference in the two groups' reporting of their CLB experiences could perhaps be attributed to differences of practice between schools. It is also possible that the young adults judged a wider range of topics to be very serious or sensitive than teachers did (Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

How do child language brokers approach the translation task?

The participants were presented with a series of 16 very short vignettes describing how an imagined CLB approached the task. Table 3 shows how teachers and ex-CLBs responded to a subset of these vignettes that relate to how CLBs approach the task. It will be seen that a slightly higher proportion of ex-CLBs than of teachers saw themselves as having made exact word for word translations, while higher proportions of teachers than of CLBs assumed that what was said was paraphrased either to achieve effective understanding or to save time. The majority of both teachers and ex-CLBs remembered a commitment on the part of CLBs to sort out any misunderstanding rather than to gloss over them because of embarrassment. More teachers than ex-CLBs reported that the description of a child and his parents "operating like a team together" during CLB meetings was like some (or most) of those whom they had observed at school. This is in line with the account of a "performance team" in a report from California (Valdès, 2003).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of school language brokering arrangements?

A review of the literature was conducted to identify the advantages and disadvantages that have been claimed for language brokering arrangements that involve children and young people. There were encapsulated in a series of statements that are listed in Table 4. Additional items were introduced to reflect the learning mission of schools as institutions. The table indicates the proportion of respondents in each group who indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. It will be seen that the figures for teachers and ex-CLBs are broadly comparable, but some statements that highlighted the perspective of the child or parent were supported by more ex-CLBs than teachers. Advantages for which this difference was 15% or more:

- Parents prefer this arrangement to having a professional interpreter or a member of the school staff acting as translator.
- The child understands what their parents already know and what they need extra explanation about

Disadvantages meeting the criterion included:

- The child may feel it is inappropriate to say boastful things about themselves so that they do not translate accurately when teachers praise them or describe their best achievements.

A small number of respondents described other advantages that they saw in these arrangements. The most popular additional advantage cited by teachers was a saving on costs. One commented: "The truth is that schools are saving a lot of money on bilingual students and teachers." It is worth noting that concerns about the CLB role giving children too much power in relation to their parents were supported by a smaller proportion of both teachers and ex-CLBs than most of the other perceived disadvantages. One advantage that was implicit in some responses but was not articulated in these terms is that, when a family member such as a child acts as language broker at a meeting, it is possible for there to be a post mortem at home afterwards when points that were unclear to parents during the meeting can be discussed in detail.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

How did/do you feel about the arrangements in your school?

If the arrangements for CLB activity in schools are to be effective, it is essential that those involved should all feel comfortable with them. Overall 87% of teachers reported that they had sometimes or often felt comfortable asking pupils to translate at school, and 83% of ex-CLBs reported that they had sometimes or often felt comfortable in that situation. 40% of teachers reported that they had sometimes or often felt uncomfortable, while 63% of ex-CLBs reported the same. A series of questions in the survey focused on

what had made respondents feel comfortable or uncomfortable during a CLB episode. As can be seen in Table 5 below, there was broad agreement between the two groups about what might make one feel comfortable when a pupil is translating for their parents at school - when it was "normal" and valued in the school, when the pupils' command of both languages was seen as good enough and when they and their teachers felt that they would understand the issues being discussed. But evaluating possible sources of discomfort seemed to differentiate the groups. More teachers highlighted the complexity and sensitivity of the issues covered in the meeting while more ex-CLBs highlighted contextual factors: when they felt uncomfortable, it was because it was unusual in their school or it made them stand out from others. They seemed particularly concerned that most pupils' parents spoke English while theirs did not.

Individual respondents added that they appreciated teachers who made it easy for them, e.g. by speaking "simple English without adding difficult words" and by "pausing in between sentences for me to translate". The act of translating for another person requires that the three parties form a particular kind of relationship. One individual valued a teacher who "asked in a nice way" and another observed that when the teacher was "talking to my parents he would often look at me too. So he wouldn't exclude me which made me feel like I was part of the talk. He also would offer me extra support." Sources of additional discomfort for the ex-CLBs included teachers judging them or not trusting them, home languages being looked down on in the school, and teachers making it clear that they saw this arrangement as difficult. Two of the respondents felt that their parents were slighted. In one case the teacher "made a big deal out of having me translate and instead of addressing my mother, they addressed me, ignoring my mother". In another "the teacher made no effort to make it easy for my mum. They made me feel like it was an inconvenience. When I was being bullied they never addressed my mother during the meeting. It was only me so it was awkward like I had to explain to my mother about it and it upset me."

The additional comments from the teachers hardly referred to the parents. For them it appeared the key issues concerned the pupil: could he/she be trusted? One was uneasy

because “I believe they would not convey the exact message”. Another “felt I could trust the particular student to discuss issues mentioned and would not ask a student I did not feel I could trust with such responsibility”. A third wrote that she would “only ask trustworthy pupils to translate”. The analysis of what that trust may involve will be one of the tasks of the second phase of the study when a smaller number of teachers and ex-CLBs are being interviewed about the process. We hope to report on this in a later paper.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

The term ‘language broker’ is a recent neologism. Much of the debate on the use of CLBs that was outlined in the Introduction was framed with reference to the traditional notion of an ‘interpreter’. In this survey ex-CLBs in particular seem to have treated the independent, accurate, word-for-word interpreter as the gold standard. They were perhaps influenced by the image of the man or woman who murmurs in a national president’s ear during negotiations with another president on behalf of their country. This is not a helpful image to inform our thinking about what is required when children act as language brokers in meetings that involve their parents. They bring to the task a unique combination of knowledge about what their parents know and understand about school and, from first hand, about the school context. Meetings in which they act as brokers continue afterwards, as family therapy meetings do, in the setting of the home. There may also be a post-mortem with the teacher on some of the key issues that were discussed. At best they are able to function as two-way cultural brokers in the sense of being a conduit for cultural knowledge between school and home.

As the survey respondents recognized, a working knowledge of both languages is essential. But a child language broker needs more - a sensitive appreciation of the cultural hinterland with which each of the adults is familiar and an ability to anticipate the gaps that will need to be filled when explaining what one has said to the other. It is not

surprising that the impact of this practice on social and communication skills was highlighted by a high proportion of respondents in both groups (a higher proportion, in fact, than saw advantages in terms of their language learning or cultural understanding which have received more attention in the research literature). However, the evidence from ex-CLBs in this survey suggests that those skills will only be enacted if the issues discussed are not too sensitive and if they experience positive appreciation from the adults involved of the skills required and the time spent on the activity. As in any other family meeting, professionals working with CLBs need to engage actively with all of the participants and show respect for the specific role and status that each has in the situation. In an effective meeting involving a CLB the 'performance team' envisaged by Valdés and his colleagues (2003) will expand to involve the teacher as well as the family.

Further work in the project will aim to lay the basis for a good practice guide for teachers by examining what survey respondents and interviewees have to say on the process in more detail. Psychologists in health settings have been urged to resist allowing children to act as CLBs for them in all circumstances. Do the observations reported here from those who have experience in school settings suggest that educational psychologists should adopt the same stance? One teacher who presented a "balanced" view would almost certainly have supported that: "There are two different issues here. Being able to speak other languages is valued here and it is a position of responsibility to be asked to be a buddy of a newly arrived pupil. I would regard this as good practice as is using peer support in some lessons. However, I would have reservation about asking children to interpret in meetings with parents as if the issues are sensitive this is putting them and the adults who don't speak English in a difficult position, so I wouldn't do this."

If an asymmetrical family meeting can support work towards the ultimate goals of the intervention, then that may be better than no meeting at all. However, there are many challenges along the way, including the initial negotiation of parental informed consent to the involvement of a psychologist and the development of a shared vocabulary in each language for unfamiliar concepts. In a meeting with an educational psychologist, the difficult dynamics of a school meeting in which a child is asked to translate information

about themselves are combined with technical vocabulary and conceptual content that may be as challenging as anything encountered at a meeting in a health care setting. The child should be involved, but should they have sole responsibility as language broker?

Note

We are grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for the funding that has made this project possible. Further details are available on the project website:
http://child-language-brokering.weebly.com

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Table 1 In what circumstances did students translate at school?[i]

		Teachers report	**Ex-CLBs report**
Formal meetings of teacher and parents	Often/sometimes	81%	96%
Informal meetings of teacher and parents	Often/sometimes	61%	74%
For new pupil from overseas	Often/sometimes	81%	70%
Letters sent home	Often/sometimes	48%	83%
Meetings with Head Teacher involving my parent (ex-CLBs only)	Often/sometimes		61%
Meetings with Teaching Assistant involving my parent (ex-CLBs only)	Often/sometimes		55%
Discussions with reception/secretarial staff involving my parent (ex-CLBs only)	Often/sometimes		64%

i Percentages in all tables have been rounded to whole numbers.

Table 2 Examples each group gave of "a very serious or sensitive matter"

Teachers	Ex-CLBs
Inappropriate behaviour	Child behaviour, personal problems
Child's exclusion	When I was in trouble at school and the school wanted me to move into another form group.
Explaining option subjects to parents/students to help them make appropriate choices; subject choices for GCSE	Picking GCSEs and A-levels; planning for subject choices; I had to translate words to my parents about going to college, informing them what subjects am I doing and why etc; subject choices for both me and my siblings
Filling in secondary transfer forms; moving school or house	Change of schools
Safeguarding issues	Domestic violence issues at home
Issues with non attendance	
For being bullied in school	
	Home office stuff
	It was about a health issue

Table 3 Proportion of respondents who responded 'that was very (or quite) like I used to be' or 'that is like some (or most) of those I have observed' to selected vignette descriptions of how a CLB might approach the task

Statement set out in the survey questionnaire	Teachers	Ex-CLBs
Pedro believed it was important to make an exact word for word translation of what the teacher and his parents said	61%	72%
Mandeep did not translate every word as she felt it was most important to explain to the person listening what she believed the person talking was trying to say	83%	**57%**
Tolu gave a short version of what was said so as not to waste everyone's time	79%	54%
When a teacher said something that Nawal did not quite understand, she always asked for an explanation so as to get it right in her home language	77%	72%
When a teacher said something that Marcela did not quite understand, she often felt embarrassed and pretended she has grasped what was meant	36%	33%
Mohammed and his parents operated like a team together when he was translating for them at school	78%	50%

Table 4 Proportion of respondents who responded 'strongly agree' or 'agree' to statements about perceived advantages and disadvantages of school language brokering arrangements

Perceived advantages		
Statement set out in the survey questionnaire	**Teachers**	**Ex-CLBs**
Parents prefer this arrangement to having a professional interpreter or a member of the school staff acting as translator	45%	68%
Children tend to prefer this arrangement to having a professional interpreter or a member of the school staff acting as translator (ex-CLB only)		**44%**
It is better to keep things within the family	48%	46%
The child understands what their parents already know and what they need extra explanation about	64%	83%
The child learns both languages better	50%	50%
The child comes to understand both cultures better	50%	50%
The child learns social and communication skills	77%	67%
Perceived disadvantages		
	Teachers	**Ex-CLBs**
Young people may not know one of the languages well enough so that they make translation errors	69%	68%
Young people may not know technical school words well enough so that they make translation errors (ex-CLB only)		58%
The meeting may cover sensitive issues so that the child or the parents may be embarrassed	85%	88%
The child may not want their parents to know about some negative things at school so that they deliberately play down what a teacher has said	77%	88%
The child may feel it is inappropriate to say boastful things about themselves so that they do not translate accurately when teachers praise them or describe their best achievements	51%	67%
Translating at school for their family may impose excessive	55%	67%

responsibilities on children so that they feel stressed or anxious		
Translating at school may take up children's time that would better be spent on other things	44%	46%
The translator is in a position of power because no one else understands everything that is being said. That gives children too much power in relation to their parents	44%	46%

Table 5 Proportion of respondents who responded 'agree' to statements about what made them feel comfortable or uncomfortable during a school language brokering episode

When I have felt *comfortable* asking pupils to translate at school/translating at school, it was because:	**Teachers**	**Ex-CLBs**
Lots of their/my friends do/did it	45%	27%
It is/was normal in our school	72%	45%
It is/was valued by people there	82%	73%
They feel they are doing something useful/ I felt I was doing something useful	91%	96%
I thought their/my English was good enough	88%	75%
I thought their/my home language was good enough	88%	77%
I felt they would understand/I understood the issues that were being discussed	80%	87%
My teacher made it easy for me	-------	64%
When I have felt *uncomfortable* asking pupils to translate at school/translating at school, it was because:		
It is/was unusual in our school	18%	57%
It makes them/made me stand out from others	30%	68%
Most pupils' parents speak/spoke English	12%	76%
It is/was not appreciated by people here/around me	12%	29%
I thought their English was not good enough/my English was not good enough	35%	20%
I thought their home language was not good enough/ my home language was not good enough	19%	25%
I felt they would not understand/I did not understand some of the issues that were being discussed	51%	19%
Because the issue that was discussed was sensitive	64%	45%
My teacher did not make it easy for me	-------	30%