

## Former child language brokers: preliminary observations on practice, attitudes and relational aspects

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### 1. Introduction

The present paper will be presenting an account of the preliminary results collected through a section of the project InMediO PUER(I) (see Antonini this volume), which is being carried out at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Translation, Languages and Cultures of the University of Bologna and having as its general aim the mapping of Child Language Brokering (CLB) as a crucially important but yet not explored phenomenon in Italy (Antonini forthcoming). Specifically, this part of the study aims at outlining the impact of CLB on the development of the children who perform/performed it on an emotional and relational level. In order to systematically explore these aspects, which have been partially touched upon in the literature and never before with respect to the Italian situation, a significant part of the project is devoted to collecting data concerning the linguistic and cultural mediation activity as perceived by former child language brokers, that is by bilingual adolescents and young adults who acted or, in some cases, still act as mediators for their families or other members of the same minority immigrant community who are not fluent in Italian. Being the first attempt to collect data on the relational aspects of CLB from bilingual subjects from all the different cultural and linguistic immigrant communities residing in Italy, the significance of the present study lies in its main focus, namely understanding the point of view of brokers themselves, who can provide external observers with precious and direct insight into this phenomenon, its processes and the people performing the brokering activity.

After a rapid overview of the existing literature on CLB with particular emphasis on the aspects touched upon in this section of the project, the methodological design of the study will be described. The rest of the paper will be devoted to a discussion of the preliminary results gathered during the pilot phase.

## **2. The literature on child language brokers**

This part of the InMedioPueri project aims at investigating some of the aspects that have already been discussed in academic studies on CLB in countries with earlier waves of recent immigration (mainly the United States, the UK and Canada), in which the phenomenon seems to have been acknowledged and researched for a longer period of time than in Italy.

Although CLB is still a relatively underresearched phenomenon, the existing academic literature has approached this kind of linguistic and cultural mediation from a number of different angles. Among those studies that privilege the point of view of brokers and their families are studies focusing on the impact of the mediating activity on children's psychological development, and on the educational, linguistic and cultural spheres (e.g. McQuillan and Tse 1995; Tse 1995 and 1996; Buriel *et al.* 1998; Dorner *et al.* 2007). The possible shifting of parent-child dynamics as a result of the increased responsibilities taken on by brokers within the family has also created considerable interest in the academic community (e.g. Pease-Alvarez and Vasquez 1994; Vasquez and Pease-Alvarez; Shannon 1994; Orellana *et al.* 2003; Weisskirch 2007 and this volume), as has the potential stress caused by this activity on children and adolescents who broker (e.g. Guske 2006). The dominant view still seems to advocate that children should not be exposed to situations in which they might have to translate or interpret sensitive information that might negatively impact them on a psychological level such as in administrative offices, banks, hospitals, and police stations (e.g. McQuillan and Tse 1995; Buriel *et al.* 1998; Hall and Sham 1998; Weisskirch and Alva 2002; Valdes 2003; Tse 2005). On the other hand, it also seems to be generally recognized that, to some extent, the role reversal and child "parentification" supposedly brought about by brokering does not only have detrimental implications. Specifically, Orellana

(2009: 67) stresses the importance of looking at the brokering activity that children perform for their families as a valuable service that, in the case of institutional exchanges, should otherwise be provided by the state, thus offering a priceless contribution both to their closest relatives and to the various institutions involved (see also Hall and Sham 2007). Furthermore, the positive effects of brokering on children has been indicated in the effects that this kind of activity might have on school performance. Particularly, the wider vocabulary and the increased familiarity with different written genres acquired through the brokering experience noted by Orellana (2009: 114) seem to have been among the reasons for the positive correlation found between CLB and the children's performance in fifth- and sixth-grade standardized reading tests (Dorner *et al.* 2007).

Fewer studies seem to have been specifically dedicated to another important sphere, namely the brokers' translation skills and their awareness of the mechanisms involved in the translating/interpreting activity. However, the existing literature on these aspects (e.g. Malakoff and Hakuta 1991, Bayley *et al.* 2005) suggests, as Orellana notes, that brokers do much more than "simply move words between speakers" (2009: 74) and indicate that, albeit perhaps on a relatively unconscious level, children and adolescents are aware of the implications of their role. These seem to include an actual mediation between cultures that goes beyond literal translation and the responsibility of managing a multiparty interaction (among others Buriel *et al.* 1998; Curtis 2005; Weisskirch 2005).

Finally, some of the tools that have been used by researchers in order to investigate the various aspects of the CLB phenomenon are questionnaires and interviews (e.g. Guske 2006; Walichowski 2001; Weisskirch 2007), narratives and journal entries (Orellana 2009), participant observation (e.g. Bayley *et al.* 2005), and simulations (Hall 2009), used to elicit information on the processes, feelings, and implications of this practice directly from the actual participants in the mediated interactions (not only brokers but also parents and teachers).

Based on a multi-methodological approach to data gathering, InMedioPueri aims at offering the first academic, data-driven overview of the CLB

phenomenon in Italy. Furthermore, while most of the above-mentioned studies focus on only one ethnicity at a time, at least in its preliminary stage, the purpose of the present project is to provide a comprehensive study of CLB practices across immigrant groups, in order to provide a convincing reflection of the complex situation that can be presently found in Italy as a result of the recent increase in the number of foreign citizens becoming residents of this country.

### **3. The study**

The part of the InMedioPueri pilot project on which the present paper reports was aimed at eliciting mainly qualitative data on CLB practices from former child language brokers. Some of the main aspects with which the study was concerned and on which we wanted to collect further evidence regarding the phenomenon in Italy were:

- providing a detailed description of the participants, situations and contexts in which CLB takes place;
- assessing the impact that CLB has on various aspects of the lives and the development of language brokers, including their family relationships and the role and responsibilities the children/adolescents must take on in specific situations and contexts;
- gathering data on both positive and negative attitudes towards CLB from former brokers;
- identifying potential strategies adopted by brokers when mediating for family and friends.

In this preliminary stage of the pilot study, it was decided to test different data-gathering methods, in order to become aware of the pros and cons of each one of them and ultimately choose the most appropriate one to approach field work with younger subjects, namely children and adolescents from the last grades of elementary school to middle school. Data were elicited by means of a semi-structured template of questions, which were in turn formulated on the basis of preliminary interviews carried out with representatives of various public

institutions in the Forlì-Cesena area of the Emilia-Romagna region (see Cirillo *et al.*, this volume). Specifically, the tools that were purposely designed and employed in this pilot study were:

- individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews;
- focus groups;
- questionnaires.

The individual interviews were carried out by one or more researchers at a time and were based on a flexible template, which allowed for changes in the order of questions according to factors such as the interest elicited in the respondents by each question, or additional topics touched upon spontaneously by the interviewees. The focus groups were carried out by two researchers who loosely followed a similar template to the one used for the individual interviews. The purpose was for small groups of people to freely interact with each other and the researchers following minimal prompting from the latter. The questionnaires comprised 71 closed- and open-ended questions and were used as an additional and more detailed tool to keep track of the respondents' answers during interviews and focus groups. They were administered to all participants after either the interview or focus group. Researchers were available for assistance throughout this phase. All interviews and focus group sessions were recorded and videotaped making sure to protect the respondents' anonymity, and were subsequently transcribed.

The interview protocols for individual interviews, focus groups and questionnaires contained three thematic blocks, which were aimed at collecting data regarding:

1. personal information, including questions about the participants' socio-demographic background, such as number of years spent in Italy, number of siblings (if any), family members living with them in Italy, parents' occupation, etc.;
2. the contexts and situations in which they recalled having acted as intermediaries and who the participants were in the interactions. Preliminary questions concerned the places, situations and conditions in which former language brokers were called to mediate;

3. brokers' attitudes and individual experience, including questions about their feelings concerning CLB, both in general and relating to specific events. Participants were also asked to relate anecdotes of successful and unsuccessful instances of language mediations performed by them.

The two different methods used for face-to-face interaction with the subjects (individual interviews and focus groups) clearly resulted in our samples differing as well. Specifically, the subjects of individual interviews were high school (1 case) and university students who had either been contacted directly by the researchers or who had volunteered for the project by answering an advert. Focus group participants, on the other hand, were students attending a vocational high school in Veneto, a region adjacent to Emilia-Romagna in the North-East of the country. This specific school was contacted on the basis of the high number of immigrant children among its students, which, according to some of the teaching staff we have been in contact with during this project, reflects a general trend occurring in the Italian educational system. Specifically, when the time comes for immigrant teenagers to choose a preferred course of study for their high school they are automatically encouraged to select a vocational school. Reportedly, this is done in part because these teenagers' (often) diminished language skills in Italian are seen as a hindrance to more "high-brow", intellectually challenging studies, and partly because the parents themselves often prefer that their children learn a trade, which would presumably ensure them more immediate economic remuneration/independence, rather than another kind of occupation that requires obtaining a university degree.

After granting their cooperation for the project, the school's teaching and secretarial staff pre-selected students coming from immigrant families and asked them to take part in our informal focus group sessions. Most students (except one) who were asked to participate offered their cooperation.

Admittedly, the two different sampling methods that were adopted implied potentially different levels of cooperation on the part of the subjects. In general, with only one exception, none of the respondents was particularly keen on

talking extensively about their experience as brokers. Particularly during the focus groups, in most cases we noticed if not exactly hostility at least reluctance to volunteer information. Possible influencing factors might have been the institutional, formal setting in which the focus groups took place (i.e. the school), the young age of the participants, the use of Italian as a (usually non-native) lingua franca, and the interaction with complete strangers.

A further difference between the two samples resides in the fact that they included both former brokers who at the time they were interviewed no longer mediated for family and friends, and (usually younger) respondents who were still involved to some extent in some form of CLB. For former brokers the emotional distance between the time of the survey and their actual brokering experience may have resulted in differences between the answers of present – as opposed to no longer active – mediators, with the latter presumably offering a more mature and articulate point of view on the subject<sup>1</sup>.

#### **4. Results**

This section summarizes the results for the 4 in-depth, individual interviews and the 4 focus groups carried out with former child language brokers as part of the piloting stage of the project InMedioPueri. Our small sample of respondents was composed of teenagers and young adults for a total of 30 people (8 females and 22 males) between the interviews and the focus groups. All the data were collected in the Northern Italian regions of Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Friuli Venezia-Giulia. As already mentioned, the focus groups were conducted at a vocational secondary school where specific training is offered to those interested in becoming trade workers such as mechanics and electricians, which accounts for the overwhelming presence of boys (21 out of 26 participants). The following table shows the total number of participants in the interviews and focus groups by country of origin.

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<sup>1</sup> On the possible differences in the perception of their role on the part of younger mediators talking about their present CLB activity and older brokers looking back on their past experience see also Orellana 2009: 14.

Country of origin	Number of participants	Sex	
		F	M
Albania	3	1	2
Bolivia	1	-	1
Bosnia	1	-	1
Burkina Faso	1	-	1
China	2	1	1
Croatia	1	-	1
Dominican Republic	1	-	1
Egypt	1	-	1
Equador	1	-	1
Ghana	2	-	2
India	2	-	2
Macedonia	1	1	-
Morocco	5	3	2
Mozambique	1	-	1
Philippines	2	-	2
Romania	1	-	1
Russia	1	1	-
Serbia	3	1	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>22</b>

Respondents ranged in age from 16 to 27, with the participants in the focus groups being in the 16-19 age group. They had been living in Italy, mainly with their immediate families, for anywhere from 3 to 18 years, with only two people having been born in Italy. The varying amounts of time spent in Italy obviously had an impact on the respondents' level of linguistic competence in Italian, which varied from a native to a beginner/lower intermediate level, and possibly on their willingness to actively participate in the discussion and volunteer information. Furthermore, although our sample is admittedly too small and diversified to be able to offer relevant quantitative results, it may be hypothesized that the time of their arrival in Italy and whether they had attended



school in this country might have had an impact on the amount of brokering they performed for their families (see 4.1.).

As far as focus groups are concerned, having had to rely on the school for a list of students coming from immigrant families, there was no pre-selection in terms of the actual extent of their mediating activity. Therefore, only after talking to the participants about their experience we were told that three of them had never brokered. These three people were not asked to fill out the questionnaire after the focus group sessions. With these three exceptions, all of the participants in the interviews and focus groups said they had worked in the past or were still working to some degree as brokers for their families, acquaintances and friends.

The next sections will offer a more detailed overview of the qualitative results derived from the three tools used for this pilot stage (individual, in-depth interviews, focus groups and questionnaires) with regards to the contexts and situations in which CLB reportedly occurs, its emotional and relational impact on brokers, and their own awareness of linguistic and cultural brokering.

#### **4.1. CLB contexts and situations**

As far as CLB contexts and situations are concerned, the subjects were prompted to try and remember where brokering events had taken place, who the participants were and how often brokering occurred in each of these contexts. The questionnaires contained closed questions eliciting possible situations and contexts in which respondents might have acted as brokers. For each of the contexts a Likert frequency scale going from “never” to “always” was provided, on which said respondents were required to mark one of the available options.

Former brokers reported on having mediated both in formal and informal settings, mainly in family situations and also between family and friends and the institutions. The former cases included, for example, banks, hospitals, police headquarters, the post office, schools, and public offices in general. It is to be noted that none of the interviewees admitted to having acted as mediators in

court, although at this point we cannot say whether this was actually the case or whether respondents were trying to avoid making reference to potentially embarrassing situations, such as one of their relatives having had trouble with the law. The informal settings in which brokers reported mediating were the whole range of family activities taking place in their parents or relatives' homes, such as conversations with neighbours and friends and watching TV, and occasionally interactions with business owners occurring outside the home.

With respect to the types of texts, respondents said that they translated both oral and written texts for their family, especially for their parents and occasionally for grandparents. Oral translating included conversations of a formal or informal nature (e.g. with doctors, school teachers or neighbours) and TV programmes, news, et cetera. Written texts included bills and official communications from schools and administrative offices, doctor's prescriptions, instructions for medicine usage, and occasionally newspaper headlines or articles.

When asked to indicate the average frequency with which respondents acted as brokers, most of the interviewees said that they were called to act as mediators more frequently as soon as they first moved to Italy with their families. However, their answers varied considerably depending on a number of different factors, such as the number of years spent in Italy, the age at which they moved to Italy if they were not born in the country, and, consequently, their level of competence both in Italian and in their parents' language. The brokers' parents' language skills in Italian, which was usually linked to whether the parents had moved to Italy before their children and thus had had additional time to learn the language, was often indicated as a deciding factor. Parents with weaker competence in Italian required the most assistance from their children in a wider range of every-day situations. Finally, personal aptitude and willingness to translate were also occasionally indicated as a determining factor in CLB frequency. In particular, one respondent from Albania suggested that her own outgoing, helpful attitude, and already established experience in brokering led her parents to ask her to assist them more often than her younger and perhaps more introverted brother (see Orellana 2009: 53). Given the small size of our sample, more data would be needed to say whether this might in turn be seen

as evidence of what previous research has hypothesized about the importance of gender and/or birth order in CLB practices within the family (e.g. Valenzuela 1999).

#### **4.2. Emotional impact of CLB practices**

As highlighted in the literature (Tse 1996; Orellana 2009), regarding the consequences of language brokering on children's emotional, cognitive, and relational development, the first interviews, questionnaires and focus groups we conducted also highlighted that the phenomenon has contradictory affective and relational consequences. On the one hand, a significant part of our respondents and interviewees described the practice as simply normal, especially if performed within a family context; on the other hand, some participants admitted to having experienced frustration, and at times complained of an annoying burden of responsibility involved in the process, especially when occurring in official, institutional and medical contexts. While most interviewees recognized the positive effects of this practice on their second language acquisition and on the deepening of their knowledge of their parents' language and culture, some of them were annoyed by the fact that CLB was a time-consuming activity.

When asked to express their perception of the activity as language and cultural mediators, the most common feelings mentioned by our respondents were "ordinariness" and "satisfaction". Former and present brokers perceived their participation in family life and their sharing of linguistic skills as natural. They also expressed a sense of pride in being able to help other people from their linguistic and cultural background and to disentangle problematic situations.

Zhuo<sup>2</sup> (1-2), for example, a 16-year-old Chinese student, having lived in Italy for 7 years at the time of the interview, admitted that she was neither particularly proud, nor particularly annoyed by the fact of being a language broker. She

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<sup>2</sup> To guarantee confidentiality, all the names of the research participants have been changed.

simply felt it was something normal, something she was supposed to do, in no way different from other assignments she had to deal with in her everyday life. Olga, a Russian woman living in Italy from the age of 7, mainly brokered for her grandparents and did not feel any particular burden of responsibility attached to mediation, due to the fact that she brokered in familiar contexts, as she explained (3).

(1) *Zhuo*: Non moltissimo (orgogliosa). Ma neanche dico “non mi piace questa cosa.”.. Neanche. Ma, diciamo, con un atteggiamento normale, tipo di... tutte le cose che devi affrontare...

*Zhuo*: *Neither excessively (proud). Nor I say “I don’t like this thing”. No. But, let’s say, I have a normal approach, as to... any other thing I have to face...<sup>3</sup>*

(2) *Zhuo*: Le cose che ho capitato io, diciamo, anche se magari traduci anche qualcosa di sbagliato non è che causa una cosa molto grave, diciamo. Più o meno sono le cose che .... Mi chiedono di aiutare per tradurre sono tutte le cose del quotidiano, non sono ... Non è che uno che deve andare a fare... diciamo, malato grave dopo hai bisogno... quello lì dopo chiamano proprio l’interprete ...

*Zhuo*: *Things I was asked to translate, let’s say, could not have serious consequences even if I translated something wrong. Things.... I was asked to help in translating, more or less, had all to do with everyday life, they are not ... you are not asked to deal with, let’s say .... severe illnesses, there you need ... they call authentic interpreters...*

(3) *Olga*: Non sentivo la responsabilità, soprattutto quando ero più piccolina, dopo magari un po’ di più, ma dato che era comunque un ambiente familiare non c’era nulla che mi pesava.

*Olga*: *I did not feel any responsibility burden, especially when I was a child, then later I felt it a little bit more, but as it was a familiar context there was nothing really troubling me.*

Both present and former brokers confirmed that they considered their role as language and cultural mediators as natural. They could not name the precise moment when they had started performing as language brokers. As soon as Karima (a 17-year-old girl from Morocco, living in Italy from the age of 5) and

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<sup>3</sup> We provide our English translation for this and the other examples from the interviews conducted in Italian.

Danica (a 17-year-old girl from Serbia, living in Italy from the age of 13) became proficient in Italian, they started brokering whenever the situation required it. Satisfaction transpired from the brokers' reports, they were happy to be of help to their families or to other members of their linguistic communities. As 17-year-old Carlos from Ecuador summarized:

(4) *Carlos: Mi sentivo di aiutare le persone per quel poco che so.*

*Carlos: I felt like helping people as much as I could.*

With only one exception, none of our respondents readily admitted to having experienced negative feelings while brokering. However, interestingly enough, following some probing on the part of the researchers, many admitted to having also experienced frustration, due either to their lack of fluency in Italian or in their native language, or to their lack of knowledge of specific bureaucratic procedures. Embarrassing situations could also cause difficulties, as Karima made clear. While acknowledging the complexities of brokering at the doctor's office because, she explained: "one should always understand correctly what the doctor exactly says", she thought it was understandable that mothers tend to prefer to be accompanied to the clinic by daughters rather than by sons, in order to avoid embarrassing situations like the one which occurred to someone she knew:

(5) *Karima: A volte possono succedere cose imbarazzanti. [...] Una donna che conosco è andata dal dottore con il figlio e il dottore ha cominciato a chiederle da quanto tempo non ha il ciclo, quelle cose lì e il figlio doveva tradurre [ride].*

*Karima: Sometimes embarrassing situations may occur.[...] A woman that I know, went with her son to the doctor's and the doctor started asking her how long she hadn't had her period for, and things like that, and the son was compelled to translate [laughs].*

Amina, another 18-year-old girl from Morocco who had been living in Italy for 3 years, reported brokering for her mother only at the doctor's office, while she was in charge of going to the bank or to the post office on behalf of her parents.

While talking about positive feelings related to CLB was fairly natural for our participants, mentioning the less positive sides of the activity was more of a

sensitive issue, and often needed some prompting on the part of the researchers. Cheng, a 22-year-old male Chinese living in Italy from the age of 12, told us that he still brokered not only for his family, but also for the Chinese community in Forlì. On the issue of the burden of responsibility in relation to language brokering, he said:

(6) *Cheng*: Non penso che è un peso. Anzi, almeno dal mio punto di vista è anche un... (...) è un piacere poter aiutare qualcuno che ha bisogno, *non tanto un peso*. Anzi. (...) dal dottore o anche dall'avvocato...dovendo spiegare molto bene alcune cose... cioè, se non ci riesci... *ti senti un po' di responsabilità*... [our emphasis]

*Cheng*: I don't see it as a burden. On the contrary, at least from my point of view, it is also... it is a pleasure to be able to help somebody that is in need, not really a burden, on the contrary. (...) At the doctor's or with a lawyer, when you have to explain something very well, if you are not able to, you feel the responsibility of it...

Initially, Cheng did not admit that brokering was a burden to him, but his use of modifiers and his facial expressions clearly suggested that the process was not completely effortless and straightforward, although his words accounted more for the pleasure to being of help. Zhuo was more open about her unpleasant feelings. Although she claimed not to be bothered by the burden of responsibility of CLB, she complained about the lack of freedom and the deprivation of free time that she suffered because of this activity, especially as soon as she became a point of reference for her large family and for family friends.

(7) *Zhuo*: Ma anche delle volte magari ho le mie cose, di studio... dopo... qualcuno viene che devo andare proprio obbligatamente... dopo magari sono molto... diciamo non ho voglia di fare. [...] Sono sempre state noiose quelle situazioni. Perché, all'inizio magari dici "adesso possiamo andare alla questura", "adesso possiamo andare in comune", dopo alla fine "che palle! Sempre in comune, sempre in questura". Poi alla fine sono sempre le stesse cose.

*Zhuo*: Sometimes I may have my own things to do, for school... then... if somebody comes around and I'm obliged to go ... then I'm very ... let's say I don't feel like doing it. [...] I have always been involved in boring situations. At the beginning maybe you can say to yourself: "Wow let's go to the police headquarters", "let's go to the town hall", then you end up saying

*“What the fudge! Always to the town hall, always to the police headquarters”. After a while, they become all the same old things.*

Salima, a Moroccan female teenager, reported being particularly irritated by her grandmother’s requests to translate the content of a TV show, while they were watching it. Her grandmother’s determination “to understand everything that they said” caused Salima some frustration because she could not accurately translate every single word from Italian into Arabic. Consequently, she became both dissatisfied with the translation, and upset because she was unable to watch the programme herself. Alzeta, a 27-year-old university student from Albania, told us that she had experienced two different phases. A first phase as a teenager, and a second phase as a young adult. Talking about the present, she acknowledged being proud of having served as a broker, but when referring to the past she confessed she was always annoyed to be asked to mediate. Things exacerbated to the extent that she rebelled against her parents. Her generational conflict exploded exactly around CLB issues, as she reported:

(8) *Alzeta: Ero sempre scocciata... da adolescente ricordo di aver detto ai miei [...]“lasciatemi stare, sempre che vi devo fare le cose, vi devo compilare i documenti, vi devo redigere le lettere, devo parlare al telefono...” ero la segretaria della famiglia*

*Alzeta: I was always annoyed... as a teenager I remember having said [...] “Leave me alone, I’m always taking care of your things, I’m supposed to fill in your documents, to write your letters, to speak on the phone for you...” I was the secretary of the family.*

The mixed feelings highlighted by our respondents in their comments and reports, led us to similar conclusions to Orellana’s in her 2009 work. Our data similarly illustrated that language brokers’ tended to consider their translation tasks as “no big deal”, and they also showed that language brokers felt some reluctance to do this little “housework”, especially when this activity deprived them of their free time. They would have rather preferred to devote their afternoons to school homework or leisure activities, just like their non-immigrant classmates did. (Orellana 2009: 2-10).

Another aspect that clearly emerged from our preliminary survey was the “hidden” dimension of the CLB experience. Some of our respondents admitted that before our survey, they neither had the chance nor the wish to think or talk

about their experience as cultural and language brokers, not even to their friends and peers. As children and/or later as teenagers and young adults, brokering was a natural but somehow private experience for them, one that they took for granted and did not wish to talk about. When Alzeta was asked if she had ever shared her experience with friends she stated:

(9) *Alzeta*: Ma non ci pensavo proprio a parlarne con gli altri. Mi sembrava, ti dico, una cosa che dovevo fare e basta. Non mi sembrava un argomento interessante del quale parlare

*Alzeta*: Talking about it, wasn't an issue. To me it was simply something that I had to do, and that was it. I didn't think of it as an interesting subject to talk about.

This could partially account for the reticence of our respondents during the focus-group investigations, where brokers were asked to portray their own experience in front of a group of peers, a kind of reticence that we generally did not encounter in individual interviews. In one case one respondent, Lou a 17-year-old, second generation Filipino with a native speaker competence in Italian, and a more limited competence in his parents' language, candidly admitted that he sometimes used his bilingual competence as a kind of authority tool, to mock or make fun of less knowledgeable friends. This statement reinforced our impression that CLB is mainly a lonesome and private experience for the child, and one that s/he tends to hold back after becoming an adult.

To sum up, the preliminary findings of our study led us to think that although there is very little accounts about this activity among former language brokers, both young adults and adolescents are intuitively well aware of the complexity of this practice and of the responsibility that linguistic and cultural brokering entails. The practice of language mediation was alternatively experienced as rewarding or frustrating depending not only on the situations, contexts, and participants involved, but also on the personal attitudes and on the frequency with which brokers were asked to perform. In some cases the brokering experience clearly influenced former brokers' professional choices.



(10) *Zhuo*: Lavori tipo come mediatrice o interprete è bello, anche se io sinceramente come lavoro...No. [Non lo farei]. Perché l'ho fatto troppo. Può darsi magari che ...

*R*<sup>4</sup>: Magari pagato..

*Zhuo*: No, non è per i soldi. Cioè, è solo magari.... Ha portato [via] maggior parte della mia infanzia... è per quello magari... per me è diverso perché ho cominciato da più o meno 11-12 anni, che è ancora una ragazzina, diciamo.

*R*. Quasi una bambina.

*Zhuo*: Quasi bambina, infatti andavo ancora alle elementari. Ah, no, prima media già. Però sinceramente a quel tempo pensavo solo di giocare, ovviamente, o di scuola. Non è che penso se questo interprete... per quello magari mi ha portato tanto tempo... Poi mi ha portato un senso... questo lavoro non mi piace... a quel tempo mi piaceva.

*Zhuo*: *Jobs such as mediator or interpreter are nice, although I must say, No. [I wouldn't do that] for a living. I've done it far too much. Maybe ...*

*R*: *Maybe if you could get paid...*

*Zhuo*: *It's not a matter of being paid ... it's just that [brokering] has taken away most part of my childhood ... that's maybe why... for me it is different because I have started more or less at the age of 11-12, I was still a teenager, so to say.*

*R*: *Almost a child.*

*Zhuo*: *Almost a child, as a matter of fact I was still in primary school. Well, no I was attending the 1<sup>st</sup> year of middle school already. But to tell the truth I was just interested in playing and in school of course at the time. So I can't think of [becoming] an interpreter.... That's why. It has taken away to much of my time... and it also gave me the sense that I don't like this job ... I used to like it at the time.*

Karima explained that she would have liked to have a professional interpreter assisting her in specific institutional contexts: at the police station for example, because, she explained, she did not know anything about the bureaucratic procedures and the documents required, or at the doctor's office, where she

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<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this paper we shall indicate the researcher speaking with *R*.

found it particularly difficult to talk about health problems in technical terms, as she was no expert on this subject:

(11) *R*: Avete mai sentito l'esigenza di avere a disposizione una persona che fa l'interprete di professione, non dico a casa, ma dal medico o a scuola, durante i colloqui con gli insegnanti ad esempio?

*Karima*: Beh dipende, per le cose che non capisco che non so spiegare. In questura, perché non è che io so bene i documenti, quelle cose là, oppure dal dottore, spiegargli certe cose non è tanto facile, cioè non sono abituata, cioè non parlo sempre di malattie io, non so spiegare, non so neanche come si deve fare. Però per il resto no. Se posso va bene, sennò più che altro è che dopo non capiscono i miei.

*R*: *Have you ever felt the need to be assisted by professional interpreters, I do not mean at home, but at the doctor's or at school, at parents' evenings for example?*

*Karima*: *Well it depends, [yes] for the things I don't know or I can't explain. At the police station for example, because I don't know what documents are needed and all that stuff, or at the doctor's, explaining certain things is not very easy, I'm not used to that, I mean I do not usually speak of illnesses I can't explain, I don't even know how I should do that. Apart from that, no [I don't feel the need to have a professional interpreter] If I can, I'm happy to do it. Otherwise the only problem might be that my parents don't understand.*

One of the former language brokers we interviewed, who proved to be very conscious of her status as former broker, suggested that immigrant children should be taught at school about the importance of the work they do both for their family and for society in general. Also, she suggested that they should be told that what they do is very close to a prestigious job. This, according to her, could help children develop self-consciousness and improve self-confidence.

#### **4.3. Relational impact of CLB practices**

On a relational level, our survey showed ambivalent feelings and mixed opinions about the influence of CLB both on the family structures and on parent-child relations. Cheng for example, reported that his brokering activity did not

affect the relationship with his parents, whereas Alzeta acknowledged her uneasiness about her parents' difficulties with the Italian language, especially when she was a teenager, and admitted that she urged her parents to learn some Italian, so they could become more independent. Parents' reluctance to learn Italian was often mentioned among the negative aspects of the CLB practice, but often after some prompting on the part of the researchers. Most interviewees believed that when parents rely largely on their children's language competence, this often prevented them from learning Italian and becoming more self-sufficient and socially active. Being compelled to help their parents in all those situations in which the linguistic gap was detrimental to their family life in Italy, was also perceived as negative by present and former language brokers. On the other hand, reflecting on the positive aspects of their experience as language and cultural mediators, our respondents mentioned an increased intellectual flexibility, and the early development of a responsible and autonomous personality, in disentangling every-day life tasks.

(12) *Alzeta*: ho iniziato fin da subito, quindi già all'età di 10 anni mi occupavo di cose che i miei amici non facevano. Quindi andare in comune, soprattutto all'inizio per ottenere tutti i documenti, il dottore, il medico di base, poi chiaramente anche il permesso di soggiorno e quindi anche in questura. [...] Questo è un fattore che ha anche cambiato il mio carattere. Da una personalità timida, dove chiaramente mi vergognavo a parlare con persone più grandi di me, istituzioni e tutto quanto, sono riuscita nel corso degli anni a svilupparmi, quindi da questo punto di vista è stata un'esperienza positiva, però nel contesto in quel momento mi metteva in difficoltà perché non me la sentivo quindi ero obbligata, dato che i miei genitori non potevano comunicare in italiano perché non lo parlavano correntemente, ero obbligata a mediare per conto loro.

*Alzeta*: I began right from the start, when I was just 10 I used to deal with things my friends didn't do. I went to the town hall, especially at the very beginning, in order to get all the documents, I went to the family doctor, then we needed the permit of stay, so I went to the police headquarter [...] This was a factor that changed my personality. I used to be shy, I was embarrassed to talk to adults, to institutions, and all that, I managed to change, therefore in this respect it was a positive experience, but at that time, in that context I had a hard time, I didn't feel fit for that, I was compelled to do that, I was forced to broker for them.

(13) *R*: Pensi che la mediazione ti abbia aiutato a diventare più matura e indipendente prima rispetto ai tuoi coetanei?

*Olga: Forse sì, indirettamente, indirettamente magari, nel senso che c'è sempre quel passaggio di avere un'elasticità mentale leggermente superiore e le vedute un pochino più ampie.*

*R: Do you think brokering might have helped you become more mature and independent than people the same age as you?*

*Olga: Maybe. Indirectly yes, maybe indirectly, I mean in that it can enhance slightly your mental flexibility and broaden your views a bit.*

When talking about their families and how the mediation influenced their relations with their parents, former language brokers often referred to the cooperative aspects of their family life:

(14) *Abdul: A scuola, quando mia madre va a parlare con le maestre [dei fratelli più piccoli] vado io a fare da intermediario.*

*Abdul: At school, when my mother goes to [my little brothers'] teacher-parents conferences, I go with her as a mediator.*

(15) *Alzeta: Il rapporto che io ho avuto con loro non è mai stato loro genitori quindi aiutano te. No, ci aiutiamo a vicenda perché loro avevano la responsabilità dell'età adulta, io avevo la competenza linguistica... siamo cresciuti più come amici.*

*Alzeta: The relationship I had with them has never been of the type: they are the parents therefore they help me. No, we helped each other, because they had the responsibility as adults and I had the linguistic competence... we grew up more as friends.*

Worthy of note is the use of the pronoun “we” to underline that all of the family members grew up in the process.

(16) *Alzeta: l'autonomia che io ho adesso come risultato di tutto quello che ho fatto, anche nell'ambito della mediazione, mi rende veramente molto autonoma e molto spesso sono io a dare dei consigli ai miei genitori su loro richiesta, perché non è che io mi impongo nel dire loro che cosa devono fare. Ma spessissimo mio padre prende il telefono e mi dice “Alzeta secondo te come è meglio agire?” perché comunque ho dimostrato nel corso degli anni di non fare cazzate, semplicemente. Quindi abbiamo un ottimo rapporto.*

*Alzeta: The autonomy that I'm allowed now, as a result of everything that I've done, also in terms of mediation, has made me a very autonomous person and often I am the one who gives my parents advice, if they ask. It's not that I tell my parents what to do, but very often my father calls me on*

*the phone and asks: "Alzeta what do you think is best to do?" because throughout the years I have shown, them that I don't fuck up, as simple as that. So our relationship is excellent.*

Reading between the lines of Alzeta's report, some satisfaction and pride clearly leak through. Not only did she regard her gradually achieved autonomy as highly valuable, but she also appreciated her current situation as a young adult, studying away from home, and benefitting from her parents' trust. Her sense of gratification in being asked for advice on important matters was also detectable from the tone of her voice. It is noteworthy that she stressed that she did not tell her parents what to do, but they asked her for advice because "throughout the years" she had shown that she did not "fuck up". It is also interesting that despite the relational problems she had reported about her adolescence, as a young adult she described her relationship with her parents as excellent<sup>5</sup>. Although some scholars tend to underline the negative effects of the excessive burden of responsibility on children's shoulders, using terms such as "adultification" or "parentification", immigrant families may need a "non-standard" organization of responsibility sharing (Orellana 2009:10), or "creative" interaction strategies with the outside world (Weisskirch this volume) to cope with the composite social, cultural and economical pressures they are confronted with, in order to provide a healthy, efficient environment for the children to grow up as fully matured adults.

#### **4.4. Linguistic and cultural brokering skills**

One further aspect we took into consideration in our study is former brokers' grasp of their role as mediators. We investigated if and how they had developed a system of brokering and translation strategies. In order to do so, we first asked our respondents how they judged their performance as language brokers, and secondly, we asked what advice they would give someone who was just starting a "career" as a child language broker. The answers they gave

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<sup>5</sup> On the blurriness and shifting of boundaries in immigrant families, especially on authority, power, and decision making issues, see Weisskirch (this volume) and on successful atypical organization of households see Orellana (2009:10).

showed us that, intuitively, they were very much aware of what language brokering, cultural mediation and translation entail, and they were also fully conscious of the complexity of these processes. Most of the respondents did not speak extensively about their translation strategies, however their suggestions were always pertinent and straight to the point. Clearly there were some differences between the teenagers' insights and the young adults' more articulate opinions, but comments were all equally interesting and thought-provoking. Adolescents tended to compact their answers into a few words. They recommended simplifying sentences, skipping unnecessary details, and giving examples in order to get around unfamiliar words. Talking about their experience they also acknowledged having used hands and gestures to make themselves understood, and asking for help whenever they found it difficult to understand or translate. Young adults were more inclined to talk more extensively about their translation and brokering strategies. One respondent in particular offered a detailed description of both what she expected from a good mediated exchange, and what she thought could be important for a would-be mediator to keep in mind, based on her own experience. Her answers were enlightening and worth reporting in full, because they illustrate a lively brokering event, one that the young woman had possibly still in mind from her childhood experiences.

(17) *R:* Basandoti sulla tua esperienza, quali sono le caratteristiche che consideri importanti in una mediazione linguistica?

*Alzeta:* Per ottenere un risultato buono. Allora... anche un pochino cercare subito di mettere in chiaro tra le parti che cercano di comunicare attraverso di me, che devono parlare piano o comunque darmi il tempo di ascoltare e di capire bene. Ma ti parlo di quando ero bambina perché adesso è diverso, no? cioè, cercavo di indicare i tempi. Cioè, tipo... mentre io ascoltavo la signora in italiano "che dice, che dice?" e io dico "mamma, aspetta un attimo fammi capire, fammi finire di elaborare". Quindi chiaramente quello che mi diceva la signora in italiano veniva riportato a mia madre secondo me correttamente, ma sicuramente veniva perso qualche elemento, non importante, però, insomma... e quella mi diceva "dobbiamo compilare questo modulo perché serve per avere un'agevolazione nel pagamento delle tasse" e magari ci aggiungeva altri elementi "eh, sai com'è, io capisco che voi non parlate bene, però dovete farlo..." allora quello che era superficiale lo escludevo, andavo al dunque. A parte che mi piace concretizzare molto, quindi... se mi devi dire 300 parole per esprimere un concetto di 200 parole tolgo quello che è superfluo, no? e quindi riferivo a

mamma sicuramente con una terminologia più semplice, un lessico molto più chiaro e diretto, in modo tale che anche mia madre avesse subito chiaro cos'è che voleva sapere la signora. E lei lo stesso, mi rispondeva in modo composito, le sue cose... eh, ma sai, di qua e di là... e io riportavo, sempre nelle mie intenzioni, con la stessa... la sintesi del discorso, brava.

*R: Quali sono le caratteristiche che un bravo mediatore deve avere secondo te, nella tua esperienza?*

*Alzeta: Allora, sintetizzare intanto, senza [tralasciare] elementi importanti. Sicuramente trasmettere, laddove è necessario, anche lo stato emotivo che vuole trasmettere la parte, insomma. Parliamo sempre del rapporto fra mia madre e un'altra persona ad esempio. Quindi è chiaro che se è un contesto istituzionale non importa nulla di quello che sentimentalmente vuole esprimere, però se è un contesto di una sua amica – perché è capitato anche questo – che vuole esprimere un dispiacere o qualcosa in particolare, si cerca di riportare anche quello.*

*R: What are the qualities that you consider important in a good mediation according to your experience?*

*Alzeta: In order to get good results. Well... it is important to make clear to the parties that are trying to communicate through my mediation, that they need to speak slowly, or at least allow me the time to listen to them and fully understand. I'm referring now to when I was a child, because now it is different, isn't it. I mean I tried to establish the pace (of the interaction). Like for example I was listening to the woman who spoke Italian and mum would say: "What does she say? What does she say?" And I said: "Mum...wait a minute, let me understand, give me the time to elaborate". And what the lady said was then reported to my mum, I judge accurately, but of course some elements were lost, not important details, but still. And she would say: "We have to fill in this form, it is important to get some tax breaks and then would add some more elements like: "you know, I see you don't speak Italian very well, but ... you need to do that ..." so I skipped the unimportant things I went straight to the point. By the way, I like to summarize, If you use 300 words to express a concept of 200 words, I skip all the redundancies, don't I? And I reported the concept back to mum using simpler terminology, clearer and more direct lexis. So that my mum could quickly understand what the lady was asking for. And she did the same, she explained to me all her things.. "well you know... and this and that", and I again reported the discourse with my intention, with the same ... the synthesis of the discourse.*

*R: What are the skills of a good broker according to your experience?*

*Alzeta: First of all, summarizing, without skipping important details. Then clearly, also transferring, wherever necessary, the emotional content, the feeling that the party wants to communicate. Let's talk again about my mum*

*and another person. I'm not talking about institutional contexts, there is no need for transferring emotions there, but if the context is a friend sharing her sorrow – because this happened to me as well- or something specific, you try to report feelings as well.*

This interview extract is particularly interesting because the interviewee illustrates her personally elaborated strategies and reports on two very problematic areas of mediation, both of which have to do with the interactional aspects of brokering and communication events in general: establishing rules for turn-taking in the first case and conveying the emotions of the participants in the second example. These are two complex and controversial aspects touched upon in the scholarly literature about community interpreting and the interpersonal role of the interpreter<sup>6</sup>.

Our respondents might not have been able to label CLB practices at first, but they soon familiarized themselves with terms as mediation, translation or interpreting during our interviews, and as a matter of fact, they were able to identify a number of interesting aspects concerning linguistic and cultural mediation. Some teenagers taking part in the focus groups often referred to the brokering practice as “explaining” or “writing”, meaning respectively “brokering” or “translating”. A Chinese girl we interviewed used the expression “helping others” meaning brokering. Karima, from Morocco, who has been living in Italy since the age of five, reported about her language brokering activity:

(18) *Karima*: Io lo faccio soprattutto per spiegare i fogli, le lettere, quelle cose là.

*Karima*: I do it mainly to explain papers, letters, this sort of things.

Another aspect which is worth mentioning, concerns our respondents' awareness of their language acquisition process. Both former and present language brokers seemed to have worked out a set of convictions and strategies on second language acquisition and on translation skills development, based on their personal experience as second language learners and as language brokers. Their set of beliefs in these matters often emerged,

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<sup>6</sup> On turn-taking managing and the interpreter moderating interactions see Roy (1996). On the interpersonal role of the interpreter see Angelelli (2003), on the role of the interpreter as “interpersonal mediator” see Pöchhacker (2008).



although perhaps not always explicitly, in their descriptions of how one should best learn the language of the host country, or how one should improve their mother tongue competence. We asked if they felt their CLB activity had helped them learn Italian and familiarize them with Italian cultural issues, or if they thought this activity had enhanced their linguistic and cultural competence in the language of their parents. Some of the former brokers agreed that mediation had either improved their Italian competence, or their native language competence or both, depending on a number of demographic factors such as how long they had been living in Italy, and whether or not they had been born in this country.

Zhuo was asked if CLB had helped her to improve her linguistic and cultural background in Italian. Showing an awareness well beyond her age she answered:

(19) *Zhuo*: Quello veramente sì. [...] alle volte mi capita anch'io sono delle cose che non lo so. Magari cose di questura... prima non mi è mai capitato perciò non so le cose... magari facendo questo... cioè *aiutare gli altri*... dopo magari...lo so anch'io come funziona un procedimento, qualche termine specifici su quell'ambito della situazione [...] Cultura per me si capisce solo a vivere in quella cultura, perché se non esci mai di casa, come fai a sapere la cultura? Anche diciamo, stessa cosa per imparare la lingua. [...] Lo sai. Se non parli mai con un italiano... cioè, con un italiano bisogna parlare italiano. E... diciamo, lo impari. Se a casa guardando solo libri tu non impari mai secondo me.

*Zhuo*: Actually yes [...] sometimes I happen not to know some things. Maybe things that have to do with the police headquarter... if this is something that I have never encountered before, I don't know. Then maybe doing it, I mean helping others ...the next time I will know how something works, and some specific terms on that particular situation. Culture you can only understand if you live in that culture, how can you get to know something about culture if you never go out? And the same thing applies to language. You know, if you never talk to Italian native speakers... I mean, with an Italian you have to speak Italian, and... I mean... you learn. In my opinion, if you stay home and just study books you'll never learn

Danica gave much of the same idea, as she explained:

(20) *Danica*: E quindi è più difficile che quando sei sempre con i nostri che poi l'italiano lo capisci.[...] Sempre se stai con italiani impari più presto....

*Danica: When you are always with ours [meaning the Serbs] it is more difficult to understand Italian, whereas if you spend most of your time with Italians, then you learn more quickly.*

Alzeta reported that her Italian language skills had largely benefited from the mediation practice. Having started mediating at a very early age her brain was trained to be flexible, she stated. As for the Albanian language, she explained that she had never thought of attending a course of Albanian, but she had often felt the need, out of curiosity, to enrich her vocabulary. She wished she had more time to read specialized books in Albanian, to acquire the same specialized language competence in her native language, the same way she had acquired economic, legal and information technology in Italian through secondary school classes. Finally, Olga agreed that brokering had helped her develop her language skills in both Italian and Russian. She explained:

(21) *Olga: [la mediazione] mi ha aiutato a migliorare le mie competenze linguistiche in entrambe le lingue, perché una volta che ti trovi di fronte ad un problema linguistico, e lo devi rendere nell'altra lingua ci devi pensare in un modo che non avresti mai pensato se non ti fossi trovato in quella situazione.*

*Olga: [brokering] has enhanced my language skills in both Italian and Russian, because as soon as you face a linguistic problem that you have to transfer into another language, you have to start thinking about it in a new way you would never have thought, if you had not found yourself in that situation.*

## **5. Conclusions**

The present paper has summarized the results of a section contained in the pilot project InMedioPueri, which was aimed at gathering empirical data regarding the contexts in which CLB is performed, on the emotional and relational impact of CLB on brokers, and on the brokers' awareness concerning their role and the linguistic skills necessary to perform this task. The results generally confirmed previous research on the CLB phenomenon in other countries. In terms of CLB contexts and situations, the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires with an admittedly small sample of present and former

brokers indicated that brokering occurred both in formal and informal settings, mainly in family situations, and also between family and friends and the institutions, with the former cases including, for example, banks, hospitals, police headquarters, the post office, schools, and public offices in general. The brokers reported translating (mainly for parents and occasionally grandparents) in contexts ranging from conversations of a formal or informal nature to bills, official communications and doctor's prescriptions.

In order to assess the emotional and relational consequences of CLB, issues revolving around the former brokers' personal attitudes towards this activity were also investigated. The respondents' answers seemed to confirm that language brokering might impact brokers both positively and negatively on an affective level (e.g. Tse 1996). Although a certain reluctance to acknowledge the more burdensome aspects of CLB was noticed at first, further prompting revealed that the practice of language mediation was alternatively experienced as rewarding or frustrating depending not only on the situations, contexts, and participants involved, but also on the personal attitudes and on the frequency with which brokers were asked to perform. Particularly, former brokers pointed out that different levels of stress were attached to mediating in different settings and situations, which, however, often goes hand in hand with a perceived sense of the normalcy of their role as brokers. Furthermore, pride and the feeling of being helpful in facilitating their family/relatives' integration in the host community seem to co-exist with a feeling of responsibility and sometimes frustration with being given these important mediating tasks. The brokers' families' excessive reliance on them was also seen as slowing down, or sometimes completely preventing their parents' and relatives' learning Italian, thus partially delaying their integration. On the other hand, increased autonomy and intellectual flexibility were sometimes identified as positive consequences of the brokering activity.

Finally, all interviewees, even the youngest, showed a certain level of metalinguistic awareness, particularly when they indicated translation strategies that might be useful in aiding mediated interactions – such as keeping things simple, summarizing, and getting around words you don't know – and when

they acknowledged the important role that CLB had played in their acquisition/improvement of both Italian and their parents' language.

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