

The Profits of Language Brokering

Charise Pimentel and Tessara Sevin chart the many ways children benefit from facilitating communication on behalf of others

Maya Macias, a twelve-year-old immigrant student from Jalisco, Mexico, accompanies her mother to a haircut appointment. At first glance, it appears Maya serves as her mother's translator, repeating the hair stylist's English statements to her mother in Spanish and her mother's Spanish statements in English. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Maya is not merely translating. She is language brokering. Language brokering is defined as a practice in which children "...facilitate communication between two linguistically and/or culturally different parties. Unlike formal interpreters and translators, brokers mediate, rather than merely transmit, information" (Tse, 1996, p. 485). In her capacity as a language broker, Maya both employs metalinguistic skills in which she strategically reconstructs messages between the two culturally and linguistically different parties (her mother and the hair stylist), and mediates in the decision making process so that her mother is ultimately satisfied with her hair style as well as the price of the service.

While Maya is content that she can help her mother, it turns out that Maya's, everyday language brokering practices do more than facilitate her mother's communication processes. As indicated in the title of Dorner, Orellana, & Li-Grining's (2007) research study — "'I Helped My Mom,' and It Helped Me," — research is increasingly pointing to the ways in which language brokering fosters the development of many social and cognitive skills — skills that are linked to language brokers' academic achievement.

Language Brokering

Research demonstrates that about 90 percent of children from language minority families serve as language brokers (Dorner, Orellana, & Li-Grining, 2007; Dorner & Pulido, 2003; Tse, 1995; 1996). These children attend school and begin to learn English; then come home and language broker for their parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends. Children from immigrant families start language brokering within one to five years of their arrival in the U.S., and children usually begin brokering

between the ages of 8 and 12 years old (Morales & Hanson, 2005; Tse, 1995; 1996). The contexts in which children language broker are varied, including in their homes, on the streets, in stores, post offices, banks, schools, doctors' offices, government agencies, among many others. In these varied contexts, children facilitate understanding in spoken conversations, as well as in written documents, including labels, instructions, tax forms, report cards, bills, bank statements, immigration forms, and various other notes and letters from schools, businesses, and government agencies.

Language Brokers and Academic Achievement

Research on language brokering, especially over the last decade, shows that language brokers often outperform their non-brokering peers on a number of indicators of academic achievement. Not only are their social interactions with teachers and students more sophisticated, but language brokers often outperform their non-brokering English Language Learner (ELL) peers in Grade Point Average (GPA) and standardized test scores. In studies that compare GPAs, students who serve as language brokers report higher GPAs than their non-brokering language minority peers (Tse, 1995; Acoach & Webb, 2004). Orellana (2003) found that the sixth graders in her study performed significantly better on standardized reading and math achievement tests than their non-brokering peers, even when controlling for early school achievement. In a similar line of research, Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grining (2007) found that language brokering was significantly correlated to fifth- and sixth-graders' standardized reading test scores. While more research needs to be conducted in this area, the little research that has been conducted indicates that language brokering builds skills that are needed for academic success. The following sections, including cognitive and metalinguistic abilities, bilingual/biculturalism, and parent-child relationships, highlight the benefits of language brokering and how these benefits contribute to language brokers' school success.



Cognitive and Metalinguistic Abilities

Language brokers often interact in adult contexts, which require the use of advanced vocabulary and cognitive abilities (Acoach & Webb, 2004). And because language brokers do not simply repeat back word-for-word statements in another language, they must develop a number of metalinguistic skills to reformulate the messages in a meaningful way. Some of the cognitive and metalinguistic abilities language brokers use include their acute attention and comprehension of non-verbal behaviors, such as body posture and facial expressions, contextual cues, and culturally appropriate meanings. They must also synthesize, label, describe, ask for clarification, and gauge whether they have accurately understood and conveyed meanings correctly. The knowledge language brokers gain from the practice of interpreting contextual cues is evident in Buriel et al.'s (1998) study, which found that language brokers who brokered in a wide variety of settings developed more sophisticated language competencies than children who only brokered in one setting.

Many language brokers also gain a number of practical reading and math skills from their everyday brokering practices. Those language brokers who read and interpret written documents utilize a number of reading strategies that are useful in the school context, including breaking words into component parts, using their knowledge of cognates, skimming and rereading for specific information, and knowing when to ask for help (Orellana & Reynolds, 2007). Language brokers also gain real-world math skills, such as measurement, adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, and various problem solving skills that come from their everyday

experiences of making purchases, balancing check books, etc. All of these cognitive skills are academic in nature and thus provide advantages to language brokers in the schooling context.

Bilingual/Bicultural Development

Once a child immigrates to the U.S. and attends school, they often begin an acculturation process, wherein they infuse the English language and mainstream American culture into their native linguistic and cultural practices, thereby developing bilingual/bicultural identities. For language brokers, the acculturation process is likely accelerated because they are often exposed to situations in which they are required to utilize their knowledge in both native and host cultures and languages (Acoach & Webb, 2004). Indeed, research studies demonstrate a correlation between biculturalism and language brokering (Acoach & Webb, 2004; Buriel et al., 1998; Tse, 1996). In Tse's (1996) study, over half of the students in the study reported that language brokering facilitated the development of their L1 and L2. Furthermore, one third of the students reported that language brokering helped them learn more about their native and host cultures. Language brokers' dexterity in two languages and cultures, as well as their accelerated linguistic skills in both languages, are skills that contribute to language brokers' school success. Buriel et al. (1998) also argue that because bicultural adolescents are better adapted to their dual cultural environment, they are less likely to be affected by the detrimental effects of acculturation, including psychosocial and behavioral disorders — disorders that often detract from students' academic performance.

Bilingual Education

Parent-Child Relationship

Immigrant families often find themselves struggling in the

acculturation process and in finding the resources they need for survival. Language brokering often provides the children of these families with an instrumental role in the family. Language brokers facilitate their parents' acculturation process, as well as advocate for their parents in their interactions with a variety of mainstream agents. In these capacities, children often take on adult-like responsibilities and make decisions that affect their entire family (Love & Buriel, 2007). As Buriel, Love, & De Ment (2006) argue, "traditional parent-child authority relationships within families are altered as children assume responsibility for cross-cultural transactions" (p. 249). As a language broker, a child begins to take on adult-like responsibilities and parents must often entrust that their language brokering children will have their best interests in mind. The resulting parent-child relationship is one that requires mutual respect and trust, which leads to a stronger bond between parents and their language brokering child(ren) (Buriel, Love, & De Ment, 2006; Chao, 2006).

The role language brokering plays in maintaining native language fluency further enhances the bond between the language broker and her/his parents. Through the process of language brokering, adolescents are often exposed to their parents' culture and values on a deeper level than they would be otherwise (Love & Buriel, 2007). This effect ensures that the child and parent can continue to identify with similar cultural practices and communicate in a common language. Also, because language brokers are exposed to the everyday struggles their parents experience, they report feeling more empathy for their parents (De Ment, Buriel, & Villanueva, 2005), and come to appreciate the sacrifices their parents have made in coming to this country. Language brokering is one way children and adolescents can show appreciation to their parents. Love and Buriel (2007) found that the satisfaction that comes from language brokering is correlated to a stronger parent-child bond (Love & Buriel, 2007). With a stronger bond to their parents, language brokers may feel more obliged to do well in school. Academic achievement may serve as another way language brokers can show appreciation for their parents' sacrifices, as well as a way to maintain a relationship built on trust and respect with their parents.

Implications for Schools and Teachers

In the face of an ongoing achievement gap between ELLs and native English speakers, schools are in great need of teaching practices that promote ELLs' academic achievement. Research in fields such as *Funds of Knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), suggest that educators look into students' home and community practices so that schools can build upon the knowledge students are already developing in these contexts. This approach reconstructs deficit approaches to teaching by acknowledging that what students learn at home is valuable and academic in nature. Language brokering is one such knowledge set that is developed in home and local community contexts that can be further nurtured in the school context.

As a way to facilitate language brokering in the school context, educators must consider the benefits of integration — that is — the integration of ELLs and native English speakers in the same learning environments. Traditionally, integration has meant ELLs joining native English speakers in their mainstream English-instructed classrooms (as is the case when ELLs exit transitional bilingual programs to join mainstream, English-instructed classrooms). This one-way integration model has prohibited ELLs from serving as language models and language brokers in their classrooms. As a way to encourage cross-cultural and cross-linguistic



language brokering, educators must consider integration that takes native English speakers into classrooms that are partly instructed in minority languages (e.g., bilingual education). In these settings, native English speakers can broker for ELLs and ELLs can broker for native English speakers. The encouragement and support for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic language brokering are already in place in most dual language bilingual programs. In these mixed language classroom settings, students take turns brokering for each other, as they try to comprehend a curriculum that is alternatively taught in both of their native languages. In schools where dual language programs are not possible, educators should consider other integrative efforts that provide students the opportunities to exercise their language brokering skills. These skills can be supported and developed in a single classroom where ELLs and native English speakers coexist, across classrooms in the same grade level in various learning activities, or across grade levels in mentoring projects, wherein older bilingual students language broker for younger ELLs.

When educators make connections between ELLs home and community practices and school practices, they not only validate home practices as knowledgeable and resourceful, they continue to build upon skills that foster school achievement. In sum, when home and school practices are aligned, students have a better chance of academic success. ❧

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