Language Brokering
Experiences of Latino University Students

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Introduction

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine the experiences of Latino/a university students who grew up interpreting and translating for their parents or still did. The study focused on the stressors associated with language brokering, the parent child relationship, perceptions on how public facilities can help with the process of language brokering and the gifts or positive attributes gained due to their experiences.

According to Buriel, Love, and Villanueva (2011), language brokering is very common for Latino children of immigrants and they typically begin language brokering at the age of 10, this role often times continuing into adulthood.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), in Spanish speaking homes, 17.5% of the individuals speak English less than “very well.” In the state of California, the population 5 years and over who speaks English less than “very well” is 19.6%, and in Los Angeles County California the percentage is almost twice that of the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Lack of services allows for non-U.S. born parents to struggle communicating with individuals who only speak English and for children of non-U.S. born parents to hold the responsibility of becoming language brokers for their parents. In turn creating stress within the family and within the child.

Studies on language brokering demonstrate that stress, including acculturation stress, depressive symptoms and emotional distress can be a few of the negative consequences (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014). And adolescents from immigrant families who were language brokers have reported increased levels of psychological distress (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Also, according to Kam, (2011) children can feel confused and torn between multiple cultural identities that can lead to stress.
Social Work Relevance

- Language and cultural diversity are part of the profession’s mission and advocating for individuals who lack needed services is part of the social justice that is valued in the profession (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2009).

- The study aimed to help social workers better understand the services needed for Latino families and for social workers to seek, provide, refer and advocate for the access to services in the language required for the client.

- The information gathered through this study is intended to be beneficial for professionals working with Latino immigrant families and understanding the many roles and dynamics within the family, as well as finding ways to better assist and meet the needs of the family.
Language brokering can occur in various cultures across the United States.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), out of the Spanish speaking homes, 17.5% speak English less than very well. In other Indo-European speaking homes, 2.2% speak English less than very well, and in Asian and Pacific Islander speaking homes, 5.5% speak English than very well (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

These statistics highlight the possibility of language brokering occurring in many homes where English is not the primary language and making language brokering multiculturally relevant.

Research by Jones, Trickett and Birman (2012), study the child culture broker role within Russian immigrant families.

Methods

Sample/Sampling Method

- The sample consisted of 14 self-identified Latino CSULB students who have had experiences as language brokers for their parents.
- Participants were recruited through non-probability purposive sampling.

Data Collection Procedures

- Following approval from the Institutional Review Board of California State University, Long Beach, a qualitative, exploratory design with individual face-to-face interviews were conducted.
- Flyers were passed out in classes (a total of 5 classes) within the Chicano and Latino Studies Department in CSULB. This was done after the researcher introduced herself to the class, informed students about the study, the procedure, eligibility criteria and provided contact information. A mass e-mail was also sent out to a total of 13 Latino Organizations on campus where the purpose of the study, procedure, eligibility criteria, attached flyer and contact information about the researcher was disclosed.
- Participants were eligible to participate under the following criteria: (a) Participants identified as Latino/a. (b) Language brokered for their parents as a child or still did. (c) Were 18 years of age or older.
- Interested candidates contacted the researcher by both telephone and e-mail and explained the purpose, procedures, and identified whether or not they met criteria. If participants were interested after the screening process the researcher arranged a place and time to meet face-to-face and go over the informed consent with the participant.
- During the face-to-face meeting, the researcher explained the informed consent, read the informed consent and provided the participants with a copy. The researcher explained the limits of confidentiality and advised participants that some of the questions from the interview guide might make them feel upset or sad. Participants were reminded of their right to refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. Participants were given a list of mental health urgent care centers in the event that they experienced emotional distress because of the project.
Every participant was required to sign a consent form. All participants agreed to be audiotaped (signed audiotape consent) and all interviews were later transcribed. The interviews ranged from 30-40 minutes in duration and were conducted on campus, at the Coffee Bean, University Student Union, and in an empty room in the psychology building, as well as outside of campus in a coffee shop.

Qualitative Interview Guide

- The interviews were facilitated utilizing an interview guide that included six demographic questions developed by the researcher, and open-ended questions related to participant’s experiences as language brokers (LBs) that were developed from current literature about language brokering (Morales, Yakushko & Castro, 2012). The questions when necessary were adapted for an adult participant and six questions were created and added by the researcher.

- The demographic questions included information on age, gender, number of years in the states, whether they were first generation or second generation American, how many years they did or have language brokered and their Latino ethnic background.

- The first set of open-ended questions were related to participant’s language brokering experience. Specific questions included, “Tell me about a time you interpreted and/or translated for your mom and/or dad?”

- The second set of questions focused on feelings about language brokering. This section included a discussion on positive and negative feelings experienced, stressors involved with interpreting and translating, and an exploration on the parent’s feelings.

- The third set of questions focused on language brokering and the family. These questions included “What is your relationship like with your parents?” There was one open-ended question exploring participant’s perceptions on how public facilities should have and can help with the process of interpreting and translating. This was followed by a set of questions related to the gifts or positive attributes gained due to language brokering. Questions included, “What do you think are some good things about having been/being a translator and interpreter for your parents?” For the final question, participant’s were given the opportunity to share any experience they felt was important for the researcher to know, if not discussed.

Data Analysis

- The sample was described using frequencies. The interviews were transcribed and later examined to identify common themes utilizing content analysis. The researcher separated responses by questions, some questions being grouped together, depending on the similarity of the questions. The researcher read the responses repeatedly, highlighted similar words used by participants and codes were created by question capturing key thoughts/concepts, ultimately identifying themes and patterns in the data.

- The main themes were summarized utilizing the narratives to highlight the findings of the researcher.
Several common themes were identified, which included participants language brokering in doctor appointments for their parents, in school settings, and translating forms or documents. Nine (64%) of the participants stated that they were LBs during doctor appointments. Ten (71%) participants reported to language brokering for their parents at their school as a child. All but one of the \((n = 13, 93\%)\) participants stated that they interpreted and translated various forms and some types of documents. This included mail, letters, car insurance forms, bank statements, school notes as children, doctor forms and/or applications, insurance letters, bills, social security forms and IRS forms. Participants shared, “I did it in school for open house every year, or maybe any school event, conference, teacher-parent conference.” “I remember when I was little, the school cafeteria application to see if I would qualify for free lunch, I would help my mom fill that out, as well as the emergency cards.” “I have done it in the stores and in the banks. Pretty much anywhere and everything I have done. Anything that was worded in English, I pretty much translated for them.” These participants language brokered in various settings, underscoring the time and energy that went into assisting their parents with communication and understanding the English language.

Feelings Experienced through Language Brokering: It was a common theme for participants to reveal feeling valued and needed through their narratives. The participants, being helpful, providing support and doing for others, for their parents, expressed a sense of altruism. Nine (64%) participants shared this common theme by stating,

A positive feeling is that I feel like I help them. I do. Well I give them some sense of relief, I feel like this is something that they don't have to worry about because they depend on me to do it.

Two (14%) participants also expressed feeling proud of themselves for having the ability to speak two languages and assisting their parents with communication. One participant expressed feeling grateful and two (14%) participants were not able to identify a positive feeling.

When asked about negative feelings experienced, it was a common theme for participants to feel frustrated when having to interpret and/or translate for their parents \((n = 9, 64\%)\). As participants expressed, this frustration was due to a variety of reasons. Frustration because of the challenge with terminology or because of the pressure placed on them by their parents, their parents depending on them and feeling obligated to LB. Or simply because they had many other demands to uphold to and language brokering was something else they had to add in. One participant shared,

If I had to pick a negative feeling I guess it would be frustration because sometimes I couldn't translate some words. It was difficult for me in instances when I had no idea how to do it so I felt frustrated, frustrated that I did not understand and could not help my parents.

Three (21%) other participants described having felt embarrassed. One participant shared, “I was embarrassed because I knew my parents could do it. I was embarrassed because my dad wouldn’t know and he has been here for many many years.” One participant expressed feeling she was an enabler for her mother and another participant expressed feeling disappointed in herself for not being able to fully help her parents due to not knowing the Spanish language fluently (feelings of inadequacy).

In regards to stressors experienced by participants, it was a common theme for participants to ascribe their stress to the large amounts of paperwork that needed translation for their parents. Five (36%) participants shared this common theme stating,

Again, it goes back to that, you get home and like they are like “hi, how was your day,” “it was good” and they have the papers in their hand, and then you are like “okay.” And then sometimes you are sitting there and translating and thinking you have so much stuff to do but I am here doing this.

Four (29%) participants reported to experiencing stress due to feeling the inability to help their parents understand what needed to be translated or interpreted because they themselves did not know or understand. One participant stated, “because she doesn't understand what I am saying and I can't find a way to tell her in a way she understands, I get stressed.”
Results (Continued)

- Two (14%) participants contributed their stress of language brokering to the expectation their parents had, to know everything that needed to be language brokered in Spanish, even when they realistically did not know. One participant expressed feeling stressed as a child due to taking on an adult role in her family. In some sense, having gone through parentification because she was taking on adult responsibilities at such a young age that she expressed adults were only supposed to do. She states, "I feel like even when I was younger and now, being the oldest it made me feel like I wasn’t a child, like I had to know about certain things that I wasn’t supposed too. Like life insurance, car insurance. Things like that, that I really didn’t care for when I was younger but I had to learn to be able to help my parents."

- However, there were 4 (29%) participants that expressed language brokering did not cause them stress.

- The Parent-Child Relationship: For 10 (71%) of the participants, language brokering was not something that affected the relationship they have with their parents. Language brokering was seen as "normal." It was expected of them to help their parents as they grew up assisting their parents with communication through interpretation and translation. It simply just became an expected, ordinary task. It was a norm for many of the participants in their Latino households. Participants stated, "I think this is just something that I felt it was just something I had to do since I was little, it was normal and I never saw anything wrong with it." "I don’t think it has, because we are family that always helps each other out.” However, there were two (14%) participants that stated language brokering did in fact make them closer to their parents, as they were able to communicate with them and have constant conversations with them. Participants shared, "maybe in a sense it made me closer to my parents because I knew all of their personal matters in certain instances because I had to interpret.” Additionally, two (14%) participants shared that they became more mature, and depended on more by their parents.

- Perceptions on How to Help: Participants were asked to share on how they thought public facilities could help with the process of language brokering. Eleven (79%) participants expressed that hiring more bilingual staff or interpreters that are consistently present to assist when needed, is what they perceived could be done to help with the process of language brokering. One participant shared, "What I am trying to say is that if public places, if they offer Spanish language, my parents would have not felt the need to take me so I could help them and translate for them. I think they should hire bilingual people and then our job (meaning herself and the researcher) will be taken away."

- One of the participants expressed that hiring bilingual staff was important but also emphasized the need to hire individuals who spoke the Spanish language fluently and not just broken Spanish, meaning, that they would not interpret the meaning of messages and omit and/or change words. Two (14%) of the 11 participants also expressed the importance of providing documents or mail forms that were in the Spanish language. One participant shared, "Send the information in languages other than English, there are so many times my mom gets forms sent in the mail that is in English and I am just like why would they do that.” Providing consistent and efficient translators was mentioned by one participant. One participant shared there was nothing else that needed to be done.

- Gifts or Positive Attributes Gained: Eleven (79%) participants expressed that being fluent in both Spanish and English was a positive thing and obtaining that skill was due to their experiences as LB’s. Seven (50%) participants stated how language brokering and becoming fluent in two languages has benefitted them in the workplace, obtaining a job, and making themselves more marketable in the work area for future careers due to the ability of speaking two languages fluently. They shared, "I think it will benefit me in finding my future career job, as I think of being bilingual as a good asset.” Five (36%) participants expressed that remaining close to their background roots and culture is a benefit and a positive gain they take from their experiences as LB’s. One shared “I think I found my identity through the means of interpretation and I feel proud of it. Culturally I became more in tune with my own culture.” Two (14%) participants shared they gained confidence, they were no longer afraid to speak out. Lastly, two (14%) participants also expressed how language brokering prepared them for adulthood and saw it as a benefit, by becoming aware of the many different situations in which their parents were placed.
Discussion/Implications for Social Work

- Through this research it is hoped that social workers will have an increased awareness of the life experiences of Latino university students and their language brokering role within their family. The results should help social workers better understand the services and resources needed and provide resources to Latino immigrant families.

- These findings demonstrate that through social work advocacy, interpretation and translation services in all public service facilities should be done. Although many facilities have improved in providing these services, as participants mentioned, not all services are reliable and/or consistent.

- Findings from the study may be useful when working with Latino immigrant families, Latino children, adolescents or adults. As these results help understand some of the roles and family dynamics within the Latino family. As well as stressors and feelings associated with language brokering.
References


