

Child Interpreting in School: Supporting Good Practice



Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Choosing the best person to act as a translator: questions to support good practice	8
3. Involving children and young people: trained young interpreters within a formal scheme	10
4. Involving children and young people: interpreting for parents and family members	11
5. Involving children and young people: supporting peers in the classroom and around the school	17

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The primary aim of this Guide is to provide support for staff in multilingual schools. How can arrangements best be made for communicating with parents and pupils whose command of English is limited?

The person who translates may be an adult or a child, paid or unpaid, trained or unprepared, a member of the family or not related. The possible advantages and possible risks will vary. What measures can schools take to secure the best possible outcome in each case?

The risks will be greatest when children are used as interpreters. Yet there is no research-based guidance available in the UK on the issues to consider when that happens.

The recommendations that are made here are based on research on the reflections of teachers and young adults who had experienced this situation at first hand over time.



1

Introduction

A growing challenge for schools

Many new pupils arrive in school in this country from families who do not have a fluent command of English. One of the challenges that their teachers and parents may then face is the lack of a shared language for communicating about the school's expectations and the child's needs. Few schools have access to professional interpreting facilities across the range of home languages spoken by their parents, and only limited use can be made of bilingual teaching and support staff for interpreting. Because children often learn the host language much more quickly than their parents, increasing numbers of children and young people contribute to family life by acting as translators or "child language brokers" for their parents. In schools that is one of the options available for ensuring effective communication. Care is required when pupils are used in that role, and other options can be considered. We will consider each of the options in this Guide.

What is a language broker?

In this Guide you will often find the terms "language broker" and "child language broker" in place of "interpreter" or "translator". We talk about children and adults being language brokers when they act as an agent for one party in a conversation. A professional interpreter is independent, impersonal and detached; a *language broker* is there to support someone (just as a finance broker, theoretically at least, is supposed to protect the interests of their client). Parents will often look to their children to act as language brokers on their behalf.

When do children act as language brokers?

Teachers and young adults with experience of language brokering reported in an on-line survey that the three most common situations in which children acted as language brokers at school were:

1. Formal meetings involving teachers and parents
2. Informal meetings involving teachers and parents
3. Translating for a new pupil from overseas

Young adults reported that the other frequent language brokering activity they had undertaken for school was to translate and explain to their parents the letters and other paperwork that were sent home by the school. Teachers in the survey appeared to underestimate how often this was needed.

We're a school with nearly, well 45 different languages being spoken so obviously it calls for, when needs be, students translating for parents or staff because it would be virtually impossible so obviously we will try to find out if there is an uncle or a member of the family who speaks English who can be present. We'll try to see if there is a bilingual member of staff who can be present. But generally if it's a meeting about regular school issues and there are no sensitive issues then if the member of staff feels that the student is mature enough and they have the trust and the confidence, then I think they will go ahead with the meeting and they will ask the student to translate.

Jedrek (Teacher)

When I went to other Parents Evenings with my mum the teacher would mainly just look at my mum and it was like I wasn't even in the room. And like sometimes the teacher wouldn't even want me next to my mum, they'd be like you go and play on the carpet and I was like oh, ok. And there wasn't really much I could do because I wasn't really going to start arguing on Parents Evening with the teacher so yeah... This teacher had had me for 2 years; so she knew that mum didn't speak English very well but she still, I don't think she liked me, to be honest... Well because I could still hear so I would just like translate after... I was pretending to be reading a book and then I sort of just listened to what they were saying and then we left the room I'd be like ok she said this, this, this and that. And she'd like go oh ok.

Celia (Ex-CLB)

(When social services organise a case conference) a social worker is present and a translator is present, a teacher is present, a pupil is present and a pupil's guardian is present, so it's quite a large meeting. But the role will be quite different because I will be playing my role of reporting what the child's progress is in several aspects. And then the translator proceeds to translate to the child and the guardian. And then the translator will translate back to us. If we have questions, say 'how does the child feel about that?' or 'how did the parent feel about it?', then the translator will translate it in English. So in that case it is not really a process as such that we're communicating with the child because I always feel that there's a block there... I don't feel as comfortable as me using a child as a translator or using someone that I know, because the people, the translators in school, are my colleagues... I don't feel that I am communicating with the parents, I'm only reporting and parroting what I have found out and then the translator will have sort of emotionlessly just, you know, translating back ... In terms of the case conference it does the job because they just want to find out what's happening. In terms of building up relationship it hardly does the work, I don't think it does because the translator just goes and then the parent just goes and it's not the same as the parents come directly to the school and having a talk among us in a Parents Evening or things like that, no.

Phoebe (Teacher)

Who can help schools to meet the challenge?

1. The first set of options is to arrange for an **adult** to translate for the parents. A school may call on a **professional interpreter or translator** for whose services payment will normally be required. The organisations in local authorities and voluntary agencies that employ such interpreters will expect them to meet set standards of knowledge and skill. They will be committed to conveying what is said between people faithfully, accurately and impartially and will have contractual obligations regarding confidentiality. Local **community interpreters** may have a good knowledge of the main language groups they work with in the area.

2. Schools can call on other adults for support. In some circumstances a **bilingual teacher or teaching assistant** may be willing to act as an interpreter on a voluntary basis, or where they hold a defined liaison role in the school this may be part of their job description. They will not normally be subject to the kind of code of professional conduct that covers many professional interpreters, but they will have the advantage of knowing the school at first hand.


3. The third group of adults who may assist in these situations are **adult brokers invited by the school or the family**. They may be members of the extended family or of a network of community organisations known to the school (e.g. a local church or mosque). Like bilingual school staff they will normally be amateurs in the interpreting role, but they are likely to be familiar with the local community of which they and the parents are part.

If we have an in-house translator we are able to convey this positive image of we welcome you here, we've got a translator here, you can come in, we explain how the exams work, how the school works, what the school day is like, how does your child learn, what is the expected progress of your child and how can you support your child. So all these things can be done in the school, you know, as part of the education of this child. We are not just simply educating your child, we want you to be our partner to be in school so this is very critical for the school to be able to provide that if they want, if they want the child, the student whose first language is not English to succeed, this is actually an important and critical part.

Turning to children and young people

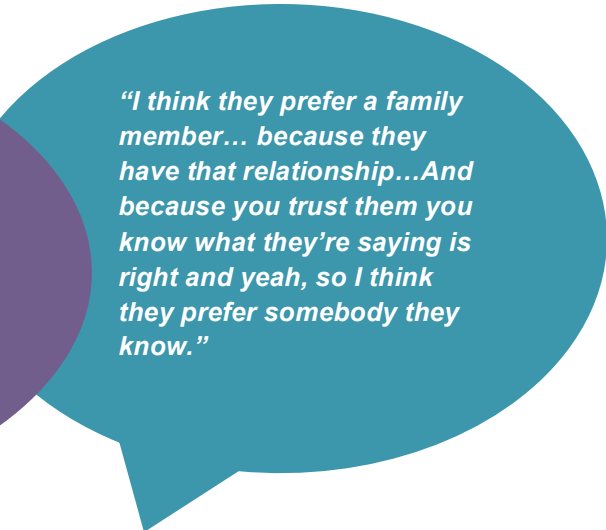
Each of those groups of adults may play an important role when parents and teachers do not share a language, but they are not always available and may not always be preferred by those involved. The primary aim of this Guide is to suggest the issues that must be addressed when a child or young person takes on the role of language broker. Sometimes children and young people are formally trained to do this within a *Young Interpreter Scheme* in a school or an area. This will be designed to provide focused peer support to newly arrived EAL learners through the medium of their first language. In some circumstances that may extend to interpreting for parents who do not feel confident using English to talk with teachers (training young interpreters is discussed in more detail on page 10).

Very frequently, however, the parents prefer to have their own children interpret for them, whether it is the child who is the subject of the conversation or an older sibling. The children who perform this service, like other non-professional interpreters, are sometimes described as *Language Brokers*, in this case *Child Language Brokers*. This distinguishes them from professional interpreters who are committed to conveying what is said by each party in a meeting through accurate word-by-word translation. In contrast, *Language Brokers* are likely to go beyond the words that are spoken when they think the listener needs that. They may offer explanations of what is said and act as intermediaries between the main parties, e.g. explaining a school's expectations or routines to parents or parents' cultural concerns to teachers.



"I think it would be better from someone from my family, well my sister, than some stranger talking because of my parents wouldn't like it so it wouldn't give this awkward feeling or this unfamiliar atmosphere."

Kara (Ex-CLB)



"I think they prefer a family member... because they have that relationship... And because you trust them you know what they're saying is right and yeah, so I think they prefer somebody they know."

Addressing the challenge

With support from the Nuffield Foundation we investigated two groups who we expected to bring distinctive and complementary perspectives to the topic of *child language brokering* in school - teachers working in multilingual areas and young adults who had acted as language brokers in the course of their own school career. The teachers were mainly from the secondary school sector in London, the South East and the East Midlands. The young adults were recruited from universities and colleges known to have a culturally diverse make-up of students and through networks based on schools with a long tradition of child language brokering. We gave both groups an on-line survey questionnaire to complete and followed that up with interviews with a small number of selected respondents.

As we expected from earlier research, many of the young adults who responded to our online survey or met us to talk individually presented a very positive picture:

- They treasured the experience of having translated for others at school whether inside or outside their family.
- They described themselves as “happy to do it” at the time and, took a pride in the role.
- They noted that it earned them respect and admiration from others.
- Different teachers described the impact on the development of many of them as being to:
 - enhance their confidence
 - underpin their sense of belonging in school and
 - offer a form of empowerment.

But for a positive outcome the process needs to be handled well. Those who had acted as child language brokers in school found the role easier when they sensed that staff in their school:

- perceived bilingualism as an asset,
- valued the role,
- acknowledged the responsibility that came with it and
- did not ask them to act in this role when the topic to be discussed made that risky or disturbing
- did not ask them to do it too often.

Drawing on evidence from those with experience of the language brokering process as teachers or students, our main purpose in this booklet is to suggest how the process can be most effective and positive at the time, how the worst problems can be avoided and how the experience can have the most beneficial impact in the future on those who take part. It is necessary first to appreciate the separate contributions that adults may make as interpreters and translators.

“It makes you look more mature and grown up and you take responsibility and you kind of learn professionally how to translate and I think your language improves a lot and you kind of learn a lot more about having proper professional conversations with grown-ups.”

Kara (Ex-CLB)

“It is quite hard to like translate for me for my mum and when the person is me so like the teacher’s going to talk about me and then I have to translate about me, so it’s quite kind of awkward to do that”

Anamika (Ex-CLB)

2

Choosing the best person to act as a translator: questions to support good practice

“It is not fair if you ask a 15 year old, if you think they’ve got emotional issues you wouldn’t ask a child to say can you talk with your parents that, you know, you’ve got problems with making friends. No, you can’t do that because you will hurt the child’s feelings and the child is not able to, you know, to find a reason or find a, find help to help the child herself or himself. Because if you talk to the parents because you want the parents’ advice or you want the parents’ input in order to help the child, so there’s no point involving the child in the translation process because the child may not understand or may not know that the teachers are so concerned about the problem. So, no, I certainly won’t talk about any sensitive issues using the child themselves.”

Phoebe (Teacher)

“I felt like I was exposed to things that I wouldn’t expose my own 7 year old to, no way.”

Ines (Ex-CLB)

When should adults be used?

A range of adults may be used as translators in schools - professional or community interpreters from a local authority or voluntary organisation, a member of staff who is bilingual, and other adults with the required language skills who are known to the family or the school. In some situations it may be essential to use an adult.

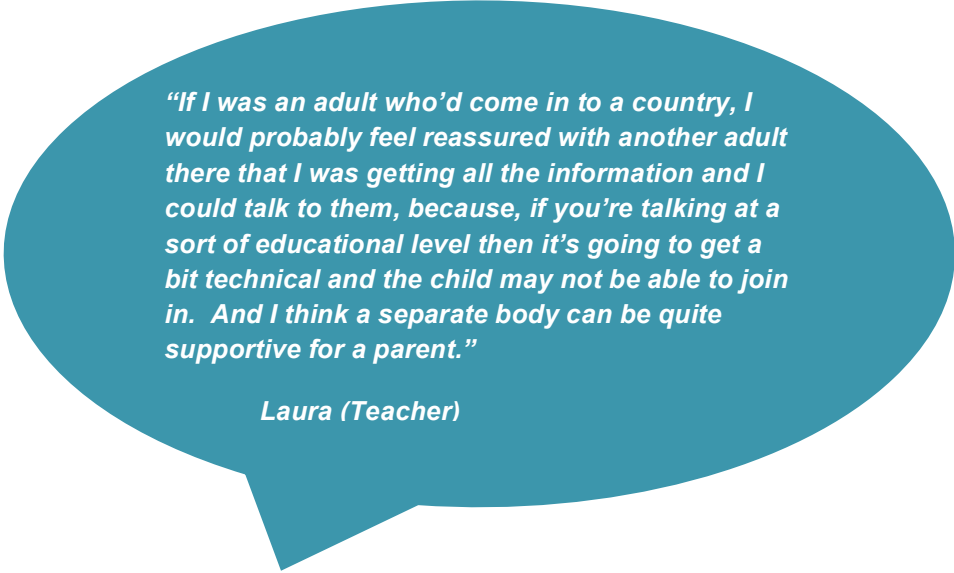
Ask these questions:

- Is there a sensitive issue so that the discussion might become tense or serious or embarrassing?
- Might family members consider it inappropriate for a child to be involved?
- Are there safeguarding issues or a report of domestic violence?
- Are the police involved, e.g. about a drug related incident involving another student?
- Is the subject of the meeting personal or private to those involved?
- Does a child have problems at school?
- May it be necessary to translate a child’s criticisms of a teacher?
- Might the meeting need to cover a complaint about the child who is being asked to translate?

In those circumstances never ask a child or one of their peers to act as a language broker or translator.

When else might adults be used in preference to children?

- Is there a less serious situation where some teachers might prefer an adult because they are seen as better able to keep appropriate boundaries and ensure confidentiality?
- Is the discussion likely to cover topics such as curriculum choices where parents who are unfamiliar with the UK education system may need extensive explanations so that many children and young people would struggle with the language or exposition required? If so, would an adult who is familiar with the school find it easier?



“If I was an adult who’d come in to a country, I would probably feel reassured with another adult there that I was getting all the information and I could talk to them, because, if you’re talking at a sort of educational level then it’s going to get a bit technical and the child may not be able to join in. And I think a separate body can be quite supportive for a parent.”

Laura (Teacher)

How will the decision be made?

- Who decides whether an adult is required? Is the decision left to an individual member of staff or to the parents? If so, what guidance do they have on the school’s policy on the issue?
- Is there, in fact, a clear and explicit school policy on when the involvement of a student is acceptable and when an adult should be used?
- Does the school office have information on how to arrange an adult interpreter or language broker in a crisis or when there is advance notice?
- In multilingual schools does identifying a suitable adult rely solely on informal staff knowledge or is there a list available showing staff and outside adults who have additional language skills?
- Are the parents’ wishes sought and respected? Parents often express a preference for having a language broker from within their own family. If the planned agenda of the meeting means that neither the pupil themselves nor one of their siblings is suitable, the parents might still prefer an adult from within their family network.

3

Involving children and young people: trained young interpreters within a formal scheme

Some schools have formal 'Young Interpreter' schemes through which student volunteers are used as language brokers for other pupils or their parents, usually outside their own age group. The arrangements that our informants respected involved careful selection, brief but systematic training and regular monitoring. The scheme might be home-drawn or linked to and supported by a local authority or independent agency. Do you have enough bilingual pupils to train young interpreters in your school? If YES, you may consider a formal scheme such as Hampshire's¹.

Why train older pupils to interpret for other parents and peers?

- They can act as ambassadors to show new pupils/parents around the school.
- They can give support through acting as language brokers at parents' evenings.
- They may be able to communicate with parents over the phone e.g. when a pupil is unwell.
- They can help new pupils in their classroom understand what the teacher requires them to do.

What might you consider in choosing who to train?

- Would other school staff see a pupil as trustworthy, kind and empathetic?
- Is the pupil competent in BOTH languages (you can ask bilingual staff or community organisations to assess language skills when you train each cohort of new interpreters)?

What factors should be taken into account in planning?

- Make sure the student is giving their time voluntarily and is comfortable with the specific task on every occasion.
- Never use a young interpreter in sensitive situations.
- Except in an emergency, arrange interpreting activities so that there is no disruption of individual pupils' lesson timetables.
- If possible, check interpreting activities against individual timetables.
- Ensure the work of young interpreters in the school is publically recognised and celebrated through, for example:
 - Certificates and badges.
 - Reports to their parents.
 - Testimonials that may be of value to university and job applications.

¹ Hampshire Young Interpreter Scheme <http://www3.hants.gov.uk/education/emtas/goodpractice/ema-hyis.htm>

4

Involving children and young people: interpreting for parents and family members

When is it inappropriate to allow pupils to translate for their parents?

When parents ask that a child or sibling act as language broker for a meeting with them at school, teachers need to consider the points that are listed at the beginning of Section 3 above. Those issues apply to the choice between using any child or young person and using an adult.

In addition, there are further considerations that apply when a child or sibling is acting as the language broker on behalf of a member of their own family. This may not be wise if:

- The school is aware of serious tensions within the family outside school, as asking a child to translate may add to the difficulties.
- There may not even be unusual or serious tensions. Ordinary sibling rivalries may be exacerbated if one is given the powerful position of translating about the other's progress at school.

Should such concerns lead staff to resist using children as language brokers for their parents altogether? That would fail to recognise the strength of some parents' motivation to "keep it in the family". Their reasons were explained by some of the young adults who talked to us in these terms:

- Parents may see it as a way of protecting the family's privacy within the school and within their community.
- They may feel more confidence in their child's support than in that of a stranger.

If there are strong reasons to overrule their wishes, they need to be carefully explained when the additional adult is introduced. The alternative that is offered must ensure confidentiality and must be seen by the parents to do so.

Parents would probably feel more comfortable having someone they knew in there than a complete stranger [...] perhaps they don't know what's going to come up, even if perhaps they think if their child is having difficulties at school that's quite sensitive, they'd rather have another family member than knowing...

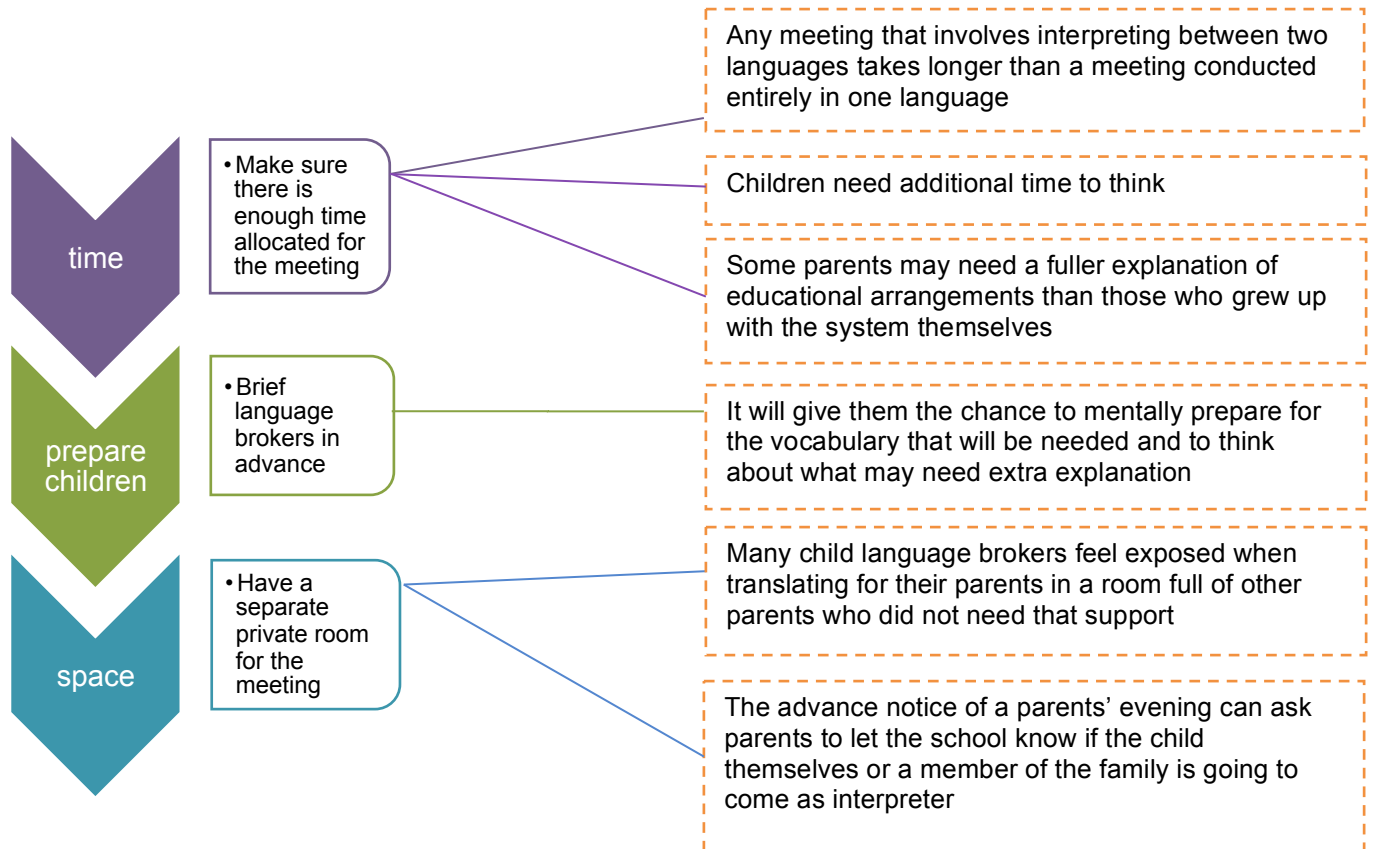
(Nicole, teacher)

I think my parents would have it within the family because it's more trustworthy, it's more reliable I'd say, I think they'd feel more safe, safer

(Sameer, ex-CLB)

Making sure that a parent meeting that involves a young interpreter or language broker goes smoothly

The most extensive evidence we received from teachers and from young adults with relevant experience as a language broker in school concerned this topic. Most of the observations on these three pages apply equally when a child or young person is translating for a family member and when a trained Young Interpreter is translating for a child who is not related to them.



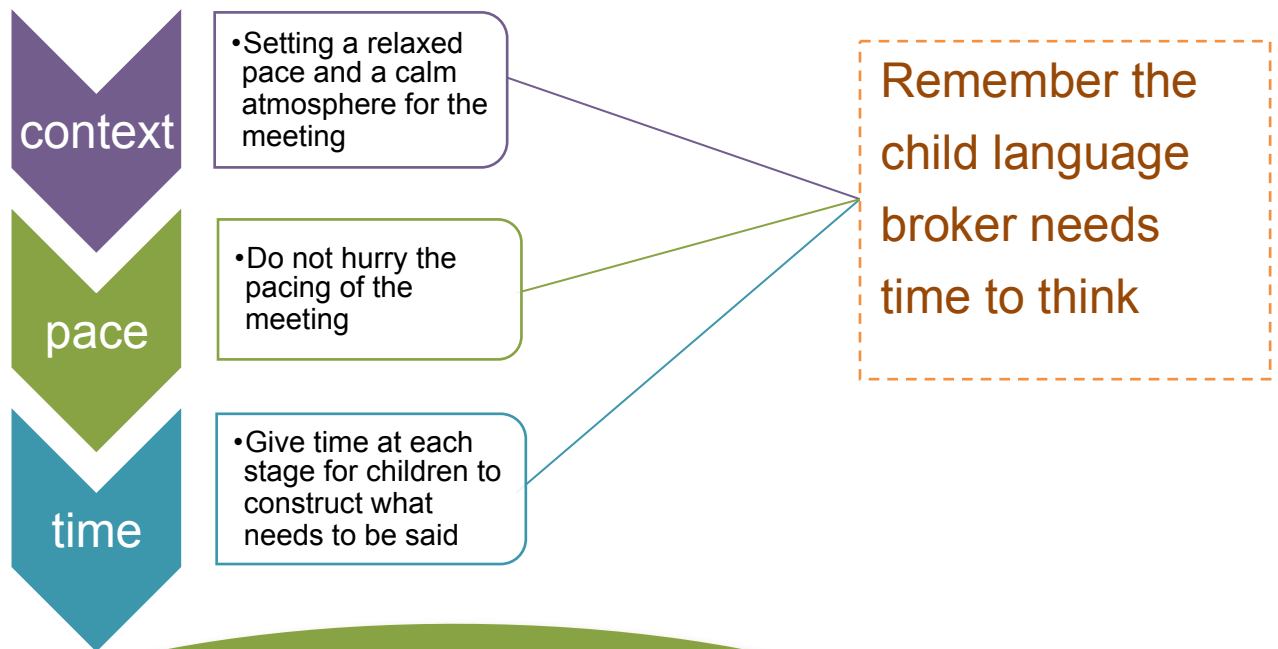
The first thing we do is I contact the child and say will you do this, is that ok for you to do this. And she said yes she was ok with that. And then I contact the parents to make sure that they're ok with it, in case there's somebody else in their family because we have to withdraw that student from a lesson so it means that she would miss some of her lesson and she has to be able to catch up with that work [...] So I make sure that everybody's happy first. Then I arrange the time and the day. Then I get a room so it wouldn't, it could be out here because it's nice and open but we don't do it in front of anybody else, we have a quiet room

(Amv. Teacher)

You've got everybody else looking at you and it's horrible, it makes you feel like oh let's just hurry up and, and just go and if she [mother] didn't understand, tough, I'll just be like ok I'll explain it when I get home

(Ines, ex-CLB)

What teachers can do during the meeting for the child



It was kind of harder at the beginning because like people would just keep talking and I'd be like woah, you're too fast. But then when I do it now I'll be like oh you can tell me about 4 sentences and then I'll just translate and then we'll continue. Like I have a little system now so I explain it to people before they start talking

(Isabel, ex-CLB)

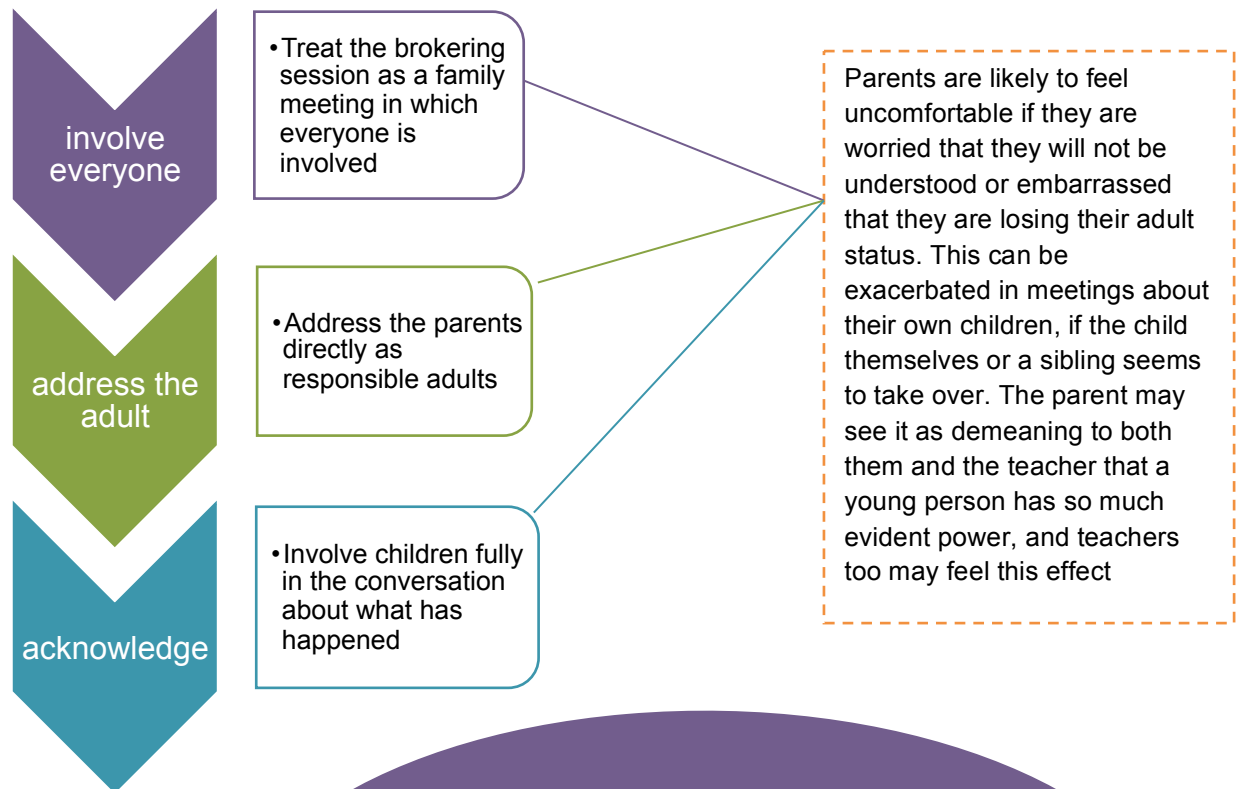
I try to like say something positive to break that ice, that, er, that electrical, so I try to put it in a, in another way, finding another maybe solution or finding alternatives maybe, yeah, to helping the child as well because I can see there is a bit of an awkward situation so I try to turn it around

(Lucia, teacher)

When you're kind of stressed and you're under pressure to do something, to translate immediately and give a response immediately, so it happens that I forgot to translate something or miss something. So then I give them the word in German and hope that they know the word or not, or if this does not work then I try to describe the word and meaning and hope for the best!

(Kara, ex-CLB)

What teachers can do during the meeting for the parent



When she's [the teacher] looking at me and talking to me, I would look at my mum and my mum just looked like she wanted to dig a hole and then, you know, get in there because it shouldn't be like that, you should be addressing the grown-up, that's how I see it. You should talk to her and then I sort of should just be the voice in the background saying what I'm supposed to be saying

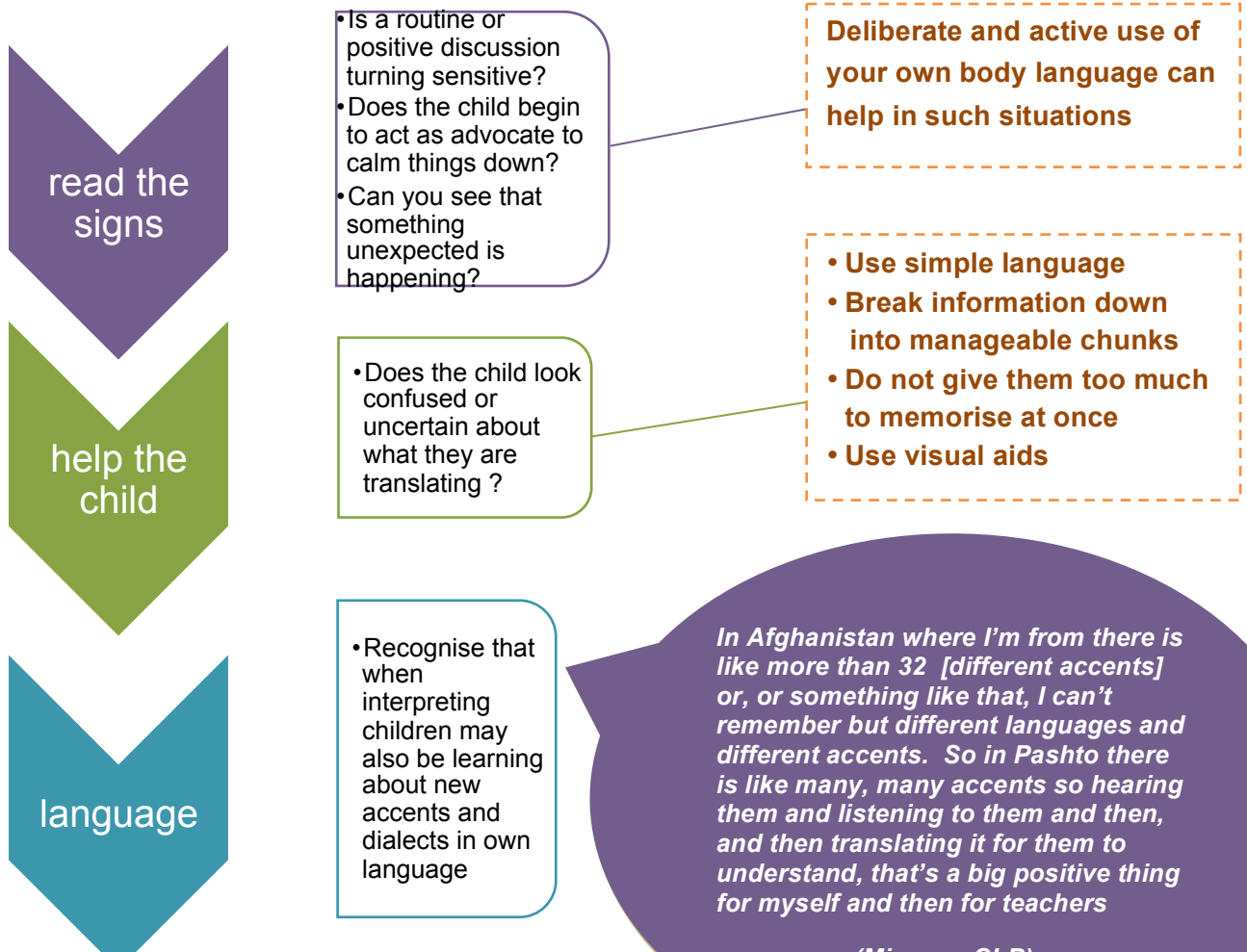
(Ines, ex-CLB)

If your child is translating for you in a meeting such as a Parents Evening meeting where the teacher actually, that shifts, there's been a shift in control and it's moved to the child, and they must feel that that's not the norm

(Nicole, teacher)

Be aware of the meeting's dynamics

The dynamics of these meetings can be complex. A teacher needs to be alert to signs that what was expected to be a routine or positive discussion is turning sensitive. In some circumstances a Young Interpreter may begin to act as advocate to calm things down. In one situation that was described to us a mother tried to tell a teacher that her daughter was being bullied at school but the girl tried to play it down wanting to avoid a fuss. The teacher could see that something unexpected was happening and needed to probe in order to learn what the problem was



Some of the teachers are like, they don't know that if you say loads of things together, if I'm going to translate loads of things together I might miss some of the points. So, so some teachers are really good with that, they will break it down like the paragraph say with a couple of sentences which is really good, then they help me to translate which is, which will be really clear for the parents

(Anamika, ex-CLB)

Number one would be use hand gestures a lot but also use other visuals. I quite often have a, my iPad will have a chart with the child's, their levels and showing where they've come from and where they are now

(Nicole, teacher)

What Young Interpreters and Child Language Brokers can be encouraged to do

A number of the young adults told us about strategies they used when experiencing difficulties with their interpreting. These difficulties included not having an equivalent word in their own language (e.g. when there was a technical or subject-related word to translate). Sometimes the problem was that they did not understand the meaning of the English word at all. When young brokers were in the early stages of learning the language and were fairly new to brokering they did describe feeling worried about their language skills. However, with more brokering experience their confidence rapidly grew. Teachers can encourage them to:



- Stick to word-for-word translation where possible
- If that cannot be done, convey the general meaning
- Keep calm, not rush and speak slowly



- Ask your teacher to discuss beforehand how best to manage the interpreting process (e.g. how long the teacher should talk for before pausing for you to translate)
- Ask them to repeat or explain anything you have not fully understood (e.g. technical words)



- Keep alert to the possibility that the parent or teacher needs extra explanation of what the other has said

I'll just probably ask, if, if the English teacher uses a couple of words that I didn't understand I will just straight, ask straight away I didn't quite get it, could you just say it in a different way, yeah

(Anamika, ex-CLB)

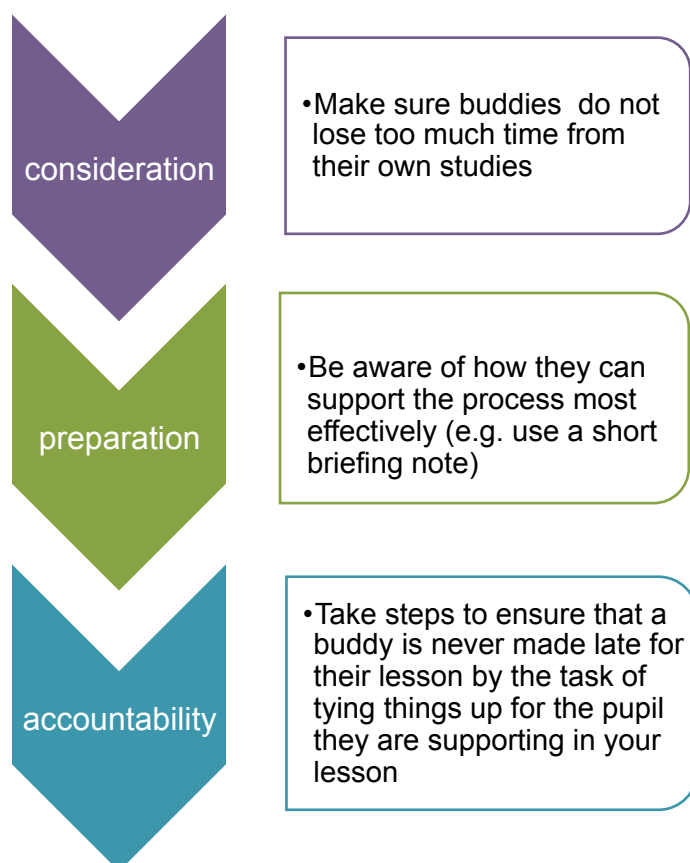
And then with parents, if you're there, if the teacher is saying something you have to be saying the same thing, you cannot lie or anything like that, even if it's your brother or your dad or mum.

(Mina, ex-CLB)

5

Involving children and young people: supporting peers in the classroom and around the school

The research project that led to the production of this guide was not primarily concerned with situations in which children act as “buddies” for newly arrived pupils but many of those who spoke to us chose to comment on these arrangements. Much of what they had to say echoed points that had been made about other uses of child language brokers. The act of language brokering for one’s peers in the classroom or around the school often engendered pride in those who took on the role, built up their confidence and consolidated their skills in both the languages they used. When such arrangements were carefully planned and prepared for, they eased the adjustment of the new pupils into school, reduced their level of anxiety and sense of isolation and enhanced faster integration into their new school community. But these benefits are only realised, we were told, when the arrangements are set up and monitored with care. The “buddy” should be selected with due consideration.



We buddy them up together for the beginning, until they’re ready to make their own friends and go off their own way. And that has been hugely, you know, successful within the school, hugely successful.

(Alice, teacher)

In year 8 there was a girl from Colombia who came to our country school for the first time and she was going to join the school permanently but she didn’t speak a word of English so I had to, so I had to sit next to her in all her lessons to translate from Spanish to English and English to Spanish. And I personally felt I benefited from it because in a way I was practising my Spanish but in a way it was also quite, not hard but like it was hard for me to concentrate on my work and do hers at the same time

(Celia, ex-CLB)

It changed me a lot because when I feel, I feel like when I was at the time I would, I was, I was thinking that I'm nothing, nothing at all. But at this stage I feel when I sit down and think about it, I think that is that me who was something, and then who was not knowing nothing, is that me doing something like that. I feel more, more like being in a big space or in a big thing that yes I'm doing something better for myself, I'm learning, I'm exploring more and, because it wouldn't seem a big thing but if you think about it, it seems a great opportunity or a great work that you're doing.

(Mina, ex-CLB)

I think there are more advantages than disadvantages because it makes you look more mature and grown up and you take responsibility and you kind of learn professionally how to translate and I think your language improves a lot and you kind of learn a lot more about having proper professional conversations with grown-ups.

(Kara, ex-CLB)

I think there has never been a disadvantage, there was always advantage because I'm like talking to new people, I'm learning more words and stuff and I'm getting confident which is advantage and also I can write it on my [...] cards, I can write it on my CV, yeah it's just like more advantage. Like my [...] cards it will look nice, I can write it on my personal statement and whoever's going to see it, they will say mm, she's a rounded personality, she likes helping, so yeah.

(Anamika, ex-CLB)

At first I was like insecure because I didn't, you know, I've never done any translation or any interpretation or anything like that but after that I started to feel more confident and used my communication skills and it helped me a lot to communicate with people that I don't know. So eventually that will help my future, you know, if someone doesn't know English then I could help them.

(Nathaly, ex-CLB)



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