

race equality teaching

volume 31 number 3 summer 2013

RACE EQUALITY TEACHING RACE EQUALITY TEACHING RACE EQUALITY TEACHING FORMERLY MCT MULTICULTURAL TEACHING

■ EDITORIAL ■ NEWS AND COMMENT ■ EDUCATION AND SOCIETY IN MULTI-ETHNIC BRITAIN SINCE 1981: AN ESSAY IN SUBJUNCTIVE HISTORY ■ HOW FAITH SETTINGS CONTRIBUTE TO CHILDREN'S LEARNING ■ INTERCONNECTING CHILDREN'S WORLDS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS ■ PRACTITIONERS' AND PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES AND ATTITUDES ABOUT BILINGUAL EDUCATION ■ USING LITERATURE TO TEACH ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE ■ ISINGQUMO: CLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE THROUGH LANGUAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA ■ CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERING IN SCHOOLS: WHY DOES IT MATTER? ■ ADVANCING LANGUAGE CAPABILITY FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BRITAIN ■ THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH ROMA ■
REPORTS AND REVIEWS

Child language brokering in schools: Why does it matter?

Evangelia Prokopiou, Tony Cline and Sarah Crafter

In this article we report on a small-scale project, now in progress, which aims to lay the foundation for developing a guide to good practice for the use of child language brokering (CLB) in schools. The research team hopes to lay the groundwork for the development of guidelines for schools and the basis for further work on theorizing the social and cultural significance of CLB. The study will involve (i) an online survey of teachers in primary and secondary schools and of ex-CLBs and (ii) an interview study exploring detailed questions in depth with a small number of selected respondents.

Background

Family life is changing fast but school practices are not keeping up (Cline *et al.*, 2009). This small-scale study aims to contribute to the evolution of policy and practice in an area of particularly rapid change: the languages spoken in schools. Family migration into and across Europe has increased substantially, enhanced in the UK by the opening up of the labour market to nationals from the A8 countries. The increase no longer affects inner-city areas only, which have long contained multilingual children. As new workers settle in rural areas, their children attend schools with little past experience of working with immigrant families.

A frequent challenge for teachers and parents is the lack of a shared language for discussions about the school's expectations and the children'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 faster than their parents, increasing numbers of young people contribute to family life by acting as child language brokers (CLBs) for their parents.

Surveys in the USA have indicated that CLBs translate notes and letters from school for their parents more often than other documents (Weisskirch, 2005), and that school is one of the most frequent venues where they interpret for them in face-to-face meetings (Tse, 1995; 1996). However, CLB research in this country has given most attention to language brokering in medical settings, exploring the perspectives of GPs, primary care nurses and CLBs themselves (see Gerrish *et al.*, 2004). So far there have been no studies in the UK of how frequently CLBs are relied on in urban schools, and none of teachers' professional perspectives on their interpreting activities, nor of the views of students who had acted as CLBs while they were at school (Cline *et al.*, 2010).

There has been some official support for schemes in which bilingual students were trained to act as interpreters for other students' parents at national (QCA, 2008) and local level (Hampshire Ethnic Minority and Traveller Service, 2010), but no official guidance exists on the commoner practice of using students to translate on their family's behalf when the conversation with teachers is about their own or a sibling's educational progress. We have been unable to trace any explicit school policy statements or Ofsted observations on the practice. It is not covered in initial teacher education. To some extent the absence reflects an ambivalent attitude to the practice that permeates professional and academic commentary on the subject.

On the one hand, our recent review (Cline *et al.*, 2010) identified well-founded professional resistance to the use of children in the language broker (LB) role in sensitive or challenging meetings. Like other non-professional interpreters, they are likely to make mistakes in their translations (Flores *et al.*, 2003) – when technical words or key features of a situation are misunderstood, for instance. The responsibility placed on the broker might be stressful and excessive. Some commentators have advocated that children should never be used as language brokers in school settings (e.g. Linse, 2011). Their view is endorsed by many other professionals, especially when sensitive or confidential matters are to be discussed – for example, in nursing (Gerrish *et al.*, 2004) or social work (Chand, 2005).

Other surveys of those directly involved, however, have suggested a more pragmatic approach that permits the use of CLBs in relatively straightforward consultations when the family wishes (Cohen *et al.*, 1999). It is well-documented that many immigrant parents and grandparents prefer a language broker from within their own family to an external professional interpreter for certain purposes (Rhodes and Nocon, 2003), though this is certainly not a universal view (Gerrish *et al.*, 2004). Those in favour of using family language brokers argue that they are more accessible when you need them (Free *et al.*, 2003; de Abreu and Lambert, 2003), more likely to understand exactly what their relative requires (Free *et al.*, 2003) and more likely to respect family confidentiality (Cohen *et al.*, 1999). Parents may feel that with their child as interpreter they can retain greater control over the conversation, since they appreciate to some extent how much the child understands the language and the situation and can interrogate them more closely about what is being said when they feel it necessary to do so (Hall *et al.*, 1990). Thus surveys of parents and other professionals do not offer a clear set of conclusions on which schools may base policies for which there is likely to be consensual support. Rather, the

research evidence on CLB activity in other settings suggests that there are complex and controversial issues still to be resolved.

We have another reason for focusing our research specifically on CLBs in the school setting: the concerns that have been expressed differ significantly from those in medical and legal settings. In a doctor's surgery or a lawyer's office the children act unequivocally as brokers on behalf of their family. They do not purport to be detached or independent in the way a professional interpreter aspires to be, but are seen instead to be working actively to support the family's interests. This is one reason why their parents trust them: the family work as a team in the meeting (Valdés, 2003). When children broker language at school, however, the interests of parent and child, by contrast, might not always be aligned. Hall and Sham (2007) gave an example of a child altering notes written by her father to the school, and Sánchez and Orellana (2006) closely analysed how some of the Mexican-American children in their sample consistently downgraded their teachers' praise during parent-teacher conferences. The authors' explanations for this unexpected finding were limited by the design of their study, which did not include a post-conference interview with the students. Our study aims to complement such findings by exploring in detail the perspectives of ex-CLBs on school situations of that kind.

Aims and research questions

The primary aim of the project is to provide an evidence base to make practice more sensitive and to ensure that school policies on the use of pupils as language brokers for their own parents and others in school are more carefully articulated. Such policies might outline (i) the circumstances in which the use of a CLB would be justified and those in which alternative arrangements would be preferable or essential, (ii) the provision of preparation and support for CLBs and school staff to ensure that identified pitfalls of CLB use are avoided, and (iii) the

formal recognition of the efforts CLB make and the skills they demonstrate through such activity. Other issues that guidance to schools and school policies should cover may emerge from the findings of the study. To this end we will investigate and triangulate the views and experiences of two groups who have been largely ignored in previous CLB research in this country and who we expect to bring distinctive and complementary perspectives to the topic: teachers in schools in multilingual areas and young adults who acted as language brokers in the course of their own school career (ex-CLBs).

The study will address the following research questions in relation to both groups:

- How often and for what purposes are CLBs used in schools?
- To what degree are CLBs used in routine contacts with parents (their own and those of others), in more sensitive discussions about vulnerable pupils (e.g. about special educational needs) and in discussions when crucial matters are being resolved (e.g. planning for subject choices in Year 10)?
- What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of school language brokering arrangements?
- How do teachers and ex-CLBs perceive CLBs in terms of their alignment with family or personal interests as against the detached, independent values of translation and interpreting?
- What views do ex-CLBs currently have of their experience of the process, of their own agency, competence and effectiveness and of how the process was facilitated or obstructed by the actions and attitudes of their teachers?
- What recommendations would current teachers and ex-CLBs make on how to improve schools' policies and practices on CLB activity?
- What differences of view and understanding are there between teachers who are

themselves bilingual or multilingual, teachers who are monolingual and ex-CLBs?

A secondary aim of the study, in addition to supporting the evolution of policy in practical terms, will be to lay the basis for further work on theorizing the social and cultural significance of CLB. To what degree will the construction of CLB activities by the teachers and young adults in this study confirm earlier findings that challenge narrow views of this role in adolescence (Crafter *et al.*, 2009) and the developmental scripts that underplay adolescents' sense of interdependence with other family members (Dorner *et al.*, 2008; Cline *et al.*, 2011)?

For teachers and ex-CLBs the study will involve an online survey of a substantial number of respondents (phase 1), followed by an interview study that explores detailed questions in greater depth with a small number of selected respondents (phase 2). Enquiries will focus on the frequency and purposes of CLB use in schools in routine contacts with parents, more sensitive discussions about vulnerable pupils and discussions when crucial matters are being resolved. The analysis will involve stakeholders' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of existing arrangements and the alignment of CLBs with family or personal interests. Ex-CLBs will be encouraged to review their experience of the process and how it was facilitated or obstructed by the actions and attitudes of their teachers.

We are grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for the financial support that makes the project possible. For more information please visit our website: <http://child-language-brokering.weebly.com>

Evangelia Prokopiou and Tony Cline are based at the Educational Psychology Group, University College London, and Sarah Crafter at the Institute of Education, University of London.

References

- de Abreu, G. and Lambert, H. (2003) *The Education of Portuguese Students in England and Channel Island Schools*. Final report of research project commissioned by Ministério de Educação, Portugal.
- Chand, A. (2005) 'Do you speak English? Language barriers in child protection social work with minority ethnic families'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35, 807–21.
- Cline, T., Crafter, S., de Abreu, G. and O'Dell, L. (2009) 'Changing families, changing childhoods: changing schools?' *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27 (1), 29–39.
- Cline, T., de Abreu, G., O'Dell, L. and Crafter, S. (2010) 'Recent research on child language brokering in the United Kingdom'. *MediAzioni*, 10, 105–24. Special issue on child language brokering. Online. www.mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it
- Cline, T., Crafter, S., O'Dell, L. and de Abreu, G. (2011) 'Young people's representations of language brokering'. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 32 (3), 207–20.
- Cohen, S., Moran-Ellis, J. and Smaje, C. (1999) 'Children as informal interpreters in GP consultations: Pragmatics and ideology'. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 21 (2), 163–86.
- Crafter, S., O'Dell, L., de Abreu, G. and Cline, T. (2009) 'Young people's representations of "atypical" work in English society'. *Children and Society*, 23, 176–88.
- Dorner, L.M., Orellana, M.F. and Jiménez, R. (2008) "'It's one of those things that you do to help the family": Language brokering and the development of immigrant adolescents'. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 23 (5), 515–43.
- Flores, G., Barton Laws, M., Mayo, S.J., Zuckerman, B., Abreu, M., Medina, L. and Hardt, E.J. (2003) 'Errors in medical interpretation and their potential clinical consequences in pediatric encounters'. *Pediatrics*, 111 (1), 6–14.
- Free, C., Green, J., Bhavani, V. and Newman, A. (2003) 'Bilingual young people's experience of interpreting in primary care: A qualitative study'. *British Journal of General Practice*, 53, 530–35.
- Gerrish, K., Chau, R., Sobowale, A. and Birks, E. (2004) 'Bridging the language barrier: The use of interpreters in primary care nursing'. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 12 (5), 407–13.
- Hall, N. and Sham, S. (2007) 'Language brokering as young people's work: Evidence from Chinese adolescents in England'. *Language and Education*, 21 (1), 16–30.
- Hall, N., Sham, S. and Robinson, A. (1990) 'Language brokering as young people's work: Evidence from Chinese adolescents in England'. Unpublished report.
- Hampshire Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (2010) 'Hampshire Young Interpreter Scheme'. Online. www3.hants.gov.uk/education/ema/ema-schools/ema-good-practice/ema-hyis.htm (Accessed 30 November 2011).
- Linse, C.T. (2011) 'Creating taxonomies to improve home-school connections with families of culturally and linguistically diverse learners'. *Education and Urban Society*, 43 (6), 651–70.
- QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) (2008) *Respect for All: Interpreter training*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Previously available at www.qca.org.uk/qca_7987.aspx (Accessed 23 June 2008).
- Rhodes, P. and Nocon, A. (2003) 'A problem of communication? Diabetes care among Bangladeshi people in Bradford'. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 11 (1), 45–54.
- Sánchez, I.G. and Orellana, M.F. (2006) 'The construction of moral and social identity in immigrant children's narratives-in-translation'. *Linguistics and Education*, 17, 209–39.
- Tse, L. (1995) 'Language brokering among Latino adolescents: Prevalence, attitudes, and school performance'. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 17, 180–93.
- (1996) 'Language brokering in linguistic minority communities: the case of Chinese- and Vietnamese-American students'. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 20 (3–4), 485–98.
- Valdés, G. (ed.) (2003) *Expanding Definitions of Giftedness: The case of young interpreters from immigrant communities*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Weisskirch, R.S. (2005) 'The relationship of language brokering to ethnic identity for Latino early adolescents'. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 27, 286–99.