

## CHAPTER 4

# What is child language brokering? Why does it exist?

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This chapter explains why children and adolescents are required to perform linguistic and cultural mediation, for whom they language broker, and in what situations.

The chapter's activities will enable students and teachers to:

- Understand what child language brokering is and what it entails
- Reflect on the difficulty of adjusting to life in another country
- Become aware of the challenges that language brokers face, sometimes on a daily basis

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

When we think about childhood and adolescence, we think about going to school, playing, making friends, taking part in sports, etc. What we do not typically envision is children and young people acting as language and cultural mediators, for other children and even adults, in situations and in relation to topics and issues from which minors are usually protected. Activities in which children and young people take on such a role are labelled child language brokering. This chapter will explain why children are often required to language broker; what they translate, what situations they mediate in, and for whom they do so; and the effect the practice has on their and their families' lives.

## 4.2. CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERING IN HISTORY

Throughout history, bi/multilingual speakers have been involved in facilitating communication, and we can safely assume that children too are very likely to have acted as interpreters and translators. Yet little is known about children who did so and the linguistic and cultural mediation activities they performed. There are very few documented records of the lives and expe-

riences of child language brokers in past centuries. A notable exception is the compelling story of the language brokering performed by four remarkable historical figures: Pocahontas and the English boys forced to live with powerful American Indian leaders to act as intermediaries. When the English settled in Virginia, both English and Powhatan leaders soon realised the value of trading adolescents to learn one another's language and culture and to act as language and cultural mediators between them. Pocahontas is regarded as being one of the first cultural mediators on American soil. She was known throughout the colonies as a mediator between the settlers of Jamestown and the Algonquian Indian tribes, and was entrusted with helping the British and her people, the Powhatan, trade and socialise. Similarly, three British boys, Thomas Savage (in 1608), Henry Spelman (in 1609) and Robert Poole (in 1611), went to live with the Powhatan to learn their language and absorb their culture. American English still reflects those efforts to communicate. Examples of Powhatan words that have been adopted in English include raccoon, opossum, hickory, pecan, moccasin and tomahawk.



### 4.3. CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERING TODAY

Another interesting documented account of child language brokering depicts the translator role performed by the young Lady Elizabeth, the future Queen Elizabeth I of England. In 1544, when she was 11 years old, she translated a long French religious poem as a present for her stepmother Catherine Parr, the last wife of Henry VIII. She could speak many languages, including Latin, French, Italian and Spanish. She continued to translate for pleasure and to improve her knowledge of the languages involved throughout her life.



Child language brokering is not a thing of the past, however. It is still an extremely common practice, which even today remains largely invisible and thus unrecognised. Child language brokering is generally associated with children and young people with an immigrant background who, by choice or out of a sense of duty, help their families interact with the society and institutions of their new country of residence. When a family moves to another country, one of the first things parents do is enrol their children in school. Hence, the children become acquainted with the new language and culture more rapidly than their parents and other adult family members do, and are thus in a position to help their relatives adjust to life in the new country.

But why are children and young people required to translate for others instead of having a professional interpreter do so? There are several possible reasons for the practice, including a lack of funding and resources to pay for the services of professional interpreters/translators; a lack of knowledge of the right that migrants have to avail themselves of alternative resources (i.e. professional interpreters); and the fact that parents may feel more comfortable with

having their child translate for them, especially when family matters are being discussed.

While child language brokering is generally associated with minors with a migrant background, it is important to underline that it is also performed by children of deaf adults (known as CODAs) and by native children/young people who learn languages at school and help newcomers adjust to life there, among others.

As child language brokering becomes more visible, some countries (including the USA) and professional associations have started introducing regulations to avoid the involvement of young interpreters in delicate situations in which they may be exposed to sensitive issues, such as in hospitals. However, that is more the exception than the rule. In most countries there are very few official documents (laws, regulations, guidelines, etc.) that make direct reference to child language brokering or provide guidance on safeguarding the children and young people involved.



#### DID YOU KNOW THAT...

**in 2016, Malia Obama, daughter of the then president of the United States, Barack Obama, acted as her father's personal interpreter during his historic trip to Cuba?**

Malia was shown translating Spanish for her father in a photo that has since gone viral.

[Read on](#) to learn more about child language brokering and how that came to be the term used most frequently for the practice today.

#### WHAT CAN I PASS ON TO MY STUDENTS?

- **Child language brokering is an unknown part of the life of immigrant children and young people.**
- **It is a practice that was carried out in the past, although there are just a few documented accounts that describe those who performed it and how they did so.**
- **It is still a very common practice today and is not limited to children/young people with an immigrant background; anyone who speaks a second language or dialect can language broker.**



#### 4.4. WHY THE TERM CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERING?

Children and adolescents who language broker use their linguistic skills and cultural competence in two (or more) languages and/or dialects to read, write, listen, speak and do things for other people. The term child language brokering became established in the 1990s, when a growing number of researchers, particularly in the US and within specific ethnic communities (Latin, Vietnamese, Russian), started uncovering the ins and outs of the practice. Thanks to their research, it became increasingly clear that what such children and young people do is quite complex: it is not only a question of transferring meaning from one language to another but also requires them to develop and use a wide array of skills and strategies.

Various terms have been coined to describe the practice over the years, including 'natural translation', 'family interpreting', 'para-phrasing', 'literacy brokering' and, more recently, 'culture brokering'. They are all intended to capture the complexity of the task for the children and young people who perform it, as well as to frame it as part of their migration experience.

**Natural translation** is the term that Brian Harris, one of the founding fathers of the study of child language brokering, put forward in the 1970s to describe how bilinguals are able to translate from one language into another from a very young age and without any formal training.

**Family interpreting** is used especially in reference to language brokering activities performed by both adults and minors in institutional settings, such as the health sector (e.g. in hospitals or at doctors' surgeries) or when accessing public services.

**Para-phrasing** is a term coined by US researcher Marjorie Orellana and her colleagues. It is a play on words based on 'para' (the Spanish word for 'for') and 'phrase', meaning using other words, which is what children do when they "phrase" things for others, intra- and interlinguistically, to accomplish social goals.

**Literacy brokering** is perhaps one of the most common forms of child language brokering, yet also one of the least explored. The term refers to all practices in which bilingual or native children are asked to sum up, explain, translate or rephrase what teachers say in classes, messages to parents, and so on (see sections 4.5 and 4.6 for a more detailed description of child language brokering in schools and other settings).

**Culture brokering** is the term some researchers use to provide an all-inclusive perspective on child language brokering by framing it as an experience that is part of a multidimensional process encompassing both the culture of origin and the culture of resettlement.

More recently, in his blog, [Unprofessional Translation](#), Brian Harris suggested that the term child language brokering should be further redefined on the basis of the age of the young person involved in interpreting/translation activities, as follows:

1. **Infant translators / language brokers.** Children under five years of age. Children may be able to do some translating at that age, but are unlikely to be capable of language brokering because they have not yet developed the necessary knowledge of the world.

## 2. Child translators / language brokers.

Children from five to 10 years of age (primary education age).

**3. Adolescent (or ado-) translators / language brokers.** Young people from 11 to 18 years of age (secondary education age).

**4. Adult translators / language brokers.** Over 18 years of age. Because once a language broker, always a language broker: many former child language brokers continue to help their parents and families as adults.

**5. School-age translators / language brokers.** From five to 17 years of age. This category could be used to cover the second and third categories above and thus include all children/young people in the formal education system.

Child language brokering is the term that has become most widely accepted and used over the years because it is the one that best captures the complex arrays and interplay of skills required of children and young people when they mediate linguistically and culturally. Child language brokering is a far more complex practice than people unfamiliar with it may assume. What makes it so complex is the need to perform several tasks and use different skills simultaneously: child language brokers must not only transfer the sense of what is being said to another language but also respond to the power relationships, cultural backgrounds, ages and experiences of the people involved.

Moreover, they need to take some wider contextual issues into account, such as “the degree of trust by the adults in the child, the short, medium and long-term consequences of what is brokered, the number of other speakers involved” (Hall and Guery 2010: 34).



### DID YOU KNOW THAT...

**there are several films that portray the bittersweet reality of being a child language broker?** Two of the most popular are *La Famille Bélier* and *Spanglish*.

Does all this sound interesting? Curious to learn more? If so, read on to get a more detailed picture of where child language brokering occurs, who it involves, and how it affects the lives of language brokers and their families.

## 4.5. WHERE, WHAT AND FOR WHOM DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LANGUAGE BROKER?

Since the 1970s, when child language brokering became an object of study, researchers have been able to observe and describe who child language brokers translate for, the contexts and situations in which they do so, how they do so, and how they feel about it.





While there are no official statistics or data on how frequently child language brokering occurs in individual countries or on a more global scale, research has helped to reveal some important facts about the practice. It has been estimated that between 57% and 100% of migrant children/young people from different language and ethnic communities act as language brokers. Children usually start language brokering between the ages of eight and 12 (but may do so much earlier). It is not uncommon for children who take up residence in a new country to start language brokering just a few months after arriving there. Child language brokering may be performed informally, such as when translating at home, for a classmate, or for a parent at a supermarket.

However, many language brokers are also required to translate in more formal contexts, such as when helping their parents to interact with their family doctor or to fill in official forms. Children and young people can language broker in a vast range of contexts and situations that require diverse linguistic, brokering and cultural skills and involve different participants.

Young interpreters might help their parents, other relatives or other people from their ethnic or language group/community access the services of banks, trade unions, the police, hospitals and doctors' surgeries, supermarkets, post offices, etc. In such contexts and situations,

they may be asked to interpret conversations and/or translate texts from forms, labels, information sheets, and so on.

Over the past 20 years, a constantly growing number of researchers have contributed to the study of child language brokering, thus helping to further knowledge of the practice and to raise awareness of the fact that it can affect children and young people in different ways. Generally speaking, child language brokering can have both a positive and a negative impact on the children/young people who carry it out, as well as on all the other people involved (families, peers, teachers, etc.). It has been described as having a positive impact in terms of increased academic competence and the development of linguistic, cultural, lexical, and translation skills, people skills, and self-assurance.

Conversely, there are studies according to which some children/young people experience and describe child language brokering in negative terms. Some studies have highlighted that it can have a negative effect on the cultural identity of children and young people, as well as on all the skills and attributes listed above. That can be put down to child language brokers having to deal with power (im)balances stemming from their migrant status, needing to interact with adults or being forced to act as language brokers.

Moreover, child language brokering may be perceived as a burden because of the responsibilities it entails, such as having to take on the role of an adult and decision-maker in the family, as well as because children may have to miss lessons to assist their parents and due to the emotional impact the practice has on child language brokers and their family relations (as explained in chapter 5).

#### DID YOU KNOW THAT...

**in 2009, 11-year-old Spanish-English bilingual Oscar Rodriguez of Las Vegas, Nevada, was hailed as a hero by firefighters and paramedics** for helping them communicate with non-English speaking passengers after a serious bus accident in which many people were killed or injured? He translated from an ambulance stretcher for busy rescue workers as they hurried to set up a triage centre for the people injured in the accident.



## 4.6. LANGUAGE BROKERING IN SCHOOLS

As already mentioned, one of the settings in which child language brokering is very likely to occur is school, where children and young people are often involved in language and literacy brokering. There are different school-related situations in which children/young people act as language brokers. They involve different people and can happen in different places and at different times: in classrooms, on other school premises (yards, playgrounds, on the way in and out of school), during breaks, and also outside school, such as at home (helping siblings or classmates or while being helped by parents with homework).

One typical scenario involves a student being asked by teachers to help another student: a classmate, a sibling or a pupil in another class. In such cases, the student will explain, translate or para-phrase lessons, assignments, rules, and messages between the school and the other student's family.

In a second typical scenario, a student is asked to language broker between two adults, usually a teacher and one of the student's parents or other relatives, a member of school staff or another child's parent. Such cases may involve language brokering at parent-teacher meetings, in emergency situations or over the phone, as well as translating school-related documents/materials.





A third typical scenario sees language brokering occurring in a peer-to-peer situation, i.e. with classmates, siblings or students from other classes. In such cases, language brokering is performed to help the other student socialise both in classrooms and outside (e.g. during breaks, in the canteen or on the playground).

Children and young people do not only mediate in the school domain. Their language brokering activities may occur outside school, although their purpose is always to help other people understand how things work. Examples include finding time and using traditional or creative ways and materials to teach their host country's language to other children or their own parents, as well as when playing at the park/playground or when playing sports. Chapter 5 provides a more in-depth analysis of language brokering in schools and the dos and don'ts of the practice.

#### DID YOU KNOW THAT...

**since 2009, the In MedIO Puer(I) research group has been organising a contest** in which students from primary and middle schools in Italy are asked to submit a drawing or a narrative describing child language brokering? A jury selects the winners and awards them and their schools plaques and other prizes at a formal ceremony.

## 4.7. CONCLUSION

Even if you have observed child language brokers in action or have actually been one yourself, you were probably unaware just how complex the practice really is. Children and young people who translate for their peers or for adults do not simply transfer meaning from one language to another. Although they are unlikely to have received training in interpreting/translation when they take the place of professional interpreters, they have to use a range of skills to do much more than provide a word-for-word translation, so as to allow the people they are helping to understand how things work and learn about another culture and system (as explained in chapter 2). Chapter 5 in this Teacher's Book will give you an insight into the complications that child language brokering entails, how the task makes the children and young people who carry it out feel, and how to safeguard the wellbeing and rights of young language brokers.



### WHAT CAN I PASS ON TO MY STUDENTS?

- **There are different terms for the practice discussed in this chapter, but child language brokering is the most widely accepted and used because it is considered the one that best captures all the complexities involved.**
- **Research has shown that children and young people who language broker may do so in all formal and informal areas of their lives.**
- **One of the settings in which child language brokering is most likely to occur is school, where children and young people can be asked to language broker for their peers and adults.**
- **Child language brokering can have both a positive and a negative impact on the children/young people who perform the task, and adults need to be aware of its possible effects.**



## TEACHER'S NOTES

## ACTIVITY 4A. In my place

**In this activity, students will...**

- Become more aware of the many obstacles that newly arrived students have to overcome.
- Identify those obstacles.
- Reflect on the fact that adjusting to life in another country does not simply entail learning a new language.
- Discuss the fact that we are very often unaware of what moving to another country really means for a young person.

ESTIMATED  
TIME

40 MIN

**How to use this resource**

<b>STAGE 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ask your students about their experiences in or knowledge of a foreign country.</li> <li>· Ask them if they have ever found themselves in situations in which they could not communicate because they did not speak the language or were unfamiliar with the culture.</li> </ul>	<b>5'</b>
<b>STAGE 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ask your students to work in small groups. They should brainstorm to identify the things they would (or actually did) miss the most if (or when) they started living in another country (item 1 in the table).</li> <li>· Ask each group to make a list.</li> </ul>	<b>10'</b>
<b>STAGE 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ask the groups to discuss and identify the things they would (or actually did) find it most difficult to adjust to if (or when) they started living in another country (item 2 in the table).</li> <li>· Ask each group to make a list.</li> </ul>	<b>10'</b>
<b>STAGE 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Ask the groups to find a metaphor, an image or an example that illustrates how it feels to start school without speaking the language used there and without having any friends (item 3 in the table).</li> <li>· Write the answers on the board.</li> </ul>	<b>5'</b>
<b>STAGE 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Compare all the lists and write them up on the board.</li> <li>· Have your students prepare a poster based on their lists.</li> <li>· Reflect with your students on aspects of the experience of settling in another country. How would you feel in the place of a young person in a new country?</li> </ul>	<b>10'</b>

**Prep time suggestions**

- Find examples of culture shock or culture clash from literature or TV/cinema (e.g. *Spanglish*, *Gran Torino*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, etc.).
- In preparation for this activity, ask your pupils to think about their experiences of travelling.
- Read chapter 5 of the Teacher's Book *Inclusion, Diversity and Communication Across Cultures*, available online (<https://pagines.uab.cat/eylbid/en/content/teachers-book>), for extra background information on the topic of child language brokering and the feelings it evokes.

### SOME TIPS AND IDEAS TO GUIDE DISCUSSION

1. If you were to move to another country, what would you would enjoy discovering/miss the most?

- Friends
- Relatives (e.g. cousins, grandparents, etc.)
- My school
- My town
- My neighbourhood

2. What things do you think it might be easiest/hardest to adjust to?

- Making new friends
- Starting a new school
- Learning a new language
- The weather
- The food

3. Can you find a metaphor, an image or an example to describe the experience of starting school without speaking the language used there and without having any friends?

### 4A. In my place

“When people move to another country, they have to learn not only a new language but also about a new culture. Young translators go through that experience while acting as linguistic and cultural mediators for their family and friends. And at times it is not easy to deal with all those things.”

“What would you do in my place?”




## TEACHER'S NOTES

## ACTIVITY 4B. Chinese whispers

**In this activity, students will...**

- Become more aware of non-linguistic aspects of brokering/interpreting.
- Identify some of the non-linguistic problems that young interpreters may face and discuss possible solutions to them.
- Discuss how brokering pushes young interpreters to develop problem-solving, interpersonal and communication skills.

ESTIMATED  
TIME



50 MIN

**How to use this resource**

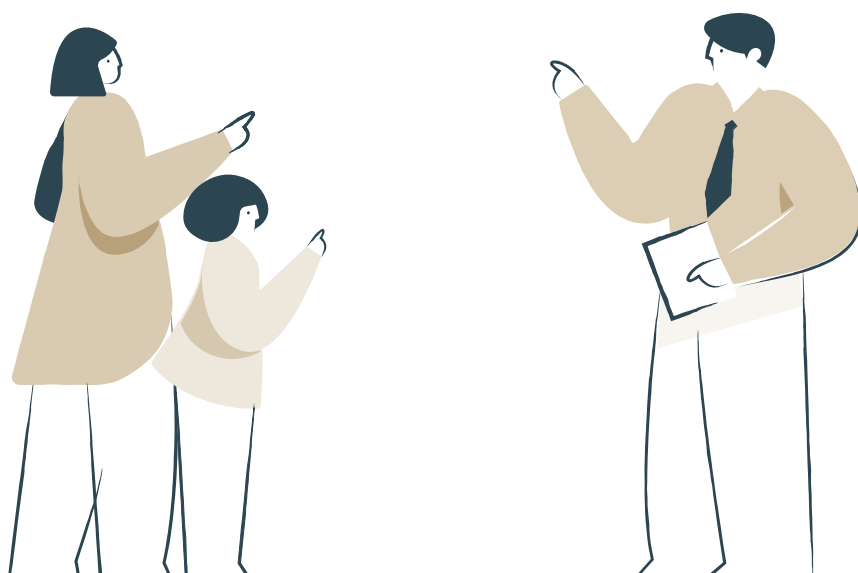
<b>STAGE 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce the game (point 1 of 'THE GAME' instructions).</li> <li>• Prepare for the game (point 2 of 'THE GAME' instructions).</li> </ul>	<b>5'</b>
<b>STAGE 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play the game (point 3 of 'THE GAME' instructions).</li> </ul>	<b>5'</b>
<b>STAGE 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Briefly ask the 'adults' in the groups if they managed to understand each other properly, and ask the 'interpreters' how they felt in the situation they were in. On the board, note down the words they use to describe their feelings.</li> <li>• Ask each group to draw up a table with three large columns and to fill in:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The first column with a list of the communication problems they had during the game (misunderstandings, difficulty in getting the message, missing information, irritation, etc.).</li> <li>• The second column with the reasons for which those problems arose (not hearing properly, the interpreter forgetting something, different expectations regarding politeness, etc.).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<b>15'</b>
<b>STAGE 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask each group to fill in the table's third column with a description of the solutions to the aforementioned problems applied by any of the three participants. If any problems were left unsolved, ask the group to reflect on whether and how they could have solved them.</li> </ul>	<b>10'</b>
<b>STAGE 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask a spokesperson from each group to read out their table to the rest of the class. Write relevant or recurrent problems, reasons and solutions on the board.</li> <li>• Reflect with your students: this game was played in one language.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of additional problems would arise if the interpreter actually had to translate the same messages across two different languages and cultures, and why would they arise?</li> <li>• What would it take to find solutions to those additional problems? Would doing so be just too demanding, or would it make young interpreters more skilled in some way?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<b>15'</b>

**Prep time suggestions**

- If you teach in a language other than English, translate the situation and role descriptions into that language. Adapt them to the local culture as necessary to make them realistic.
- Print and cut out enough descriptions for the class.
- If you wish, you can prepare and print out the table mentioned in stages 3 and 4 above. It should have three columns with the headings "problems", "reasons" and "solutions".
- Read chapter 5 of the Teacher's Book *Inclusion, Diversity and Communication Across Cultures*, available online (<https://pagines.uab.cat/eylbid/en/content/teachers-book>), for extra background information on the topic of child language brokering and the feelings it evokes.

## 4B. Chinese whispers

When translating a conversation between two adults, young language brokers may be faced with problems that require more than language skills, such as dealing with new or awkward situations, memorising a lot of information at once, and managing misunderstandings.



### THE GAME

1. In groups of three, decide who is to play each of the three roles in the situation described: adult 1, adult 2 and the interpreter. All three will actually be speaking the language that is normally used in class, but adults 1 and 2 can only communicate through the interpreter – fictionally, they are speaking two different languages. The interpreter has to repeat, in their own words, what the adults say. The adults have to improvise what they say depending on how the conversation goes.
2. Give each student the description of their role. They should silently read through their own card and may ask you questions if they have doubts, but must not show or read out their card to the other students in the group.
3. Adult 1 starts the Chinese whispers game by reading out the passage at the end of their role description into the interpreter's ear (adult 2 must not eavesdrop!).

The interpreter whispers what they have just heard in adult 2's ear, repeating the message as faithfully as possible but using their own words.

Adult 2 responds as they see fit, according to their role description, again whispering in the interpreter's ear.

The whispered conversation goes on – through the interpreter – for five minutes.





## Roleplay – the parent-teacher conference

It is going to be a long afternoon at the school. It is parent-teacher conference day! Each parent has five minutes to speak to each teacher.

### Start the meeting by reading this

#### ADULT 1

the maths teacher

You are the interpreter's maths teacher. The student has not been performing very well lately and you are determined to make that clear to their parent, even if you have to be blunt to do so. You are feeling pressured because other parents are queueing up, which makes you nervous. And when you are nervous, you tend to speak fast...

Good afternoon, how do you do? I see you've brought your child with you, which is good because s/he can interpret for us. It's also awkward in a way, because we have to talk about the constant decline in his/her marks during the past few months. Now, I'm aware you were unable to attend past parent-teacher conferences, but his/her marks have been falling since the start of the year, and I'm worried that s/he might end up failing maths. S/he can still remedy the situation though, as I keep telling him/her in class. I'm actually willing to give him/her extra tests so that we can bring his/her average up, but to achieve that, of course, the results will need to be much better than what I'm seeing in class!"

#### ADULT 2

the parent

You believe your child – the interpreter – is a brilliant student. They have never mentioned any problems at school and always performed well at their old school in your home country. In your family and culture, teachers are to be respected and appreciated. You have brought a small home-made cake for each teacher as a thank-you gift. You were unable to attend the previous conferences and are absolutely determined to give out your gifts today.

#### INTERPRETER

adult 1's pupil,  
adult 2's child

You try to interpret as honestly as possible, without intentionally distorting information.