

What do people in your community think about language brokering?



Children and young people from immigrant families sometimes translate or interpret into English for an adult in their family whose English is not good enough for them to be able to cope outside the home. This activity is known as '**language brokering**'. A

recent piece of research found that young people's views about language brokering were very varied, and that they depended on whether the young people themselves knew more than one language and whether or not they had acted as language brokers themselves. You could investigate for yourself how people in your own community feel about language brokering.



How to investigate

Use a story vignette: The researchers mentioned above used this story vignette about a young language broker to start a discussion among the people whose views they were interested in:

Eduardo

Eduardo is 14 years old. He speaks English and Portuguese. Eduardo's mum can't speak English, so she often asks him to help her. Eduardo is proud and pleased to help his mum but he is embarrassed when he translates for her at the doctors. Eduardo misses school some days because his mum needs him to translate for her.

You could use the same story vignette, or you could change some of the details to make it more suitable for where you live. For example, you could change the languages that Eduardo speaks, or you could make the story character female rather than male.

TIP:



If you make any changes, be sure to change the name to something suitable (for example, if you say that he speaks Gujarati and English you could name him Itesh). Also, make the character in the story slightly younger than the people you will

interview in your own study, so that they will be able to identify with the story character yet feel that they are in a position to give advice to the character.

Ask questions: The researchers asked the people in their study a set of questions to try to find out how these people thought about Eduardo and how other people around him might think about what he is doing. You could choose one or more (or all!) of the same questions. If possible, record the answers that your participants give to your questions. Otherwise, use a notebook to jot down their answers.

Questions

- What do you think about what Eduardo is doing?
- What would his teacher think?
- What would his parents think?
- What would his friends think?
- What do you think about Eduardo?
- What do you think about Eduardo's mum?
- Would you change anything about Eduardo's life?
- What advice would you give if Eduardo were your friend?
- What do you think will happen when Eduardo grows up?

Who to investigate: it is best to choose at least 4 people to take part in your investigation. Here are some examples of the kinds of people you could choose

(1) You could focus on young people who speak only English. 4 would be a good number to investigate.

(2) you could keep the same focus (young people who speak only English) but divide them into two groups: those with friends who are bilingual and those who mainly know only other monolingual English speakers (at least 2 in each group);

(3) you could focus on young bilingual speakers of English and another language; again, 4 would be a good number;

(4) you could keep the same focus (young bilingual speakers of English) but divide them into two groups: those who have done language brokering themselves and those who have not (again, at least 2 in each group);

(5) you could compare say 2 monolingual English speakers and 2 bilingual speakers (it is probably best to make sure that the 2 bilingual speakers have the same personal experiences of language brokering: either they have both acted as language brokers, or neither of them have ever acted as a language broker).

What to investigate: listen to your recordings or look through your notebook, and note whether your participants have anything to say about:

Eduardo as a person: do they describe him in positive terms (e.g. he's nice, cool, or helpful) or negative terms (e.g. he's silly or stressed)?

Eduardo's skills: do they comment on the fact that he can speak two languages?

Eduardo's feelings: in the story there is mention of Eduardo being proud, pleased to help his mum, and embarrassed. So your participants say anything about these feelings? Do they say what he might be embarrassed about? Do they mention any other feelings he may have?

NOTE: in previous research, participants who could speak only English often commented on how clever Eduardo was to be able to translate.

Eduardo and school: do your participants give an opinion about whether it is difficult for Eduardo to have to miss school sometimes? Do they make any suggestions about how he could manage to avoid missing school?

Teacher's views about Eduardo: do your participants think Eduardo's teachers would be sympathetic, or annoyed with him?

Eduardo's friends' views: do your participants think Eduardo's friends would see his language brokering as normal, or strange?

Anything else: note any other general themes in the answers your participants give e.g. do they say anything about whether his education might suffer or benefit, from his language brokering?

Conclusions from your language investigation:

These will obviously depend on who your participants are, and what they have said. If possible, look for any general points about how your participants perceive bilingualism. For example, if your investigation included monolingual speakers of English, you may be able to consider whether your investigation suggests that they understand what it is like to live in a bilingual family where the parents' English might not be as good as their children's. You may be able to decide whether your participants see language brokering as a good thing, or as an activity that might be difficult for the language broker, or that might damage their chances of doing well at school and in life more generally. In any case, try to see what is similar in your participant's replies, what is different, and where there is no agreement.

Suggested Reading:

Tony Cline, Sarah Crafter, Lindsay O'Dell and Guida de Abreu (2011) Young people's representations of language brokering. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 32/3: 207-220. (Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper).