

## CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES OF THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERING

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**Abstract:** Child Language Brokering (CLB) is a very common, yet unseen form of language and cultural (inter)mediation performed by bilingual children and adolescents to help their family, peers and other involved parties interact with members of the host society in a wide variety of formal and informal settings and domains (Antonini 2016). Extant literature provides a detailed description of various aspects of CLB, including, inter alia, who children translate for, where they do so, what they translate, how they feel when they language broker, as well as the impact that CLB has on various aspects of their life and development. Past research focussing on the emotional impact of this practice have reported that child language brokers may experience mixed feelings (Corona *et al.* 2012). They may perceive CLB either/both as a cause of stress and a burden and/or an experience that they find enjoyable (Hall and Guéry 2010; Parke and Buriel 1998; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Weisskirch 2007) and which they are proud to undertake (Love and Buriel 2007). This article presents a thematic analysis of the over 600 visual and written narratives by children and adolescents collected by means of three editions of the school contest "Traduttori in Erba" that took place in Emilia-Romagna (Italy). The results show how the affective responses of child language brokers may be shaped by age, setting and the people for whom children language broker, but are also indicative of broader feelings related to their migration experience and the dynamics of family relationships (Crafter and Iqbal 2022).

**Keywords:** Child Language Brokering; feelings; empathy; awareness; linguistic mediation.

## ***1. Introduction***

The aim of this paper is to offer a preliminary reflection on how the practice of CLB impacts the emotional sphere of the children and adolescents who are involved in mediating linguistically and culturally for the families and peers.

Child language brokering (henceforth CLB) is a very common yet unseen aspect and consequence of migration, a phenomenon “resulting from a variety of historical and social factors, but that it has occurred for thousands of years, as long as cultures have migrated across the globe” (Alvarez 2017: 12). It is a form of language and cultural (inter)mediation performed by bilingual children and adolescents to help their family, peers and other involved parties interact with members of their new country of residence in a wide variety of formal and informal settings and domains (Antonini 2016). Although not limited to bilingual children and adolescents with a migrant background, research has focussed mostly on this category of language brokers (Orellana 2017).

CLB is a largely unacknowledged aspect of immigration. Despite being a very common alternative to professional interpreting and translation in all those domains in which immigrant families need to interact with the host society and institutions, CLB has been largely invisible in modern times until recently particularly from “political, educational, research, policy and, inevitably, adult perspectives” (Hall and Guéry 2010: 29). It is often regarded as an ad hoc solution “aimed at overcoming linguistic barriers when they occur and with no specific guidelines on how to deal with such barriers” (Antonini 2015: 100). In fact, through schooling and socializing in the school setting, first and second generation children/adolescents with a migrant background often learn the language of their new country of residence before their adult family members (parents and grandparents) (Weisskirch 2007). Consequently, when professional mediators or bilingual adults are not available to mediate, bilingual children are likely to be entrusted with the role of the language broker.

In Italy too CLB is a common practice (Ceccoli 2018; Pugliese 2016), yet often hidden even to the eyes of those who rely on it as it is a practice rarely mentioned in official directives and regulations and its use in lieu of professional linguistic and cultural mediation services is often considered a necessary evil even in those contexts where sensitive information is discussed or conflictual situations may arise (Antonini 2016; Valletta 2015).

The data presented and discussed here are part of broader project, the In MedIO PUER(I) research project (<https://inmediopueri.it/il-progetto/>), a multi-method study that pioneered CLB research in Italy. For the purposes of this paper the focus will be on three dimensions of the affective response to CLB that are pertinent to this study: positive and/or negative feelings, the emotional impact of CLB on family relations and dynamics, and CLB as an expression and tool of empathy.

## ***2. An overview of studies on the perception of CLB***

In the past four decades CLB studies have contributed to bring to the fore various aspects of CLB, including, inter alia, who children translate for, where they do so,

what they translate, how they feel when they language broker, as well as the impact that CLB has on various aspects of their life and development. Children/adolescents language broker conversations and translate various kinds of documents and texts. CLB occurs in a wide array of formal and informal domains ranging from the home, the school, public offices, shops and health care settings. Children and adolescents mediate culturally and linguistically for family members, members of their social network and community as well as their peers. Therefore, the language brokering activities they may be involved in can range

from the relatively trivial, maybe just writing out a note for the milkman, to the massively complex, like helping a father fill out a tax form, but at the higher level the children are responding challenges that their fellow students are unlikely to meet until they are adults (Hall and Guery 2010: 41).

CLB is thus a practice that is socially and contextually situated (Eksner and Orellana 2012; Crafter and Iqbal 2022) that requires children/adolescents to navigate or manage potentially challenging or, at times, conflictual situations (Crafter and Iqbal 2020) that can trigger a variety of affective responses.

### **2.1. The affective response to CLB**

There is a growing body of literature on feelings attached to CLB, which stems mostly from studies in educational studies, psychology and sociology and, more recently, interpreting and translation studies.

Research on feelings associated to CLB has yielded mixed or contradictory results (Corona *et al.* 2012). As argued above, the reason for these contrasting findings lies on the fact that the emotional dimension of CLB is multi-layered and influenced by several factors and variables, such as age, personality traits, power relations, settings, the people involved in the mediated interaction, and the languages involved. Moreover, feelings, alongside behaviour and cognition, are one of the three components that affect and shape attitudes and identities and can thus affect "(a) the performance of brokering itself, (b) child language brokers' psychological development, (c) their relationship with their families, and (d) the communicative success of the brokered interaction" (Ceccoli 2022: 4).

CLB has been described in negative terms when it is perceived as a cause of stress and a burden (Weisskirch and Alva 2002; Kam and Lazarevic 2014; Tomasi and Narhcal 2021). Weisskirch (2007) reported a negative perception of CLB which was described as not enjoyable nor helpful particularly in the relationship with parents or in learning the language spoken at home, but also when language brokers are required to take on responsibilities in situations in which adults would normally be in control, they may experience mixed feelings (Corona *et al.* 2012).

A negative perception and experience of CLB has also been associated with a decline in psychological well-being, as language brokers may be at risk of adverse health outcomes, which can range from higher levels of depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and withdrawal (Chao 2006; Valtolina 2010).

CLB is described as an enjoyable and positive experience (Hall and Guéry 2010; Parke and Buriel 1998; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Weisskirch 2007) which children are proud to undertake (Love and Buriel 2007). A positive

experience associated with language brokering has been associated with higher self-esteem (Acoach and Webb 2004) and correlated with a strong parent-child bond (Love and Buriel 2007). has also been linked to improved cognitive and metalinguistic abilities (Acoach and Webb 2004), academic performance (Dorner *et al.* 2007) and bilingual and bicultural developments (Tse 1996). In this respect, Buriel *et al.* argue that when language brokers “are better adapted to their dual cultural environment” they are less likely to be affected by “the detrimental effects of acculturation, such as psychosocial and behavioral disorders” (1998: 7).

## 2.2. The impact of CLB on family dynamics

The impact of CLB on family dynamics has been reported in mixed and often dichotomous terms. CLB can impact family dynamics when it leads to role reversal, adultification or parentification. Role reversal has been associated to negative feelings when it is described as a cause of disruption of the hierarchical order within the family household (Umaña-Taylor 2003; Titzmann 2012). Conversely, it is viewed in a positive way when children perceive CLB as a normal task within the context of household chores and as part of a parent-child performance team (Valdés *et al.* 2003). Adultification and parentification are constructs that describe parents’ emotional and instrumental dependence on their children’s language brokering (Trickett and Jones 2007; Weisskirch 2010; Cline *et al.* 2017; Crafter and Iqbal 2022). They are generally related to adverse emotional responses within the context of problematic family relationships, whereby CLB leads to parental dependency on their children and role-reversal (Umaña-Taylor 2003; Shen and Dennis 2019), but also to problems caused by a different level of acculturation (Martinez *et al.* 2009).

Conversely, some studies have hinted that, through adultification and parentification, language brokers can acquire attributes and skills that can be used to their advantage (Trickett and Jones 2007; Alvarez 2017).

A growing body of studies calls for a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the study of perceptions of CLB and their impact on the life and health of language brokers (Kam and Lazarevic 2014; Shen and Dennis 2019).

## 2.3. Developments in the study of CLB and emotions

CLB does not occur in a vacuum and in particular situations it can expose children/adolescents to the attitudes, expectations, prejudice and stereotypes that might be held by the general populations and the people for whom they translate. Recent developments in the study of CLB have focussed on the adverse affective response caused by often intersecting factors and variables, such as age, class, gender, local and national attitudes and politics, power relations, race and setting in shaping the children’s/adolescents’ identity and attitudes toward their native and acquired languages and cultures. For instance, Reynolds and Orellana (2009) address CLB in terms of issues of race, class, and ethnicity while García-Sánchez’s (2014) study of CLB practices performed by Moroccan immigrant children in Spain takes a gender- and race-related perspective. While Kwon (2014) observed how working-class children may experience an adverse impact of CLB practices and develop a buried sense of inadequacy and desire. Nash (2017) explored avoidance,

defiance, or socializing strategies used by Arab American language brokers when they are confronted with stereotypes and discrimination.

The study of CLB as an empathetic practice represents a significant development in the study of CLB. The role played by empathy in the affective response to CLB had already been observed in the literature. For instance, De Ment *et al.* (2005) reported how through language brokering children and adolescents learn about and understand the daily struggles that their parents experience and the sacrifices they make, and they develop empathy for them, and show appreciation (i.e. reciprocate care) by doing well in school (Love and Buriel, 2007). However, the need to reframe the study of CLB and locate it “along a ‘caregiving continuum’” (Bauer 2016: 34) is a more recent development. Care is defined as the provision of practical or emotional support” (Milligan and Wiles 2010: 737) that is practiced through “interdependency, reciprocity and multidirectionality” (*ibid.*), which aptly reflects the new approach to the study of CLB in “conceptualizing children as social actors” (García-Sánchez 2018; Bauer 2016).

### **3. Method: In MedIO PUER(I) and Traduttori in Erba**

In MedIO PUER(I) is a multi-method project<sup>1</sup> that was founded in 2006 to investigate child-mediated exchanges between migrants and the host country and filling a gap in research on CLB in Italy. Its main aims are to:

1. map out and confirm CLB practices among linguistic and ethnic communities that live in Emilia Romagna and Italy at large;
2. describe the participants involved as well as the situations and contexts in which it takes place;
3. assess the impact it has on various aspects of the life and development of language brokers;
4. gather data on attitudes and perception held by children, parents, teachers and institutional representatives towards this practice;
5. raise awareness on CLB by making it visible to all involved parties.

Over a time-span of 15 years data has been collected by means of a variety of ethnographic and qualitative methods comprising semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, visual and written narratives, and participant observation, that allowed the research group to observe and analyse the phenomenon from the widest perspective possible.

One of the tools used to collect data was a school competition, *Traduttori in Erba* (Translators in Bud) that took place for three editions in the 2010/2011, 2011/2012 and 2016/2017 school years. The analysis presented in this paper focuses on narratives purposely selected from a pool of 620 visual and written narratives collected by means of three editions of the school competition. The narratives were produced by 6- to 14-year-old children and adolescents attending primary and middle schools in the Forlì-Cesena province, who chose to either write

<sup>1</sup> In MedIO PUER(I) stands for Intermediazione Linguistica e Culturale ad Opera di Giovani Utenti in Emilia Romagna e in Italia.

a text or present a drawing describing their own experience as a language broker or a language brokering event they had witnessed.<sup>2</sup>

The school contest was organised with a set of rules and an official jury that had the task of selecting the winners. The rules of the contest were explained to the participating pupils by the teachers without the presence of the researchers. The rules stated the topic of the contest (to describe a CLB event that the children had either performed or witnessed) and how the visual and written narratives were to be submitted (see Figure 1).

**Il progetto**

Il gruppo di ricerca InMedio PUER(I) del Dipartimento di Studi Interdisciplinari su Traduzione, Lingue e Culture dell'Università di Bologna compie attività di ricerca sulla (inter)mediazione linguistica e culturale a opera di bambini/e e ragazzi/e figli/e di immigrati, un fenomeno estremamente diffuso nella realtà sempre più multilinguistica, multietnica e multiculturale delle società europee, in particolare di quella italiana ed emiliano-romagnola.

Il concorso **TRADUTTORI IN ERBA** è stato pensato per sensibilizzare insegnanti, famiglie e allievi/e riguardo a un fenomeno che molto raramente riceve l'attenzione che merita, nonostante il valore e l'importanza che queste attività hanno per l'integrazione delle comunità di immigrati nella nostra società.

Per la lista dettagliata delle tematiche e degli argomenti relativi alla mediazione linguistica a opera di bambine/i e adolescenti, si rimanda al bando del concorso consultabile sul [www.inmediopueri.it](http://www.inmediopueri.it)

**La selezione**

Un gruppo di 10 esperti, individuati dai promotori tra i/le docenti del Dipartimento di Interpretazione e Traduzione dell'Università di Bologna, costituirà la giuria del concorso che segnalerà, attraverso un'apposita scheda, una rosa di sei disegni/temi vincitori.

I **disegni/temi** vincitori saranno premiati nel mese di maggio 2017 durante una manifestazione presso il Campus di Forlì aperta alle scuole partecipanti e al pubblico.

Le **scuole** dovranno comunicare l'adesione al progetto tramite modulo contenuto nel bando e scaricabile dal sito [WWW.INMEDIOPUERI.DIPINTRA.IT](http://www.inmediopueri.it) entro e non oltre il **3 marzo 2017**

I disegni/temi dovranno essere inviati entro il **12 aprile 2017** (nel caso di invio tramite posta farà fede il timbro postale).

**COME SI PARTECIPA**

- SCUOLE PRIMARIE I° CICLO (I, II)  
È richiesto di realizzare un disegno con didascalia.
- SCUOLE PRIMARIE II° CICLO (III, IV, V)  
È richiesto di realizzare un disegno con didascalia o un elaborato.
- SCUOLE SECONDARIE I° GRADO  
È richiesto un elaborato.

Fig. 1. The leaflet explaining the purpose and rules of the competition<sup>3</sup>.

The narratives were submitted mostly in paper, but also in digital form (emailed to the researchers).

For the purposes of this study, the texts that made reference to affective responses to CLB were selected, pseudonymized, and digitalized into Word files. They were then imported in an nVivo project and codified in order to carry out a thematic analysis with the aim of identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns across selected narratives (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021; Nowell *et al.* 2017; Floersch *et al.* 2010) within the qualitative dataset of narratives collected with *Traduttori in Erba*.

The 47 selected narratives were written by primary and middle school pupils between 8 and 14 years of age. This wide developmental span was chosen following Antonini (2016) who observed that the age at which the children/adolescents

<sup>2</sup> In order to be able to participate in the competition, schools acted *in loco parentis* and submitted a release form for the use of the narratives and drawings exclusively for academic purposes. The three editions of *Traduttori in Erba* took place before the GDPR came into effect.

<sup>3</sup> <https://inmediopueri.it/traduttori/>

language broker may be a factor in determining a positive or negative perception of this practice.

The selection of the narratives was based on two main criteria: i. they were full compositions (thus excluding captions and short description added to drawings); ii. the narratives had to contain a clear statement of emotion (thus excluding those narratives where some sentiment could be inferred but was not mentioned directly). In order to provide the appropriate context, the length of the unit of analysis ranged between one sentence and longer stretches of text. However, this increased the chance of having to attribute the same item to two or multiple nodes as one sentence often contained references to different aspects and/or causes of the affective response to CLB.

The responses were categorized by using the qualitative analysis software NVivo in a two-step process. First, the author coded all the selected narratives by creating code category sets, which were then compared with those produced by another independent coder in order to develop a single framework and ensure coding coherence and consistency.

The following sections will provide a description of the main themes that emerged from this analysis and will include excerpts from the selected narratives.

#### ***4. Analysis***

This paper stems from the following research questions:

1. In what ways does CLB affect child/adolescent language brokers?
2. How do language brokers describe the affective impact of CLB?

The visual and written narratives submitted by the children/adolescents who took part in *Traduttori in Erba*, included or described their experience as language brokers in an array of situations and contexts. Not all of them dealt with the affective response to CLB. Therefore, the thematic analysis carried out on the itemized narratives and the subsequent coding identified themes were then organized into hierarchies when connections became apparent. This led to their categorization into five umbrella themes (as illustrated in Figure 2).

The analysis identified five distinct (though often interconnected) core themes: awareness, empathy, family dynamics, positive and negative feelings.

Awareness, empathy and family dynamics are linked to the first research question dealing with the affective impact of CLB on the language brokers' lives and perceptions of their role, their relationship with their peers and with their family (mainly their parents), while positive and negative feelings relate to the second research question exploring how the children/adolescents described their experience as language brokers.

For all themes, with the exception of empathy, a varying number of subthemes was identified with the aim of further organizing and aggregating the identified items. Figure 3 shows the parent-child hierarchy for the emotional impact of CLB.

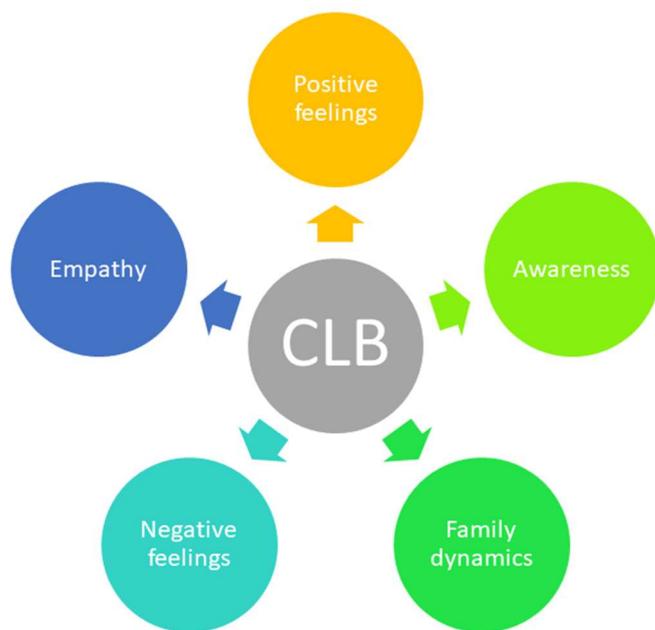


Fig. 2. Core themes.

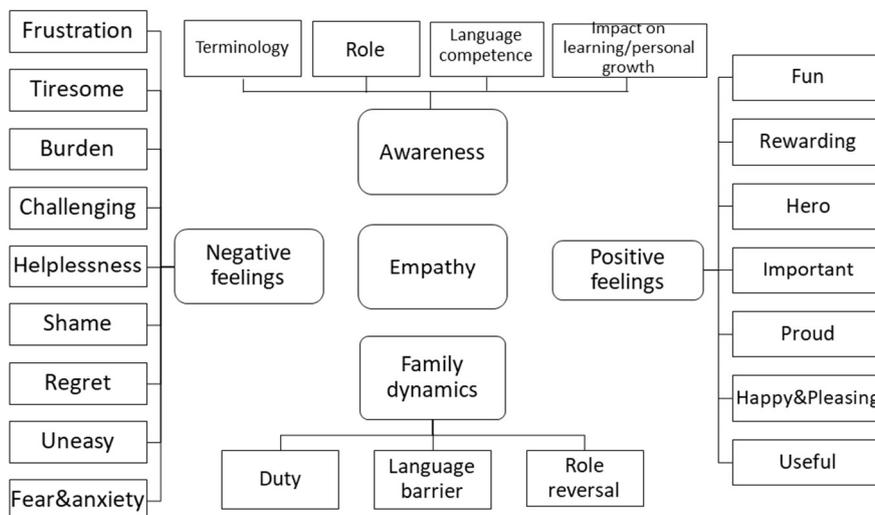


Fig. 3. Coding hierarchy.

It is important to note that most of the selected items in the narratives can be attributed to multiple sub-themes as they describe emotions linked to different aspect of the CLB practice.

The following sections provide a more in-depth analysis of the results framed by the research questions.

#### 4.1. How CLB affects child language brokers

The narratives that were the object of this study highlighted three main themes that revolve around the issue of the impact of CLB practices: emotional impact of CLB on family relations and dynamics, awareness of the impact of CLB, and empathy.

##### *4.1.1. Emotional impact of CLB on family relations and dynamics*

As already mentioned in §2, CLB can impact family dynamics in different ways. The items included in this theme have been grouped into three categories: parental language competence, role reversal and duty, and representation of how the children/adolescents in this study sample perceive these aspects.

Examples 1, 2 and 3<sup>4</sup> show that language brokers are aware that the lack of language competence in Italian is a barrier that makes their parents dependent on them for communicating and interacting with society and institutions:

(1): It is more difficult for adults, because they have only attended school in their country. Children, who will attend school [in the new country], will not experience the same difficulties as adults, especially if they were born in Italy. Children can thus help their parents a lot by translating for them or suggesting words, or even by teaching them something about the new country. With time the parent will learn to speak Italian, even just those few words that will allow them to communicate in daily life. (Female, 14)

(2): Generally speaking, I can say that my experience as a language broker has been simple, especially because this task was divided between my sister and I and, with the passing of time, my job as a language broker has become increasingly less necessary since my parents are learning the basics of the Italian language even if in some cases they still need me. (Male, 14)

(3): I tried to teach her [the mother] Italian, I hoped I could do so but [...] I did not succeed. She didn't want to learn and kept watching her films, she didn't care. (Male, 11)

All three examples clearly describe how the responsibility of acting as language brokers falls on children because, through schooling, they learn Italian before their parents. However, they also highlight that language brokers are not always allowed to relinquish this responsibility because the linguistic competence acquired by their parents is not sufficient to enable them to become independent of their children's help.

Role reversal refers to CLB being perceived as the responsibility of the child/adolescent in helping their parents/family interact with the host society and the feelings associated with it are generally negative. Examples 4 and 5 express feelings that emerge in all the cases that describe language brokering for one's parents.

<sup>4</sup> All the examples from the narratives are presented in the English translation provided by the author. The information in brackets at the end of each excerpt indicates the gender and age of the child/adolescent who wrote the narratives from which it was taken.

(4): Once I went with my mum to her Italian class to help her understand what her teachers were saying about her: I was like a mother, she was like my daughter and I felt slightly ashamed. (Female, 14)

(5): My parents are those kind of people who, even if they have been living in Italy for many year, sometimes do not know how to write or say words, for this reason, despite my poor knowledge of both languages, they come to me to ask how to write or day a word or a sentence and, even if at times I find it boring, I help them and the situation becomes like the one between “a teacher and a pupil”, where I’m the teacher even if I find this quite distressing. (Male, 14)

More positive feelings are described in relation to language brokering for other relatives, e.g. siblings or aunts and uncles, especially when children/adolescents take on the role of teachers:

(6): When I was in primary school I helped children who spoke Arabic and I liked it a lot, I felt like a teacher. (Male, 12)

Lastly, example 7 illustrates how the allocation of roles and responsibilities within the family for some migrant groups language brokering is seen as the children’s duty:

(7): Our experience helps you understand that being ‘translators’ means doing things that boys and girls of our own age would not normally do. It is not easy to spend a whole afternoon at the trade union’s or at the Police station, because we have to do something important for our family; but we have to do it because it is our duty! (Female, 14)

#### *4.1.2. Awareness*

Four subcategories have been identified within this theme and they are linked to role (15), impact on learning and personal growth (12), terminology (6), and language competence (5). The examples that will be discussed below contain the children/adolescents’ reflections on the role of the linguistic mediator, the perceived impact of CLB on their education and learning, but also their awareness of what it takes to be a language broker.

Language brokers are aware of the fact that they are filling a gap in the provision of professional linguistic mediation and that without their help many people would not be able to access key services (example 8). Moreover, when they talk about the role of the language broker as a linguistic and cultural mediator they unknowingly use images and metaphors that have been employed for decades in academic literature to describe the role of the interpreter/translator (examples 9 and 10):

(8): I think that the role played by “young mediators” is just as important as the one played by a real mediator because without “us” many unpleasant things would have happened. For instance, many foreign people would not have understood which document they needed to present to the police station or, even worse, which medicine to take for some disease. (Male, 14)

(9): I liked it that someone asked me to translate a letter, I became aware of the fact that "Language is like a bridge that connects the two banks of a river". (Male, 12)

(10): I think that helping to translate can open a window for children from another country and bring light, colour and joy in their life. (Female, 8)

The awareness subtheme is also linked to the realization that acting as a language broker can contribute to facilitating inclusion:

(11): This is what it means to be a translator: to give words to those who do not have a voice, to those who cannot defend themselves, because to be able to speak means knowing ones' rights and ones' duties. To give help to those who need it: this is the translator's task. (Male, 14)

(12): Translator: a word loaded with meaning. It is sometimes attributed to very young people who, like me, help their parents or acquaintances avoid being left alone in situations that could be quite embarrassing. Being unable to write or speak marginalizes you from society, it isolates you, and, slowly, makes you feel useless. Many people who don't know how to speak are unwittingly mocked and humiliated. (*ibid.*)

The category related to the impact of CLB on learning and personal growth is linked to both positive and negative emotions and often encroaches what the children/adolescents say about their duty as language brokers (as in §4.1.1). CLB is described in positive terms when linked to improved and more rapid language learning and proficiency in both Italian and the language spoken at home, acquisition of vocabulary and the awareness, when mediating linguistically, of having to go beyond a verbatim translation (example 13). Other statements of positive emotion were linked to having to take on more responsibilities than their peers and how this contributed to their personal growth (example 14).

(13): Translating is a very important thing for foreign people living in a country where a different language is spoken. The role played by children is important because, from what is my experience, a child/youth who is still very young, is able to learn languages quicker, and this is particularly true for foreign kids. (Female, 12)

(14): I think that it's fantastic that some kids help their parents by translating languages and not only Italian because it helped me grow by giving me responsibilities and made me mature. (Male, 14)

Language brokers report negative emotions linked to learning and personal growth when CLB activities obliges them to miss lessons or school days:

(15): Sometimes I have to miss school because I've got to go with them, I am sorry about this but there is nothing I can do when they need me. (Female, 14)

(16) The other kids who are my age play, relax or go out the whole afternoon, but I always have to go out with my mum, often I have to do my homework late in the evening before going to bed, but I have no other option because my

parents don't speak [Italian] very well and what in theory they should do, I have to do, I don't have a choice. (Female, 13)

The reflections on language competence highlighted the fact that language brokers are aware of their limited and uneven competence in the languages they use for their language brokering activities either because they are not fully proficient in one or both of them, or because of the complexity of the language they need to interpret or translate:

(17): I realized that I did not know how to translate some words because I was only nine years old and I only knew basic things in Chinese. (Male, 13)

(18): But I am not always able to translate everything: even if the Italian language is similar to Rumanian, sometimes it is hard for me to understand the text or individual words. This happens for instance with all utility bills; they are and will remain a mystery to me, I will never be able to translate them. (Female, 14)

This awareness can also be the cause of stress and anxiety:

(19) When I do it, I feel afraid because I'm afraid of making mistakes and if I made a mistake it would be very embarrassing, (even if I do not think that anyone would notice it), but anyway, everyone would exclaim: 'Ah, ah, ah ..., she doesn't even know her own language!' But this is not the only thing I feel when I translate, there are others: I feel important at that moment, I understand how useful my act is (without me there would be total chaos because the teacher would not be able to communicate with the pupil and vice versa). (Female, 10)

This example is not only indicative of mixed feelings attached to CLB, but also of the complexity of this emotional response, which can be caused by a variety of factors and variables that intersect and cannot be analysed as separate units (in this case the awareness of the uneven competence in the languages used, and thus of making mistakes and being judged for them by her peers and the teacher, coupled with the awareness of the key role played by language brokering in ensuring communication).

#### *4.1.3. Empathy*

Care and compassion are expressed through the empathetic perception of CLB and they cut across all the categories analysed in this study. As already emerged in several of the examples above, empathy is displayed in relation to various situations and people involved in the mediated interaction. Language brokers show understanding for what the people they help with their interpreting/translating experience and for aspects that go beyond language and include other aspects of inclusion too (examples 19 and 20):

(19): Another example that might seem trivial is that of a newly arrived classmate who, by not understanding the rules of the game, might get excluded. By writing and reflecting on this topic I have been able to understand that a small gesture is enough to achieve much more. (Female, 10)

(20) That day having to translate for a person for whom I care a lot was undoubtedly a fantastic experience. It made me feel what it means to love and help to live those who need help. She is my mum. (Male, 13)

Empathy is also expressed by children who are or have been the recipients of language brokering (example 21), but is also present as a direct expression of care and compassion in the narratives produced by children without a migrant background reflecting on the linguistic challenges that their peers have to overcome when they arrive in a new country (example 22):

(21): I felt strange thinking that about two years ago I was in her same situation. At the same time, I was proud of myself because in these two years I have learned a lot and now I too can help other people. (Female, 13)

(22): I think it is important to make our language understood to those who do not speak it, because for those who do not understand what we are saying it's like being in the dark, inside a house with all the shutters closed, where not even a ray of light manages to get through. On the other hand, when another child arrives and shows friendly gestures that he can understand, like hugs and smiles... he can see that we don't want to avoid him that we want to be friends with him, and the world for him is coloured again (Female, 9)

The reflections in these two examples perceptively point to two interesting and uncharted aspects of the study of feelings towards CLB: the affective response of children/adolescents who benefit from language and cultural brokering, and the empathetic response to CLB on behalf of children who are not language brokers but have learned about it by either observing their classmates perform it or by reflecting on it when they are made aware of it. In the latter case, as described in (22), the school contest became the occasion for teachers to start a conversation on the challenges faced by newly arrived pupils who do not speak Italian, on the role played by child language brokers in helping their inclusion in the class, and on the importance of a caring approach to help them feel welcome.

## 4.2. Positive and negative feelings towards CLB

The diagram in Figure 3 above shows the categories of emotion associated with a positive and/or negative perception of CLB that were expressed by the authors of the narratives. All the feelings described in the narratives correlate with the range described in the literature (as illustrated in §2.1 but also by Weisskirch 2007 and Orellana 2017).

In terms of frequencies, indicated in brackets, as illustrated in Table 1 (in §4.3) more positive feelings (52) were expressed as opposed to negative feelings (37).

### 4.2.1. Positive feelings

The positive emotions reported by language brokers in the sample were related to feeling Useful (12), Happy/Pleased (16), Proud (6), Important (5), but also Gratified (4) and Heroic (4).

Happy and pleased are adjectives used in the narratives in association with feelings of satisfaction with one's role as a language broker:

(23): I was happy because I like helping my uncle. (Male, 11)

(24): Even though I often have to translate for my parents and friends' words or sentences that I know and can explain, I am always happy to do it and I never say no. (Female, 14)

Given that all the narratives were collected as part of a school activity for the *Traduttori in Erba* competition, references to feeling useful are mostly linked to the role played at school in helping the teachers communicate with non-Italian speaking pupils and to a lesser extent when helping a family member:

(25): By going to school, I have learned Italian and English on top of the language I already speak, that is Arabic. For this reason, in the past years. I have been very useful to the teachers. (Female, 10)

Other statements of positive emotions associated to CLB express how language brokers feel important and proud of having become proficient in Italian (often in just a few months) so that they can help their parents and friends, and they sometimes describe themselves as the hero who saves the day.

(26): I feel proud because few Chinese were able to translate after just ten months in school and I was happy because it seemed to me that all the effort I had put in in those ten months had resulted in satisfactory results; even if I was not excellent, I had made a huge progress. (Female, 12)

One other interesting aspect is the sense of gratification expressed whenever they describe their parents' or teachers' gratitude for their language brokering:

(27): I am happy I can translate every now and then because every time I do it my mum always says "thank you so much!!" (Female, 14)

(28) I also had to translate at school where there was a child who did not speak Italian but knew the language I speak so I translated everything the teacher was saying. The teacher was very pleased by what I had done and as a reward gave me an extra good mark. (Male, 13)

#### 4.2.2. Negative feelings

Statements of negative emotion refer to feelings that have been described extensively in extant literature. The adverse responses that were reported in the narratives that were the object of this study are associated with similar feelings:

- challenging (9)
- fear and anxiety (9)
- burden (6)

- Uneasiness (4), shame (2)
- Other feelings: helplessness (3), tiredness (2), regret (1), frustration (1)

CLB is perceived as challenging (with a negative connotation) when it occurs in public service and health care settings (e.g., the trade union, the police station, the doctor's) and when children/adolescents have to translate complex texts. Example 28 clearly illustrates all these challenges:

(28) We have to go to the police station too and in that case we have to deal with very important things and responsibilities as the document that we usually help to request or renew is the residence permit: we stand in long queues, as we do at the doctor's, to talk to different officers until it is our turn, then we try to deal with it in the best possible way and when we get it done we can breath a sigh of relief because this time too "we did it" ... but what a challenge! (Female, 14)

Fear and anxiety are associated with making mistakes when speaking either Italian or their other language(s) and being judged for that, but also with the awareness that are not fully competent in the language from and into which they translate. Children and adolescents who language broker (especially when involved in facilitating communication for the loved ones in the healthcare setting) are always very aware of the responsibilities they have and do not take their role lightly as they are fully aware of the implications and consequences (see for instance Antonini and Torresi 2021). Hence, language brokers may experience the fear of mistranslating or misunderstanding what is being said, and, as a result, causing harm to family members:

(29) Once the doctor told me that my grandmother was very ill and that she had to take important medicines: he started saying all these difficult words and I got very confused, I was afraid for my grandmother's health. (Female, 14)

As also illustrated by other examples included in this paper, CLB is considered a burden when the responsibility of language brokering falls on only one child, when it is protracted over the year because parents do not learn the language or do not feel confident enough to go to offices on their own, when children/adolescents do not translate just for their parents but for other family members or acquaintances.

Less frequently expressed negative feelings in relation to CLB are helplessness, tiredness, regret and frustration.

### ***4.3. Preliminary pattern exploration***

A previous study on the *Traduttori in Erba* data had already detected the correlation between age and emotions and the fact that younger children (in primary school) generally expressed "more carefree and happy feelings towards their roles as language brokers, which may be a result of the fact that they have not yet been involved in complex and emotionally burdensome situations" (Antonini 2016: 11) compared to older adolescents of middle school age.

In order to confirm these findings, all the narratives included in the sample were classified according to the school attended at the moment of the submission of the

narrative: Primary school (which for this sample corresponds to the 8 to 10 age group) and Middle school (which includes the 11 to 14 age group). A matrix coding query that cross-referenced these two classifications with the five coded themes and respective subthemes showed that age can be viewed as a causal variable in how CLB is perceived and described. Table 1 below summarizes the results of the Matrix Coding Query that was carried out on the data.

| <b>POSITIVE FEELINGS</b> | <b>Middle school</b> | <b>Primary school</b> |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Happy&pleasing           | 12                   | 4                     |
| Useful                   | 8                    | 4                     |
| Rewarding                | 4                    | 0                     |
| Proud                    | 4                    | 2                     |
| Important                | 3                    | 2                     |
| Hero                     | 2                    | 2                     |
| Fun                      | 5                    | 0                     |
| <b>Total occurrences</b> | <b>38</b>            | <b>14</b>             |
| <b>NEGATIVE FEELINGS</b> | <b>Middle school</b> | <b>Primary school</b> |
| Uneasy                   | 3                    | 1                     |
| Tiresome                 | 2                    | 0                     |
| Shame                    | 2                    | 0                     |
| Regret                   | 1                    | 0                     |
| Helplessness             | 1                    | 2                     |
| Frustration              | 0                    | 1                     |
| Fear&anxiety             | 5                    | 4                     |
| Challenging              | 7                    | 2                     |
| Burden                   | 6                    | 0                     |
| <b>Total occurrences</b> | <b>27</b>            | <b>10</b>             |
| <b>FAMILY DINAMICS</b>   | <b>Middle school</b> | <b>Primary school</b> |
| Role-reversal            | 6                    | 0                     |
| Language knowledge       | 9                    | 1                     |
| Duty                     | 5                    | 1                     |
| <b>Total occurrences</b> | <b>20</b>            | <b>2</b>              |
| <b>AWARENESS</b>         | <b>Middle school</b> | <b>Primary school</b> |
| Terminology              | 5                    | 1                     |
| Role                     | 12                   | 3                     |
| Positive Impact          | 8                    | 0                     |
| Negative Impact          | 4                    | 0                     |
| <b>Total occurrences</b> | <b>29</b>            | <b>4</b>              |
| <b>EMPATHY</b>           | <b>Middle school</b> | <b>Primary school</b> |
| <b>Total occurrences</b> | 2                    | 6                     |

Tab. 1. Affective response to CLB by age group.

Older children (those in the 11 to 14 age range) tend to describe a wider array of feelings and to provide more comprehensive descriptions that contain references to various dimensions of the emotional impact of CLB, while younger children tend to report single events or experiences. The results of the query indicate that the

affective response to CLB may be influenced by age for all the themes except for Empathy. Care and compassion is often described within the school setting and emerges also as part of the reflection that was enthused by taking part in *Traduttori in Erba*, particularly in primary school.

A cluster analysis of word similarity (in Figure 4) detected some associations between the different themes and subthemes.

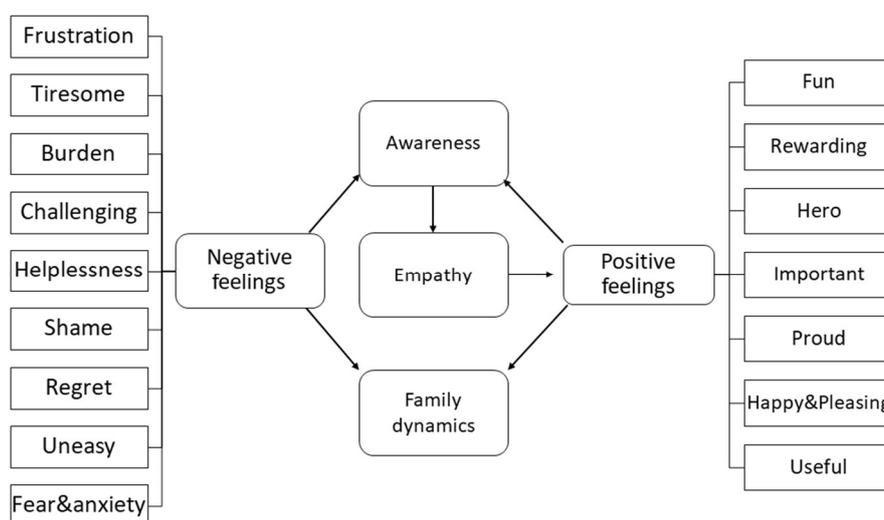


Fig. 4. Cluster analysis of word similarity.

With the premise that a more in-depth analysis is required to investigate the correlation between affective responses and the dimensions presented and discussed in this paper, it is however possible to provide a preliminary explanation for the associations detected by the cluster analysis.

The influence of Negative feelings on Awareness is linked to being aware of the responsibilities of language brokering and of the limitations posed by a limited knowledge of the specific terminology needed in specific interaction (e.g., in healthcare settings), but also, to a lesser extent, to the negative impact on school attendance. Conversely, Positive feelings are associated with improving one's linguistic competence in the languages used by the language brokers and their personal growth (e.g., becoming more responsible).

The influence of Negative feelings on Family dynamics appears to be connected with a protracted role-reversal caused by their parents' lack of independence based on their unwillingness or inability to become more fluent in the Italian language. It is also linked to the burden of responsibility in specific settings (e.g., healthcare) and the fear of making mistakes that would have dire consequences on their loved ones.

Contrariwise, the influence of Positive feelings on Family dynamics seem to be associated with feelings of satisfaction with one's role as a language broker and with having their work as language brokers acknowledged and praised by the adult recipients of CLB, namely parents and teachers.

Another interesting connection is the influence that Awareness has on Empathy and how this reinforces Positive feelings. Being aware of the positive impact that language brokering has on the lives of other people (their parents or peers) appears to be conducive to positive empathetic feelings, which are also engendered by previous experiences as a recipient of CLB or, as is the case of Italian children who learn about this practice, by becoming privy to this aspect of the migration experience.

## 5. Limitations of the study

Before concluding this study and discussing the implications of the findings, it is necessary to describe its limitations. This study offered a description of the emotional response to CLB as described by a small sample of children/adolescents with a migrant background living in Italy, hence, the findings cannot be generalized. Secondly, this is an exploratory and qualitative study that will need to be the object of a more in-depth analysis. Thirdly, the analysis should be integrated with other influential factors that contribute to the shaping of a positive or adverse response to CLB and this can be achieved by embedding this analysis into the broader context of the analysis of all the narratives that were collected by means of *Traduttori in Erba*. Finally, while the matrix coding query of data indicates that age is an influencing factor in the shaping of emotions related to the CLB experience, there are associations and variable correlations that need to be further explored to better understand how the affective response to CLB intersects with other aspects of the children's life and migration experience.

## 6. Concluding remarks

This qualitative study was carried out with the aim of contextualizing CLB within the area of affective responses to this practice and to answer the two main research questions that were the object of this study: how CLB affects child/adolescent language brokers and in what terms they describe it.

The qualitative research that is reported here confirms the multidimensional and overlying nature of affective responses to CLB particularly with regard to the themes identified in this study (as emphasized by Hall and Sham 2007 and Orellana 2017).

The thematic analysis that was carried out with 47 narratives written by primary and middle school pupils between 9 and 14 years of age afforded a valuable insight into the feelings related to this dimension of their migration experience and the dynamics of family relationships.

The analysis focussed on three dimensions of the affective response to CLB, positive and/or negative feelings, the emotional impact of CLB on family relations and dynamics, and CLB as an expression and tool of empathy, which were further categorized into five interconnected and, in some cases, mutually influenced core themes: i. the emotional impact of CLB on family relations and dynamics, ii. awareness, iii. positive and/or iv. negative feelings, and v. CLB as an expression and

tool of empathy. The first three themes are linked to the first research question dealing with the affective impact of CLB on their relationship with the people for which they language broker (peers and family members), while the second research question explored positive and negative feelings associated with CLB.

These findings on the emotional impact of CLB on family relations and dynamics align with what has been observed in the literature in terms of role reversal (Umaña-Taylor 2003; Titzmann 2012), adultification (Cline *et al.* 2017; Crafter and Iqbal 2022) and the burden of the responsibilities that come with their duty and role as language brokers (Weisskirch and Alva 2002; Kam and Lazarevic 2014). However, the analysis of the narratives also detailed the emotions attached to having to translate for their parents and family members, which include, most notably, frustration at their parents' lack of or limited language competence (and sometimes their refusal to learn Italian) that makes them dependent on their children, but also acceptance of CLB as the children's duty within the family (Valdés 2003).

The analysis of the awareness category yielded interesting results that show that language brokers are aware of the issues and situations that lead to resorting to CLB and are thus aware of the fact that they are filling a gap in the provision of professional linguistic mediation and facilitating inclusion. They are also aware of the benefits of acting as a language broker in terms of the impact this practice has on their learning and personal growth, as well as the development of better language skills and competence (Corona *et al.* 2012; Dorner *et al.* 2007). This corroborates with previous research on the children's awareness of their own mediation and the impact of having an inexperienced and untrained (child) mediator language broker (see for instance Hall and Sham 2007; Guo 2014). Moreover, child mediators' self-awareness is also correlated to the positive and/or negative attitudes and feelings they develop about their experience as language brokers (Guo 2014).

The findings on the role of empathy add to the research not only within CLB studies, but also within the broader context of Interpreting Studies, in which the study of the role played by empathy in linguistically and culturally mediated interactions in emerging (Merlini and Gatti 2015). Empathy is performed and perceived as i. a form of awareness of another's experience (a peer or family member); ii. an interpersonal activity, whereby "the empathizer shows and communicates empathy to a receiver" (Merlini and Gatti 2015: 140), but also as iii. an incentive on behalf of the receiver to show empathy to others. In CLB empathy has also been viewed as an expression or consequence of care and compassion (Garcia-Sanchez 2018; Crafter and Iqbal 2022). In the present study, the narratives showed that children/adolescents empathize with the recipients and beneficiaries of their language brokering activities, i.e. their classmates and friends, parents, family members and teachers. However, the results also point to another interesting aspect that is the incentive, after having been a recipient of CLB, to become language brokers in order to be able to help others.

The findings of this study point to the need to further research on the affective response to CLB by the beneficiaries of language brokered interactions. Research has taken mostly the perspective of language brokers on CLB, and to a lesser degree of adult participants and recipients of mediated interactions, i.e. parents (Corona *et al.* 2012), teachers (Cirillo 2017) and public service workers (Cirillo and Torresi 2010). Such research could assess and analyse the emotions and perspective of the

children who are at the receiving end of this practice and determine how CLB can affect and be affected by care and empathy.

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