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Through the children's voice. An analysis of language brokering experiences

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Through the children's voice: An analysis of language brokering experiences

ABSTRACT

Due to the lack of provision of language services and for cultural reasons, immigrants very often choose to entrust their children with the task of translating for them. The present paper will discuss results from a wide-scale study carried out by the In MediO PUER(I) research group of the University of Bologna aimed at assessing the main attitudes towards and opinions on CLB held by the primary actors involved in this form of linguistic and cultural mediation: children of immigrant families attending primary and middle school in the Forlì province of the Emilia-Romagna region. The analysis of the narratives they produced and submitted will provide a detailed description of the language brokering activities in which children are involved, and will illustrate their feelings towards CLB thus providing an insight into the impact that CLB has on their lives.

1. Introduction

Translation and interpreting are ancient practices, and they can probably be considered one of the oldest human activities. Ever since the need to overcome language barriers emerged, communities and peoples have had the need to rely on the skills of individuals (adults and children) able to

speak two or more languages. Nonetheless, it was only with the onset of the demographic changes triggered by mass migration in the past century that the provision of language services became a pressing issue and, regrettably, a problem often ignored by the central and local governments of many countries.

Translation and interpreting studies have traditionally approached this practice with a partial eye to “the linguistic and social interactional processes involved in an interpreted [and translated] event” (Antonini 2008: 246) and to professional interpreting and translation.

By contrast, non-professional interpreting and translation (NPIT), despite being a huge and largely submerged reality which involves people translating and interpreting on a regular or ad-hoc basis in a huge variety of formal and informal settings ranging from tourism, the media, public services, activism, conflicts, etc., was considered, until very recently, the poor relative of translation and interpreting studies and hence constituted a widely ignored area of research. One of the main reasons at the basis of this neglect may be ascribed to the fact that it was and still is generally regarded, by both the professional category and the academia, as a dangerous practice both in terms of ethical issues and of the impact it may have on the people who need to resort to the services of a linguistic mediator and thus a matter of concern.¹ Yet, NPIT is a reality in every country that is subject to language contact brought about by a number of factors, one of which is migration.

NPIT performed by children and adolescents is commonly defined as child language brokering (CLB) and this widespread practice of linguistic and cultural mediation or brokering has generated the bulk of academic production and research on NPIT and has developed into a self-contained area of study (Orellana 2009). For the purposes of the In MedIO PUER(I) research project, along with many other researchers and scholars (and the contributors in this volume), the term ‘child language brokering’ is preferred

for two main reasons. First of all because it includes the word ‘child’ which immediately focuses the attention on the age of the mediators and, secondly, because, as Hall and Sham noted, the term “brokering” captures the complexity of this activity whereby children not only translate or interpret but also “exert agency” thus displaying a high level of cognitive and social responsibility (2007: 18), by handling complex technical, legal and administrative problems and making decisions on behalf and for the benefit of their families (Shannon 1990).²

The present paper will illustrate and discuss the data collected by means of a school contest that enabled the In MedIO PUER(I) project to collect written and graphic narratives from primary and secondary level education students. After introducing the research project, this paper will discuss the ethics involved in conducting research with/on children and will provide a description of the main methodologies employed. The second part of the paper will focus on the school contest and on the analysis of the who, what and where of CLB in Italy as well as how the children perceive their role as language mediators.

2. The In MedIO PUER(I) project

The study of CLB in Italy is still in its infancy. Before 2007 (the year in which the In MedIO PUER(I) project started) any data or observation on this practice was simply a by-product, an accidental and marginal discovery within studies focussing mostly on the teaching/learning of Italian as a second language and migration.³ Hence, the In MedIO PUER(I) project started out with the aim of mapping out this practice in Italy but also

- to confirm that CLB is extremely common among all the linguistic and ethnic communities that live in Emilia Romagna and Italy at large;

- to provide a detailed description of the participants, the situations and contexts in which CLB takes place;
- to assess the impact that CLB has on various aspects of the life and development of language brokers, and on public institutions' policies;
- to gather data on children's, parents', teachers' and institutional representatives' attitudes towards CLB.

In order to achieve such aims a multi-method approach (combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies) was adopted to observe the phenomenon from the widest perspective possible. The research methodologies employed for the purpose of studying CLB in Italy comprised semi-structured interviews and focus groups, participant observation in classrooms, the administration of questionnaires, the collection of written and graphic narratives. The targeted population included former language brokers, primary and secondary level education teachers, representatives and operators of a variety of public institutions, health care operators. Moreover, contrary to other studies on CLB, the In MedIO PUER(I) research project instead of singling out on one specific linguistic and ethnic group focussed on all linguistic and ethnic groups present in the region, thus providing a complete and nuanced depiction of CLB as obtaining in the province of Forlì-Cesena.

The following section will provide a description of the issues involved in doing research on and with children.

2.1 Research on/with children and the use of narratives

Before moving on with the analysis of the narratives collected by means of the school context, it is important to discuss the issue of the involvement of minors in research both in terms of their rights and of the difficulties

involved in the presence of a particularly stringent legislation as is the case in Italy.

Research on and with children is generally viewed within the context of the international rights-based framework within which minors, who are defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) as “a human being below the age of 18 years”, were granted the right to express their own opinion. Article 12 of the UNCRC states that all minors who are capable of forming their own views, have a right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, with the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, thus gaining the right to be heard.⁴

Stemming from the subsequent ratification of the UNCRC by many states, the past two decades have witnessed an important shift in the perception of children and childhood and, as a consequence, a growing attention to the acknowledgement of the children’s right to be considered as active participants in society (Lansdown 1994; Hall & Sham 2007). This, in turn, has resulted in a great number of studies and publications aiming at ‘reconstructing childhood’ (James & Prout 1990, 1997) and uncovering those elements of childhood that until then had remained invisible to acknowledged social actors and agents such as public institutions and service providers, academic research, that is to adults (Books 1998; Morrow 1995). This new sociology of childhood has contributed to shift the established dominant approaches which perceived minors exclusively as (passive) objects of enquiry, to a theoretical and methodological paradigm that views minors as social actors and active agents with a unique perspective and insight into the reality that is the object of study (Tisdall & Punch 2012).

While in the relevant literature many studies provide examples of children and young people as competent social actors and emphasise their agency (e.g. Hutchby & Moran Ellis 1998) it is more rare to find interpretations and

explanations as to what children and young people make of and how they perceive such agency, as Bluebond-Langner and Korbin observe

anthropologists have both asserted and clearly documented children's agency, singly and in groups, in a number of situations. What is less clear is the degree of agency, the impact of that agency, let alone the nature of that agency (2007: 242).

James and Prout's definition of the children's role as social actors which describes them as "active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (1990: 8) is particularly true for the role they play as language brokers to help their families and communities integrate in their new country of residence.⁵ Following the paradigmatic shift in the perception of childhood and children's agency, research on child language brokering has been able to provide evidence that supports the view that when children and young people interpret and translate for others they are actively participating in decision-making processes that have an impact on both their own and their families' lives (Shannon 1990; Hall & Guéry 2010). This also entails that they when and while they act as mediators they will need to interpret and resolve any misunderstandings, ambiguities and difficulties (James 2009: 41) they come across when they are brokering for others.

Nonetheless, despite the new way in which children's roles and status in society are perceived, researchers and scholar do not entirely agree on how research with and on children should be approached and conducted. Hence, while it has been observed, for instance, that "to carry out research with children does not *necessarily* entail adopting different or particular methods, [because] like adults" they can take part in most data collection methods (e.g. interviews, questionnaires and participant observation) (Christensen & James 2000: 2), "adult perceptions of children and children's marginalized position in adult society" (Punch 2012: 321) are still influencing how research with children is viewed and approached.

Research with/on children, just like any other type of research, has potential benefits and drawbacks, it is therefore important to be aware of the fact that, in reality, both from an ethical and methodological point of view, the added concern is for the children themselves, not just the science.

The availability of guidelines and standards that regulate research involving minors represents a valuable support for researchers. The ethics of research with children is an issue addressed by various research councils and professional bodies in their ethical guidelines and codes of practice with the purpose of helping researchers carry out their research in an ethical manner (Morrow 1995). They also provide useful guidance for the drafting of informed consent, a fundamental instrument aimed at obtaining the consent of parents (or adults acting “in loco parentis”) to carry out research with their children. Once informed consent has been obtained, children must be put in the condition of providing their assent so that they know that they can choose whether to participate in the research.⁶

After this initial stage of fieldwork, researchers must also deal with a series of issues that arise during research. The first one concerns how the subject matter is introduced to the participants and, when children are involved, all sensible precautions must be taken in order to ensure that they will not be harmed or negatively affected by participating in the research. Secondly, children should be informed that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage. Thirdly, the subject matter should be explained in a way that does not generate any apprehension, confusion or misunderstanding and which avoids any kind of condescension on behalf of the adults involved in the research.

Good planning and the use of ethical guidelines are a useful support for solving general ethical dilemmas, however, more specific ethical issues may arise at any stage of the research, hence researchers should be prepared to deal with them.

In the case of the collection of data for the In MedIO PUER(I) project, as Morrow and Richards (1996) reported for the UK, obtaining the signed consent from the parents was just one of the final, and time-consuming, steps of the preliminary stages of the study. Consent was also obtained from the local educational authority, the schools managers and principals and the teachers. Yet, despite collecting all these consents, we were not granted the permission to video record, and in some cases even audio record, the children involved in the research project. The idea of the school competition was born out of the need to find a way to collect the children's opinions and narratives of their experiences as language brokers. The choice of having the children write about their experiences with CLB relied on the fact that narratives are particularly adaptable for the purposes of ethnographic and qualitative research since "a narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or her or his audience" (Moen 2006: 3).

Narrative research is a relatively recent interpretive method of inquiry and it is mostly situated within qualitative and interpretive research traditions. However, it is increasingly employed in the social sciences in a variety of disciplines that include, inter alia, anthropology, conversation analysis, educational practice and experience, (socio)linguistics and sociology. Its expediency in qualitative research relies on the fact that "the story becomes an object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives" (Mitchell & Egudo 2003: 1). Various researchers have provided many definitions of narrative and narrative research, which tend to differ according to methodological emphasis applied. However, as Moen (2006) argues, it is possible to describe narrative research according to three basic assertions: i. firstly that human beings are inextricably connected to the context (i.e. the social, cultural and institutional setting) and the situation they experience and, thus, the stories they tell help capture both the individual and his/her context; ii. secondly,

that narratives and the story they tell are shaped and influenced by a number of personal and interactional factors (e.g. personal values, past and present experiences, interlocutors and addressees, the place and time when the stories are told); thirdly, that narratives are characterized by a multivoicedness that is shaped by the teller, the addressees, but also the researchers. The present study follows Lieblich et al.'s comprehensive definition that best summarizes the nature and complexity of narrative research by defining it as:

Any study that uses or analyses narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (...) or in a different manner (...). It can be the object of the research or a means for the study of another question. It may be used for comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality (1998: 2).

Data collection methods in narrative research includes field notes, in-depth interviews, the researcher's observations, storytelling, letter writing, autobiographical writing, pictures and drawings. In CLB research the main narrative methods that have been used are interview (Bauer 2010, Forthcoming) and focus group transcripts (Bucaria & Rossato 2010; Rossato 2014), journal entries (Orellana et al. 2003; Orellana & Reynolds 2008; Orellana 2009), the analysis of graphic narratives (Torresi in this volume) and the transcript of simulations. In general terms, the use of one or more of the methods listed above is dependant on the research object and objectives and can also be influenced by ethical and pragmatic issues.

In the case of the In MediO PUER(I) project the decision to choose narratives over other methods of quantitative and qualitative research was determined by two main reasons. The first one was to promote the In MediO PUER(I) project in schools so as to gain the interest and co-operation of teachers. The second was represented by the opposition on behalf of school principals to granting the permission (especially in primary schools) to either audio or video record children during interviews or field observation.

The latter represented a significant methodological problem for the researchers who decided to opt for the school contest and the collection of written and graphic narratives in order to obtain the children's accounts of their experiences as language brokers.

The following section will describe the school contest in detail.

4. The school competition: TRADUTTORI IN ERBA (TRANSLATORS IN BUD)

Emilia-Romagna is one of the Italian regions with the highest number of immigrants and the first in terms of the percentage of foreign minors enrolled in primary and secondary schools (see Antonini (2014) and Rossato (2014) for a detailed analysis of current migration trends to Italy). It was thus only natural for the In MedIO PUER(I) research group to choose to engage the schools in their data collection activities. The aim of the school competition was, therefore, twofold. First of all it was considered instrumental in making the research project known to the teachers of primary and middle schools in the province of Forlì-Cesena, which is situated in the south-east of the northern region Emilia-Romagna. Secondly, it was also devised to give children who engage in CLB activities an opportunity to illustrate their experiences by describing in their own words or drawn images the translation and interpreting activities they are asked to perform, as well as their feelings towards CLB, thus giving visibility to the huge contribution they make to their families and the Italian society.

Two editions were organized in 2010 and 2011. The schools involved were primary schools (children aged 6-10) and middle schools (children aged 11-14) in the province of Forlì-Cesena. The children taking part in the contest were asked to write a short composition or present a drawing in which they described their experience as a language broker or in which they illustrated

a situation in which they had witnessed a language brokering event. This latter point was introduced in order to allow Italian children to take part in the contest.

Great care was used in the wording of the rules of the competition which included a definition of the practice of linguistic and cultural mediation, as well as what was expected in terms of the content of the narratives. A great advantage was represented by the fact that teachers were entrusted with the task of explaining the competition and the subject matter to the children in words and terms that they could easily understand and relate to their own experiences.

@@ Insert Figure 1 here

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Comune di Forlì
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 Relazioni Internazionali
 Assessorato alle Politiche Educative
 e Formative, Istruzione

Provincia di Forlì-Cesena
 Assessorato alle Politiche per l'Istruzione

InMedIO PUER(I)

Traduttori in erba
 Concorso di disegno e composizione
 per i ragazzi delle
 scuole primarie e secondarie
 di primo grado.

Tema del concorso
 "La mediazione linguistica e culturale
 ad opera di bambini e adolescenti
 figli di immigrati".

The contest had an official framework comprising a set of rules, a jury and an official ceremony that took place at the town council and during which the Mayor of Forlì, at the presence of other authorities, handed out the awards to the winners. The main awards consisted in vouchers for school

material for the winners, but also for the schools they represented. Smaller awards (University of Bologna gadgets) were also awarded to second, third and fourth place. All the winners also received a plaque bearing the engraving “Translator ad honorem”. The ceremony was covered by the local newspapers.

In all, we received 200 contributions which helped us understand the extension of the CLB phenomenon as well as a wide range of issues and factors that are related to it and which are summed up in the following list:

- the where and when of CLB
- identity issues
- bi/multilingualism factors
- the positive and/or emotional impact of CLB
- the often traumatic experience of the first day of school
- the difficulty of learning Italian
- translating strategies adopted by the language brokers
- parentification and adultification issues
- the role played by peer Italian mediators
- (in)voluntary humour

All the aspects described by the children in their narratives contribute to paint a multifaceted picture of what it means to mediate linguistically and culturally for other people and in a huge variety of situations and contexts, and most of them are well documented in the literature on CLB practices. Others, like, for instance, the description of the first day of school or the role played by young Italian mediators, have not been addressed in other studies and would certainly deserve more attention. What is certainly worth mentioning is that they help us understand that CLB is just one element of the complex process of adjustment and acculturation that is part of the language brokers' life.

The following sections will focus on two of these aspects that the children chose to describe in their graphic and written narratives: the situations and

contexts in which they are asked to broker and the perception they have of their role as language mediators.

4.1 The when and what of CLB: The school setting

The when and what of CLB is one of the aspects of this phenomenon that has been studied more in depth (Weisskirch 2005). Through their narratives, the children who took part in the school competition confirmed that, as described in previous studies carried out in other countries and with a variety of linguistic and ethnic groups, they are generally asked to language broker in wide array of formal and informal situations and contexts. The main institutional domains in which children and adolescents language broker for family members and other people range from educational and health care services, as well as financial, administrative and legal services. Art. 36 of Law N. 40 of 6th March 1998 asserts the necessity of establishing "i criteri e le modalità di comunicazione con le famiglie degli alunni stranieri, anche con l'ausilio di mediatori culturali qualificati" and, whenever possible, of the families themselves. Schools, health authorities and centres and other public offices are allotted a number of hours with professional language and cultural mediators on an annual basis and depending on the demand by foreign pupils/students and users. The institutions then decide how and when to use these language services. However, when it comes to the regulation of language brokering activities performed by children there are no available guidelines. The only official and direct reference to CLB in schools is contained in a circular on the integration of foreign pupils published in 1989 (http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/circolari/cm301_89.html), which encourages the involvement of pupils of different ethnic origins, who have

some competence in the Italian language, in helping their peers who do not speak Italian.

Conversely, the new guidelines for the welcoming and integration of foreign students published in 2014 by the Ministry of Education, University and Research

(http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/linee_guida_integrazione_alunni_stranieri.pdf), while providing clear indications on how to welcome and assist foreign students who enrol in Italian schools, do not even acknowledge the existence of this phenomenon and the fact that in the majority of cases it is the only available option to help teachers, students and their parents overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

The narratives submitted for the two editions of Traduttori in Erba provided a detailed picture of the language brokering activities experienced and witnessed by children.

Primary-school age children generally describe having brokered in both formal and informal situations which include peer-to-peer (for friends and school mates) and child-to-adult (for their parents and/or family members and teachers, for instance) interactions.

Middle-school age children report more complex and formal language brokering events, which may include interactions taking place at the hospital, police station, at the lawyer's, but also at the trade union. Hence, the pattern that emerges shows that the level of difficulty and complexity of such linguistically mediated interactions, in terms of the vocabulary and knowledge required, tends to increase as the children grow older.

@ @ Insert Figure 2 here



Figure 2 above is a drawing submitted by a 10-year old girl who lists both informal (at the supermarket, at the baker's and the butcher's) and formal contexts (like, for instance, at the doctor's and at the bank). This is a very good example of the wide array of the language brokering activities in which children of immigrants engage on a regular basis both for their families and for other members of their ethnic and language community. Very often they include interpreting and translating in situations that an adult Italian native speaker would find rather challenging and demanding (e.g. at the police station, at the hospital, translating the inland revenues form, and so on). Indeed, as observed in the relevant literature

the demands made upon children when literacy brokering 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 & Guery: 41).

One of the contexts in which children are asked to language broker more often is the school (Prokopiou et al. 2013; Cline et al. 2014).

Within the school setting, the situations in which children are asked to interpret and translate include pupil-teacher interactions, parent-teacher meetings, communications from the school to the parents, emergencies or impromptu situations. Children and adolescents are asked to language broker in all these situations because schools can resort to a very limited number of hours of paid professional linguistic and cultural mediation. Hence any situation that requires the services of a professional and that cannot be dealt with with the help of a professional will see a child/adolescent acting as a language broker.

The language brokering of pupil-teacher interactions occurs whenever the teacher needs to communicate with a pupil who cannot communicate in Italian. There are two available options, the first one is to ask a pupil from the same class and who speaks the same language to interpret for his/her school mate; the second option is to ask a pupil from another class to assist the newcomer pupil with some class activities and in communicating with the teachers.

Example 1 contains the story of how a 12-year old boy was helped by one of his class mates when he started attending primary school and how he came to rely on his friend who language brokered for him in the school context:

(1) When I arrived on 16 September 2009 I did not speak Italian, I only knew a few words. The first person who helped me learn Italian was my mother, and then my friend Vladi. Vladi is a Moldavian boy who could speak both Romanian and Italian. He helped me a lot by translating the things that my teacher told me, when my class mates talked to me or when doing my homework.

Example 2 below is illustrative of the fact that the enrolment of non-Italian speaking children in schools can take place at any time throughout the academic year without guaranteeing the help and assistance of professional language and cultural mediators. This situation entails that children speaking their same language and who are fluent in Italian are asked to translate for them and to make sure that they become familiar with school activities and rules.

As an 11-year Tunisian girl explains:

(2) By attending school I learnt Italian and English which can be added to the language I already know, that is Arabic. For this reason in these last few years I have been quite helpful to teachers. Day after day our class “gets bigger and bigger” as foreign children from many countries including Arabic-speaking countries enrol at my school. Since they have just arrived they do not know Italian, for this reason they cannot express themselves nor can they understand the topics explained in class. This is when I “step in” and translate for both the teacher and my class mates.

Example 3 shows how children may also take the initiative and intervene outside the classroom to facilitate peer-to-peer interactions

(3) Another example which might seem trivial regards the kid who has just arrives and who, by not understanding the rules of the game, might get excluded. By writing and thinking about this topic I have realized how a small gesture can have such a big impact.

Some children go even beyond that and, hoping also to make the adults for whom they language broker more autonomous, use the notions they learn at school and the material they use in class to teach them Italian:

(4) I always help my mom in our vegetable and food shop. We put together a 50-page booklet where I wrote a few words in Italian, which I translated into English and then into Bangla. When a customer walks into the shop and says a word my mother doesn't know, she takes out the booklet that we have prepared together and turns to the page with the right word. In this way she's able to understand what she's being asked and she can answer by herself. This book was my idea.

(5) I told her words and she repeated them after me. She wrote down words in Arabic with the translation in Italian below. I still occasionally teach her a bit of grammar, and when she comes to my house we only speak Italian. I prepared a big book where every day I would add pages that I photocopied from by school books. That book had 100 pages, the cover was light blue with a pink ribbon. I taught her the same things I had learned. In the end my aunt threw away the book because it was too heavy.

Even though a great part of the hours of professional mediation allotted to schools is used for parent-teacher meetings, they are not sufficient to cover the needs of schools for all the students and for all the languages they speak. This means that in many cases children of foreign origin are required to interpret at parent-teacher conferences⁷ where his/her own school performance is discussed and with all the implications that this may have in terms of a series of issues and factors.

The following example (6) illustrates how child language brokers have to navigate through complex circumstances when mediating between parents and teachers, particularly when the subject matter is their own academic progress and performance. A 14-year old Chinese boy reports his experience of having to interpret for his father at parent-teacher conferences at his middle school. The narrative entitled “Parent-teacher conference day” is structured in separate paragraphs, each representing a meeting with a different teacher. With just a few exceptions, in most of these meetings the teachers reported a negative assessment on the child’s academic and linguistic progress and complained about the fact that he did not have the books and materials necessary for him to study the different subjects and do the assigned homework:

(6) Last month, one day at 3:45 pm my father and I went to school for parent-teacher conferences. My father does not understand Italian and I translated for him.

First my dad and I talked with my art teacher and she said that once I did not do in-class assignment because I haven’t bought the course book and she said that I need to buy the course book.

(...) We talked to the Italian teacher and she said that I need to work harder or I will repeat the year.

(...) Then we talked to the music teacher. She said that I play the flute well, but my homework is not good because I do not understand Italian well.

(...) The technology teacher said that I am good at graphic design but I don’t study because I do not have the course book.

(...) I translated all good and bad things for my father.

This example is particularly significant for a number of reasons. First of all, as can be seen in the original in Appendix 1, this child is not very fluent in

Italian, this means that at the time of his writing he had probably arrived in Italy quite recently. Nonetheless, as often is the case with language brokers, he was required all the same to interpret for his father and his teachers. Secondly, he admits to having translated everything for his father including the comments on the fact that he does not have the material (e.g. school texts) necessary for him to practice and study, something that could also be interpreted as a reproach to his parents. Thirdly, this and the other examples presented in this paper are particularly illustrative of the self-positioning of language brokers in situations in which they have to deal with the complexities that characterize mediating between languages and cultures, namely

competing claims for allegiance, competing expectations relating to chronological and social age behaviour, the contrastive complexities of monologic and dialogic performance, and the contrastive contexts of the immediate setting and the broader cultural meanings (Hall 2004: 293).

The same positioning may occur in other situations in which children may be required to interpret and translate, which include, inter alia, the translation of written communications and notices from the school to the parents as reported also by Orellana (2009).

The feelings associated with language brokering experiences vary consistently according to a number of factors and situations. The following section will address the issue of how children perceive their role of language mediators in terms of the feelings and emotions they associate with their language brokering activities.

4.2 *Children's perception of their role as language mediators*

The literature on CLB has highlighted the fact that the emotional experience of being involved in this practice can be variable (Weisskirch 2007) and has also shown that children tend to report mixed positive and negative feelings (Tse 1995).

Positive feelings are usually associated with the awareness that by translating and interpreting for others they can learn new vocabulary and literacy skills, but also contribute to maintaining and improving their native language skills (McQuillan & Tse 1995; Orellana et al. 2003). A negative perception of CLB is likely to be engendered by feelings such as anxiety, fear, embarrassment, and worry, which contribute to turn the children's engagement into a stressful and cumbersome experience.

The great majority of the narratives obtained by means of the school competition express mixed emotions.

In general terms, children of primary school age report a more positive attitude towards their role as language brokers especially when they could avail themselves of assistance of a child language broker when they arrived in Italy and could not speak the language:

(7) I am happy to help her, I am pleased to do it because I remember when I had just arrived to Italy and didn't understand the language, so this is why I am happy I can be useful to someone who needs my help.

Whenever children report negative feelings these are usually associated with the fear of making mistakes and a sense of insecurity related to their native language skills:

(8) 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 don't 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).

As language brokers get older and their LB activities become more complex and demanding the perception they have of their role and responsibilities as language brokers changes accordingly. What is clear from the comments expressed by middle school age pupils is that they tend to have more complex attitudes towards CLB practices and the way in which they impact on their lives, both in terms of the awareness they have of the responsibilities attached to handling complex events, but also on the substantial burden posed by their LB activities on their school and free time. After listing all the LB activities in which they are involved on a regular basis both for their families and members of their language community (example 9), three fourteen year old Chinese girls observe:

(9) In this situation we feel all the burden of the responsibility that our parents give us, because they do not speak Italian or don't speak it very well and, thus, they are not able to understand what they are required to do.

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!

We are really sorry when we have to miss a day or a few hours of school, but we can't say no to our parents or friends who need our help!

5. Conclusions

In Italy, despite “the ever growing request and need of language services for the new migrant population” (Antonini 2010: 234), the measures and policies implemented are scarce, and often rely on ad hoc solutions (Rudvin 2006).

However, even those countries with a more established tradition in the provision of language services to immigrant groups are not able to cover all the needs and situations in which these services are required.

This is particularly evident in the school setting where teachers very often do not have any other choice but to resort to child language brokers to help newly arrived pupils get adjusted to a new country, a new language, a new culture and a new school system.

The unexpected success obtained by the school competition among teachers and students alike was particularly relevant to understand another important aspect of this phenomenon, its utter invisibility. Thanks to the competition it was possible to give visibility to a practice that receives no attention or recognition and that is often taken for granted by those adults who are the main beneficiaries of this practice.

As Hall (2004) rightly pointed out, when children are asked to language broker they not only have to navigate the complexities of the social context but they also face social and practical dilemmas and need to negotiate a pathway through these complexities. Hence, the study of CLB must always be addressed as a complex phenomenon that needs a scientific approach: all the aspects, effects and processes triggered by language brokering do not occur or happen in isolation from one another, therefore they need to be studied with a methodological approach designed to take a complete picture of this phenomenon and which takes into consideration all the ethical issues inherent in research with/on children. Moreover, given the immense contribution that child language brokers make to their families and society

at large, “the talents these bilingual youngsters exhibit cannot be denied. Identifying and nurturing the talent that these bilinguals display should not continue to go unnoticed. Rather, those talents need to be nurtured and celebrated” (Angelelli 2010: 94).

Notes

1 Only very recently was NPIT granted official recognition within interpreting and translation studies with the inclusion in 2011 of an entry devoted to the Natural Translator and Interpreter in the Translation Studies Reader and of two entries (‘non-professional interpreting and translation’ and ‘child language brokering’) in the forthcoming edition of the Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies.

2 For a detailed analysis of the state of art of research on CLB see Orellana (in this volume) and Hall and Guéry (2010).

3 The only study that preceded the In MedIO PUER(I) research project is Valtolina’s (2010) analysis of the relationship between language brokering and the psychological well-being of a sample of Italian-born Filipino adolescents.

4 The 54 articles contained in the UNCRC cover a wide array of rights for children and young people which fall under the rubric of (i) empowerment, that is, advocating for children as autonomous people under the law; (ii) the right of protection, that is, claiming on society and the state for protection from harms perpetrated on children because of their dependency; (iii) economic, social and cultural rights, which are related to the conditions that are essential to meet basic human needs, access to education, housing, food, work, health; (iv) environmental, cultural and developmental rights, which include the right to live in safe and healthy environments and the right to cultural, political and economic development. Beside these physical and collective rights, children are also entitled to individual rights that “allow

them to grow up healthy and free” (Calkins 1972: 327), namely ownership over one’s body, freedom of speech, thought and choice, freedom from fear, and the right to make decisions. All these rights should be safeguarded whenever children are involved in research.

6 Mayall builds on James and Prout’s definition by distinguishing between actor and agent and specifying that

A social actor does something, perhaps something arising from a subjective wish. The term agent suggests a further dimension: negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints” (2002: 21).

6 The issue of informed consent is central in discussions on research on/with children. Consent is usually interpreted and defined as permission from parents or adults acting ‘in loco parentis’. In the past, children were not seen as entitled of the right to say ‘no’ to research. In more recent years this situation has changed. However, researchers are still required to obtain consent from a wide range of adult gatekeepers (e.g. parents, school teachers, head teachers, local educational authorities).

Informed consent is based on three features: (i) disclosure of the knowledge and information on the research that must be provided to the participants in a form they can understand; (ii) their voluntarily consent and (iii) their competence to give this consent (Beresford 1997). Since children do not have the same cognitive capacities as adults, informed consent should be developed so as to provide information that is customized in a form that children can understand.

7 In Italy parent-teacher conferences are face-to-face meetings in which parents and teachers meet in person. They take place once every school term and they are notified in writing to the families and also online on the school’s website. The form in which these meetings are carried out varies according to the school grade. In primary schools they consist of pre-

scheduled one-to-many meetings between one parent and multiple teachers, whereby the parent(s) of each child meets every teacher and is updated on the child's academic development and progress. In middle schools they are one-to-one interviews. At all school levels, special parent-teacher meetings can be scheduled to discuss specific matters.

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APPENDIX 1 – EXAMPLES IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

(1) Io sono arrivato in settembre 16 dell'anno 2009. quando sono arrivato non sapevo parlare l'italiano, ma solo qualche parola. Per imparare l'italiano prima mi ha aiutato la mamma e il mio amico Vladi. Vladi era un bambino moldavo che sapeva parlare il rumeno e l'italiano. Lui mi ha aiutato moltissimo, traducendomi le cose che mi diceva la maestra, quando mi dicevano qualcosa i miei compagni o quando facevo i compiti.

(2) Andando a scuola ho imparato l'italiano e l'inglese che si aggiungono alla lingua che conosco già, cioè l'arabo. Per questo motivo in questi anni, sono stata molto utile alle insegnanti. Giorno dopo giorno la nostra classe "si allarga sempre di più" e giungono ancora bimbi stranieri, provenienti da tanti paesi e pure dai paesi in cui si parla arabo. Essendo appena arrivati non conoscono l'italiano, per questo motivo non possono né esprimersi né capire gli argomenti trattati. A questo punto "intervengo" io traducendo sia alla maestra che ai compagni.

(3) Un altro esempio che potrebbe sembrare banale riguarda il compagno appena arrivato che, non capendo le regole di un gioco, rischierebbe di

rimanere escluso. Scrivendo e ragionando su questo tema, sono riuscita a capire bene che basta un piccolo gesto per riuscire a fare tanto.

(4) Io le dicevo delle parole e lei ripeteva con me. Lei scriveva delle parole in Arabo e sotto le scriveva Italiano. Io ancora adesso l'aiuto a fare un po' di grammatica; quando viene da me parliamo solo in italiano. Io le ho preparato un libro molto grande dove ogni giorno aggiungevo qualche scheda, fotocopiando i miei libri. Questo libro aveva 100 pagine, la copertina era azzurra con un nastrino di tre colori. Io le insegnavo le stesse cose che avevo imparato io. Adesso questo libro mia zia l'ha buttato via perché era molto pesante.

(5) Io aiuto sempre la mia mamma nel nostro negozio di frutta, verdura e alimentari. Insieme abbiamo costruito un libretto che ha 50 pagine e 100 facciate, in quel libretto io ho scritto delle parole in italiano e poi ho trasformato in inglese e poi dall'inglese ho trasformato in lingua bangla. Quando arriva un cliente e dice una parola che mia mamma non capisce, lei prende subito il libretto che abbiamo fatto noi due insieme e va nella paginetta dove c'è quella parola giusta. Così riesce a capire quello che le domandano e sa rispondere da sola. Questo libretto è stata una mia idea.

(6) Il mese scorso un giorno alle 15:45 io e mio babbo siamo andati a scuola perché c'erano le udienze con i professori. Mio babbo non capisce italiano e io ho fatto la traduzione.

Prima io e mio babbo abbiamo parlato con la professoressa di arte e lei ha detto che io una volta non ho fatto la verifica perché non ho comprato il libro e ha detto che devo comprare il libro.

(...) Abbiamo parlato con la professoressa [di italiano] ha detto che devo lavorare di più se non rimango in prima.

(...) Dopo abbiamo parlato con il professoro di musica. Lei ha detto che in fatto sono bravo, ma i compiti non vanno bene perché ancora non conosco l'italiano.

(...) La professoressa di tecnica ha detto che disegno bene ma non studio perché non ho libri.

(7)

(8)

(9) È in questa situazione che sentiamo tutto il peso della responsabilità che i nostri genitori ci danno, in quanto loro non parlano o parlano poco la lingua italiana e, quindi, non sono in grado di capire ciò che viene loro richiesto.

La nostra esperienza vi fa capire quindi che essere “traduttori” significa fare cose che non fanno normalmente i ragazzi della nostra età. Non è facile passare un pomeriggio in sindacato o in Questura, perché si deve fare una cosa importante per la famiglia; ma dobbiamo comunque impegnarci a farlo, perché è un nostro dovere!

La cosa che ci dispiace di più è quando dobbiamo saltare un giorno o qualche ora di lezione, ma non si può dire di no ai genitori o agli amici che hanno bisogno di noi!