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Quien habla dos idiomas vale por dos: Tying a child's language brokering skill into their educational journey to develop bilingualism

This article examines the Spanish proverb, *quien habla dos idiomas vale por dos*, which literally translates to mean he who speaks two languages is worth two people and applies its meaning to immigrant children who are language brokers for their families. Historically, the United States has not promoted multilingualism and even frowned up language brokering because it is viewed as an adult task taken on by a child. However, recent research shows that language brokering is actually a benefit that aids the family in the acculturation process and assists the child in the journey of becoming bilingual. There is much research already on the benefit of being bilingual. This project set out to show that connecting child language brokers to educational programs could ultimately nurture their bilingual skills and support them to be successful academically. The goals of this project were to link language brokers with (a) current research on benefits of bilingualism, (b) to find any pioneers in the United States leading the way in promoting bilingualism or multilingualism, and (c) to offer next steps.

Quien habla dos idiomas vale por dos is a Spanish *dicho* (proverb)

with a literal translation of he who speaks two languages is worth two people. Now, consider immigrant families adjusting to a new culture, new language, new customs, new systems, and consider how this dicho might impact the acculturation process of these families.

Language brokering is a common practice among children of immigrant families in the United States as well as in other countries. However, publically, those who have adopted Western values frown upon this practice. Instead of language brokering being seen as support, many see this task as a child taking on adult responsibilities and ultimately causing a shift in familial power (Weisskirch, 2010). In fact, California in 2002, put forth legislation prohibiting children from being used for translation in medical, legal and social service settings. The rationale for this legislation states that children are not able to translate information accurately, the information being translated may negatively impact the familial relationship and may also be traumatizing (Morales & Hanson, 2005). However, recent studies show that language brokering may actually be beneficial and serve as an acculturation strategy whereas both the child and the family gain an understanding of cultural norms, practices and resources needed to adapt to this new society. Not only can language brokering be beneficial in this regard, it can also serve as a way for the family to preserve the heritage language. Families who are able to maintain the heritage language are often more cohesive as a unit and keep a connection and respect of their own culture while helping them learn about a new one (Villanueva & Buriel, 2010). This, in essence, is the true meaning of the dicho, *quien habla dos idiomas vale por dos.*

Immigration, for any family, is stressful even if it is chosen. Immigration means learning about a new culture, a new language, new norms and practices and new systems. Many families who emigrate from Latin American countries to the United States do not speak English or have not yet acquired the needed fluency in English to be considered proficient. Parents must often enter the workforce quickly in order to survive and therefore, do not have the time to learn and master English as well. Consequently, their children become the main translators and interpreters for the family (Martinez, McClure & Eddy, 2009).

Children have the ability to learn language quicker and as a result, are often used for translation during the immigration process. However,

language brokering is much more than translation. Language brokering means interpreting languages, cultural norms, and interactions and transactions of others while navigating through social systems (Corona, Stevens, Halfond, Shaffer, Reid-Quinones & Gonzalez, 2012). It also means having to be the voice or power for the family in situations where the adult feels disempowered. It also means sometimes being the voice in the decision-making when it is warranted (Martinez, McClure & Eddy, 2009). Language brokering is not bilingualism; it is more closely tied to learning how to navigate between two languages for the survival of the family (Morales & Hanson, 2005). What are the educational options in the United States for students who are considered the language brokers of the family?

Current Educational Models in the United States

English-only Initiatives in the United States: Toward the end of the 20th Century, the modern monolingual movement was reborn in the United States. First, several states proposed English-only ballot initiatives for schools. Then, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was not reauthorized. The monolingual rebirth continued in 2001 with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This act drastically changed accountability and required all students to be proficient on state tests even though all state tests were in English. In addition, NCLB dismantled funding that provided needed support for English language learner services in schools. To further fuel the monolingual movement during this time, more than 27 states adopted an English-only policy (de Jong, 2011). As a result, English as a Second Language classes were only allowed to use English within the classroom. Often, this caused teachers to compromise effective teaching strategies and ethical beliefs in order to conform to a one-size fits all approach to meeting the needs of second language learners (Bondy, 2016). Most language brokers are placed into these segregated classrooms where the heritage language is ignored and often seen as "un-American".

Partial-Immersion Programs in the United States: Partial immersion programs provide English for the majority of the day and the student's native language for only a short time. The goal is for students to

be in an English-only program without support in the student's native language as quickly as possible. The goal of the teacher remains the same, give support to the student in the native language, but transition the student into English-only; not as a goal to help a child become bilingual but as a way to help the child become English-only (Ovando, 2003). If a language broker is placed in such a classroom, this program essentially sends out the message that cultural and linguistic differences are not worthy. The goal of partial immersion programs is to teach English as soon as possible and integrate these children into the mainstream of education. The emphasis is not in creating bilingualism or biliteracy and often students exit this type of program without proficiency in either English or their primary language (McKeon & Malarz, 1991).

Transitional-Bilingual Programs in the United States: Transitional bilingual programs are the most common type of bilingual programs offered in the United States. They provide instruction in both English and the student's native language. The goal of this program is to provide support until the student has reached a specific level of English proficiency. Once this level is attained, the student is placed into an English-only program (Ovando, 2003). Instead, as the name of the program suggests, the goal is t0 help the student transition into an English language dominant educational system. This framework is closely tied into the deeply rooted belief system in the United States that English-only is the American way (Borden, 2014). For a language broker, maintenance of the heritage language is an essential survival tool for the family and something that is valued as part of the acculturation process. The family depends on the child's Spanish and could actually benefit from the child growing bilingual and bi-literate skills in the academic realm.

Two-Way Dual Language Programs in the United States: In the United States, many school systems have adopted a two-way dual language framework, especially English-Spanish models. Two-way dual language programs place students who speak both English and the target language in a classroom together to learn each other's language and work side-by-side with the ultimate goal of becoming bilingual and bi-literate (Ovando, 2003). Research shows that students who learn and manage two languages

receive cognitive benefits, enhanced executive functioning and become balanced bilinguals. Balanced bilinguals are those who have learned both languages equally and use language as a tool. All of the skills contribute to enhanced familial relationships and ties (US Department of Health and Human Services & US Department of Education, January 2018).

Next Steps for Language Brokers

What if the United States encouraged language brokering and then tied it into a child's academic journey? Upon enrollment, schools do not always see the language broker as an asset but rather as a burden to the school. These are students who come in with a stigma that stems from deep seeded monolingual educational practices. This concept could be a reality if tapped into correctly. For example, all schools ask about a family's home language. If a language other than English is identified, a primary language test ought to be the first go to but instead, this triggers an English Language proficiency test. This fact indicates that most school officials are unaware of the children who serve as language brokers for their families. If this were identified, a prime opportunity for the school to connect this valued skill to children's future educational journey could be tapped into and highlighted (Zehr, 2010). Currently though, a child's language brokering status in the family is not always obvious. In fact, language brokering is not widely accepted because many see it as an adult burden placed onto a child rather than an asset waiting to grow or to be valued as a functional task to aid the family. Instead, placing the child in this role is seen as hindrance that leads to family dysfunction and poor outcomes (Weisskirch, 2010). First, instead of prohibiting language brokering, it should be encouraged. Immigration often causes family chaos and disequilibrium. Language brokering should be seen as a functional task to aid the family rather than a hindrance that leads to family dysfunction and poor outcomes (Weisskirch, 2010). On the other hand, studies do show that children who function as the language broker for the family often acquire a higher level of understanding of both languages and often have higher problem solving, they are not always considered truly bilingual or bi literate. One remedy is to identify these language brokers and enroll them in an additive bilingual education program that could exponentially and permanently further their academic success. Currently, research in the area of language brokering is limited and

far from being widely accepted (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Knowing the research and knowing the potential for these children to become bilingual and bi-literate, why not connect them directly to an academic system that will ultimately value their skills and build upon them?

Why Two-Way Dual Language Education for Language Brokers

Cognitive Benefits: There is considerable research suggesting that children who learn two languages outperform their monolingual counterparts and develop higher levels of cognition such as increased attention and working memory (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson & Ungerleider, 2010). Brain research shows that learning two languages actually strengthens the executive control system (Weisskirch, 2010). Executive functioning is responsible for problem solving, social reasoning, memory and math reasoning (Marian, Shook & Schroeder, 2013). All of these benefits make the case even stronger for schools to look out for and enroll children who are language brokers for their families.

Increased Self-Perception: In addition to increased cognitive levels, there is much research that shows that children who master two languages not only have higher academic outcomes but also higher self-efficacy than their monolingual counterparts. This means these children have a higher self-perception because their own culture and language is being promoted equally alongside English within the classroom and school-wide. These types of programs also create students who show cross cultural competency and a higher level of acceptance of others throughout life (Cortina, Makar, Mount-Cors, 2015). In a study completed by Dorner, self-perception was of notable mention for immigrant students enrolled in a two-way dual language program (2010). Over the course of 18 months, Dorner found that not only did immigrant parents support the program because they knew it was a way to forge a better path for their children, but their children reported having higher self-esteem about themselves. In interviews, the students in the program were proud of their abilities in both languages and they reported that they were motivated to continue learning both languages. The students in this program also reported that they were able to help their younger siblings and family members in both languages (2010). This is a true benefit that language brokers could reap from two-

way dual language programs.

Preservation of the Heritage Language: Children who are able to communicate in their heritage language to their family continue to report having strong ties to their culture and identity. They also feel more connected to the family's struggles during the immigration process and find they are valued (Pimentel & Sevin, 2009). Two-way dual language programs can validate the role of the child who serves as the language broker, and the school can serve as a resource to the home.

Peer Models: One of the key advantages of two-way dual language programs is the pairing of students from two language groups. As a result, students are able to serve as peer models for each other and in essence, be language brokers within a classroom setting (Thomas & Collier, 2002). For language brokers, this only further supports their role in the family positively. This role also levels the power of the two languages being taught thus making each equal. In order for this to truly work, it is important that the teacher set up interactions that level the power of the language interactions. Teachers need to strategically construct opportunities for students to take on the role of language brokering within the classroom whether it is in the target language or English. If only the proficient speakers have the opportunity, the power of the languages is never leveled and a marginalized context takes place. If this happens, students become to identify themselves as being able and not being able. Teachers need to create learning situations where students can highlight their different strengths and talents within a two-way dual language classroom while building language proficiency in both (Lee, Hill-Bonnet & Raley, 2011).

Cultural Competency: Schools that offer a two-way dual language program understand that developing an awareness of cultural competency is critical to the success of students. It is a central principle that being bilingual is a cultural norm and a central value to the school and all families that are served within the community. This core value is taught explicitly to students and shared by staff and families (Howard, Sugarman, Christian, Lindhom-Leary & Rogers, 2007). Genesee & Cloud (1998) calls this intercultural understanding and tolerance. These two authors had the idea

that multilingualism was a necessity for the United States back in 1998, but it was not a value that took hold and was even outlawed in several states.

Implications for Language Brokers

If all of the research about two-way dual language programs is valid, then the United States should be viewing language brokering as a value adding or strengths based function rather than a detriment (Weisskirch, 2010). In addition, this practice should be embraced and programs in schools should help to foster the skills of these children. As supported by the research, children who are comfortable with a bicultural identity grow up to be more flexible and understanding to others with cultural and linguistic differences. Other studies show that families who need language brokers want their children to serve in this role because their circumstances are already known. Other advantages include learning how to navigate social situations, strengthening familial ties and overall building a sense of well-being within the family and school settings (Cline, Crafter & Prokopiou, 2014). These are the types of citizens needed to compete in today's ever-changing world. However, being an immigrant in the United States today seems to be even more challenging. Today's immigrant is faced with a politically charged climate with embattled undertones of race, culture and language. To further compound this, the United States, has historically never truly embraced any other language other than English and insists on being monolingual. The systematic eradication of languages and cultures dates back to the educational practices of the Native Americans in 1860 and has continued with the implementation of state language legislations and even the passage of several anti-bilingual state legislations (de Jong, 2011). Not only does the United States marginalize speakers of other languages, the educational system has deeply rooted practices in place that widen the achievement gap for children of immigrant families, first generation children and children who are not considered to be English proficient or who do not speak standard English.

What does all of this mean? The research states that two-way dual language programs enhance all learners not just language brokers and not just dominant Spanish speakers but speakers of other languages: Korean,

Japanese, Chinese, French… However, the history of the United States points to the continual lack of support of creating a multilingual society for a variety of reasons. One pioneer in leading change to create an infrastructure to hopefully build a system to educate bilingual students is the State of New York. In a response to the 240,000 English language learners and the increase in the foreign-born population, New York has been a leader in reforming education policies and initiatives, all to support "innovation and leadership for multilingual children" (Carnock, p.4, 2016). In addition to taking this action, New York has also dedicated resources and professional development to all levels of the educational systems in order to prepare everyone to handle the implications required to support and educate all students. All students include children who speak other languages, and the model is considered an asset based model rather than one based in deficit. Even though this state is the leader in taking charge of promising educational practices, it is not without challenges. However, if the United States is serious in becoming a competitive powerhouse once again in this global society, it might want to consider how being multilingual is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. In a study conducted by Cortina, Makar & Mount-Cors (2015), they found that in order to have successful two-way dual language programs it is crucial to have community support, parent support, school-leadership and teacher leaders all committed to this program, and the act of renewal that is needed to continually revive and reshape the program to meet the needs of students. In addition, the program is intended to serve two linguistic groups, which ultimately promotes linguistic and cultural desegregation. If the program is built to serve an elitist model, it does not become a model that is balanced but more of a foreign language program created for the affluent. If the two-way dual language program is embedded within a school, it is up to the school leadership and teachers within the strand to take the necessary steps to be included within the greater context of the larger school community and to be careful not to isolate themselves or be seen as a different program. Within the classroom, it is equally important that the teacher ensures both languages are given equal attention. This creates the balance of both languages within the classroom setting and ultimately spreads to the students who take pride in learning and using both (2015).

Specifically, in order to make all of this work for language brokers and their families, it is important that school officials learn to recognize these children upon enrollment. An easy way to spot a child language broker is to see how the school enrollment form is filled out if completed in the office. Language brokers tend to translate or paraphrase from English to target language (Dorner, Orellana & Li-Grining, 2007). Once enrolled, language brokers can build their academic language along with their peers in dual language programs in a number of ways including being exposed to academic vocabulary lessons in both target and native language and rich cognitive and linguistic tasks in both languages. Teachers should be sensitive to language brokers and know that they are considered target language proficient and are a valuable asset to their family who help to alleviate some stressors that accompany the immigration experience (Dorner, Orellana & Li-Grining, 2007). In another study, Salinas-Gonzalez recommends that teachers help to supplement translation skills by building background knowledge in areas such as medical, legal and finances in order to help child language brokers improve their real-world expertise. She also suggests that teachers take time to acknowledge translating is a difficult task and connect with students and recognize them for it (2003).

For the Classroom Teacher

What can the classroom teacher do now? First, know that a child's home language is not a barrier but an additive benefit from which everyone can learn. The role of the primary language can be used to understand difficult content concepts such as Science and Math vocabulary. Often, allowing the student to tap into their heritage language brings out connections to cognates and other comprehensible input allowing for deeper academic learning opportunities that may have been stifled if only English was used (Stevenson, 2015). This is also known as building linguistic capital in the classroom. Allowing students to navigate both languages while acknowledging both builds both social and linguistic skills further developing a student's positive development. The teacher should also tap into that home to school connection to build on that heritage language literacy to not only show that it is a value-added skill but also a family affirming lens (Yoo, 2019). In addition to these strategies, the classroom teacher can use bilingual books and materials or even build a

library with primary language books. Optimizing students' linguistic resources is also game-changer. Translanguaging is a resource, translation is a resource, many technology apps make language accessible and using other students as language experts is also a resource. Creating language tutoring and pairing up newcomers are just some other ideas that are easy but worthwhile. Even allowing students to publish their own stories in their heritage language in another way to celebrate language (Freeman & Freeman, 2007). Bringing all of these resources and strategies into the classroom acknowledges and celebrates what being a language broker is all about. Students are funds-of-knowledge, and so is the heritage language. Using the classroom, peers and the home are formidable ways to acknowledge and celebrate language while also developing bilingualism and biliteracy. The goal is to be additive not subtractive. If all of these practices and more are utilized inside the classroom and connected to a student's outside world, the balance of power of language is equalized meaning that not one language is more dominant than the other. If the teacher leads the way to open access by allowing the use of all languages with the classroom as a way to enhance learning, students are more apt to connect to what is being taught in a deeper and fuller way. In addition, the second language will be developed in a safe environment while the primary language is maintained.

Conclusion

What are the next steps needed to making multilingualism a priority in the United States and offering these programs to children who serve as language brokers to their families? First, the United States needs to value multilingualism and see it as value adding rather than approaching it from a deficit stance. This is where a two-way dual language classroom comes into play and is able to level the language power base of two languages in one room. Schools also need the freedom to offer these options and link services to incoming families who recognize that a child might be serving in this type of role and translating and interpreting information for the family. Making that personal connection between home and school ensures that the child will feel validated and proud of the home language and culture. Both practices need to be aligned and when this alignment occurs, the chance of academic success grows beyond belief. Then, these families will not only survive their immigration journey; they will thrive. Teachers need training on how to

provide language access in their rooms. Simple additions, such as recognizing the different languages being spoken are the first step. Next, valuing the languages and being curious is another. Using students as experts and bringing in resources are all easy pathways into translanguaging that promotes language equity.

In addition, more studies on language brokers and how it relates to their educational experience should be considered. Currently much of the research and literatures focuses only on the experiences of language brokers in terms of stressors and how families utilizes the child language broker to navigate through the immigration experience. While there is research tying academic benefits to language brokers, it is limited and does not connect to frameworks that exist such as two-way dual language programs.

Author

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