

Multilingual Students Acting as Language Brokers in Italy: Their Points of View and Feelings towards This Activity

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Abstract : Italy is undergoing one of its largest migratory waves, and Italian schools are reporting the highest numbers of multilingual students coming from immigrant families and speaking minority languages. For these pupils, who have not perfectly acquired their mother tongue yet, learning a second language may represent a burden on their linguistic development and may have some repercussions on their school performances and relational skills. These are some of the reasons why they have turned out to be those who have the worst grades and the highest school drop-out rates. However, despite these negative outcomes, it has been demonstrated that multilingual immigrant students frequently act as translators or language brokers for their peers or family members who do not speak Italian fluently. This activity has been defined as Child Language Brokering (hereinafter CLB) and it has become a common practice especially in minority communities as immigrants' children often learn the host language much more quickly than their parents, thus contributing to their family life by acting as language and cultural mediators. This presentation aims to analyse the data collected by a research carried out during the school year 2014-2015 in the province of Ravenna, in the Northern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, among 126 immigrant students attending junior high schools. The purpose of the study was to analyse by means of a structured questionnaire whether multilingualism matched with language brokering experiences or not and to examine the perspectives of those students who reported having acted as translators using their linguistic knowledge to help people understand each other. The questionnaire consisted of 34 items roughly divided into 2 sections. The first section required multilingual students to provide personal details like their date and place of birth, as well as details about their families (number of siblings, parents' jobs). In the second section, they were asked about the languages spoken in their families as well as their language brokering experience. The in-depth questionnaire sought to investigate a wide variety of brokering issues such as frequency and purpose of the activity, where, when and which documents young language brokers translate and how they feel about this practice. The results have demonstrated that CLB is a very common practice among immigrants' children living in Ravenna and almost all students reported positive feelings when asked about their brokering experience with their families and also at school. In line with previous studies, responses to the questionnaire item regarding the people they brokered for revealed that the category ranking first is parents. Similarly, language-brokering activities tend to occur most often at home and the documents they translate the most (either orally or in writing) are notes from teachers. Such positive feelings towards this activity together with the evidence that it occurs very often in schools have laid the foundation for further projects on how this common practice may be valued and used to strengthen the linguistic skills of these multilingual immigrant students and thus their school performances.

Keywords : immigration, language brokering, multilingualism, students' points of view

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