Institutional perceptions of Child Language Brokering in Emilia Romagna

Letizia Cirillo (Università di Siena at Arezzo), Ira Torresi and Cristina Valentini (Università di Bologna at Forlì)¹


1. Introduction

Child Language Brokering (hereafter CLB) is a relatively recent field of academic research. Most studies carried out so far (e.g. Orellana 2009, to cite but one of the most recent works) tend to focus on the cognitive, psychological, relational and sociological impact of CLB on children and their families. Very few contributions (Rosenberg et al. 2007; Valdés 2003) take into account the other party involved in child-mediated events – institutions. In those cases where institutions are mentioned, they are usually equated with the contextual variable of setting, thus largely neglecting their staff’s opinions and attitudes about CLB, as well as the existence or absence of institutional standards and guidelines regulating child-brokered interactions.

Conversely, one of the aims of the In MedIO PUER(I) project (Antonini, this issue) is precisely to fill this gap by examining how institutions perceive CLB as a means to interface with adult migrants. In the piloting stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers and operators of ten local authorities and service providers located in the Forli-Cesena area of the Emilia-Romagna region in North-East Italy, in order to highlight recurrent patterns in their

¹ The authors jointly discussed and designed the contents and style of the entire paper (co-authoring sections 1 and 5). However Cristina Valentini is mainly responsible for section 2, Ira Torresi is mainly responsible for section 3, and Letizia Cirillo is mainly responsible for section 4.
perception of language brokering in general and of CLB in particular. The present paper focuses on the preliminary findings of this piloting phase.

In section 2 of this paper, the existing literature about institutions’ perception of the CLB phenomenon is reviewed. In section 3, the design and method of the pilot study are outlined. In section 4, the results of the interviews are presented and discussed.

2. Previous Research

CLB is still considered a marginal area of research in Translation and Interpreting Studies (Hall 2004). Whereas in other European countries, especially in the UK, academia has been paying some attention to the phenomenon since the mid-90s, to date there are no research projects on CLB in Italy. The majority of the empirical studies carried out mainly concentrate on gathering data about CLB events focusing on children and family members’ attitudes and expectations. Accordingly, although CLB as a form of ad hoc community interpreting has been vastly acknowledged as “influencing the contents and message [...] and ultimately the perception and decision of the agents for whom they act” (Tse 1995), the status, role and perceptions of the totality of such agents have hardly ever been investigated. Moreover, very few works have specifically taken into account the institutional party involved in child-mediated events. Where institutions are mentioned, they are almost invariably identified with the settings and situations in which CLB occurs, rather than being acknowledged as one of the participants in child-brokered interactions.

In their comprehensive review of (largely US-based) qualitative and quantitative research on language brokering at large, Morales and Hanson (2005) confirm that CLB studies have so far focused on topics such as bilinguals’ linguistic and cultural brokering skills; the influence of brokering activities on children’s psychological, socio-emotional and cognitive development; and the relational and sociological impact of CLB on children and family dynamics. The issue of institutions’ perception of CLB is not even raised. Studies focusing on CLB as a
form of translation or interpreting, however, do mention institutional settings, but only as the source of the kind of texts children are more frequently asked to translate. Such texts include governmental forms, bank statements, school and business-related correspondence, while situations where interpretation is required include encounters between family and educators, customers, or other agents (McQuillan and Tse 1995).

Orellana (2009), too, refers to institutions only incidentally, confirming that the main settings in which CLB events can take place include institutional (public) as well as non-institutional (private/domestic) settings. The most commonly reported non-institutional settings are the home, school (in particular, parent-teacher conferences), stores, and generally, the street. Formal or public situations, on the other hand, comprise restaurants, banks, healthcare institutions (in particular hospitals and doctor’s offices), work settings, business settings, legal settings (solicitor’s offices), post offices and government offices (Wadensjö 1992; Kaur and Mills 1993; McQuillan and Tse 1995; Orellana 2003; Valdés 2003; Weisskirch 2007; Morales 2008). The point of view of the institutions involved in such formal situations, however, is usually neglected.

With regard to the spread of CLB in healthcare institutions, more specifically, Valdés has interestingly stated that the above-mentioned situations include interactions that are, in theory, covered by public service access regulations. The author notes that “the situations mentioned also include many other types of everyday interactions with individuals in their neighbourhoods and communities, including apartment managers, prospective employers, passing police officers, finance-company employees and so on” (2003: 73). However, as the author suggests, in most cases “it is not clear [...] whether policies governing the use of interpreters are clearly established” (ibid.: 75). Moreover, although interpreters are available at medical centres, the choice of whether to accept their services or to resort instead to a member of the family they trust always rests ultimately upon the family. Exploring institutional attitudes and behaviours more accurately, Valdés reports some examples in which having children speak on adults’ behalf is described as unacceptable by certain official interlocutors. In particular, Valdés mentions the case of an insurance agent who refused to complete the transaction because the child who was speaking on
behalf of his mother was under age. (ibid.: 76). However, Valdés’s study focuses on parents’ and children’s views and perceptions of the range of situations in which the latter served as interpreters, once more reporting institutional or public parties’ views only marginally.

Another important attempt at conceptualising contexts of interaction and interlocutors’ roles is Martinez et al. (2009), where CLB is presented as a “collective practice” that encompasses not only the child but also the other two parties involved, who actively contribute to shape the interaction. The authors categorise CLB events as either “high demand” or “low demand” language brokering contexts, the former requiring greater effort and putting more pressure on the child broker than the latter.

Institutional perceptions of CLB are more specifically the focus of a limited number of papers whose aim is to assess public services’ accessibility, especially in the healthcare sector. In this regard, Rosenberg et al.’s (2007) work on physicians’ perceptions of professional and family interpreters seems by far one of the most inspiring, although it does not specifically focus on CLB. In their research, the authors set out to describe and compare the perceptions of professional vs. family member interpreters concerning their roles and tasks in primary care clinical encounters. Results showed that physicians perceived family interpreters to be less skilled translators than professional interpreters. In addition to this, physicians expected professional interpreters to act not only as linguistic but also as culture brokers. Moreover, with professional interpreters, physicians tended to follow specific institutional communication guidelines. In contrast, physicians tended to act as though such guidelines did not apply to interactions mediated by family interpreters, whom they usually treated as caregivers. The authors conclude by wishing that “guidelines to working with an interpreter should include directives on working with both professional and family interpreters, describing the similarities and differences with each type, and modifying the clinical encounter process to correspond to those attributes” (Rosenberg et al. 2007: 290).

Another contribution from the professional sector focusing on the assessment of children’s role as interpreters is Shelley’s (2007), who carries out a more
thorough investigation of advantages and disadvantages of child interpreters vs. professional interpreters. Once again the author, while acknowledging child interpreters’ assistance to be effective for patients from linguistically isolated households with specific dialects, points out important issues of concern in this regard, such as role reversal in the family. A number of disadvantages are underlined regarding professional interpreters as well, for example concerns regarding patient confidentiality. However, staff members, despite raising some negative points, tend to consider professional interpreters as the optimum choice, because they ensure fewer errors in translation, higher patient satisfaction, and improved patient outcomes. 

The latter argument introduces a further element. Whereas the academic world has so far paid little attention to institutional perceptions of CLB and, more generally, “natural translation” (Harris and Sherwood 1978), professional associations, especially in the US healthcare sector, have lately been carrying out a growing number of awareness-raising campaigns about the phenomenon, publicly denouncing these practices as unacceptable (Shelley 2005). As a matter of fact, they claim that children lack the vocabulary and emotional maturity to serve as effective interpreters. More generally, the role of the healthcare interpreter is not considered to be appropriate for children since in clinical encounters faulty translations may result in potential lethal consequences. Moreover, failure to provide adequate interpretation services is increasingly perceived by healthcare staff as a form of discrimination towards migrants (Associated Press 2005).

From a legal point of view, such campaigns asking for specific regulations limiting or altogether banning the use of children as interpreters confirm the lack of statutory instruments available in the US, despite the existence of guidelines and recommendations issued to regulate the conduct of medical staff in professional interpreter mediated interactions. In Europe, by contrast, the use of professional interpreters is encouraged, especially in communication between school and immigrant families, but it is rarely a statutory right, as evidenced in a survey conducted by the European Commission (Eurydice 2009). The report concludes:
access to interpretation services is a statutory right in six countries (out of the 34 surveyed), and applied to a specific category of immigrant families (refugees) or in very specific situations requiring contact between immigrant families and schools. In these countries [...] national recommendations, national resources, or local initiatives cover these situations where this statutory right does not apply (Eurydice 2009: 12).

The report, however, does not explicitly mention the phenomenon of CLB which appears to remain invisible, and therefore fundamentally neglected, in both the legal and the academic perspectives.

In conclusion, we can argue that the scarcity of available literature on institutions’ perceptions of CLB bears witness to a generally negative attitude of various agents and institutions vis-à-vis CLB and to the statutory void concerning the resort to children as language and culture brokers. The literature we do have available, however, is too scanty to draw generalisations. The issue of institutions’ perception, therefore, requires further investigation. The present paper is intended as a modest contribution to this endeavour.

3. The study

As outlined in Antonini (in this volume) the In MedIO PUER(I) project seeks to analyse CLB as a phenomenon that does not only have an impact on the child as a broker, but also on the brokered communicative event and its participants (institutions and adult migrants between whom the child brokers). For this reason, research into the perceptions of CLB by local institutions was a critical part of the project design from its inception. Since the group thought it would be relatively easier to contact representatives from local institutions than migrant children and their families, interviewing service providers was envisaged to be the first operative step in the implementation of the project, once the mapping of current migration flows in Emilia-Romagna and Italy, in general, was completed.

Two semi-structured 20-minute interview models were devised by the group and refined in subsequent meetings to be administered to public service managers and operators, respectively (Appendices 1 and 2). The rationale for this distinction is that we thought that operators might have more insight about
the everyday practice of brokered communication, as well as more first-hand experience, than service managers. Conversely, we expected service managers to have more access to policy-making, but less front-office experience, vis-à-vis service operators. In addition, we expected service managers to be more aware than operators of institutional strategies or procedures about overcoming language and cultural barriers with non-Italian-speaking service users (e.g. call a professional interpreter; call a professional culture and language broker\(^2\), or resort to any non-professional bilingual resource available). In particular, we were interested in knowing whether institutions and their policy-makers recognized child language brokers as a resource, as a necessary “lesser evil” in the face of lack of funds to hire professional interpreters, or as underage, potentially exploited, non-professional figures whose work was not tolerable in an institutional setting. As it turned out, issues such as overcoming the language and cultural barrier, or whether CLB was an acceptable practice, hardly emerged as the object of systematic and critical consideration.

It was agreed that the interview model for managers (see Appendix 1) would be piloted first, so as to obtain a more informed response about any existing institutional policies about CLB. At the same time, this decision was made to avoid irritating institutions’ higher officials, who may have felt “bypassed” if we had tried to contact operators who interface with migrant families first. As it turned out, however, several of the selected interviewees whom we were referred to as “managers” also dealt with service users first-hand. In this sense, the categories of “manager” and “operator” tended to blur (see third column of Table 1). In two cases (respondents 1 and 4 in Table 1), the interviewer was referred to an operator by the manager she had originally contacted. The same kind of outcome is expected in the future as well, especially in small public service institutions that do not directly depend on public authorities or administrations (e.g. aid societies, cooperatives). For this reason, interviewers

\(^2\) In Italian, there is a (sometimes fuzzy) difference between public service “interpreters” (interpreti), who are supposed to translate at the linguistic and pragmatic level (and to occasionally manage the cultural barriers that may lead to communication failures), and “brokers” (mediatori), who are supposed to be communication facilitators between interlocutors from different cultures and language communities.
are prepared to shift from one interview model to the other in order to accommodate the complexity and diversity of the human resource management of the institutions involved in the study. The semi-structured interview format allows enough flexibility to do so. For the same reason, the results of interviews with both operators and managers will be considered together as a single set of data.

The interview models for service managers and operators were piloted in Forlì with the 10 service providers detailed in Table 1. The piloting of both interview models was successful and no item had to be changed during the piloting stage, although changes are likely, especially if the group decides to refocus the study on specific issues that have emerged or will emerge during focus group and individual interviews with former and current child language brokers. Although several interviewees tended to give long and comprehensive answers in relation to items that would have occurred later on during the interview, it was decided not to remove any item as to ensure that all the relevant information would be provided – interviewers were simply instructed to treat the interview model as a checklist and not to ask questions that had already been indirectly answered by the interviewee.

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<tr>
<th>Respondent #</th>
<th>Institution type</th>
<th>Interviewee’s position</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Local authority (police)</td>
<td>Operator</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Local authority (municipality)</td>
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<td>Local authority (healthcare)</td>
<td>Manager</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>School (state)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>School (state)</td>
<td>Manager/Operator (teacher)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Charity / aid society (Catholic)</td>
<td>Manager</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Support centre (municipality)</td>
<td>Manager/Operator</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Social cooperative</td>
<td>Manager/Operator</td>
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3 Institutions’ names are confidential (see items no. 9 of Appendix 1 and no. 5 of Appendix 2).

4 Respondent no. 2 is indicated as a local authority and no. 7 as a support centre, although they are both departments of the Municipality, because the former provides services that stem from citizens’ duties, while the latter provides services that citizens are not obliged to use – it mainly sets up free events for families, parenting courses and workshops for children.
Each group member arranged and administered at least one interview. The list of institutions was brainstormed during a meeting and divided into broad areas – schools, health authorities, other local authorities (the municipality and the police), aid organisations working with migrants and migrants' cooperatives, and trade unions. Each area was assigned to one or two group members who would contact several institutions in Forlì and nearby Cesena to identify relevant managers. The managers were then contacted personally and, when possible, an interview was arranged with them. The group members who had never conducted a research interview were accompanied by the project coordinator, Rachele Antonini, or another group member who had previous experience in the field. Additionally, presentation letters signed by the Heads of the group’s Faculty (University of Bologna’s Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators - SSLMIT) and Research Department (University of Bologna’s Dept. of Interdisciplinary Studies in Languages, Translations and Cultures – SITLeC) were produced at each interview, together with an abstract of the project.

All interviews were conducted between November 2007 and October 2008. They were both audio- and video-recorded using a digital camcorder and a digital audio recorder; the digital tracks were then transferred onto DVDs and later transcribed. The interviewers also took notes in the spaces left blank after each item of the original interview model. The notes and the DVDs with the

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<th>Social cooperative</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Trade union</td>
<td>Manager</td>
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Table 1. Classification of public service providers interviewed

5 A social cooperative is a society that either includes both service providers and users or, alternatively, a society whose members are disadvantaged workers. Respondents 8 and 9, in particular, are migrant residents’ cooperatives offering services to incoming migrants.

6 Although ten interviews in one year might at first sight seem little effort, the preparation of each interview took several days, sometimes weeks, to seek the right contacts within the institutions we were interested in participating. Additionally, several of institutions that were contacted either refused to grant an appointment for an interview, or their officials kept referring us to other officials and/or institutions.
video and audio tracks were collected in a folder to which all group members had access, while the transcriptions were circulated via e-mail.

Interviews with service managers and operators have been temporarily suspended to allow time and human resources for focus groups, but they will be resumed shortly following the same procedure, not only in Forlì and Cesena (where a list of contacts has already been drawn), but in the Emilia-Romagna region as a whole and, hopefully, other parts of Italy as well.

4. Results and discussion

As has already been discussed in section 3, the interview models for service managers and operators were piloted in Forlì with 10 service providers. In what follows, we shall present and discuss the findings emerging from these 10 encounters. In particular, we will divide the discussion into two main parts, section 4.1 and section 4.2. In 4.1 (roughly corresponding to items 1-8 and 13 of the interview model in Appendix 1, and items 1-4 and 23 of Appendix 2), we will deal with the involvement (if any) of the institutions in this study with interpreting/brokering services proper, as well as their expectations towards professional language and culture brokers. In 4.2 (items 9-12 and 14-16 of Appendix 1, and 5-22 and 24 of Appendix 2), we will focus on perceptions of CLB occurrence, the role of child brokers within service provider-migrant encounters, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of child-brokered communication, and its possible effects on the people/institutions involved; we will also relate these perceptions to findings from previous studies on CLB. Before moving on to these issues, however, a few preliminary observations are in order regarding the attitude of the interviewees and the style of the interviews.

First, interviews were longer than expected, with recordings ranging from 40 to 90 minutes for a total running time of approximately 10 hours. Respondents were extremely cooperative in answering our questions and most of them provided us with relevant information regarding migrant-related issues, including official statistics on migrants’ access to services and contact names for
managers in other areas/services or operators in other divisions within the same service provider/authority. Second, and as expected, interviewees were not able to produce specific data on the incidence of CLB, and declared that the phenomenon was not officially recorded in their institutions, although most of them expressed interest in our research and in the possibility to monitor the development of CLB practices in the near future. As a consequence of the lack of official statistics on CLB, the information collected during the interviews is essentially based on the anecdotal evidence gathered as part of the interviewees’ either direct or indirect experience with brokered communication.

4.1 Service providers and migrants

Despite the specificity of each one of the institutions participating in the study, some generalisations can be made regarding their experience with migrants and dedicated brokering services. On a general level, all respondents reported an increase in the number of migrants accessing public services in the Forlì area, in line with the latest report issued by the Province of Forlì-Cesena (Provincia di Forlì-Cesena 2008). For instance, the participating charity referred to migrants as constituting 80% of their users; similarly, school representatives described their classes as being made up of an increasing number of non-native speakers of Italian; finally, health authority managers claimed a steadily growing request on the part of migrants for medical services, especially those related to women’s and children's health – a datum which is consistent with national trends.

Surprisingly, all interviewees admitted having no official policy or guidelines regarding communication with non-Italian-speaking service users, and described proficiency in one or more foreign languages as not being among the skills required in their operators' profile. Linguistic skills in languages other than Italian are therefore reportedly left to the operators' initiative and largely limited to a basic knowledge dating back to their school years, or dependent on their origins and life experience, as in the case of nurses and paramedics from

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7 This essentially applies to English and French.
foreign countries residing in Italy, or Italian staff who received training abroad. The only exception to this generalised lack of specific training is represented by the people working for the two cooperatives in this study, all of whom were reported to be officially qualified as “cultural brokers” (*mediatori culturali*) and “intercultural brokers” (*mediatori interculturali*) respectively. The latter, in particular, received specific training in mediation and counselling in a dedicated course acknowledged by the Region Emilia-Romagna. Overall, however, and as already mentioned in footnote no. 2, there seems to be a fuzzy line between language and culture brokers, and a great deal of confusion concerning their expected skills (be they linguistic or social), responsibilities, and workplaces, as evidenced by the various ways in which they are referred to (e.g. cultural/intercultural brokers, language brokers, public service interpreters, etc.).

Brokering services proper, i.e. those involving professional brokers translating from/into Italian into/from a foreign language and culture in service encounters between institutions and migrants, are outsourced for all the institutions interviewed to a cooperative which won the municipal bid to provide such services. This cooperative arranges scheduled and non-scheduled appointments upon service providers' request within the framework of a comprehensive agreement with the municipality of Forlì. At present, the institutions resorting most often to professional brokers from the Language Brokers’ Cooperative seem to be schools and the local health authorities, which, as can be gathered from the interviews, mainly request brokering services for parent-teacher conferences and doctor-patient encounters at community health centres (*consultori*) respectively.

Interviewees were unanimous in reporting scarce funding, and in some cases complained explicitly about the management of migrant-related issues by present and past Italian Governments, which they criticized for treating such issues as emergencies. Overall, respondents considered the brokering services available insufficient to meet their needs due to discontinuous nature of such

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8 We will call it Language Brokers’ Cooperative; it is not one of our respondents.

9 The only exception is the local health authority, which has recently signed a dedicated agreement to cover for up to 2,200 hours a year of brokering activities by professionals paid through regional public funding.
services, although they commented positively on the work done by the Language Brokers’ Cooperative, particularly with reference to some specific brokers, whose activity was praised for being very professional and extremely valuable. To this respect, when asked about their expectations regarding professional language and culture brokers, interviewees highlighted, on the one hand, familiarity with specific bureaucratic procedures, relevant linguistic skills and the ability to deal with often complicated issues emerging from the interaction between migrants and institutions, and, on the other hand, in-depth knowledge of the cultures involved in the exchange, considerable mediation skills, and the ability to deal with often sensitive issues and facilitate dialogue by establishing “common ground” (“un incontro”). Some respondents, including no. 5 (a school) and 6 (the charity), maintained that, although it is unthinkable to cater for dozens of ethnic groups, it would be desirable to have dedicated offices and staff providing brokering services on a regular basis at least for the largest groups of users. Having outlined the context in which the 10 service providers interviewed operate, we shall now move on to consider their perception of CLB in more detail.

4.2 Service providers and CLB

The situation outlined in section 4.1 is characterised by a growing number of non-Italian-speaking migrants accessing public services and scarce resources allocated to brokering services, with resulting problems in service provider-migrant communication. Against this backdrop, it is small wonder that migrants resort to other options, including CLB. According to respondents, children-mediated communication is an emerging, although not massive, phenomenon, which has gradually increased in the past few years in the interaction between migrant communities and public institutions in the Forlì area, and is “bound to further increase as a result of family reunions” (“destinato a poter aumentare, […] perché comunque i nuovi trend sono i ricongiungimenti familiari”; healthcare service manager). Given the poorly structured nature of the brokering services available, we were expecting interviewees to mention migrants’ non-awareness of such services, and, possibly, mistrust towards brokers hired by the
institutions as likely causes of the diffusion of CLB practices. However, none of them referred to these possibilities, although they all reported instances of CLB, and more generally, "ad hoc interpreting" (see, among others, Bührig and Meyer 2004)\textsuperscript{10} in their interaction with various communities of migrants.

The average reported frequency of CLB in the institutions under investigation ranges from 10-15 times a year for respondent no. 2 (a municipal front office), the charity (which provides services for around 400 migrant families a year) and the cooperative referred to as respondent no. 9 (with 7,000 users/interventions per year on average) to once or more times a day for the two schools. As to the police, the person interviewed claimed that CLB occurs on average twice a week at their front offices, but reported ad hoc interpreting by adults to be much more frequent (4-5 times a week). In addition, she pointed out that some communities (especially the Chinese) tend to rely on few key people as spokespersons, and hinted at the possibility that these ad hoc interpreters may be paid by the communities for their translating services. Other respondents did not provide any figures. In particular, the healthcare manager never mentioned child brokers explicitly; the union representative said that CLB occurs on occasions, but was not able to recount any of these occasions, and added that ad hoc interpreting by adults is more common; the person in charge of the cooperative corresponding to respondent no. 8 only mentioned the help Chinese children give to their parents when the latter have to fill in forms and comply with bureaucratic requirements; and the person responsible for the municipal support centre (respondent no. 7) said that, as far as they were concerned, CLB was decreasing. In fact, the person responsible stated that most CLB does not involve children per se but adolescents aged 15-17, and that it is usually confined to cases when services are directly delivered to the user’s home.

The age of children brokers ranges from 7 to 11 years for children and from 14 to 17 years for adolescents. Children brokers are overwhelmingly from China, whereas adolescent brokers mainly come from Morocco, although instances of

\textsuperscript{10} See also Pugliese and Veschi (2005), who refer to the same notion as “mediazione spontanea” (spontaneous mediation), and Harris and Sherwood (1978), who use the phrase “natural translation” (see section 2).
brokered communication involving Afghan adolescents (at the charity, or no. 6 in Table 1), Nigerian adolescents (at the municipal support centre, no. 7), and Bangladeshi children (at one of the schools, no. 4) were also reported. The perception of CLB in relation to the Chinese and Moroccan communities is definitely the most homogeneous. To be more precise, all respondents mentioned brokering activities by Chinese children to prevail over brokering activities by any other ethnic group of children, and 3 respondents out of 10 (respondents no. 6, 7 and 9) were able to recount instances of Moroccan adolescents coming to their front offices with their families.

According to interviewees, none of the institutions they represent has any official policy on CLB; however, most respondents seem to agree that it is best to avoid resorting to children whenever possible, or even rule out child-mediated communication in high demand language brokering contexts (see section 2), especially when sensitive issues are at stake which directly affect children. For instance, the spokesperson for the municipal support centre would always exclude children from conversations regarding issues of family mediation. Similarly, representatives of the charity and of the union would avoid resorting to children as brokers when they are directly involved in the issues discussed, including the economic situation of their families, or difficult matters like dismissal, eviction, child custody, etc. Regarding these situations, the spokesperson for the charity maintains that children should not bear the burden of communication on difficult issues of which they may not be aware, only because they have better linguistic skills than their parents. The representative of the school referred to as respondent no. 5 said child language brokering should be avoided during parent-teacher conferences, and more generally each time children’s school progress is discussed, while the spokesperson for the police authority stated that expulsion procedures require the presence of professional interpreters. Finally, the representatives of the municipal office (respondent no. 2) and the cooperative corresponding to respondent no. 9, while acknowledging the helpful role of child language brokers, said they would never resort to them if they had other options.

Despite institutional stated reluctance to resort to children’s help, CLB seems to occur in a large number of settings and during a variety of speech events,
where children and adolescents mediate between institutions and their families (or, less frequently, families’ friends). The events referred to by respondents are face-to-face interactions with service providers, predominantly, but not exclusively, at service providers’ offices (see above). Telephone interpreting is also mentioned, but only once, and essentially with reference to the calls made by a professional broker to the families of some Chinese children enrolled at the school referred to as respondent no. 4. In the same interview another form of brokering is explicitly referred to, i.e. the filling in of forms by Chinese children, who take the forms to school and ask their teachers for help in understanding and completing them correctly. Judging from the interviews with the two teachers, school is definitely the setting where CLB practices occur more frequently and are most varied. Differently from what happens in other settings, where child brokers mediate between adults, at school they essentially mediate between adults (teachers) and other, especially newly arrived, children – which explains why CLB is so common in this context. By contrast, CLB between teachers and parents chiefly occurs in absentia, i.e. with the two benefiting parties not being present in the same place at the same time. Examples of this kind of CLB are mainly written-to-oral translation of teachers’ notices regarding school routine activities and organisational matters (e.g. meetings, canteen menus, materials needed in class, school trips, etc.), which parents have to read and sign. For this specific type of communication, the child is referred to as a “facilitator” ("facilitatore"; respondent no. 5).

Interviewees were also asked if they could recount any event in which child brokering was key to successful communication and, conversely, any in which it caused communicative problems (see Appendix 1, items 11 and 12, and Appendix 2, items 12 and 13). Two episodes are particularly significant and were told as examples of positive and negative effects of CLB on communication, respectively. The first story was told by the spokesperson for the municipal support centre and is about a very delicate situation in which an African female adolescent had to mediate between the centre operators and her

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11 According to respondents (specifically, both school teachers and the representative of the cooperative appearing as respondent no. 8), child brokers help their mates (be the latter siblings or members of the same community), who are not yet competent speakers of Italian or even have literacy problems, both inside and outside of the classroom, for example with homework.
mother\textsuperscript{12}, who had just been dismissed by a poultry processing company. According to the interviewee, the girl was very good at keeping emotions at bay in this potentially very traumatic event, although she appeared ashamed of the situation, as her mother was crying and desperately asking for a new job to be able to take care of her three children. The second story was told by the person in charge of the charity and is about a Moroccan ten-year-old child mediating for his family, who had just been evicted. According to the interviewee, the child was very assertive and aware of his rights, besides having very good linguistic competence. He acted as an advocate, asking for a new place for his family, while at the same time providing very little information regarding what he considered to be private matters, which did not need to be shared with his interlocutors (“why do you want to know that?”/“perché lo vuoi sapere?”). In the respondent’s opinion, the child’s assertiveness, and the fact that he was placing high expectations on the institutions, while at the same time showing mistrust in his interlocutors, engendered conflict rather than easing communication.

Focusing on CLB perceptions, during the interviews reference was made to attitudes by the three parties involved in child-brokered communication, namely service providers, parents, and children. As for interviewees’ reactions to child-brokered events in which they were personally involved, only respondent no. 9 (one of the social cooperatives) explicitly mentioned service providers’ emotional response: he specifically discussed how he and his colleagues felt embarrassed having to talk about and explain adult matters to children, who lack “life experience” (“esperienza di vita personale”), especially when these matters directly concern the children they are talking to. As to perceived parents’ attitudes during child-brokered communication, interviewees described parents as “completely reliant” (“si affidano totalmente”) on their children (police authority), keeping a low profile and being “submissive” (“remissivi”) participants in the interaction (municipal support centre and charity), filled with pride for their children (municipal support centre), and often showing impatience in having to comply with regulations and procedures they may not know or understand (municipal front office, no. 2). As to perceived children’s attitudes, responses are more varied and situation dependant, and therefore deserve to be

\textsuperscript{12} Their country of origin was not mentioned.
discussed in greater detail. In particular, adult-perceived children’s attitudes towards CLB, and the related issue of how CLB impact children, can be roughly divided into positive and negative.

As to positive attitudes and effects, school representatives described children as generally willing to help, and claimed that not only do children rarely refuse to translate for either their classmates or parents but that they even like doing it. This is especially true when children mediate for their classmates (or peers), because they feel in charge of solving problems for other children and feel appreciated for their role in supporting their integration into the classroom. To this respect, the two schools involved in the study so far positively evaluate children’s experience as brokers by bestowing on them the titles of “tutors” (“tutor”) and “little translators” (“piccoli traduttori”). School representatives’ opinions are in line with other respondents’ claims. To be more precise, the spokesperson for the municipal support centre (who did not refer to children brokering for their peers but for adults) described child brokers as being at ease with their role, and feeling “important” (“importanti”) when engaged in brokering activities. Similarly, the health authority manager said that CLB should not be abhorred, because it enhances children’s self-image and autonomy.

Contrary to the above-mentioned positive perceptions and allegedly positive effects of CLB, some respondents pointed out the downsides of the phenomenon. The person interviewed at the police authority reported children being “embarrassed” and “fearful” (“imbarazzi” and “intimidati”) when brokering. Similarly, the person speaking for the municipal front office (respondent no. 2) said children seem to be embarrassed and uncomfortable with the task of mediating between their parents and the institutions (“una situazione molto imbarazzante”, “si vede che lo fanno con un po’ di sofferenza. Comunque con disagio”; “a very embarrassing situation”, “you can tell it’s painful for them. Or at least they’re uncomfortable”) and feel under pressure, especially since their parents are often impatient (“e quindi questa insopportabilita […] una certa pressione nei confronti dei figli”, “and so this impatience […] a fair
amount of pressure on their children”; see above). The respondent for the school indicated as no. 4 in Table 1 claimed that children feel the burden of responsibility to be too high in clinical settings and in interactions concerning the issuing of their families’ residence and work permits. Finally, the representative of the charity mentioned the risks connected to the fact that child brokers tend to become adults too early. In particular, she referred to possible negative consequences caused by CLB-related stress to children development and psychological stability, and hinted at the possibility that the adult-children role reversal may seriously affect family relationships.

5. Conclusions

In this final section we shall try to draw some conclusions from the results presented in section 4. Clearly, given the paucity of literature on institutional perceptions of CLB, and considering the limited number of interviews analysed thus far, the contents of this last section are not to be intended as generalisations, and the observations made will need to be substantiated by further research.

Overall, the study conducted reveals little awareness of CLB on the part of institutions. This clearly emerges from the lack of specific guidelines, as well as the fact that institutions neither measure the phenomenon nor assess its potential impact on their work, or its effects on the participants in child-brokered events.

Generally speaking, and consistently with the studies reported in section 2, interviewees would rather avoid CLB, especially when the issues discussed are particularly sensitive and conflicts may be generated. To this respect, respondents’ main concern seems to be the impact of CLB on children’s emotions, followed by a concern for CLB effects on parents’ feelings, and, only marginally, a concern for CLB’s potential disruption to the institution’s routine activities.
However, Italian institutions appear to be more willing to tolerate CLB, especially if compared to the campaigns carried out in the US aiming at banning such practices altogether (see section 2). This is due to two basic reasons. First, the lack of consistent policies and strategies vis-à-vis the employment of paid, skilled interpreters and culture and language brokers (mainly due to a lack of funding) forces institutions to deal with language barriers as a permanent emergency. Against this backdrop, CLB is seen as a makeshift solution to an increasingly widespread problem. Thus, CLB practices are generally acknowledged as precious resources in meeting everyday needs. Second, institutional perceptions of CLB practices can arguably be seen in relation to a more general problem, i.e. the poor acknowledgement of language and culture brokers’ and interpreters’ status, roles and qualifications. In Italy, the lack of official recognition of such professional figures often implies that anyone – even a child – mastering Italian and another language can safely call him/herself, and act as, a translator, an interpreter or a language and culture broker.

Talking more specifically of institutional perceptions of CLB, there seem to be two contrasting, although not mutually excluding, views. On the one hand, the acquisition of responsibility through CLB practices is considered to benefit the child in terms of confidence and maturity. In other words, by virtue of their special status as family translators, children are thought to become independent and able to stand up for themselves. In fact, in a number of situations, the role of children is crucial, as communication between their families and society at large would be impossible without them. The importance of such role is explicitly acknowledged by some respondents, particularly school representatives, who mention specific initiatives aimed at enhancing the social value of CLB within the classroom. In this respect, we may well say that highlighting children’s productive contribution to the small-scale social system of the classroom promotes children’s active citizenship (Bauer 2008; Fuller et al. 2008). On the other hand, the acquisition of responsibility is seen negatively when it comes to child-parent relationships. In particular, respondents made reference to what is known as “adultification” or “parentification” process (see, for instance, Guske 2009). This seems to characterise a large part of CLB practices and to cause a great deal of perceived embarrassment to both
children and adults, possibly making child brokered communication frustrating or even traumatic.

Works Cited


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Appendix 1: English translation of the Italian interview model used for service managers

INTERVIEW MODEL TO BE USED WITH SERVICE MANAGERS\textsuperscript{14}

Information on the interviewee:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and surname:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution/association/organization/public administration:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role/position:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following items are to be used as guidelines and can be altered or adjusted according to how the interview progresses:

1. Does your institution (hospital/school/etc) have a specific policy for non-Italian-speaking service users? (if the question is unclear, explain: does your institution resort to interpreters, brokers\textsuperscript{15} etc. to communicate with non-Italian-speakers?)
2. In everyday working practice, what kind of behaviour is adopted with non-Italian-speaking service users? (do you resort to interpreters, brokers etc.?)
3. In which situations/contexts do you most often experience the need to communicate with non-Italian-speaking service users? (can you tell us about any real case?)
4. Are employees working at your institution given specific input on how to behave with non-Italian-speaking service users? (training courses/workshops, guidelines, etc.)
5. How long has your institution been resorting to interpreters?
6. Does your institution receive any special funding to pay interpreters?
   a. If it does, how many hours per year does that funding grant?

\textsuperscript{14} In the Italian original documents corresponding to this one and the one in Appendix 2, a blank space follows each item for the interviewer’s notes.

\textsuperscript{15} See note 1 for the difference between interpreters and brokers. This difference is mirrored throughout the interview model, especially in items 5 and 7. The as yet foggy definition and perception of brokering practices (mediazione) even by the institutions that do resort to mediatori provides the rationale for item 8.
b. Do you think those hours are enough to meet the real needs of your institution?

7. How long has your institution been resorting to language and culture brokers (*mediatori*)?

8. What do you expect from a professional language and culture broker (*mediatore*)? (e.g., skills, education, training, languages spoken, etc.)

9. In situations involving non-Italian-speaking service users, has your institution ever used children and/or adolescents (up to age 15) as language brokers? (reassure the interviewee that his/her name, and the institution’s name, will not be disclosed in relation to this answer so as to protect them from legal problems)
   a. If not, why?
   b. If it has, do you know how often children act as language brokers in your institution?

10. What kind of feedback have you received from your institution’s departments/wards/classes concerning this issue?

11. Can you tell us about any real situation in which a child’s help/brokering was key to successful communication between the institution and the child’s family?

12. And in which a child’s brokering caused problems?

13. Do you have any statistics available concerning access to your institution’s services by non-Italian-speaking migrants?

14. As far as you know, is your institution currently changing its official policy about child language brokering?
   a. If it is, how?

15. Have you noticed any differences between ethnic groups in managing brokering? (does some group prefer to resort to children rather than professionals, etc.)

16. Are there any particular cases or situations in which you think that the language brokering should not be carried out by children?
Appendix 2: English translation of the Italian interview model used for operators

INTERVIEW MODEL TO BE USED WITH SERVICE OPERATORS

Information on the interviewee:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and surname:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution/association/organization/public administration:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role/position:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Does your institution (hospital/school/etc) have a specific policy for non-Italian-speaking service users? (if the question is unclear, explain: does your institution resort to interpreters, brokers\(^\text{16}\) etc. to communicate with non-Italian-speakers?)

2. In everyday working practice, what kind of behaviour is most frequently adopted with non-Italian-speaking service users? (do you resort to interpreters, brokers etc.?)

3. Does your institution receive any special funding to pay interpreters?
   a. If it does, how many hours per year does that funding grant?
   b. Do you think those hours are enough to meet the real needs of your office/ward/school?

4. In which situations/contexts do you most often experience the need to communicate with non-Italian-speaking service users? (can you tell us about any real case?)

5. In situations involving non-Italian-speaking service users, has your institution ever used children and/or adolescents (up to age 15) as language brokers? (reassure the interviewee that his/her name, and the institution's name, will not be disclosed in relation to this answer so as to protect them from legal problems)
   a. If not, why?

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\(^{16}\) See notes 1 and 11 for the difference between interpreters and brokers.
b. If it has, do you know how often children act as language brokers?

6. Are such situations increasing or decreasing in number?

7. Does this kind of brokering happen at the office/in face-to-face situations, over the telephone or in any other mode?

8. As far as you know, is your institution currently changing its official policy about child language brokering?
   a. If it is, how?

9. Have you noticed any differences between ethnic groups in managing brokering? (does some group prefer to resort to children rather than professionals, etc.)

10. Has it ever happened that children came to your office/school/hospital on their own and that they later reported the interaction to their parents?

11. How old are, on average, the children involved in language and cultural brokering?

12. Can you tell us about any real situation in which a child's help/brokering was key to successful communication between the institution and the child's family?

13. And in which a child's brokering caused problems?

14. As far as you know, have children ever refused to act as brokers?

15. Are there any particular cases or situations in which you think that the language brokering should not be carried out by children?

16. Which are, in your opinion,
   a. The main advantages of child language brokering?
   b. The main problems of child language brokering (sensitive issues, specialised terms, transferring concepts across cultures, the child’s emotional involvement...)?

17. What is child brokers’ attitude about their role with respect to:
   a. their parents?
   b. the operator?

   (Is it a positive attitude or a negative one?)

18. Do the families who use the services provided by your institution prefer to have their children or professionals interpret for them?
19. If child language brokering is the only option available, do parents prefer to have their own children or other children from the same language and cultural community (up to 15 year-olds) interpret for them?

20. What are parents’ attitudes during interactions brokered by their children?

21. Have you ever noticed any differences in parents’ attitudes during interactions brokered by their children and by professionals?

22. What are parents’ attitudes when their children act as brokers for other people (e.g. members of the same community, other relatives, friends, etc.)?

23. What do you expect from a professional interpreter/broker (*mediatore*)? (e.g. skills, education, training, languages spoken, etc.)

24. What do you expect from a child broker?