Theoretical, empirical, and practice literature on language brokering: Family, academic, and psychological outcomes

Judy Mier-Chairez, Brenda Arellano, Sarah E. Tucker, Eileen Marquez, and Lisa M. Hooper

Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, USA; Holy Spirit School, Louisville, Kentucky, USA; Counseling and Human Development, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, USA; University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa, USA

ABSTRACT
Language is an important characteristic of culture. Importantly, with the ever-present migration of persons across countries and cultures, physical boundaries of language have been blurred creating a robust area of study: language brokering in the context of globalization. Migration and immigration often necessitate the learning of a new language and in immigrant families, open an opportunity for language skill differences and language brokering. Language brokering is a process by which a bilingual individual, often the children of immigrants, assists in communication between two parties speaking distinct languages. This common practice has generated an increased focus and body of research on the current and after-effects of language brokering on individuals who broker. The present article provides a brief review of the literature on language brokering including identified antecedents and select outcomes such as family, academic, and psychological outcomes. Overall, the literature shows the associations among language brokering, the contexts in which it may occur, and the outcomes (family, academic, and psychological) for language brokers remain less than clearly understood, although inroads are being made as researchers delve more deeply into specific areas such as parentification, age, child development, and family dynamics.

KEYWORDS
Language brokering; parentification; translator; bilingualism; immigrant families; acculturation; culture brokering; psychological outcomes

Introduction
Language is a defining factor in the identity of a country, its culture, and the people who live there. Although the United States does not have a legally designated language, it is generally understood that the primary language in the United States currently is English. English has not, however, been the only language spoken in the United States throughout its history. Beginning with the numerous languages spoken by the native people of the United States and continuing with the languages spoken by new inhabitants who spoke the language of their country of origin, hundreds of languages (e.g., Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, French; Ryan, 2013) have been, and continue to be, spoken in the United States at any one time.

CONTACT Lisa M. Hooper lisa.hooper@uni.edu Professor and Richard O. Jacobson Endowed Chair for Research, Director, Center for Educational Transformation, University of Northern Iowa, 108 Schindler Education Center, Cedar Falls, IA 50614–0410, USA
© 2019 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
This diversity of language in the United States can be attributed largely to immigration. Although coverage of immigration in both the national and global media may seem recent, rates of immigration have increased steadily since the 1960’s (Lopez & Radford, 2017). Recent data show that Asia, Europe, and North America have the highest number of international migrants, or immigrants, with the largest number residing in the United States (United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017). In 2017, approximately 43 million immigrants were living in the United States, with 51.2% coming from Latin America and 30.5% coming from Asia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Many of these immigrants come to the United States with little or no English language ability and depend on others, often their own children, to assist them. The United States Census Bureau reported in 2012 that 85% of foreign-born individuals report speaking exclusively a language other than English at home, with only 35% reporting speaking English “very well” (Gambino, Acosta, & Grieco, 2014).

With the rise of globalization in the last part of the 20th century and the accelerated blurring of cultural and economic boundaries that followed, the aftereffects of immigration and globalization has become a robust focus of research (Čiarnienė & Kumpikaitė, 2008). More recently, the study of language in the context of globalization has emerged, with researchers focusing on the benefits and value of learning multiple languages (Adina, 2016) and the use of language translation in writing as a teaching methodology that promotes normalization of language differences (Horner & Tetreault, 2016).

As language contributes to the identity of a country, it is equally a formative element in the identity of each individual who migrates to another country. For any newcomer to any country, whether arriving by choice or circumstance, the process requires the adoption of a new identity. With regard to language, the necessity of learning and speaking another language is “to give up what is an intrinsic part of ourselves, and to take on what has no meaning, at least to start with” (Czubinska, 2017, p. 172). The language aspect of immigration alone is a deeply complex and personal element of relocation to another country, one that may be overlooked as attention is directed toward immediate concerns.

If an interpersonal phenomenon is capable of humanizing globalization, it is language brokering. This seemingly natural activity, often born of necessity, exemplifies the interweaving of individuals from disparate cultures speaking different languages, who interact with social, school, and governmental systems. Perhaps this is why language brokering has been studied by a wide variety of academic disciplines, all of which find relevance and importance in their outcomes. With immigration rates continuing to rise in the United States and in other countries, study of the effects of language brokering in general is timely. Given nascent research focused on understanding the factors affecting outcomes of language brokering for children and adolescents who will eventually grow into adults in their new home country, it seems worth considering that a sense of urgency be adopted. This is particularly true given that by 2050 children of immigrants are projected to represent one in three children in the United States (Passel, 2011) and many of these children will likely serve as language brokers.

**Defining language brokering**

Past research suggests that children of immigrants often learn a host language more quickly than their parents (Gonzales, 2011), consistent with a phenomenon known as
the parent-child acculturation gap (Kim, Schwartz, Perreira, & Juang, 2018). This may be
due to children’s increased exposure to the language in school and with peers. The
advantage in language acquisition, combined with the limited availability of professional
translators (Cline, Crafter, & Prokopiou, 2014), may foretell the practice of language
brokering, defined as “facilitating communication between two linguistically or culturally
different parties” (Tse, 1996, p. 485). A similar process is culture brokering, described as
the act of mediating a new culture for one’s family (Jones & Trickett, 2005). Culture
brokering can be thought of as an umbrella term under which language brokering exists.
The literature on culture brokering describes its occurrence in a variety of behaviors,
including translating documents, making appointments, and answering phones. Although
the behaviors associated with culture brokering are often language based, the term places
emphasis on how these processes convey meaning about the new culture, rather than on
the act of translating itself.

Although culture brokering and language brokering are closely related terms and could
arguably be used interchangeably or in conjunction (e.g., Guan, Greenfield, & Orellana,
2014), more recent literature indicates researchers appear to frequently adopt the term
language brokering to define this process. The term culture broker(ing) continues to be
used within the literature, but is now conceptualized as describing individuals who take
steps aimed toward closing the racial and cultural power differences, in addition to
linguistic differences, between dominant and nondominant groups (Ishimaru et al.,
2016). Within this definition, the culture broker is often an “institutional agent”

A number of other terms have been used to describe the process of helping family
members navigate language and culture, such as “natural translating” (Harris & Sherwood,
1978), “family interpreting” (Valdés, 2002), “para-phrasing” (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner,
& Meza, 2003), “procedural brokering” (Lazarevic, Raffaelli, & Wiley, 2014), and “child
brokering” (Katz, 2014). This variability in terminology may be due, in part, to the overall
dearth of research on the topic (e.g., Kam, Marcoulides, & Merolla, 2017) and the varied
and multiple fields that study language brokering, including education, Chicano studies,
educational psychology, liberal studies, child and adolescent development, applied linguistics,
counseling, clinical psychology, human development, communication, and developmental psychology.

In addition to the varied terminology often used in empiric studies, investigations
focused on language brokering have included participants of diverse ethnic backgrounds,
including those who self-identify as: Hispanic or Latinx (e.g., Griffith, Silva, & Weinburgh,
2014; Morales, Yakushko, & Castro, 2012; Niehaus & Kumpiene, 2014; Weisskirch, 2005),
Israeli (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009), Sudanese (Perry, 2014), Chinese (e.g., Kim et al.,
2014; Trickett & Jones, 2007; Tse, 1996), and German (Titzmann, 2012; Titzmann & Michel,
2017), among others. To date, however, the majority of studies have examined the
language brokering process in Latinx immigrant families (e.g., Titzmann & Michel, 2017).
Importantly, and in addition to the ethnicity with which individuals and family members
self-identify, there are other cultural factors that may inform the language brokering
process and the outcomes that are often seen when language brokering occurs
(Lazarevic et al., 2014). With this variety appearing to stem from multiple geographic,
cultural, and academic directions, and given that it is embedded in immigration (Guan &
Shen, 2015), it is practicable to consider that language brokering may, itself, be a global
phenomenon. As such, language brokering and language brokers may offer a means of gaining a glimpse into a more applied and personal aspect of immigration and globalization as opposed to the larger abstractions. Perhaps, when considered in a global context, the outcomes of various fields of study may be found to relate to one another in previously unrecognized ways.

**Characteristics of language brokers**

A review of the literature points – preliminarily – toward several important characteristics of language brokers and language brokering that may be implicated in select outcomes. These characteristics include immigration status, age and developmental factors, gender, family dynamics, and the context in which language brokering takes place (Hooper, 2018). For example, children who act as language brokers tend to be children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, and language brokering appears to be common in families who have recently immigrated to the United States. In her sample of 64 Chinese- and Vietnamese-American high-school students, Tse (1996) reported that 90% of the students had served as language brokers, with 52% taking on their role within their first year in the United States and 62% by their second year. In another study, researchers reported that, of the 236 participants in their sample of Latinx children ages 8–13, seventy-three percent had language brokered for their mother and 55% had language brokered for their father (Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003).

Children act as brokers irrespective of their country and culture of origin (Tse, 1995), often as early as 8 years of age, with no clear age when these responsibilities end, if indeed they end at all (McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Tse, 1995, 1996; Weisskirch et al., 2011). Language brokers tend to be the oldest child in their family (Valdés, Chavez, & Angelelli, 2003), and are more likely to be female (Buriel, Perez, DeMent, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Weisskirch, 2005). Studies employing qualitative methods found that parents in Latinx samples tended to describe their children who acted as language brokers as being confident in both Spanish and English, as well as characteristically friendly, sociable, and detail oriented (DeMent & Buriel, 1999; Valdés et al., 2003; Valenzuela, 1999).

**Characteristics of language brokering**

Importantly, although there may be a designated language broker in the family, many parents do speak and/or understand enough English to be active participants in the translation process (Orellana & Guan, 2015), often resulting in collaborative brokering experiences. For some families, brokering events are fundamentally collaborative, in that family members work together toward a common goal (Guntzviller, Jensen, & Carreno, 2017). The extent of collaboration may depend upon the context of the language brokering event and the materials being translated. Studies have indicated that in the process of language brokering, children often are asked to translate complex materials, such as mortgage documents, letters for their parents, and tax forms (McQuillan & Tse, 1995). These acts can take place in a variety of settings outside the home, such as banks, medical offices, schools, and shops (Cline et al., 2014). Relatedly, Tse (1996) found that children who engaged in language brokering for their parents also reported language brokering for friends, siblings, and other relatives, neighbors, teachers, and school officials.
The sheer number of children and families engaged in language brokering makes it a salient process, but the effects of being a language broker on the broker’s life are not clearly understood and have been found to vary (Shen, Kim, & Benner, 2018). Extant research is sparse, multidisciplinary, and has offered mixed findings (Kam, Guntzviller, & Pines, 2017; Kim, Hou, & Gonzales, 2017; Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, & Little, 2015), thwarting the development of effective policies and culturally responsive interventions (Hooper, 2018), both of which serve as structural supports for individuals and families in the process of immigration. Although a broad scope of investigation may ultimately be advantageous to the study of language brokering, it has not yet cohered to form a well-integrated interdisciplinary understanding of a process that tends to vary widely across cultures and individuals.

Of the language brokering research that has been undertaken, much has focused on the experience of the broker, with qualities of the broker, such as age being investigated (e.g., Tedford, 2010; Titzmann & Michel, 2017). Recent research has also begun to include the qualities, characteristics, and experience of the brokees, those for whom the brokering is performed (Kam, Guntzviller, et al., 2017). Other researchers have focused on the effects of contextual factors, such as cultural and transcultural stress (e.g., Kim, Schwartz, et al., 2018) and the parent–child relationship (Morales et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2018), particularly with regard to psychological outcomes in children and adolescent language brokers. For example, in a study of Mexican American adolescent language brokers (N = 604 at Wave 1; N = 483 at Wave 2), Kim, Hou, et al. (2018) found that the level of contextual stress to which an 11–15-year-old adolescent is exposed is significantly related to whether language brokering acts as a protective or risk factor for psychological outcomes such as depressive symptoms, anxiety, and behavioral problems. Other researchers have focused on the relation between language brokering and societal contextual stressors, such as discrimination (Kam, Marcoulides, et al., 2017).

This review will examine evidence in the literature of known contextual antecedents to the phenomenon of language brokering, including individual, environmental, and systemic factors that have been found to influence the presence of language brokering. Select outcomes, specifically those associated with the family and the children who serve as language brokers, will be addressed, with attention to the academic and psychological outcomes for child and adolescent language brokers. Finally, recommendations will be offered that, based on extant literature, point to priorities for further and more in-depth study.

**Contextual antecedents of language brokering**

In order to offer a meaningful discussion of outcomes of language brokering – academic, psychological, or of family well-being – an understanding of the formative contexts in which language brokering emerges may be helpful. There are many potentially influential contextual antecedents and although they vary based on individual circumstance, some appear frequently, and may serve to inform interpretation of existing studies and direction of future studies. Some of the overarching contextual antecedents are immigration, acculturation/cultural background, and family (Corona et al., 2012). These are important contextual antecedents for language brokering that often overlap, intersect, and are explored in the practice and theoretical literature, as well as being presented in the empiric literature.
**Immigration and acculturation**

A situation that necessitates language brokering is unlikely to happen without immigration having taken place and an inextricable part of immigration is acculturation. In fact, becoming competent in the host language is often a key component to acculturation (Berry, 1997; Rubenfeld, Sinclair, & Clément, 2007). The process of language brokering has been proposed as an acculturation strategy that facilitates the maintenance of a bilingual identity (Tobin et al., 2018). Thus, serving as a language broker allows individuals to remain connected to their heritage and culture concurrent with learning about the receiving culture (Weisskirch et al., 2011). It can also serve as a mutually beneficial forward move in acculturation in that parents can more easily function and learn with the help of their brokering children and, in turn, children are exposed to complex situations they may not otherwise encounter, advancing their learning of this new culture. On the other hand, more language brokering is likely necessary when a family is less comfortable with the host culture, which places a higher demand — and possibly a higher burden — on those doing the brokering (Orellana & Guan, 2015). This type of family contextual factor has been posited by Titzmann and Michel (2017) as being a substantial contributor to variances in the psychological outcomes of language brokering in that a higher frequency of language brokering predicts higher levels of internalizing problems.

When an individual or a family is less able to function in their environment due to unfamiliarity, this can create acculturative stress, and evidence suggests that the association between language brokering and acculturative stress is nuanced. Kam (2011) explored this association in a group of 7th and 8th graders (N = 684) of Mexican descent in Arizona by analyzing acculturative stress based on two dimensions: family-based acculturative stress and other-based acculturative stress. Family-based acculturative stress was measured using questions relating specifically to family and other based acculturative stress questions covered a number of other areas such as feelings of otherness and embarrassment. Kam (2011) found that other-based acculturative stress was not significantly related to brokering frequency, but family-based acculturative stress was. This highlights an important nuance that it appears language brokering may be positive in certain contexts and negative in others. Thus, it is important to examine acculturative stress in the family when looking at the impact of language brokering because these factors may intersect in ways that hold implications for important outcomes such as parental depression, lower parental involvement, and occupational stress (Orellana & Guan, 2015).

**Family factors**

Interwoven with issues directly related to acculturation is the relationship between language brokering and the parent–child relationship. Shen et al. (2018) found that a language broker’s negative feelings about brokering, specifically feelings of being burdened, were associated with problematic parent–child relationships, supporting previous research by Weisskirch (2007). The idea of language brokering being perceived as burdensome was also investigated by Kam, Marcoulides, et al. (2017), who posited that a closer look at language brokering and parentification, defined as a child’s “adoption of adult family roles by providing instrumental or emotional support for their parents” (Titzmann, 2012, p. 881), would reveal profiles of adolescent language brokers. By studying language
brokering in the context of family functioning, roles, responsibilities, and communication patterns, parentification has emerged as an important family systems construct. For example, Kam, Marcoulides, et al. (2017) found that levels of parentification are a potentially important family system construct and process when considering outcomes of language brokering, particularly for adolescent language brokers. Findings by Titzmann and Michel (2017) also indicated a significant relation between language brokering and parentification, such that the authors suggested that language brokering may be “a first step or an acculturation-related subcomponent of parentification” (p. 85).

Evidence suggests that a broker’s feelings toward language brokering evolve over time, and that negative feelings can develop when brokering situations become increasingly complex. These more difficult experiences have been described as burdensome, embarrassing, anxiety-provoking, and frustrating (Orellana & Guan, 2015), emotions that can be exacerbated in the context of adolescent social development. As the child who language brokers in a family moves into adolescence, they follow the normative process of becoming more concerned about the way they are perceived by their peers. Brokering exposes them and their family as “different,” a designation that many adolescents attempt to avoid at any cost. In contrast to their previous view of their brokering experiences as being a normal part of their life, in adolescence they may begin to see it as something extra they have to do that their peers do not. Language brokering can also single out a person or group as “other” and open the door for discrimination (Kam, Marcoulides, et al., 2017), which can be detrimental to psychological health by changing perception of self and surroundings (Chou, Asnaani, & Hofmann, 2012).

**Language brokering and select outcomes**

The literature examining the relations between language brokering and select outcomes, especially for child language brokers, has produced mixed results. There is evidence of both positive and negative outcomes across the factors linked to language brokering. It is important to highlight that these contradictory findings may be due in part to methodological differences, as well as the incomplete understanding of language brokering as a construct (Anguiano, 2012). Additionally, some characteristics, such as age, may play an important role, as there is increased evidence to suggest that language brokering is associated with more positive outcomes in adolescence and beyond, as compared to early childhood (Acoach & Webb, 2004; Buriel et al., 1998; Chao, 2006; Tedford, 2010). Many researchers to date have operated under the assumption that language brokering brings with it certain consequences, and that these consequences make language brokering harmful. Thus, many positive qualities that could result from language brokering go unexamined despite evidence that language brokering can nurture a sense of feeling important, competent, valued, and essential (Chao, 2006).

An exception is a study by Kam, Guntzviller, et al. (2017), in which the authors investigated brokering frequency, prosocial capacities, such as perspective-taking and empathy, and intercultural communication apprehension among a sample of 120 Latinx mother-adolescent dyads. Findings suggested that increased frequency of language brokering was associated with higher levels of perspective-taking and empathic concern, with empathic concern also being associated with lower levels of intercultural communication apprehension. This study may serve as an indicator that, as the scope of language
brokering research broadens, the positive outcomes of language brokering, particularly in the family context, may be interwoven with the presence – or absence – of relational characteristics, such as empathy.

**Language brokering and family relationships**

There is evidence that language brokering holds implications for family relationships (Guntzviller et al., 2017; Weisskirch, 2018). Some early studies on language brokering argued that language brokering for a parent could strengthen the bond between parent and child in Latinx families (e.g., DeMent & Buriel, 1999). Similarly, it was found that for Chinese-American children, language brokering was linked with a heightened sense of pride from helping their family. This, in turn, was hypothesized to bolster the parent–child relationship because the children gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their parents than children who do not language broker (Hall & Sham, 1998). This finding was corroborated by a study of Korean, Chinese, and Mexican older adolescents who served as language brokers. The researchers reported that language brokering provided opportunities to build trust and foster feelings of closeness to their parents (Buriel, Love, & DeMent, 2006). More recently, Pines, Kam, and Bernhold (2019) investigated parent–child relational quality and adolescent brokers’ cultural identity goals. The researchers found that even young brokers who reported having weak Latinx cultural identification experienced improved parent–child relational quality when they accommodated their parents’ cultural identity by “acting Latinx” while language brokering.

Qualitative studies also have supported the link between language brokering and positive parent–child relationships. A multiple case study of six parents of Mexican language brokers reported the parents had a trusting and intimate relationship with their child (Morales et al., 2012). In fact, some studies have described the language brokering child and their parent as a team, in which the child and parent work together to accomplish a common goal (Cline et al., 2014; Guntzviller et al., 2017; Valdés et al., 2003). Additionally, it seems language brokering may set the stage for children to feel compassion toward their parents’ difficulties (Corona et al., 2012) as well as greater respect for their parents (Chao, 2006). Many studies also have found that language brokers feel a sense of commitment to their families (Corona et al., 2012; Dorner, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2005; Orellana, Dorner, et al., 2003). This commitment could take the form of protecting parents from humiliating or embarrassing information (Orellana, Dorner, et al., 2003; Valdés et al., 2003) and acting as advocates for their families (Cline et al., 2014; Valenzuela, 1999). Though there are many positive outcomes seen in children related to their language brokering and family relationships, most parents report both positive and negative feelings about language brokering (Corona et al., 2012; Morales et al., 2012).

It also has been hypothesized that engaging a child language broker in the act of translating embarrassing or age-inappropriate information has the potential to damage the parent–child relationship (Cline et al., 2014; Thompson, Green, Taylor, & Corey, 2018). There is preliminary evidence that Latinx parents in families that may have higher rates of language brokering (i.e., two monolingual Spanish-speaking parents and a bilingual child) also report higher levels of stress and lower feelings of parental efficacy and child adjustment as compared to Latinx parents in families with lower rates of language brokering (Martinez, McClure, & Eddy, 2009).
These findings align with those of other research, which suggests that parents of adolescent language brokers in particular may feel language brokering strains their relationship with their child because the child does not always want to cooperate (Morales et al., 2012). There also is evidence to suggest that the context in which child language brokers operate may hold distinct implications for the parent–child relationship. A study of 118 Latinx immigrant children in grades 7 through 11 found that the home was the only setting in which languagebrokering was related to lower parental decision-making authority, knowledge, and parent–child closeness (Roche et al., 2015). Language brokering in other settings, such as in schools or in the community, was not related to parenting changes.

Guntzviller et al. (2017) studied language brokering in health settings with a sample of 100 Latinx parent-child dyads and found the majority of the children in their sample were able to adequately interpret for their parents in these settings. Further, self-efficacy was a significant predictor in the model for both child and parent in that higher self-efficacy for child and lower self-efficacy for parent related to higher levels of health literacy for the child. The authors concluded that this research supported the use of a team model for interpretation in which the parent, child, and provider work together to communicate. Further research is needed on how this approach may be accepted, as an older study (Cohen, Moran-Ellis, & Smaje, 1999) using qualitative methods found that general practitioners view the use of children as language brokers in a medical setting as unacceptable.

Children of immigrants have also been used as language brokers in other settings such as in stores, government agencies, and other contexts of conducting official business. Research in settings other than home, school, and medical settings, however, is lacking (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Although multiple studies have identified that language brokering does occur in various settings (e.g., DeMent & Buriel, 1999; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Orellana, Dorner, et al., 2003), the question of whether there are differential effects in different settings remains.

The evidence suggests child language brokering may be associated with children’s feelings toward their relationship with their parents. For example, in a study employing retrospective reports of language brokering experiences, Guan and Shen (2015) found in their sample of 139 undergraduates of Asian, Latinx, and non-Hispanic White backgrounds that higher retrospective rates of language brokering for mothers were linked to lower perceived maternal support and lower regard for their mothers. Similarly, higher rates of language brokering for their fathers was linked to lower perceptions of paternal support. These associations were mediated by maternal and paternal praise. Other studies have found similar results, indicating that Latinx children who have negative beliefs about language brokering also are more likely to report more family problems and lower levels of perceived parental support than do Latinx children with positive beliefs about language brokering (Weisskirch, 2006, 2007).

**Language brokering and parentification**

Some researchers have argued that language brokering is damaging to the parent–child relationship and to the child’s well-being because it is a form of parentification (i.e., the adoption of adult roles by the children in a family; Arellano, Mier-Chairez, Tomek, & Hooper, 2018; Hooper, 2016; Titzmann, 2012). It is assumed that parentification occurs more commonly in immigrant families than in native or ethnic majority families, because the
family dynamics often change with immigration when parents are compelled to rely on their children (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009; Trickett & Jones, 2007). In the language brokering literature, some researchers have argued that through language brokering parents may become dependent upon their children in order to communicate within their new context, make decisions (Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999), and protect the family’s welfare (Valdés et al., 2003), thus resulting in an unhealthy reversal of roles within the family. Some theoreticians and researchers contend this role reversal is harmful to the child because it alters normative development of their identity (see special issue, Hooper, 2018).

Earlier studies also pointed to the perceptions of people within the family’s ecological context. One study, for example, reported that general practitioners who had encountered language brokering felt very strongly that it was damaging to the parent–child relationship (Cohen et al., 1999). Teachers who have encountered language brokering also reported feeling it places the child in a developmentally inappropriate role. For instance, some teachers felt that when children language broker in situations where they and their parents may not have the same interest in mind, such as when the child must translate about their difficulties in a school meeting, it places the child in an age-inappropriate executive position (Cline et al., 2014). It is important to remember, however, that language brokering takes place within a cultural context. For example, family obligation and family assistance play a central role in the Latinx culture. Thus, language brokering may simply be another form of culturally expected family assistance (Guan & Shen, 2015; Suárez-Orozco & Qin, 2006). Additionally, it has been argued that language brokering is not a form of role reversal, because parents maintain their position of control by directing what is to be brokered (Valdés et al., 2003).

A recent study of 243 Latinx early adolescent language brokers (Kam, Marcoulides, et al., 2017), indicated adolescent language brokers are a heterogeneous group. Kam, Marcoulides, et al. (2017) found three categories of adolescent language brokers: (a) infrequent-ambivalents, (b) occasional-moderates, and (c) parentified-endorsers. Of the three language brokering categories that emerged in the study, the parentified-endorsers were those adolescents who reported high levels of parentification, high levels of ethnic identification, brokered most often for parents, and endorsed the highest levels of brokering efficacy and positive beliefs toward language brokering. However, this group was also more likely than other adolescents in the study to report perceived ethnic/racial discrimination and depressive symptoms. Kam, Marcoulides, et al. (2017) concluded that this may place these highly parentified language brokers at the greatest risk for negative mental health outcomes over time, due largely to the increased responsibility placed on them through parentification.

Language brokering and academic outcomes

There is evidence that child language brokers who begin language brokering soon after their arrival in a new country may benefit by learning their new language more quickly than they might otherwise (Cummins, 1989). Tse (1996) examined this thesis by investigating the views and experiences of 64 Chinese and Vietnamese adolescent language brokers. The findings of this study indicated that a majority of the sample believed acting as a language broker had improved their mastery of both their native and second language and their culture. A qualitative case study of language brokering in a Sudanese refugee
family living in the United States also asserted that language brokering served to develop linguistic literacy in the host language for both the broker and the person needing the translation (Perry, 2014). In their study of language brokering in medical settings among 100 Spanish-speaking families, Guntzviller et al. (2017) found that young language brokers who would typically be considered at-risk for low health literacy based on education and income levels showed advanced health literacy for their age. Given that the same study indicated child brokers with higher self-efficacy levels also had higher health literacy levels, the researchers suggested the positive effects of language brokering may be especially beneficial to adolescents.

It appears that some teachers who have encountered language brokers also believe that language brokering may benefit the child when brokering in a school setting. A study investigating the viewpoint of teachers reported that 77% of their sample of 63 teachers in the United Kingdom felt language brokering helped children acquire communication and social skills, and 50% of their sample endorsed feeling that acting as a language broker helps children better learn both native and host languages (Cline et al., 2014). Previous research by Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grining (2007) supported these teacher views. In their sample of Latinx children ages 10–14, active language brokers performed significantly better on both reading comprehension and math achievement tests in 5th grade than did children who did not language broker, even when holding previous achievement test performance constant. These apparent linguistic advantages of language brokering found in the literature have led to the assertion that the linguistic dexterity that language brokers demonstrate constitutes a type of giftedness (Valdés et al., 2003).

In the study of language brokering, earlier research reported discrepancies between perceived advantages in knowledge of the English language and grades in English courses. In her 1995 article, Tse reported that, although her sample of Latinx adolescent language brokers (N = 35) indicated brokering helped improve their English, they reported a mean grade point average of only 2.4 in their English courses. This suggested that perceived skills in English were not being reflected in the broker’s academic achievement (Tse, 1995). More recently, researchers studying larger samples of language brokers of Latinx backgrounds (N = 362) have argued that language brokering can positively predict academic performance and feelings of academic efficacy in Latinx adolescents (Anguiano, 2012; Buriel et al., 1998; DeMent & Buriel, 1999). More specifically, language brokering frequency and positive beliefs of language brokering taken together predicted academic self-efficacy, which in turn was linked to better academic performance. Similar findings were reported in a study of 100 Latinx junior high (n = 65) and high school (n = 35) students, which indicated that language brokering demonstrated a positive association with both academic self-efficacy and self-reported grade point average (Acoach & Webb, 2004).

There is evidence to suggest that there may be a link between language brokering and academic self-concept. For example, findings from a study of 66 Latinx students in grades 6–11 suggest that children who language brokered more frequently also tended to report a poorer academic self-concept than children who language brokered less frequently (Niehaus & Kumpiene, 2014). A dissertation study (Tedford, 2010) cited similar results. In this study of 205 Latinx middle schoolers, children who language brokered for more people tended to report lower academic self-efficacy than those who language brokered for
fewer people. This study also reported a negative relation between language brokering and academic achievement. Earlier research by Umaña-Taylor (2003) indicated similar findings, which also suggested that language brokering may restrict the time and opportunities for children to develop academic skills (Umaña-Taylor, 2003).

The Niehaus and Kumpiene (2014) study also found that academic self-concept among child language brokers may be related to the difficulty of the material being translated and positive attitudes toward language brokering. This finding supported previous research by Tse (1995), which indicated that academic outcomes, including academic self-concept, were related to the complexity of the language brokering task. Evidence suggests that these associations are nuanced and may be influenced by the context in which the language brokering occurs. For example, among a sample of 362 Latinx adolescents, language brokering in high stakes situations (e.g., in a hospital) was linked to poorer academic achievement, while brokering in everyday situations (e.g., at home) was linked to higher academic achievement (Anguiano, 2012). It is also important to note that the academic achievement of youth in the study who self-reported high levels of family obligation were not negatively impacted by brokering in high stakes situations, suggesting that other cultural factors may serve a protective function.

The research examining the link between academic achievement and language brokering points to both positive and negative outcomes (see Tuttle & Johnson, 2018). Discussed specifically in the literature is the assertion that some children of immigrants do not perform well academically because their parents do not encourage their children to apply themselves in school (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Parent reports, however, show that when their children do not perform well in school, they believe it is due to institutional or individual factors (Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2002). Perhaps relevant to the discussion of academic outcomes are findings by Umaña-Taylor (2003), which indicated that, when additional contextual factors, such as years in the United States and parental education were taken into account, language brokering was no longer a significant predictor of academic achievement. This suggests that immigrant children’s academic performance may be better assessed by individual or institutional characteristics and contexts – rather than – or in addition to the language brokering activity itself.

Language brokering and psychological outcomes

The effect of language brokering on the broker’s psychological health has been less frequently explored than other outcomes (e.g., academic achievement) and the accumulated literature remains unclear and inconsistent. One study conducted with participants of Chinese, Korean, or Mexican heritage found a positive relation between language brokering and internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression-anxiety, somatic complaints, withdrawal) for Chinese and Korean brokers but not for Mexican participants (Chao, 2006). Martinez et al. (2009) did, however, find a significant association between language brokering and internalizing symptoms in their sample, which consisted entirely of recently immigrated Latinx participants (N = 73), 90% of whom were of Mexican heritage.

The frequency and volume of brokering may be an important factor in its association to negative psychological outcomes. Love and Buriel (2007), for example, found a positive correlation between depression and the number of people for whom a child brokers. Similarly, Martinez et al. (2009) found that higher language brokering contexts (brokering
for more people) was significantly associated with the likelihood of using substances such as alcohol and tobacco. The positive relation described by Orellana and Guan (2015), showed that higher substance use, as well as lower self-esteem, was more prominent among brokers who held negative feelings toward brokering than those who had positive feelings toward it.

Feelings about language brokering were also investigated by Kim et al. (2017), who found in their study of 557 adolescent language brokers in Mexican-American families that feeling burdened by the task of language brokering was associated with more depressive symptoms, although feelings of self-efficacy were related to fewer depressive symptoms. This study also found that two specific contextual factors, parent-child alienation and adolescent resilience, moderated the association between the psychological experience of language brokering and symptoms of depression. Results indicated that adolescents with higher levels of alienation from parents and lower levels of resilience were more prone to feeling burdened by the task of language brokering, as measured by depressive symptoms. The authors concluded that fostering parent–child relationships and resilience in adolescents may help young people develop attributes that serve as protective factors to internalizing symptoms.

Recent language brokering research has underscored the need to support adolescent development of resilience and other protective factors. In their 2018 longitudinal study composed of Chinese-American adolescents (N = 350 at Time 1; N = 291 at Time 2), Shen et al. (2018) found that adolescent feelings toward language brokering tend to remain stable over time, with 70% of study participants remaining in the same language brokering subgroup (burdened, efficacious, no brokering) over a 4-year time period. Importantly, the study found that those adolescents who felt burdened by language brokering were more likely to experience poorer parent–child relationships and problematic psychological adjustment as they moved into emerging adulthood. Given these results, assessing adolescent views about language brokering may be a useful starting point for evaluating which adolescents are at risk for negative psychological outcomes.

Titzmann and Michel (2017) focused on age as a factor that may affect the psychological outcomes seen in child and adolescent language brokers. In their study of 119 adolescents who immigrated to Germany at age 4 or older, results indicated a significant positive relation between language brokering and internalizing problems among younger adolescents (average age 13 years, 7 months). This association was not evinced among older adolescents (average age 18 years, 1 month) in the study. The authors concluded that, while age was the only demographic variable that was a significant predictor of internalizing problems among the adolescents in the study, the associations between language brokering and parentification were also significant. These findings underscore negative outcomes, namely the interference of the normative changes in family communication patterns that occur during adolescent development as individual autonomy increases. Consonant with Titzmann and Michel's study (2017), Kam, Marcoulides, et al. (2017), found parentified adolescent language brokers were more likely to report depressive symptoms and greater perceived ethnic/racial discrimination.
Limitations and future directions

Although the associations among language brokering, the contexts in which it may occur, and the outcomes for individual language brokers remain less than clearly understood, inroads are being made as researchers delve more deeply into specific areas such as age, child development, and family dynamics. Given the number of children and adolescents who engage in the process of language brokering, it remains an important aspect of the immigration process to understand. Extant research remains scarce, and at times has provided mixed findings. These inconsistencies may slow development of effective and culturally responsive treatments (American Psychological Association, 2017; Kohn-Wood & Hooper, 2014), in addition to informing educational and social policy, which is especially important with vulnerable immigrant populations.

Further complicating progress in developing a more unified understanding of language brokering is that the current body of research is derived from many fields of study including psychology, education, linguistics, Chicano studies, and others. Although having a broad scope of investigation is positive and important for language brokering, it has not yet cohered adequately to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of how an aspect of language brokering studied by one discipline may relate to aspects studied by other disciplines. For example, words such as pride, confidence, and maturity (McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Walinchowski, 2001) may represent important psychological concepts but are not themselves commonly measured in studies of clinical psychology, making it difficult to replicate and connect to the psychological studies that are being conducted.

In addition to the various disciplines and scientific communities that appear to be interested in clarifying the meaning of language brokering in the 21st century (see special issue, Hooper, 2018), there are multiple theoretical frameworks through which language brokering is described. An important discussion has been brought forward on the appropriateness, or rather inappropriateness, of viewing language brokering through the lens of an independence development model (Dorner, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2008). Instead, it is proposed that a model of developmental interdependence (Greenfield, 1992) may be more fitting for the populations typically engaging in language brokering. The independence model emphasizes autonomy and self-sufficiency whereas interdependence highlights how helping the family and being more connected to family can increase competencies and push forward development. It is important that language brokering be examined through a culturally specific lens. Assuming language brokering is damaging to a population without considering cultural-specific norms, family and culturally sanctioned behaviors, and culturally and ecologically valid contexts is problematic and could lead to flawed assumptions and conclusions.

In addition to the limitations imposed upon the study of language brokering by the multidetermined and multifactorial focus it often receives, investigations about language brokering have been limited by factors related to methodology and measurement. As previously mentioned, language brokering has been operationalized in many ways within the literature. Though using various methodologies allows for the exploration of different aspects of the language brokering process and experience, it is not without issue. There is limited evidence of the reliability and validity of the scores derived from the commonly used language broker survey (see Anguiano, 2012 for an exception). It is also common for researchers to measure language brokering using a subjective semi-structured interview.
The consistency, as well as the reliability and validity, of these semi-structured interviews within the literature remains unclear, and contradictory findings may be due in part to issues of measurement. Further, the results of some studies may be influenced by memory bias with the use of retrospective reports of language brokering (e.g., Guan et al., 2014; Guan & Shen, 2015). Although retrospective reports have the potential to provide valuable insight into the lasting memories left behind by language brokering experiences, the accuracy of these reports is uncertain.

Another limitation of the literature on language brokering is its focus with regard to perspective. As previously mentioned, the bulk of research on language brokering has focused on the experience of the broker. Little research has examined the relation between language brokering and parental perceptions and outcomes (see Corona et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2009; Morales et al., 2012 for exceptions). Relatedly, because so little research has examined parents, it is unclear whether there are bidirectional influences related to parental factors. For instance, it is possible that families with warmer parent–child relationships are more conducive to a positive language brokering experience, and that positive experiences as a language broker could help strengthen the parent–child relationship.

Further, many studies have used small sample sizes. This has benefits, as it allows for an in-depth qualitative understanding of the experiences of a small group of families. Dorner et al. (2008), for example, found that the views and experiences of their sample of 12 Latinx adolescents changed over the course of 5 years. Similarly, Morales et al. (2012) were able to report detailed information on the experiences and thoughts on many facets of language brokering, including relationship quality and sources of tension, within their sample of 6 Mexican-immigrant families. Many quantitative studies have also utilized small samples (Acoach & Webb, 2004; Cline et al., 2014; Weisskirch, 2006). Although it is difficult to recruit participants in research studies when working with underserved groups (Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak, & Crann, 2015; Kohn-Wood & Hooper, 2014), small samples limit generalizability as well as the complexity of the analyses. Future studies would benefit from using larger samples, which could in turn allow for the exploration of more specific research questions and employ advanced data analytics.

Newer research in the area of language brokering has addressed some of the limitations in the literature such as by utilizing larger samples. Oznobishin and Kurman (2016), for instance, used a sample of 302 immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and another study utilized a sample of 813 Latinx adolescents in the 7th grade (Titzmann, Gniewosz, & Michel, 2015). Recent studies have also examined potential moderating variables. These recent studies explore the role of such factors as cultural identity (Crafter, de Abreu, Cline, & O’Dell, 2015), immigrant status and age (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2016; Titzmann & Michel, 2017), and executive functioning skills (Rainey, Davidson, & Li-Grining, 2015). Some researchers have also examined the impact of specific parenting factors such as parental warmth and control (Roche et al., 2015), parent–adolescent closeness (Tilghman-Osborne, Bámaca-Colbert, Witherspoon, Wadsworth, & Hecht, 2016), mother-adolescent agreement (Titzmann et al., 2015), and family dynamics and levels of parentification (Kam, Marcoulides, et al., 2017). Additionally, steps have been taken in recent studies to develop a comprehensive, empirically validated and reliable measure of language brokering (Kim, Hou, Shen, & Zhang, 2016).
The inconsistency of findings in the extant literature on language brokering illustrates the complex nature of the phenomenon. The variety of disciplines that have engaged in research indicates that language brokering does not exist in isolation. By its nature, it is embedded within the context of individual differences, immigration, acculturation, culture, family, and other systems. All are complex, and likely intersect with language brokering in complex ways. To think of language brokering as either beneficial or detrimental is overly simplistic. Future research would also benefit from a careful examination of bidirectional effects of language brokering and other factors, as well as the mediating and moderating factors at play.

Given recent findings related to the age effect (Titzmann & Michel, 2017) and parentification (Arellano et al., 2018; Kam, Marcoulides, et al., 2017), future research – specifically on child and adolescent language brokering – should continue to explore factors that are not only inherent to the immigration process (Suárez-Orozco & Qin, 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), but also are relevant to child development and family systems. A number of studies have found a positive relation between adolescent language brokering and internalizing symptoms. This seems to be a focused and fertile area of future study, given that adolescent family members often become a family’s designated language broker and given the increase in depressive symptoms observed in adolescence.

Language brokering needs a cohesive effort toward developing a comprehensive picture of the brokering experience. Ultimately, future study of language brokering will benefit from soliciting participation and support of fellow researchers from a diversity of disciplines and backgrounds. The study of a human phenomenon that is the product of immigration and globalization by researchers with a singular perspective is inherently self-limiting. Perhaps the most progressive move researchers can make in advancing and refining the study of language brokering is to move toward a global, interdisciplinary collaboration.

Declaration of interest
The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Funding
This work was not supported by funding.

ORCID
Lisa M. Hooper http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5493-0110

References


Walinchowski, M. (2001). Language brokering: Laying the foundation for success and bilingualism. In R. Lara-Alecio (Chair) (Ed.), *Symposium conducted at the annual educational research exchange*. College Station, TX.


