

**LANGUAGE BROKERING:  
'EXPLORING PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN CHINESE FAMILIES'**

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'EXPLORING PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN CHINESE FAMILIES'**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents the research findings related to language brokering in Chinese immigrant families. Applying an interpretive theoretical framework, this study sought to capture the participants' reality. This research was accomplished by interviewing four Chinese immigrant youth whose age ranged from 16 to 21 years. Three of the participants were female and one participant was male. The findings suggest Chinese immigrant youths perceive language brokering as an overall positive experience, yet it sometimes can bring forth negative emotions. In terms of the impact on the participants' relationship with their parents, language brokering can also produce a more intimate relationship with parents because of its inherent emphasis on communication between the parents and their children. Nevertheless, one more effect emerging from the data was that in other situations the language brokers displayed a loss of respect for their parents. As language brokering is related to the mental health of immigrant youth and the healthy adjustment of the immigrant family to the country, social workers are expected to shed light on issues of language brokering practice in Chinese immigrant families. Accordingly, policy makers may be required to expand initiatives for programs that support Chinese immigrant youth.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

A growing percentage of the Canadian population now speaks English as a second language as the immigrant population continues to increase. From transactions at the bank to visits to the doctor, the language barrier of new immigrants sometimes limits important activities. Therefore, some immigrant parents become dependent on their children's translation skills soon after the point of immigration, as their children are more often able to speak English fluently (Gonzales et al., 2002; Martinez, McClure & Eddy, 2009). While the Canadian Department of Immigration funds welfare initiatives for those who are not able to speak either of Canada's official languages, this governmental institution may have overlooked the needs of the immigrant children and their hardships in acculturation. As an immigrant myself, I am in close proximity to language brokering practice in local immigrant families and I am also informed by my own personal experience. Therefore, this research project was conceived as a means to illuminate the difficulties that Chinese immigrant youth experience, and the responsibilities that they take for their family as a language broker. This thesis shows a glimpse of the immigrant family and immigrant youth's lived experiences with language brokering, as well as the impact of language brokering on immigrant youth's mental health and parent-child relationship in Chinese immigrant families.

Having Interpretive Social Science (ISS) (Neuman, 1997) as the theoretical framework, it is acknowledged that the true meaning of social reality is not simple or obvious on the surface (Neuman, 1997). However, it is noted that one can reach the social

reality through “a detailed study of the text, contemplating its many messages and seeking the connections among its parts” (Neuman, 1997, p. 68). Applying this theoretical lens to this study, a wide range of background knowledge of language brokering was explored (e.g. Asian migration history, Chinese family culture, acculturation process, etc.), and an attempt was made to find the connections within the information that would lead to an accurate picture of language brokering in Chinese immigrant families. In this research, one of the most crucial considerations is how Chinese immigrant youth experience their relationship with their parents. Therefore, the direct discourses of immigrant youth were looked to, and they were considered as the most important source of information in this study.

This thesis has five chapters. Chapter Two presents a literature review about the history of migration; the Chinese familial context and acculturation gap will be presented along with previous literature in language brokering. Chapter Three explains the methodology and theoretical framework that was applied in this research, as well as the process of data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the findings of this research; the themes that emerged from the interviews will be addressed. Based on these findings, Chapter Five enters an extended discussion of implications for social work and social policy for language brokers and their families.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this chapter, the existing literature related to the association of language brokering and the psychological distress of the brokers will be presented. The relationship between language brokering and parent-child relationship in Asian families follows. The literature illuminates the historical context of language brokering, and the reason why the research on language brokering in Asian families is particularly crucial at this point of immigrant history in Canada. Because of the emerging immigrant population from China, language brokering in immigrant families has become more widespread than in the past, and the language brokers' roles and responsibilities have become crucial in their families. In order to understand the language brokering experiences of Asian youth, literature from both sociology and psychology was used.

### **Historical Context of Canadian Migration**

Canada has been one of the leading countries for accepting immigrants for many decades (Schmidt, 2007). In the post-war years, most of the immigrants were from Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States (Seydegart & Spears, 1985). In the last five decades, the number of immigrants to OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries has increased steeply (OECD, 2011). Within this global trend, there has been a huge shift in immigration populations in Canada. The new immigrants of Canada have come from countries in Africa, Asia, Central and South America (Seydegart & Spears, 1985). Within the last few decades in particular, migration from China to Canada has increased (Castles & Miller 2003; Shan & Guo, 2013). This

change in immigrant populations is more apparent upon consideration of the immigration statistics. In 1966, immigrants coming from the United Kingdom and Ireland numbered 65,065 and represented 33.4% of the total immigration to Canada. Other large groups came from Italy (31,625, 16.2%), the United States (17,514, 9 %), Germany (9,263, 4.8%), Portugal (7,930, 4%), France (7,872, 4%), and Greece (7,174, 3.7 %). However, in 1996, immigrants from Hong Kong comprised the highest number (29,966), which represented 13.3 per cent of total immigration for the year of 1996. The second largest population came from India (21,276, 9.4%), and China followed (17,516, 7.8 %) (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005). In the year of 2007, roughly 1.1 million residents of Canada's population were of Chinese origin; which was the second largest visible minority in the country (Statistics Canada 2007, cited in Smith et al., 2013). As it can easily be presumed, Chinese immigrants have distinctive cultures and languages which are distinguishable from European immigrant populations. Thus, the new immigrant populations now have been facing additional challenges because of the vastly different culture and the language.

### **Language Brokering in Immigrant families**

The literature indicates the hardships of minority family members in the acculturation process. Minority immigrant family members need to figure out how to best adjust to the mainstream culture while maintaining their heritage language and ways of communicating (Ng, 2007). Likewise, when these Chinese immigrants arrive in the new country, they are required to adapt to a new culture, a new environment and a new language. The acculturation process is often difficult to handle and it is a time-consuming

process (Martinez et al., 2009; Morales & Hanson, 2005). In order to make this adjustment easier, immigrant parents are likely to rely on their children as they acquire the host language faster than their parents (Gonzales et al., 2002; Martinez et al., 2009; Szapocznik, Kurtines & Fernandez, 1980). Immigrant children translate the language and deal with adult-like situations for their parents in a new country. They have been called ‘language brokers’ (McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Morales & Hanson, 2005). Language brokers are fluent in both languages, thus they translate the language for their parents according to their parents’ needs (Weisskirch et al., 2011). Language brokering has been an important job that immigrant children have taken for over a hundred years throughout the immigration history of Canada. Immigrant children’s language brokering for their parents is a prevalent activity: almost 84% of first generation immigrant youth have done language brokering for their parents at least once. Language brokering begins at about age 10 and it often continues into adulthood among Asian immigrant families (Buriel et al., 2006; Chao, 2006). However, research on language brokering is relatively new, and only a few scholars have recently started to pay close attention to those ‘language brokers’ (Buriel et al., 2006; Morales & Hanson, 2005). Their emerging interest on language brokering might be a response to changing immigrant populations and their emerging needs. In other words, immigrant children who play a role in language brokering may face new challenges compared to immigrant children of the past. Therefore, the emerging research of language brokering in Asian immigrant families has implications for mental health concerns for immigrant youth (Buriel et al., 2006).

### **Cultural and Familial Context: Asian Families**

Cultural features need to be addressed to have a proper understanding of the association between language brokering and the parent-child relationship in Asian families and the impact on the psychological well-being of Chinese immigrant youth. The noticeable traits in Asian families are family connectedness, personal sacrifice for important others (such as parents, siblings and extended family members), fulfilling family obligations, filial piety, and taking precedence of others' needs and wishes. These are the core values of Confucian ethics (Phinney et al., 2000). Other important cultural features in Asian families are interdependent relationships and family commitments which play a significant role in coping patterns in Asian culture (Triandis, 1995, Yeh & Wang, 2000). However, the host (Western) culture considers autonomy, independence, and personal goals as more significant than family commitment (Lim et al., 2008; Triandis, 1995). Many Asian immigrant parents try to keep their values from their culture of origin after their immigration; yet, they also adopt some values of their host culture such as independence and self-reliance (Chao, 1995; Koh, Shao & Wang, 2009). Therefore, immigrant families might build up their own unique family culture in the host country, and this may imply that dynamics in the parent-child relationship in Asian immigrant families are different than both traditional Asian families and families within the host culture.

It is noteworthy that some researchers have claimed that language brokering frequency is related to higher internalization, and poorer mental health among Chinese Canadian adolescents (Chao, 2006; Hua & Costigan, 2012). In addition, Juang and Alvarez (2010) claimed Chinese immigrant youth are particularly affected by a negative

family climate because Chinese culture emphasizes interdependent family relationships and obligation. Furthermore, some researchers argue that Chinese youth might have more psychological distress because of the high expectations of parents, hierarchy, guilt, shame, and punitive communication in Chinese family culture (Hua & Costigan, 2012; Juang & Alvarez, 2010; Sung, 2010). However, another study shows different results: Asian immigrant youth do not worry about their parents' high expectations for them, since family communication has improved (Yeh et al., 2003). Furthermore, some recent surveys also demonstrated that language brokers feel generally positive about their translation role (Weisskirch, cited in Cline et al., 2011). However, it is crucial to note that previous research in Asian families has been biased, and is strongly influenced by Western psychology. Even though sacrifice, interdependence, strong family bonds, responsibility, and filial duty are strong characteristics of Asian families, these qualities do not appear in the recent literature. In addition, it is possible that these values explain why the parents' authoritarian characteristics do not affect parent-child closeness in Asian families as they may do in Western families (Tsai-Chae & Nagata, 2008). Therefore, every aspect of Asian family culture should be considered and a balanced perspective is needed in order to fully understand language brokering in Asian families.

### **Language Brokering and Stress**

It has been shown that language brokering in general, particularly in Asian families, causes a certain level of distress to immigrant youth (Cline et al., 2011; Hua & Costigan, 2012; Morales & Hanson, 2005). Some studies claim that frequent language brokering is positively correlated to internalizing and externalizing symptoms such as

depression, worry, fear, self-injury, and social withdrawal (Dorner, Orellana & Jimenez, 2008; Hua & Costigan, 2012). In addition, there is another potential disadvantage of language brokering: extra effort is required for children to accommodate school work and family obligations, feeling nervous while translating at important events, feeling burdened by pressure from family members and family responsibilities, and low performance in school (Dorner et al., 2008; Hua & Costigan, 2012). Nevertheless, other researchers have demonstrated that language brokering does not necessarily have bad consequences for immigrant youth. They claim language brokering is a normal means for immigrant children to support their parents (Orellana et al., 2003). Furthermore, children who translate for their parents may assume many adult-like responsibilities on a regular basis and may show accelerated process in their cognitive and socio-emotional development compared to those who broker infrequently or not at all. This is because language brokers need to develop social skills in order to negotiate sensitive situations in adult world (Buriel et al., 2006). Therefore, the relationship between language brokering and stress is complex and has not been clearly defined (Martinez et al., 2009).

### **Language Brokering and Parent-Child Relations**

The evidence of the correlation between the quality of the immigrant parent- child relationship and frequency of language brokering remains inconsistent in previous research (Dorner et al., 2008; Hua & Costigan, 2012; Love & Bruel, 2007). Both qualitative and quantitative researchers evaluated ‘language brokering’ as a positive factor for relationship of the language broker with their parents (Buriel et al., 1998; Hua & Costigan, 2012; Weisskirch, 2005). Likewise, some argue that in general, immigrant



children of Latino families are glad to help their parents by language brokering (Baptiste, 1993; Dorner et al., 2008; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). McQuillan and Tse (1995) claimed that brokers have more trusting relationships with their parents since they accomplish their expected responsibilities. For immigrant children, these trusting relationships may foster better understanding of their parents and increase their respect for their parents (McQuillan & Tse, cited in Chao, 2006). Language brokering also creates more opportunities for youth to communicate with their parents; college students who have done language brokering recalled their language brokering as a positive experience where they developed intimate relationships with their parents (Chao, 2006; Buriel et al., 2006). Buriel et al. (2006) also emphasized that language brokering can improve the parent-child relationship in immigration families; they reported that college students considered language brokering as a chance to have an insight into and a sense of appreciation for their parents' sacrifices in the new country. They feel bonded with their parents, and this is a crucial goal in Asian families (Buriel et al., 2006).

Meanwhile, other studies have reported that the role of language brokering imposes psychological distress and is an uncomfortable position for youth in their relationship with their parents. This is since immigrant youth can perceive in this situation their parents' dependence and vulnerability (Hua & Costigan, 2012; Morales & Hanson, 2005). Olsen (1988) also warned the role reversals can reduce the respect of the broker for their parents and nosedive the status of parents as authority figures and role models (Olsen, cited in Chao, 2006). These role reversals can also cause feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and resentment toward the parents (Chao, 2006; Umaña-

Taylor, 2003). Moreover, parental disempowerment through language brokering can cause poor mental health for immigrant children (Martinez et al., 2009; McQuillan & Tse, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002)

### **Acculturation Gap and Value Transmission**

Acculturation is “the process of cultural and psychological change that results following meeting between cultures” (Sam & Berry, 2010). There are four types of acculturation. These are “Assimilation (identification mostly with the receiving culture), Integration (high identification with both cultures), Separation (identification mostly with the culture of origin), and Marginalization (low identification with both cultures)” (Berry, cited in Chen et al., 2008). Acculturation gap refers to differences between immigrant parents and children in the process of acculturation in the host country (Martinez, 2006). Acculturation gaps between immigrant parents and children can affect their relationship (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006). The intergenerational conflicts in immigrant families are related to acculturation level, and these conflicts could be deteriorated especially when the children are in early adulthood (Kim & Park 2011; Lau et al., 2005; Tsai-Chae & Nagata, 2008). In fact, intergenerational acculturation gaps are common in immigrant minority families (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006). However, this intergenerational acculturation gap should not be dismissed in Asian immigrant families. Stuart et al. (2010) point out that the conflicts between parents and adolescents can have a different pattern in immigrant families. In Western culture, the conflicts between parents and adolescents occur frequently and it is seen as a normal developmental process for adolescents (Stuart et al., 2010). In the Western perspective, it is believed that the conflicts with their parents are

inevitable, because adolescents tend to look for more autonomy and independence in that stage of developmental life (Stuart et al., 2010). Therefore, the conflicts are natural and helpful for establishing one's ego and values (Smetana et al., 2006; Stuart et al., 2010). Nevertheless, Chung (2001) claimed that the normative function of intergenerational conflict can change when a family immigrates to a new country. While the immigrant youth adopt a new culture, immigrant parents feel the cultural gap along with the generational gap (Chung, cited in Stuart et al., 2010). Immigrant parents want their children to keep the values of their culture of origin, but their wish is often frustrated (Stuart et al., 2010). Consequently, the conflicts between immigrant parents and immigrant youth induce the parents to stick more to their origin culture and traditions (Stuart et al., 2010). Therefore, the conflicts between parents and children terminate as a long lasting, detrimental family discord, rather than a temporal feud (Stuart et al., 2010).

### **Cultural Orientation and Ethnic Identity**

Cultural orientation and ethnic identity also can contribute to the complex process of acculturation. Considering unique characteristics of immigrant family, cultural difference and parental expectations can provoke the intergenerational conflict between parents and children (Ying et al., 2001). Moreover, some studies reported strong ethnic identity is positively related to immigrant youth's high self-esteem (Phinney, 1989; Yeh et al., 2003). Ying et al. (2001) illuminated that American-born Chinese youth appear to have a better relationship with their parents than did early immigrant counterparts. This result indicated that the parents' cultural orientation affected their relationship, since there is a higher probability that the parents of American-born Chinese may have a

stronger American cultural orientation than the parents of early immigrant Chinese. It implies that not only the cultural orientation of youth immigrants, but also the cultural orientation of parents could be a decisive factor for the quality of the relationship between immigrant parents and their immigrant children (Ying et al., 2001). This result may infer that language brokering, as a part of the parent-child relationship in immigrant families, is a two-way communication between parents and children, not only a one-way service that children might do for their parents. Therefore, language brokering could be understood as a reciprocal relationship between parents and children in immigrant families.

### **Conclusion and Critique**

Much of the parent-child relationships in immigrant families are explained at the micro-level in the related literature. However, the language brokering and parent-child relationship in immigrant families might also need to be understood at the macro-level, because the stress of language may be related to lack of social support for immigrants in Canada. Li (2001) criticized the evaluation of immigrants' performance in Canada; he argues that Canada has evaluated immigrants through their earning capacity, education qualification, occupational skills, and linguistic capacity. Nevertheless, their adaptation into a Canadian society is a crucial consideration as well. Since Canada does not evaluate their psychological adaptation and social involvement in Canadian society, immigrants' acculturation has been omitted in immigrant policy (Li, 2001). Ma (2002) added that the exclusion of immigrants' voice in policy might have aggravated the emotional burdens of immigrant youth who practice language brokering in their households. Ma (2002) further

asserted the relationship between immigrant policy and the mental health of immigrant youth as he emphasized the importance of a caring and supportive social environment. His research shows that city level, population characteristics, socio-economic conditions, social climate, and social services conditions have strong effects on behavioral and emotional problems of immigrant children (Ma, 2002). Thus, sufficient social services for immigrant children should be available when they face the challenge of integration into the society (Ma, 2002).

Canada's immigrant settlement policy states that Canada pursues a 'multicultural' 'bilingual' society in which immigrants do not need to deny their cultural of origin, but they are encouraged to enjoy both host and home cultures (Schmidt, 2007). Furthermore, federal and provincial governments state that Canada has sought for a larger realm of integration of immigrant populations (Schmidt, 2007). Based on these political stances of Canada, it is evident that Canada needs to support more research and social services on language brokering and the parent-child relationship in immigrant families. However, there has been gradual financial deduction in health and social services. In 1996 and 1998, the provincial government in Ontario reduced funding for hospitals by over 10%, and also decreased funding of community based health and social services (Steele et al., 2002). Citizenship and Immigration Canada have provided services such as 'settlement programs', the 'Adjustment Assistance Program (AAP)', the 'Host Program' and the 'Immigrant Loans Program (ILP)' (Canada Library of Parliament, Research Branch, 1989; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2009). However, these programs do not discuss mental health issues of immigrant families, and only focus on immigrants' language

ability or employment. Even though mental health issues of immigrants can be easily predicted considering their socio-economic status, these issues are considered ‘secondary needs’, and not as ‘urgent needs’ that must be addressed immediately.

Moreover, it has been shown that the society has imposed a ‘model minority stereotype’ to Asian immigrant youth through the media since 1960s because of their high levels of achievement in academia (Costigan, Hua, & Su, 2010; Li, 2001). Though, as some researchers have remarked, there is still very little attention to the growth and adaptation of the new generation in the conventional immigration research (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Kim & Park, 2011; Portes, 1994; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006).

A great limitation of this literature review is that much of the research into Asian immigrant youth language brokering was conducted in the United States. Hence it should be noted that such theoretical concepts may not apply directly to the Canadian context.

Based on the above literature review, this thesis will approach the issues regarding language brokering by seeking to answer three main questions: First, how does language brokering impact parent-child relations? Second, how does language brokering impact the mental health of immigrant youth? Third, what are the strategies that language brokers use to deal with the tension and stress of language brokering?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

In this chapter the theoretical framework of this study and the choice of methodology will be explained. The reasons why this framework and methodology are suitable for this study will be demonstrated, and how this theoretical framework enhances the certain dimensions of this study will also be discussed. Moreover, the research questions stated at the end of Chapter 2 will be viewed through the lens of the chosen methodology. Lastly, recruitment of the participants for this research project, data collection and data analysis will follow.

#### **Interpretive Framework and Phenomenology**

The theoretical framework that used for analyzing the data is interpretive. Neuman explained the interpretive framework “the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action” and ‘understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds’ (Neuman, 1997, p. 68). Interpretive researchers claim that social reality is determined by how people perceive the situation. If ‘insiders’ think a certain life experience is important, then it becomes meaningful to the researchers as well. Therefore, social reality can vastly differ according to one’s perception (Mason, 2002).

The interpretive perspective was found to be most appropriate for this study, since one’s language brokering experience is different from another and each individual assigns different meanings to a certain event. Along with the interpretive theoretical framework, phenomenology was chosen as the methodology. Phenomenology is a philosophy and research method that is grounded in the assumption that “clients are reliable” (Singer,

2005). The reason phenomenology was chosen is that it supports the interpretive perspective as they both agree with the nature of social science.

For the phenomenologist, research is closely connected to the clients' knowledge and needs (Singer, 2005). A phenomenologist holds that lived experience itself can be the strongest evidence of social reality (Singer, 2005). It claims that is not the researchers who decide the norm, but the people who experience the event are the norm. Thus, the researchers try to describe the individual's experience (Singer, 2005). Phenomenological researchers bracket their experiences and biases, so that they can eliminate their perspective (Singer, 2005). The researchers seek for openness and transparency in their observations in the interview (Singer, 2005). Moreover, phenomenologists claim their evidence is in individuals' experience and the interview. In other words, the individual's experience and the interview itself are the most important data for phenomenologists. Streubert and Carpenter (1995) claim phenomenology aims to investigate specific phenomena, or to explain the appearance of one's lived experience. Therefore, the focus of analysis for phenomenology is the individual's lived experience (Pascal et al., 2011). However, Schutz asserted that there is a difficulty in conducting social science research when rooted in the 'subjective meaning'. Therefore, researchers need to apply concepts that allow them to explain various social relationships in everyday life (Hekman, 1980; Schutz 1964). Hesserl also asserted phenomenology focuses on the everyday, common-sense world in which we live and work (Gorman, 1976; Husserl, 1964). In other words, phenomenology values and pays close attention to what individuals experience in daily lives. For these reasons, phenomenologists consider exploring the lived experience as an



important source to understand the true meanings of life. Therefore, they believe assessing lived experience would allow the researchers to get important data (Pascal et al., 2011).

Immigrant families might experience the immigration process differently. These different processes and struggles need to be recognized to understand the parent-child relationship in Chinese immigrant families. Therefore, it might not be appropriate to consider every Chinese family as a homogeneous group. Choosing the interpretive perspective (Mason, 2002) is an attempt to obtain an accurate understanding of Chinese immigrant families. Reasons for this framework choice will be explained in the following passages.

First, the interpretive approach is able to make this research culturally sound. An individual's life experience should be explained within 'contexts', such as one's personality, peers, family, society and culture. However, working with a population who do not share the same culture as the researcher makes this approach difficult, because it is challenging for any outside observer to understand other cultures perfectly. Using an interpretive approach enables researchers to observe a subject's experience more accurately without perfect knowledge of their cultural background as it relies on the individuals' narrations; participants are expected to explain to the researcher what a certain life event means to them (Mason, 2002).

Second, the interpretive framework allows for the exploring of meanings in one's life experience (Mason, 2002). It does not have a limitation or fixed perception when

interpreting social reality. Thus, it opens more possibilities of finding the new meanings of language brokering and parent-child relationship in Chinese families.

### **Researcher's Statement**

I still remember the moment that I stepped into the Toronto Pearson International Airport. I arrived to Canada in January 2006, in a very cold night. I could not sleep in the hotel in Toronto even after 14 hours of flight because of excitement for my new journey. After enjoying a short 'honey moon' period in Canada, I soon figured my journey would not be an easy road. Having first-hand experience as an immigrant, I considered myself as an insider researcher in this research.

My age helped me approach language brokering in immigrant families as well. Since I was still attending university in Korea at the point I immigrated to Canada, I was in between the positions of the immigrant parents and of the immigrant children that I would later encounter in my Master's research. I needed to learn the language alongside immigrant parents in adult language classes, but I was categorized as immigrant youth because of age at that time. Therefore, I could often identify with both parties. It was crucial that I could identify myself with both parents and children because it allowed stepping into both of these experiences more closely. While listening to both parents and children, I could find children's language translating was a shared experience in immigrant families and that it played an important role for families to adjust to Canada. Positioned as an insider researcher, I acknowledged that being an insider could enable the successful and productive interactions with participants, because I was able to share common languages, themes and experiences with my participants (Hodkinson, 2005;

Palmer, 2006). Furthermore, it was beneficial for this research that I could combine academic background knowledge and my experience in the Asian family culture (Palmer, 2006).

To some extent, however, I was still an outsider researcher. First, I did not share exactly the same experience with language brokers. Second, my nationality (Korean) was different than the participants' (Chinese Canadian) - even though I shared similar family culture with the participants (East Asian culture). However, using phenomenology and ISS as the methodology for this research helped filling the cultural gap between the researcher and participants.

Canadian immigrant settlement policy states that Canada pursues a 'multicultural' and 'bilingual' society in which immigrants do not need to deny their cultural of origin but they are encouraged to enjoy both host and home cultures (Schmidt, 2007). However, I wondered at that time if this national level of immigrant policy accurately reflected the reality. In my experience, the time of transition of becoming a bilingual has been accompanied with sacrifice, emotional depression, and confusion of one's identity. Many immigrant youth seem to go through this transitional period. Furthermore, these youth might assume even more responsibilities working as a language broker for their parents. However, immigrant youth's needs and difficulties are not often recognized in the host culture simply because they tend to adjust to the society in a shorter time than their parents. Since I understood and experienced the difficulties immigrants might go through, I tried to illuminate social injustices that have been unnoticed by previous research

(Palmer, 2006). Therefore, in this research project I hoped to present the language brokering experiences of Chinese immigrant youth in Hamilton, ON.

### **Insider's Knowledge & Reflexivity**

As mentioned earlier, the research questions for this work were first derived from my personal observations. Since most of my friends who have done language brokering for their parents have expressed a certain level of distress, my first assumption was that there were emotional hardships in the process of language brokering. Therefore, I hoped that the emotional hardship on immigrant youth during language brokering could be identified and recognized, so that the problem could be defined and ultimately so that immigrant youth could be advocated for. Nevertheless, through the interpretive lens (Mason, 2002) I realized that I was biased in terms of observing others' experiences; I considered immigrant youth were oppressed as they are culturally obligated to help their parents. I figured my bias may lead to a failure to understand others' reality. In addition, as the interpretative social science (ISS) perspective was applied, I also could miss the relevant pieces in language brokers' experience if a conclusion was made in advance of the data.

However, using phenomenology (Singer, 2005) as the research methodology could also bring three positive consequences onto this research.

First, it could deconstruct the power relationships between the researcher and participants. Within a phenomenological methodology, the researcher considers participants narrations as the most important evidence and try not to carry the researcher's perspective. It cannot fully eliminate the power that the researchers have

over the participants, though it does minimize it. Therefore, it enables better communication between the researchers and participants and provides a more comfortable (non-judgmental) situation for the participants when disclosing themselves.

Second, phenomenology as a research methodology can bridge the gap between the research and the practice (Randles, 2012). As the participants understand the language in the research, the research is not remote from the real life situation. Thus, it could bring a practical advantage.

Third, the researcher can ask questions that they could not otherwise ask unless they bracketed and reflected themselves during the interview. Phenomenology prevents the researchers to use their presumptions and define their taken-granted knowledge.

### **Research Questions**

The main research questions were:

- 1) How does language brokering impact parent-child relations?
- 2) How does language brokering impact the mental health of immigrant youth?
- 3) What are the strategies that language brokers use to deal with the tension and stress of language brokering?

For question 1, close attention was paid to the fact that interpretive researchers focus on ‘social interaction’. As Neuman (1997) explained, in the ISS perspective social reality is made by people who interpret meanings in their daily lives. Social reality is fluid and fragile because people may create meaning differently according to their changeable social relations (Neuman, 1997). Therefore it was explored how parent-child relationships changed after the participant immigrated to Canada. Comparing their

relationships before and after immigration, it was possible to see what relational factors changed their social reality. Moreover, an attempt was made to answer this question relying only on the participants' narration.

For question 2, it was first needed to determine if the consequences of language brokering and immigrant youth's mental health were temporal or permanent. Moreover, when examining their stress level, their discourses about themselves were relied on, rather than by using an assessment tool. Direct quotes from the interviews were the primary source used to understand their stress level.

For question 3, the participants were asked about their strategies to ease the stress and tensions during language brokering. The verbal/physical language that participants used to describe their way of dealing with stress was focused on.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through use of recruitment posters (see attached Appendix A: Recruitment Poster). The posters were put in the main campuses of McMaster University, local Chinese churches, and community boards in Hamilton Ontario. Once participants saw the poster, they got in contact via email or telephone. After the initial contact, a Letter of Information/Consent (LOIC) was sent (see attached Appendix B: Letter of Information/Consent) to inform them of what to expect in the interview.

### **Participants' Description**

The participants of this study were Chinese immigrant youths between 16 and 21 years of age. There were four participants who had experience in language brokering.

The gender ratio of the participants was 1:3 (male: female). All participants were either university or high school students. They had immigrated from mainland China or Hong Kong to Canada at ages 6-8, and identified themselves Chinese. They all identified themselves as Christians, and two of these were actively involved in church activities with their parents. The four participants were not able to speak English when they first came to Canada, thus they took English as a second language (ESL) classes to learn the language and went through a transitional period of becoming bilingual. They started language brokering as soon as they had acquired the language (around age 8-11), though they experienced difficulties with this role since they were not fully equipped to translate for their parents at that time. They continue to translate for their parents till present day. Three of them reside with their parents in Hamilton, ON. One participant stays in Hamilton by herself for schooling, but in summer resides with her parents in Toronto, ON.

### **Interview Process**

After having a short meeting, the participants were asked to sign the LOIC. There were four participants for the interviews, and face-to-face interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour. Open-ended questions were asked of the participants, and they were asked to freely talk about their experience as a language broker. An interview guide (see attached Appendix C: Interview Questions) was used to ask the core questions (e.g. their stress level during language brokering and their relationship with their parents), yet the participants were permitted to speak about any related topics that they would like to share.

### **Data Analysis**

The methodology used in this study implies that every experience has its own values (Mason, 2002). Therefore, the participants' experience should neither be undermined nor omitted. Close attention was paid to the participants' discourse and the true meaning of their life experience was actively sought. In order to collect the data of lived experience, phenomenologists use the principle of 'getting close to another's experience' as the primary tool. As a strategy of analyzing the data, the Reinharz five-step process of phenomenological analysis (Reinharz, cited in Singer, 2005) was applied.

In the first step, the researcher changes the clients' experience into a form of action and language, so that experiences become recognizable to the researchers (Reinharz, cited in Singer, 2005). Transcripts were made of each recorded interview for the first step of analysis. In the second step, the researcher changes the discourse that they hear to an understanding of the original experience (Reinharz, cited in Singer, 2005). Thus the transcripts were coded line by line. The discourse was changed into simplified forms so that their original lived experience could be understood. In the third step, the researcher changes the interpretation of the original experience into conceptual categories that help understanding (Reinharz, cited in Singer, 2005). Therefore, the coded data was categorized into similar themes. In the fourth step, the researcher transforms conceptual categories into a written document that described what the researchers learned about the client's view (Reinharz, cited in Singer, 2005). Lastly, the researcher and the audience clarify the preceding steps as the researcher transforms the written document into an understanding which explains the experiences of the participants (Reinharz cited in Singer, 2005).



The next chapter presents the findings of this research. Along with themes that emerged from the data, direct quotes from the participants' discourse were used to provide a vivid picture of language brokering.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

In this chapter the themes that emerged from the participants' discourse about experience as a language broker are presented. The types and frequency of language brokering are described. Second, the consequences of language brokering are discussed, both negative and positive impact. In addition, it is explored how parent-child relationships are shifted as a result of language brokering. Third, an examination is made of strategies that language brokers use to deal with the tension and stress of language brokering.

### **Types and Frequency of Language Brokering**

The participants reported that the types of language brokering varied from simple tasks (e.g. paying bills, making phone calls for customer service, translating rare terms and phrases) to heavy tasks (e.g. filling out forms, editing documents, translating for mortgages). In addition, types of translation did not hugely change over time. The following are some examples of the participants' narratives about language brokering:

My parents really hate speaking English. So majority of time, I translate for them a lot. Doing shopping, going to restaurants... So every time we go to restaurant, they always ask me to translate. Even when we were doing mortgage, my mom drag me along and has me to translate. And same thing happen all the reservations at hotels when we go on a vacation. So pretty much everything, when I am there they ask me to. [P1]

For example, filling the form [...] like there are some specific words that my mom doesn't understand and she needs me to translate it for her. [P3]

Also, along with general translation, the four participants noted that they had done 'cultural brokering' for their parents. That is, they helped their parents to communicate

with Canadian-born English speakers, because their parents do not wholly understand the culture of the host country.

And some communication with other people, sometimes my mom doesn't really know how to communicate with them so she just needs me, so I started to help her [P3]

Birth order may be related to frequency of translating. The language brokers who are the first child answered that they translate for parents more than their siblings. P2 complained of the high dependency of parents onto first child:

Probably because I am the oldest in the family and I always think 'you have two younger siblings you can ask, why do you ask me, why does the oldest have to do everything?' [P2]

However, even though high frequency of translating may bring negative emotions such as being 'annoyed' or 'frustrated', the frequency did not appear to have a large impact on the broker's general relationship with their parents. In fact, previous relationship characteristics of the parents determined the present relationship more than the frequency of language brokering.

### **Impact of Language Brokering**

Language brokering permeated into various aspects of the four participants' lives. It had both negative and positive impacts on their lives, and it also brought shifts in the parent-child relationship.

**Negative impacts.** The language brokers experienced negative feelings during language brokering due to various responsibilities that come along with language brokering. They were particularly stressed when they first started translation, since they were young (i.e. age 8-10) and they had not yet acquired full-understanding of the translating contexts or

had yet attained fluent language proficiency in both Chinese and English. They felt frustrated at times, though their stress level decreased as their translation skills improved.

*Language brokering and stress.* In regard to level of stress, the four participants agreed that short-term stress was caused by language brokering. The feeling of frustration was mentioned multiple times throughout the most interviews. However, all participants mentioned that in the long term, it did not impact on mental health or stress. Furthermore, most participants denied a direct relationship between language brokering and stress. However, all participants answered they were ‘frustrated’ or ‘annoyed’ at least one time during language brokering, because they had difficulties communicating with their parents due to their lack of understanding of context and/or they could not fully express English terms in Chinese. P1 explained the relationship between language brokering and level of stress. He was not concerned about his performance, though he mentioned the context in which he is translating could be related to the stress level.

I think most appropriate answer is not depending on whether I am translating or not. It depends on context. If I am translating in the restaurant, I would feel good. But I am translating for sense of higher responsibility, I would feel bad, because I would feel like I am missing out important decision. So I would say, it is material that I am translating, it’s not how I am translating. [P1]

P4 who had done language brokering with light responsibilities asserted language brokering did not bring any stress. However, it needs to be considered that the frequency of her translating was low as well.

Moreover, the ability of translating affected the level of stress. The four participants expressed feelings of frustration when they were not able to translate

properly. Frustration was experienced more often when they first started to translate for their parents:

So back then, because I still kept learning, so there were a lot of time I get frustrated that I can't explain to her and she expects me to explain to her. But now [...] I need to translate, I would be able to do it. [...] I won't get really frustrated, because I would be able to do it. [P2]

I'm pretty sure I was frustrated at some points (laugh). [...] because since I grew up here, my Mandarin is not good, so to express myself in Mandarin, it's a bit harder than English.. So sometimes I had to like, find my way around to try to explain to them what it is. [P4]

Here, language proficiency does not only refer only to English skills, but also refers to Chinese language ability. All of participants immigrated to Canada before the age of 10, thus they have experienced difficulty expressing something in the Chinese language as well.

However, the participants became less stressed as language brokers and as their parents improved their language skills. Moreover, it appears that as they gained the experience and confidence in language brokering, language brokers found a way to express themselves better to their parents. Their parents had also developed knowledge and language of the host country.

On the other hand, most participants reported their role in the family had changed as a result of language brokering. One participant mentioned the higher stress that is caused by her high responsibility for the family as a language broker:

I thought life is simple you don't have to do a lot of things, because in China, my parents take care of everything. But now I actually took part of the percentage right now. So now I know what is going on in family and there are so many fees and charges that we need to take care of. [P3]

Even though she said the process of language brokering is interesting and not stressful, her responsibilities for the family increased her stress with her position as a language broker.

**Positive impacts.** The four participants stated generally language brokering has been a positive experience for them. First, all participants reported they could preserve their Chinese language and identity with language brokering. Second, some participants mentioned language brokering accelerated their learning of English and of Canadian society. Third, some participants mentioned it promoted their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

*Maintaining ethnic identity.* All participants answered language brokering was helpful for maintaining their Chinese language proficiency and ethnic identity. Some participants mentioned that their ethnic identity changed over time since they were exposed to the main-stream culture and used the English language most of the time. In fact, two participants were aware of losing their mother tongue. Language brokering for their parents, however, enabled them to keep up their Chinese language and thus it helps them maintain their ethnic identity as Chinese:

It can maintain Chinese identity which I sometimes am grateful for. I always think my Chinese going down drain, because I don't really use it. It always makes me feel sad; I could've been so good at Chinese (laughs) [P2]

Moreover, Chinese language proficiency is vital for their relationship with their parents, because most participants are only able to communicate with their parents in the Chinese language:

I don't really speak English to them; I only speak Chinese to them, because my dad can't speak English at all, and my mom... Well I just feel awkward speaking English with her (laughs). We are not used to that language background. [P3]

Furthermore, it is observed that all participants do not speak Chinese often outside of family:

For my parents... I can't speak to them [in English] because they won't talk to me (laugh). So I guess it helps me maintain my Chinese too. All my friends that I talk to, I speak English basically. I don't think I have any friends that speak Chinese. I speak all my friends in English. Basically outside of my family, I speak English all the time. So my family is really the only thing that I speak with them in Chinese. [P2]

Therefore, language brokering may have a long term impact on the parent-child relationship as it allows constant communication with parents in Chinese language.

*A means of learning English.* Some participants used language brokering as a tool for learning English. One participant recalled the time he started language brokering at age 11.

I think I began to translate around somewhere around 11, anyway simple things, I think at that time, she [mother] didn't need to me translate. She just wanted to make me practice, because at that time I was doing even worse than her, but then eventually the practice has had an effect, so I became more fluent and fluent. [P1]

When P1 first started translating for his parents, it was the aim for him to acquire the language more quickly; not because of an urgent need to help his parents. Another participant explained how language brokering has helped her to learn English:

I make a lot of mistakes when I translate but... well it is good that people when they listen to me, they actually listen my words and understand what I say. So they kind of reorganize my words so 'oh that's how they organize it' and then I would remember it. And I am going to use that way to express myself next time. [P3]

***Improving interpersonal skills.*** P3 reflected language brokering was an ‘interesting’ experience and that it was beneficial for her learning about Canadian society. Furthermore, as she was placed in situations where she must speak with other people for translating, she was able to overcome the fear of speaking with strangers and losing face. As a result she is now less concerned about how other people would think about her. She evaluated this as a positive experience for her self-esteem and as a great means of improving interpersonal skills:

In English translation there must be a lot of communication with other people. And I used to be a shy person [...] because I don’t want to lose face, I care too much about how I perform [...] But English translation, sometimes there is no time for you to think about all this - you have to translate to help them, right? So I just like go up to them and translate whatever I know, even though I make a grammar mistake. [...] because I have to, and you have to get this problem solved, so I kind of get used to it. Even though I make mistake in front of people I don’t care. [...] But before, I really care about that because when I point out on my mistake, it was really hurting my self-esteem and I worried for days and tried to being more prepared next time and have this stress top over me, so it was different. It kind of changed me. [...] When I talk to them I am not shy anymore. So, it’s a good thing it changed [P3]

Participant P3 got more chances to speak with others; it fostered her confidence and ability to communicate with others. Beforehand, she was introverted and did not have many opportunities to speak with strangers. However, language brokering helped to overcome her fear to speak with others. In addition, the experience as a language broker eased her acculturation in the country, and helped her gain knowledge about Canadian society.

***Self-esteem.*** Most participants reported that language brokering has positively affected their self-esteem and self-efficacy. P1 explained how language brokering made him think of himself a competent individual.



It does raise my self-esteem quite a bit. For example, you know that in church, I translated a couple of times there for the pastor [...] I do the same thing [for my parents] so I can do okay. So yeah, it helps. [P1]

Participant P1 appeared to value his experience as a language broker, since he was able to apply his translating experience outside of the home (e.g. church). Language brokering increased his self-esteem, because he feels that he is capable of doing something difficult. Most participants also mentioned feeling ‘helpful’ to others or their parents during language brokering. This ‘feeling of being helpful’ contributes high self-esteem, however, it is not always equivalent to having high self-esteem. P2 said “I guess that makes me that I am helpful to my mom [...] but in terms of my own self-esteem there is no much effect.”

**Parent-child relationship shifting.** Language brokering appeared to change the parent-child relationship in the Chinese immigrant families studied. It will be examined how parents and children communicate during language brokering, and how it affects their closeness, and respect for parents.

***Increase in communication.*** Some of the participants reported that language brokering provided more chances to speak with their parents as it offered common topics on which to speak together. In particular, P3 mentioned how language brokering narrowed the gap between parents and children:

In China [...], I don’t really come to them [parents] I usually go to my friend for help for academic help or whatever. And they don’t need my help either, because they were doing their business there and they were living in their hometown [...] so we were doing our own stuff [...] but when we came here at least we talk about English translation and I kind of teach them some words and they ask me about how to spell this word and so on. Sometimes my mom just gives me a phone call and asks me how to spell this word (laughs). That’s funny too. [...] So it can actually, break the gap between children and parents, because there is always some gap between parents and children. I think the communication gap because they are from different generations so they should have different topics. So

translation should be something that they can share and it is like common topic we can talk about. (P3)

On the other hand, some participants agreed that although language brokering offered chances to speak with their parents, they did not agree that language brokering was a necessary condition for good communication with their parents. P4 said that since she talks to her parents frequently, she would still be communicating with her parents regardless of language brokering.

***Increase in closeness.*** Two participants said language brokering makes them feel close to their parents. In their family, since language brokering mobilized the power from parents to children, the vertical parent-child relationship has become more horizontal. In other words, the parent-child relationship has become a more ‘equal’ and ‘friend-like’ relationship. It made language brokers view their relationship with parents as closer than before:

I always feel like she [mother] is always standing on top and always kind of like “you have to respect me, you shouldn’t teach me this and that, because I know more than you do” and stuff like that, but because I have friends whose parents they are like best friends, so I really want that relationship to exist between me and my parents, so we can talk like friends. So this [language brokering] is a perfect opportunity. We are definitely getting that point. So we can be friends. [P3]

P3 stated that she felt “closer to parents” after language brokering. In P3's case, language brokering was a fun activity to learn English with her parents and it helped to build intimacy with her parents. However, P1 and P4 denied language brokering cultivated their closeness with their parents, because they already had a close relationship with their parents before language brokering. Both P1 and P4 considered the language brokering activity as a separate relationship in itself, and

accordingly it did not have special function or effect on their relationship with parents.

*Respect for parents.* In spite of the positive effect of language brokering on communication for some participants, most participants answered that language brokering affected the respect they had for their parents negatively, yet one participant did not think there is a relationship between language brokering and respect for parents:

Sometimes [language brokering] just makes me less respects them, because you know how you look up to your parents. [...] your parents know everything. They are supposed to be ones, who are teaching you, know everything, right? And I start asking you for help and you're like "I thought that you know everything, what happens with that?" And that kind of things takes away respect for your parents. [P2]

One the other hand, even though P1 admitted language brokering had an impact on his respect for his parents, he said it only had a little affect. The reason for this response is that, during the translation he feels arrogant, but he reminds himself continuously about his parents' situations, so he willingly tried not to lose his respect for them.

*Dependency of parents.* Most of the participants' parents have become more dependent on their children after immigration. However, the participants reported that their mothers' dependency in particular was higher than their fathers'. When dependency of parents upon the language broker is too high, the participants stated feeling 'annoyed' and 'frustrated'. Moreover, they could not understand why their parents did not try for themselves before they came and asked for help.

Sometimes I get a bit annoyed, because my mom always asks me "Could you help me to look at this form?" and "Could you help me to make this phone call?" She always comes to me and asks for help. Sometimes I would be very busy. So I don't have time, so sometimes I would be very annoyed so because why wouldn't

she try herself first before she comes to me for help. I want her to try herself first before she come to me so she can learn the language too. [P3]

The fact that mothers are more dependent on their children than the fathers reflects that the mothers have a lower English proficiency than father. In addition, it would appear that mothers have lower chances to learn English or less opportunity to communicate with others in the society.

*Language brokering: a reflective view.* Language brokers are often stressed during translating, but in a moment of reflection the four participants stated that language brokering had been a ‘positive experience’ overall. Even though they have experienced negative emotions such as, ‘frustration’ and ‘anger’, and being ‘nervous’ or ‘annoyed’ at times, all participants answered that language brokering did not have effect on their mental health in long term:

I guess it does not any long term, but maybe short term. Because of frustration, you know what I mean? It is never healthy... always get angry [...] because in long term, it helped my relationship with my mom, so it can be positive. [P2]

At that time, it seemed negative, but as time passes on, it seems more and more positive. As I look back now, I was thinking it was partially because it is me has to tell now, so I am pretty happy, but by the time I was pretty stressed - what if I didn’t translate it correctly I added another zero behind the price, that kind of stuff. [P1]

Moreover, all participants agreed that the stress of language brokering declined as time passed by. Participants mentioned a couple of reasons. First, the language brokering helped them become more ‘mature’ in terms of personality. All participants started translating for their parents at age 8-10 and continued to do so by the time of the interview (ages 16-21). They stated understanding their parents better than at the time

they first started translation. Moreover, they learned to be patient during and after language brokering. P2 said she was at a time ‘immature’ such that she experienced conflict with her parents during language brokering. However, their understanding of their parents’ situation has increased as time passes by. In addition, the language brokers have come to appreciate their parents’ hard work as immigrants in Canada. This improved understanding of their parents’ situation may have lessened the stress during and after language brokering. Second, language brokers’ ability to translate has developed. They understand the translation context and terms better in both Chinese and English as they have learned and gained experiences as a language broker.

**Strategies for dealing stress during language brokering.** Language brokers have developed their own ways to deal with stress and confusing situations as a language broker. However, language brokers showed that they dealt with the stress with passive strategies (e.g. endurance, patience) rather than active strategies (e.g. expressing resentment, arguing with parents)

***Understanding/ appreciation.*** All participants appeared to try keep motivated when helping out their parents and to try to have a good attitude towards them. Sometimes they showed compassion to their parents’ situation. Furthermore, they tried to remember the hard work they parents have done for them. P1 has often placed himself in his parents’ shoes, and this experience has made him understand that his role as a language broker was inevitable because of situational reasons:

I can understand my mom as well. When I am in China, I can speak Chinese fluently as well. I just prefer to let my dad or mom to speak, even when I was being asked, because it just feels like easier for everybody. And just it is better to hear. [P1]

Appreciation and understanding of the parents' situation are repeated in other participants' discourses as well.

They ask me because they can't do it themselves. There is a reason behind it. And sometimes they are slow. And sometimes you might not understand how much they can't get it. [P2]

When I was younger I was just frustrated, like 'why don't you understand? It is so easy', right? But now like okay, it is like a harder language for them to learn than me. [P4]

Sometimes I feel pretty cocky. Like my parents, they can't speak English, they fail. But most of the times I feel like I just know that I am helping out, so they can survive and well fed me I just know that. I keep that in mind. [P1]

Appreciation of the parents' situation helps language brokers perceive their role as a language broker not as a reflection of their 'parents' failure' but as 'daily activity to help them out'. All language brokers appreciated their parents' work in raising them in foreign country.

*Being patient.* Even though language brokering was accompanied by negative emotions at times, all participants tried to be patient and to endure the unpleasant feelings. When participants were asked to give a piece of advice to other language brokers, most participants suggested them to be patient:

I would say that like it definitely goes with frustrating and annoying but stick through with it. Your parents are good people. [P2]

I think if you translate, you should patiently translate [P3]

So my advice for them is just to be patient. I don't want to ask them if their responsibility... Most of them are really frustrated when they are doing and all that kind of stuff. So well, your parents raise you up like your entire life and you are in new country and they probably have more problems than you are, because they

have to take care of their family. So I would say, you could be more patient with them when you are helping them translate, they would appreciate it. [P4]

Language brokers tried to be patient, because they had learned to be compassionate due to their parents' difficulties in Canada.

*Using humour.* Some participants showed that using humour eased the stress of language brokering. One participant said she 'jokes about it' with her peers. In fact, when participants described the pressure they felt from parents or annoying situations during language brokering, they laughed and used their sense of humour in their discourse.

*Community.* The four participants of this study were Christians and they mentioned their involvement in church activities at least once in the interviews. P2 spoke about how her church helps with language brokering and with her relationship with parents:

I think one thing that helped me translating for my parents, because I go to the church which is triangular - Cantonese, Mandarin and English. And sometimes they have like join service together [...] English would be translated into Cantonese or Cantonese translated into English or Mandarin, like that stuff. So sometimes we have these join services, then I would be listening to those translators and sometimes it can help people to learn "oh, this is how you translate it" [P2]

Furthermore, P1 also pointed out that the 'church activity' was a turning point for his relationship with his mother - as church provided a common activity for both of them. The religious institutions played an important role for these immigrant families. For instance, through the church activity, they could network, make friends in Canada, and learn how to deal with hardships in and through relationship with others. Moreover,

religious teachings have helped language brokers love their parents and be patient in difficult times:

My faith, there are a lot of things to do with it. [...] I think as my faith grew my relationship with my parents also grew. I don't really know how it happens – which is good (laugh) and also taught me to learn to be more patient, and loving my parents [P2]

The findings present that language brokering has different meanings to each participant according to their family situation and acculturation process. Thus, language broker's role and responsibility were distinguishable to one another. The participants responded that translating itself did not cause stress, but when it combined other external factors, such as other personal duties, high dependency of parents, high responsibility, it could induce stress. All language brokers reported feeling of nervous, frustrated, and annoyed during language brokering.

In spite of stress as a result of language brokering, all participants in this study reported their experience of language brokering was overall positive. Language brokering could help keeping ethnic identity for immigrant youth as it helped immigrant youth continuously used Chinese language. Some participants perceived language brokering as a good opportunity to learn and train themselves. Therefore, language brokering could contribute to having high self-efficacy and self-esteem for some participants.

Some immigrant families experienced shifting in parent and child relationship through language brokering. Language brokering could increase communication and closeness between parents and a child, but the language broker's respect for parents could decrease.



The strategies for dealing with stress during language brokering appeared understanding/ appreciation, being patient, using humour, and getting support from community (e.g. local churches).

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter provides an extended discussion of language brokering based on the findings of this research. The findings of this research will be compared with those in the reported literature. The implications for social work and governmental policy recommendations will be drawn out in this discussion. Recommendations for social workers and the limitations of this study will be addressed.

These research findings indicate that the participants, for the most part, experience short-term stress due to language brokering. This seemed to be related to their initial experiences of language brokering. Age appeared to be a factor as most of the participants indicated that they were between the ages of 8 to 10 when they began interpreting for their parents. However, it appears that as they became mature and acquired confidence and skills (i.e. their language proficiency, background knowledge), the level of stress decreased. There also appeared to be a gender factor in language brokering – as mothers seemed to need more help from language brokers. However, the gender of the participant did not seem to affect the reported experiences of language brokering. Even though language brokers translated for both of the parents, the translating frequency for mothers was higher than fathers. Even though mothers of all participants were working, their English proficiency was not high enough; therefore mothers were more likely to rely on their children. This may imply mothers (women) had less opportunities to learn the host language because, due to the double duty they had as a

primary care giver at home and as an employee at work, they had little time for formal education.

Also it appeared that language brokers were able to think of language brokering positively as other literatures asserted (Buriel et al., 1998; Weisskirch, 2005), as they ‘understand’ and ‘appreciate’ the parents’ work and hardships in Canada. Even though language brokers often perceived their parents as if they had failed by not readily becoming fluent in English, the brokers tried to understand parents’ restriction of learning the new language and appreciated the work parents had done in Canada to raise them. The understanding of parents’ situation helps the language brokers perceive language brokering not as ‘his parents’ failure’ but as ‘his activity to help them out’. It is noted that appreciation of parenting is an important value for children in East Asian culture (filial duty).

In fact, language brokering could have good effects on the mental health of immigrant youth. Language brokering appeared to help in maintaining ethnic identity for the immigrant youth in this study as it allowed them to use their mother tongue on a daily basis. Ying et al. (2001) claimed it is most ideal for one’s mental health when the cultural orientations of both the home country and the host country are retained. In addition, language brokering helps immigrant children maintain their Chinese language; this enables their continuous communication with their parents. To that extent it can keep them be connected with their family friends and extended family members who speak Chinese. Considering this, language brokering could be advantageous for the mental

health of immigrant youth in the long term as it facilitates keeping their relationships with significant others.

As to the experienced emotions that accompany language brokering, some studies claim that frequent language brokering causes internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Dorner et al., 2008; Hua & Costigan, 2012). Likewise, the four language brokers reported feeling nervous, frustrated, and annoyed during language brokering. Further, one participant expressed feeling guilty because she thought it is not ‘right’ to complain or be annoyed by her parents’ request. Moreover, these language brokers sometimes faced confusing situations in which they were not sure whether they could translate for their parents or not, because they were worried that their translating may hurt their parents’ feelings. This could be best understood in the Chinese family cultural context which highlights personal sacrifice for important others, fulfilling family obligations, filial piety, and taking precedence of others’ needs and wishes (Chao, 1995; Chao & Tseng 2002; Phinney et al., 2000). However, the stress lasted for a short time, and it did not impact in the long term.

On the other hand, as some researchers have claimed, language brokers feel generally positive about their translation role (Weisskirch, cited in Cline et al., 2011). When the participants of this research recalled their experience, the positive aspects of language brokering were emphasized in their discourses. In fact, all participants in this study evaluated their experience was overall ‘valuable’ and ‘beneficial’. After language brokering, most of them evaluated it as a productive and helpful experience as they did difficult tasks for their parents. It may be related to the Asian culture that these

individuals put such a large premium on perfection and hard work in parent-child language brokering. Therefore, the findings of this research support some existing reports that language brokering can bring mixed feelings (i.e. both negative and positive) (Martinez et al., 2009).

Moreover, the findings agree that language brokering contributes to the closeness between language brokers and their parents (Yeh et al., 2003). Some participants said language brokering promoted their intimacy with the parents as it provided more chances to communicate with them. At the same time, these findings also showed that the strict family hierarchy was eased off as language brokering changed the power dynamic in the Chinese family. In China, the roles of parents and children are traditionally strictly divided, and the parents are positioned as authoritative figures more so than in typical Western families. However, language brokering has granted more power to immigrant youth. As a result, immigrant youth are given an equal position as parents in the family. Some participants of this research evaluated this alteration as a positive change, because it cultivated their intimacy with their parents.

Therefore, the results of this research refuted some previous reports that claim the cultural features of Chinese family (e.g. interdependent relationships, family obligation, and strict hierarchy) have negative consequences onto mental health of immigrant youth (Costigan et al., 2010; Juang & Alvarez, 2010; Sung, 2010). The findings of this research imply Chinese immigrant youth have resilience to recover from stressful events in the family (i.e. language brokering). The Chinese family culture that emphasises interdependent relationships and family commitment has ultimately positive

consequences for mental health of Chinese immigrant youth, though the experience may seem negative for Chinese immigrant youth in the short term.

It is difficult to precisely define what language brokering is based solely on these results, since each participant's experience was divergent. However, it was shown that language brokering was, in general, found to connect the parent and child for the participants in study. It was also one of the forms of cooperation in the family which eased their acculturation in the host country. Language brokering may emanate from the already interdependent relationship in the Chinese family, in which family members help each other as a family of immigrants who go through a difficult stage of life together in a new country.

### **Implication for Social Work**

This research suggests that language brokering brings short term stress onto Chinese immigrant youth even though it can cultivate the parent-child relationship in the long term. Therefore, Chinese immigrant youth need support for social integration to minimize the stress induced by language brokering, however they are not yet given proper attention by school or the government. Hence, more programs need to be provided in schools or community organizations, so that they can support both immigrant parents and children.

In fact, language brokering is related to various social work practices, because social/family issues can compound the stress of language brokering in immigrant family. The stress level of language brokers is related to language education, adjustment to school, parents' employment and dependency, and so forth. Therefore, language brokers

and their parents need comprehensive services and their practical/emotional needs should be recognized.

**Social work practice.** Language brokers need support, especially immigrant children who are young and new to the country. This is because that is the time at which language brokers are most stressed, due to the low level of language proficiency and adjustment in society. Schools can play a crucial role to reduce language brokers' stress level, because this is where language brokering can add more stress onto immigrant youth who are already having difficulty adjusting to school. Schools need to be aware of this issue, and they are required to actively seek ways to shorten this stressful period for Chinese youth. It has been shown that the language barrier can limit their social circle in school, and that this could affect their development of personality. Even though most schools in Ontario provide ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, they are required to provide enough classes and hours for all immigrant youth. One participant mentioned she was 'kicked out' of ESL classes prematurely because of the increased Chinese immigrant population in Toronto. Moreover, schools are expected not only to care for the language issues of immigrant youth but also to provide proper help for their emotional adjustment. In the interview, it appeared that emotional support was acted out at the personal level (i.e. 'nice kids in school', 'Sunday school in church'). However, it would be desirable to formally integrate this support into the school system (e.g. counseling program, peer one-on-one programs). Schools are required to remove barriers for children's adjustment and actively reduce their stress level that might come from language brokering and acculturation.

For immigrant parents, it has been shown that mothers' accessibility to English education is lower than fathers' such that they become more dependent on their children. In order to fill this gap between fathers and mothers, it would be important to provide enough English classes for mothers with daycare services and night classes so that mothers can learn the language without barriers.

**Social policy.** In fact, social policy is one of the most influential factors for the lives of immigrants (Steele et al., 2002). However, language brokers are sometimes invisible in the society and their opinions are hardly reflected by social policies. Hence, policy makers and the public should recognize the needs of language brokers and support them by expanding funding and services. Therefore, policy makers should not support the austerity in social service organizations and support programs for mental health of immigrants. Wood and Newbold (2012) suggested expanding funding of mental health initiatives for immigrants as one of the solutions to the current problem. It is vital to be aware of the mental health issues of immigrants, and to remove barriers of accessibility by expanding funds for social service programs. Moreover, collaboration between government and community-based organizations is needed so that the mental health issues of immigrant youth is not taken lightly by the society (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2009). Formal partnerships between government policy makers, social workers, and immigrant communities may address the importance of mental health of immigrant youth. This partnership may allow involving immigrants in policy-making decisions so that their voice may contribute to the social policy (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2009). Moreover,



policy makers should recognize immigrant youth as a unique population and promote special strategies of mental health services for them (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2009).

### **Recommendations**

**Social workers and Community Organizations.** Social workers at settlement services should be able to criticize the system so as to advocate for the immigrant youth and their family who need support. For instance, social workers can take a role in opposing the neoliberalism in government which argues for cutbacks on social service for immigrant youth. Moreover, social workers can educate their clients that they also have a right to have their voice heard in the society. This therefore makes sure their voice can be heard in the society, as social workers themselves become a part of their voice and thus bring crucial resources to their clients (Ross, 2011). Moreover, it is vital for them to promote available services in the community. One participant of this research pointed out that there is a lack of promotion of programs which aims to help immigrants. Even though there are available services for immigrant families in community, sometimes it was not easy for new immigrant to find and utilize them. For this reason, most of the participants reported that they received help at the individual level, such as through church community, friends, and other immigrant peers.

The findings of this work illuminated that language brokering did not determine whether the parent-child relationship is good or poor, but instead that the previous relationship and good communication mattered more than translation itself. Accordingly, social workers are supposed to find a way of improving the communication in parent-child relationships in the context of their clients' culture of origin. Moreover, when

working with immigrant youth, social workers should recognize their experience as an immigrant can be distinctive from others and it may or may not be related to their cultural background. Understanding one's experience only in the cultural/ethnic context could fail to understand their clients' need.

Community based organizations could also help reduce the stress of immigrant families and improve family relationships. Human service agencies which aim to help the settlement of new immigrants in Canada might have noticed the mental health needs of the immigrant population, because many of their clients express psychological distress after their arrival to Canada. However, there are not many mental health services available in the community. Hence, social workers and nonprofit organizations may need to appeal for the needs of immigrants in regards to their mental health in order to facilitate their successful adjustment in the society.

**Further Research.** As this study illuminates one side of a relationship (e.g. immigrant youth), it may only reflect a partial reality in language brokering. Since the parent-child relationship is a dynamic communication between parents and children, both voices need to be heard. Therefore it would be desirable if the parents' perception could be included in further research. Moreover, it should be noted that most of research into language brokering has been U.S.-based. Since there are significant contextual differences between Canada and United States, more studies into language brokering in the Canadian context are necessary.

### **Limitations of the Present Study**

Even though this study does not include a large number of interviews, it has otherwise allowed an intense examination of the personal experiences of the participants. In addition, this study has permitted viewing language brokering through the perspective of the individuals in question. However, this research project has some limitations. As the interpretive approach was applied in this research, one of the biggest challenges was the difficulty in finding a common cause of the problems that most of immigrant youth were experiencing in language brokering. Since each participant's report shows a great difference, the results of this research do not appear coherent but discursive, and the participants' experiences would not be able to represent the whole immigrant population's experience. In addition, since the framework wholly depends on how participants experience their own social reality, it could limit the possibility of improvement when the participants still 'feel right' about their life experience. In addition, there are a couple of limitations to using phenomenology as the chosen methodology. First, as a researcher, it is not possible to take myself out of this research completely even though every attempt was made to bracket myself (Mason, 2002). Second, this study may be criticized due to the fact that a great deal of credit was given to individuals' narrations (Fearfull, 2005). The participants of this research can manipulate their narrations so that they justify themselves. Moreover, participants could have provided incorrect information. There could be external factors that might affect their narrations, such as pressure from the society, family/ peer relationships, religion, for self-defense. Thus it should be noted that these factors could lead the participants to make a statement which is not relevant to their real life situations in this research project.

This thesis explored parent-child relationship in Chinese immigrant families. Immigrant youth have unique circumstances that are period of transition, high expectation from family and society, and multiple responsibilities in the household and school. Therefore it is worth paying attention to the parent-child relationship in Chinese immigrant families to help immigrant youths' acculturation and improve their mental health. However, within the trend of austerity and neoliberalism, the immigrant youths' health adjustment to the society is only measured by visible outcomes (e.g. academic performance, earning capacity). Immigrant families' emotional adjustment to the country should be considered to build the healthy multicultural society in Canada. Thus the funds and supports for mental health services for immigrants should be extended according to the emerging needs in Chinese immigrant families.

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Reference



## Appendix A

### Participants Needed for Research in Language Brokering in Asian Immigrant Families

#### "Have you ever had to translate for your parents?"

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of Immigrant youth (Age: 16 to 24 years old).

You would be asked to explain your experience as a language broker (informal language translator) for your parents through a face to face interview.

You would participate in a one hour interview

In appreciation for your time, you will receive \$10 Tim Horton's gift card.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Seung hye Yang (Sue Yang)  
Social work department in McMaster University  
289-684-3690 or  
Email: yangsh2@mcmaster.ca

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.**

Or  
Email:  
[yangsh@mcmaster.ca](mailto:yangsh@mcmaster.ca)

Call Seung hye Yang  
(Sue Yang)  
289-684-3690

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## Appendix B

### LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

#### A Study about Language Brokering: Exploring Parent-Child Relationship in Asian Families

**Investigators:**

**Student Investigator:**

Seunghye Yang  
Department of Social Work  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
**(289)-684-3690**  
E-mail: yangsh2@mcmaster.ca

**Faculty Supervisor:**

Dr. Mirna E. Carranza  
Department of Social Work  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
**(905) 525-9140 ext. 23789**  
E-mail: carranz@mcmaster.ca

**Purpose of the Study**

You are invited to take part in this study on ‘Language Brokering: Exploring Parent-Child Relationship in Asian Families’. I want to conduct this research to learn about your experience in language translation for your parent or parents. I am hoping to learn how this experience influences your relationship with your parents. I also hope to find out the relationship between language brokering and your psychological well-being. I am doing this study for my master degree in social work in McMaster University.

**What will happen during the study?**

You will be asked to answer a few questionnaires about your experience in language translation for your parents. You might be asked to explain how language translation affected your relationship with your parents. I will also ask you for some demographic/background information like your age and education. You are going to have one face to face interview, and the interview will last one hour.

**Are there any risks to doing this study?**

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. However, you may feel uncomfortable with sharing your experience in language brokering or feel uneasy to talk about your relationship with your parents.

You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. And you can stop taking part at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

**Are there any benefits to doing this study?**

The research will not benefit you directly. I hope to learn more about your unique experience of language brokering and its affect onto your relationship with your parents. I hope that what is learned as a result of

this study will help us to better understand immigrant youth and young adults' challenge and relationship in their family. This could help to obtain evidence for investing social service or programs for immigrant family and young adults.

**Payment or Reimbursement**

You will be given \$10 Tim Horton's gift card

**Who will know what I said or did in the study?**

You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. No one but me will know whether you participated unless you choose to tell them. However, there might be possible for someone to identify you by the stories you tell, even though I will not identify you by name.

The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked desk where only I have an access to it. Information kept on a computer will be protected with a password. Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed after 2 years.

**What if I change my mind about being in the study?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop the interview for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study or up until approximately June, 2013. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

**How do I find out what was learned in this study?**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately August, 2013. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at: (289)-684-3690 or yangsh2@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

**CONSENT**

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Seung hye Yang of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately June 7th, 2013
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

... Yes.

... No.

2. ...Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this email address \_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.



Appendix C  
*Interview Questions*

**Language Brokering: Exploring Parent-Child Relationship**

**Seung hye Yang, (Master of Social work student)**

**(Department of Social work – McMaster University)**

**Information about these interview questions:** This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about language translating in immigrant family. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just “yes or no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: “*So, you are saying that ...?*”), to get more information (“*Please tell me more?*”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“*Why do you think that is...?*”).

**1. Information about you:**

- a) Tell me just a little bit about yourself.
- b) Your age now?
- c) Where do you live?
- d) Do you go to school?
- e) Do you live with your parents?
- f) Were you born in Canada?
- g) If not, when did you move to Canada?

**2. Experience of language translating:**

- a) Could you give me examples of your language translating experience?
- b) How was your experience of translating for your family members?
- c) Thinking back to when you first started to translate language your family, how has this experience changed?
- d) Can you explain about the most memorable event in your language translating?
- e) Why was it the most memorable [probe for easy and more challenging experiences]?
- f) Can you describe your overall relationship with your parents?

**3. Further questions:**

- a) How does the experience of language translating affect your relationship with your parents and your family?
- b) How does the experience of language translating make you feel about yourself [probe for self-esteem, identity, positive and negative feelings]?
- c) “Is there anything else you think I need to know about? What advice would you give to young people who are doing this translation for their families?”

-The End-