A Family Business:

Becoming Bilingual as Means of Survival

for a First-Generation Latino Family

in the United States

Lizbeth Aguilar

Senior Seminar CSRE200X

Prof. Amado Padilla

December 2, 2021
Introduction:

As a young Latina at one of the world’s highest ranking universities, writing an autoethnography was not a project I was particularly drawn to do. After all, what could I contribute to the discussion of bilingualism that other, much more accomplished, people had not already? Academics have spent years conducting research on the best methods of teaching bilingual education. Researchers have conducted interviews, followed young children from kindergarten to middle school, and interviewed educators on their opinions and on what methods have worked best for them. There was (and is) an extensive literature on bilingualism and the best techniques to use in school to ensure children learn English quickly. However, as someone who experienced many of these techniques, including a “sink-or-swim” education, I began to reflect on the value of bilingual education and my own experiences as an English Language Learner. I came to realize that I am, in fact, an expert.

My educational journey and life experiences surrounding it shaped my formation into the bilingual Latina I am today. Without the lack of bilingual education I received attending a private Catholic school, and without the push from my parents to continue to succeed academically, I would certainly not be attending one of America’s finest universities. Because I attended private schools all my life, my experience is unique to that of many other English Language Learners. This is not to say my experience should not be considered just as important. Although it came with considerable emotional and psychological consequences, I remained resilient and have achieved the success my parents and myself so desperately dreamed of.

At twenty-one years of age, I am finally delving into my past – exploring my experiences and putting them in conversation with existing literature throughout this piece. Without jumping through hurdles and facing challenges head on, I would not have discovered my potential. Now,
here is my story as an English Language Learner traced through my educational history. I will guide you through some narratives that focus on the true emotional impact of bilingual education methods that have been assumed to be beneficial and effective to non-native English speakers. I will begin by narrating a particular memory from preschool leading to physical and emotional segregation and its impacts on me as a child. Then I will continue by narrating parent teacher conferences and the lack of translation support for my parents leading them to believe I was severely behind. This section will in turn focus on the emphasis on English-proficiency as bilingual education which will therefore lead into a discussion on the necessity of knowing both English and one’s native language in order to become a language broker. In this paper, I will argue that the consequences of English proficiency becoming both a marker of social integration as well as a complete necessity in order to survive in the United States have negatively impacted bilingual children from elementary school age through adolescence on an emotional level.

**Where it Began: The Effects of Segregation in a Classroom**

As I sit in the corner of the preschool classroom, wistfully staring at my peers, I can not help but wonder why Teacher Melody had sternly instructed me to sit and stay put. I did not hurt Paul. I did not purposely hold the toy above his head. This was all just a big misunderstanding, why won't anybody listen?

These were the thoughts running through my head as a shy three year old girl entering her first year of preschool. I was enrolled in Our Lady of Mount Carmel, a private Catholic preschool through eighth grade located in the suburbs of Redwood City. Redwood City itself is slightly more diverse than the surrounding neighborhoods of San Carlos and Menlo Park. But, like them, it rests in “The Peninsula” - the span of suburban municipalities that connect the south

---

1 Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.
east of San Francisco to the west of San Jose. This stretch of land in The Bay holds some of the
highest median house prices across the nation. Inflated by its proximity to Silicon Valley,
Stanford University, and even San Francisco, Redwood City itself boasts houses much more
expensive than the national average. My family of immigrants felt very out of place in this
suburban town. And yet, my parents made the deliberate choice to enroll me in a private school
without an explicit bilingual education, emphasizing how important it was to learn in order to
survive in the United States.

And as a native Spanish speaker, immersing myself in a majority English speaking,
White, upper-middle class environment was less than ideal. To be quite frank, it was miserable.
The constant state of confusion, feeling like I was in some sort of “other” category, desperately
missing the safety and security of my home. Continuously not being able to communicate with
people effectively was infuriating and made day to day tasks a lot more difficult. I would become
aggravated as the day went on when people would talk to me and I would not understand what
they were saying. All of which contributed to my general anxiety I lived with for years.

At this time, (a couple months into the school year) I was just starting to feel more
comfortable in my little preschool routine. One of my parents would drop me off in the morning
and my aunt, Gloria, would come pick me up in the afternoon and we would make the hour walk
back home. Free play always followed snack time on a typical day at preschool. There was a lot
of comfort in knowing what activity came after the previous one, especially because I could not
always understand what was going on. Teacher Melody, Teacher Stephanie, and a couple of other
Teacher Aides would wander throughout the building to ensure all of their students were safe. On
this day, I chose to play at the table in the back left corner of the main classroom.
“Fishing,” they called it. We were given thin but bulky rectangular wooden poles that resembled building blocks with magnets glued to the ends. Our “pond” – in reality just a blue plastic container – contained several thin wooden fish and other aquatic creatures, all with magnets glued to one side. A few of my classmates were playing near me, engaged in their own little worlds. One of my classmates, Paul, was sitting on the floor near the table where I was fishing. For some unknown reason, I became distracted, removed my wooden fishing pole from the safety of the pond, and held it off the table. It was at this exact moment Paul, who I had not noticed had moved directly underneath my arm, stood up and hit his head on the fishing pole.

The next few moments flew by in a daze. I remember feeling like each moment happened in slow motion. Things were happening to me and around me but I felt like I was out of my body. There have only been a few times in my life where this has occurred, in feelings that I can only describe as panic and fear. It reminded me of a “deer-in-headlights” moment, where I froze because my mind could not process fast enough.

Paul burst out in tears, clutching the crown of his head, doubled over on the ground. Teacher Melody frantically rushed over to see what had happened. Her immediate reaction was obviously to comfort Paul. After all, the kid was crying, I was holding the object that caused the damage, and my look of shock and silence was clearly due to the fact I had done something wrong… At least that is what I imagine went through people’s heads.

Not long after, she looked at me with a look I had never seen before. In my shocked state, I had remained frozen in the same position. She snatched the little wooden fishing pole I so desperately had clung to, grabbed my right wrist tightly, and led me to the attached reading room. My feet dragged behind me and I trotted after her, desperately trying to keep up. She sat
me on the floor in the back left corner of the classroom and gave me the most stern talking to I had ever had in my short life.

What Teacher Melody did not anticipate was that she actually gave me a different disciplinary lecture. She did not teach me what was right and wrong (I knew hitting people was wrong it was very much an accident). She instead taught me that in order to have power and to have a voice, I needed to speak English. I have never felt so disempowered, even to this day, as I did when I realized nothing I said could have made her listen.

So, from my little understanding of the English language, she had told me to sit down and not move. Already paralyzed with fear, I was in no position to wander away from my corner. I felt like I was in a minefield, just waiting for a bomb to go off with a single wrong move. I watched my classmates shoot nervous glances at me and one by one, start leaving the room. After a little while, I was the only one in the reading room with no one but the books and bean bags to keep me company.

Tears quietly streamed down my face as I sat, scared and confused. I wanted nothing more than to go home and explain to my parents that I didn't mean to hurt him and that I never meant to cause any harm. I longed for a source of comfort to swoop me away from this terrible situation. I could not tell anyone how I felt even if I wanted to. I would not be able to get the words out due to my emotional state, but I also did not possess the knowledge of words to say that could possibly explain what happened. I was left to fend for myself. I felt more isolated than I had ever felt before.

After what felt like an eternity, Teacher Stephanie cautiously approached me and signaled for me to get up. I carefully took her hand and she led me to a beanbag where we sat while she read The Hungry Caterpillar. I took a few deep breaths that calmed me down and
stopped the tears. She rubbed my back as I sat curled by her, wishing that my mother would come rescue me.

This experience was the first of many instances of physical and emotional segregation.

In this section, I will discuss the legal context that places many other English Language Learners in the same perspective. Although many educators and professionals have argued in favor of segregating English Language Learners for the purpose of teaching them English, I have come to the conclusion that physical separation from classmates actually inhibits their learning and ability to learn at the same level as their peers. Our talents and abilities are not celebrated and built off of (being fluent in Spanish or another language) but rather, the focus is on what students lack (the ability to speak English).

For most people, when thinking about segregation in schools, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, comes to mind. There is, however, a different context of segregation for non-native English speaking students. Segregation in schools is still prevalent in many aspects under the guise of “special needs” or “English-language learning” classes. For many English language learners, segregation in a classroom can lead to a range of emotions, including isolation, a feeling of “othering” and over time, potentially a lack of dedication and attention to their education.

In Arizona, a lawsuit was brought forth by parents and students in the Nogales Unified School District. In 1992, *Flores v. State of Arizona* was filed, with plaintiffs arguing that the civil rights of Limited English Proficient students were violated for a number of reasons. They alleged the state “failed to provide a program of instruction that included adequate language

---

acquisition, academic instructional programs and funding for at-risk, low-income, minority students.” The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and the state did not appeal. Following this decision, Arizona passed several legislative bills and policies to meet the needs of the Limited English Proficient students. In 2006, the state founded the Arizona English Language Learners Task Force who was responsible for creating the 4-hour English Language Development block model. In short, the 4-hour block model requires English Language Learning students to receive English Language Development services in a specific English immersional setting/program for a minimum of four hours per day for the first year in which they are classified as English Language Learners.

This specific model is based on the assumption that ELL students will acquire English proficiency much faster in an English-only instruction setting than a dual language setting. But if students do not understand the English language itself, how are they expected to understand the grammatical rules and other language concepts presented to them? Imagine focusing on a specific topic for four hours a day for days on end. While it might seem like the fastest way to learn something, people are bound to lose interest and/or focus when being placed in that setting for years.

This model, however, is not supported by research of second language acquisition. In fact, segregating English Language Learners from their peers for the majority of the school day prevents them from benefiting from “core content and cognitively rich instruction.”

---

creates a sense of “othering” amongst themselves and their classmates, preventing them from forming meaningful connections with their peers in other classes.

Various researchers have found that ELLs benefit tremendously from interaction with their peers and a focus on grade-level content. If students are in separate classrooms for more than half of a school day, it is quite difficult to have that peer interaction and even feel comfortable talking with native-English speaking students. From my own personal experience, I can advocate for the tremendous impact interacting with my native-English-speaking peers had on my ability to comprehend the English language. Many researchers have studied peerlingual education, which can be described as a “strategy in which bilingual peers assist ELLS in content area instruction.” This method is beneficial to ELL students because they are able to communicate and learn from their peers in a manner that furthers their understanding of the English language and retains core, age-appropriate curriculum. With the 4-hour block model, peerlingual education cannot be executed.

For older students who are learning English as a second language, the 4-hour block model is not conducive to their academic advancement. Middle school students and above are required to pass standardized exams in order to a) enter high school and/or b) graduate from high school. While remaining in the 4-hour per day model learning English, they are excluded from other core classes, i.e. math, science, social studies, etc. The lack of access has severe implications for ELL students’ academic progress. Not only are they deprived of the educational opportunities granted to their English-proficient peers, they are at higher risk of not graduating due to the lack of knowledge required to pass standardized exams.

---

The emphasis on English-proficiency above other enriching subjects made me wonder about the efficacy and practice of a bilingual education program. Is segregating students in order to teach English for hours at a time more important than them forming connections with their peers? Or even sharing their own cultural and linguistic knowledge?

**Bilingual Education: What does “bilingual” actually mean?**

Parent-teacher conferences were always a difficult time for my parents. As non-native English speakers, understanding what any given teacher was attempting to explain was a tedious process with plenty of back and forth. Without a translator provided by the school, it was difficult for them to clearly understand the impact of what my teachers were telling them. For the first few years of my education, teachers did not have much to say other than I was a ‘quiet’ and ‘obedient’ little girl who did as she was told without much of a fuss. Since I did not talk as much as some of my other classmates, I did not form as strong of a connection with my teachers as I would have liked. As much as I wanted to form friendships and confide my teachers, not fully understanding the English language prohibited me from communicating with them the way I wanted. To show them I respected them, I just kept my head down and did as I was told. As I aged, parent teacher conferences became more centered around my academic achievements and progress.

Allow me to paint you a picture. I, a seven-year old beginning the second grade, was beginning to feel left-behind compared to the rest of my classmates. I noticed that during class, my teacher would use words I could not understand and I had to use context clues to figure out what it meant. While learning nouns, my teacher would circle words in a sentence and give an explanation to the class. Because I had trouble piecing together what she said, I would look at
commonalities between the words she circled in each sentence. By the time I figured out she was circling people or places, she had already moved on to verbs. This was a common occurrence which caused me to remain puzzled. The day to day hamster-wheel left me feeling completely drained and unfocused. My head would hurt and I had little energy by the time I got home. As hard as I tried to pay attention, I could not understand and keep up with what Mrs. Smith was saying.

The second grade parent-teacher conference with Mrs. Smith is an event my mother has never been able to forget. Although she went in hopeful, her and my father left that conference feeling anxious and completely crestfallen. Not to mention, they were convinced I had an undiagnosed learning disability that would prevent me from achieving success.

I did not know why my parents seemed so worried when they got back that day. I could not figure out why they tried so hard to speak English to me even when I could tell it was hugely challenging. I spoke fluent Spanish! Why wouldn’t my parents just talk to me in Spanish?

It was not until I got to high school that I learned of what my teacher had said in that conference. According to my mother, the entire conference had gone very well while discussing every subject except for English and Language Arts.

“What did she say?” I asked, curious more than anything.

“Pos ya no me acuerdo muy bien pero si me acuerdo que nos dijo que tu estabas atrasada comparado con los demás estudiantes en tu clase. Y que no ibas a progresar porque no tenías suficiente conocimiento de vocabulario porque nomas te hablábamos en español en la casa. [Well, I do not recall the conference very well but I do remember she said you were behind your other classmates academically. And that you would progress because you did not possess enough vocabulary which was due to the fact that we only spoke Spanish to you at home.]”
This was not an answer I was expecting, albeit not a surprising one. Memories suddenly started to make sense and an overwhelming sense of anger washed over me as I recalled the scared little seven year old who could sense her parents’ worry without being able to understand where it came from.

Fortunately, Spanish was still taught throughout elementary school. My Spanish teacher herself encouraged my parents to continue talking to me in Spanish, emphasizing how important and beneficial it was to be bilingual and how I would eventually catch up to my classmates in terms of vocabulary and writing. She recommended they take me to the library more often to pick out books to read. I willingly obliged and over time, could not pull my nose out of books.

My parents once again only talked to me in Spanish, recognizing the beauty and importance of their native language. I would get my fill of English in school, they told me. I am eternally grateful my parents continued to push me to be fluent in both languages so as to not lose a large aspect of my culture and heritage. Without the ability to speak Spanish, I would not have been able to communicate with my grandparents and several other family members. The stories and wisdom they have to share would have been lost had I been unable to understand and speak to them. Trips to Mexico would have been exhausting rather than fun as I would be trying desperately to get around or communicate with people. The beauty and richness of the language is something I hold near and dear to my heart. Losing the ability to speak Spanish would have been like losing a part of myself.

Although I was lucky enough to be given the resources and space (thanks to my parents) to become fluent in both languages, many English-language learners do not receive such space and education. Without them reading bedtime stories to me in Spanish, making me watch
television shows with them in Spanish, and even writing short summaries of books I read – once again, in Spanish – I would have lost the ability to speak, read, and write fluently.

Learning English has been the emphasis in bilingual education programs. The term ‘bilingual’ serves as a placeholder for the reality—English is valued higher than any other language. I have examined a few bilingualism programs that, on the surface, seem to promote dual language learning. However, both programs and many others like it continue to reinforce the idea of English proficiency being the main goal. English proficiency for a “non-native” English speaker is not bilingualism. In reality, bilingualism for non-native English speakers seems to imply that only English-proficiency is necessary to teach while assuming a student will continue to maintain their native language on their own, potentially from their parents and family members or in their household.

Robert E. Slavin, Nancy Madden, Margarita Calderón, Anne Chamberlain, and Megan Hennessy conducted a study over the course of five years to analyze the effects of Transitional Bilingual Education and Structured English Immersion programs in children from kindergarten through fourth grade. Transitional Bilingual Education can be described as a learning structure in which students learn to read and write in their native language then slowly transition to English between second and fourth grade. Although Transitional Bilingual Education programs appear to be the most beneficial to the emotional needs of young children, critics would argue this program is unable to provide youth with mastery in their native language or the English language and reinforce immigrant stereotypes by having linguistic inferiority.

Slavin et. al followed students throughout their early elementary school years that were randomly assigned to either Transitional Bilingual Education or Structured English Immersion
programs. The students’ first English language proficiency test, conducted in the first grade, showed children in the Structured English Immersion (SEI) program were dramatically more proficient in the English language than their peers in the Transitional Bilingual Education program (TBE). Upon initial observation, children who were in the SEI program seemed to be grasping the English language more successfully. However, by the fourth grade, when the students in the TBE program were fully transitioned to English, the English language proficiency exam (peabody and spanish equivalent) was administered once again. The results showed no significant difference in English proficiency between students in either of the programs. For the researchers, the outcomes of this study clearly proved that different methods of teaching English as a second language were just as effective as the traditional SEI programs most schools follow. However, critics have pointed out that Transitional Bilingual Education programs have continued to perpetuate the idea that inherent worth and value as an active member of society comes from one’s ability to speak English proficiently. From my experience and situations I have observed throughout my life, English proficiency is not only the marker of social integration, it has also become a complete necessity in order to survive in the United States.

Mastery of English supposedly opens up opportunities for immigrants to obtain higher paying jobs (supposedly because most immigrants are still limited to typical “immigrant” jobs-low paying, English mastery not required). According to Spener, “English has become the

---

13 Slavin et. al. “Reading and Language Outcomes of a Multiyear Randomized Evaluation of Transitional Bilingual Education.”
14 Slavin et. al. “Reading and Language Outcomes of a Multiyear Randomized Evaluation of Transitional Bilingual Education.”
15 Spener, David. “Transitional Bilingual Education and the Socialization of Immigrants” Spanish Education Development Center, Washington, D.C.
public issue in the socialization of immigrant adults and children living in the United States.”

With this comes two main concerns over the English language debate: One, the United States has been multilingual since its founding and millions of native born U.S. citizens have not mastered the English language as defined in schools (textbooks, curriculum, etc.), and two, the question arises of whether it is truly necessary to master the English language based on the functions and roles open to adult immigrant opportunities. John Schumann theorized that people did not master English from formal instruction alone, rather, they mastered a second language due to the social and economic benefits it provided. And with good reason.

Mastering English was a necessity for me, as I was the only member of my family who could potentially switch back and forth between languages with ease. In order to be an active member of society, I had no choice but to master English in order to help my parents succeed and achieve the simple (not so simple) act of survival. The emphasis on English proficiency did not allow me to maintain proficiency in Spanish. However, because knowing English was crucial to success, I began to master the art of translation to assist my parents and other family members.

Practicality: The Weight of Knowing English for Bilingual Children

In my own experience, English did indeed provide many social benefits. Like many other bilingual children, I was often in charge of translating documents for my parents. From emails to legal documents, the range of translations depended on the needs of my parents and family members. This is not to say I was not inclined to take on this responsibility, however, for a child so young to be relied upon so heavily for basic survival in the United States, the immense pressure often felt rather suffocating.

---

16 Spener, “Transitional Bilingual Education and the Socialization of Immigrants”
17 Spener, “Transitional Bilingual Education and the Socialization of Immigrants”
18 Spener, “Transitional Bilingual Education and the Socialization of Immigrants”
When I was about nine years old, I began asking my parents why I did not have any siblings. All of my cousins had older or younger siblings and I was the only person who did not. My parents, both fifty at the time, informed me they were too old to adopt a baby and that caring for a young child would simply be too much for them. But alas, I persisted, begging for a younger sibling to rely on and care for.

It took about eight months of research before I convinced my parents to visit an adoption agency. Using my mother’s email (which I had created) to send inquiries, I managed to schedule three consultations at several adoption agencies around the Bay Area. The first two appointments did not satisfy my parents, but Bay Area Adoption Services (BAAS) provided the comfort and security they needed in order to proceed with the adoption process.

Now, what does this have to do with bilingualism? For a typical nine year old-nothing. But when a child is the only English-proficient speaker in a household surrounded by predominantly English-speaking people, even menial tasks have to do with bilingualism. Parents adopting is not a process most native-English speaking children are deeply involved in. For a nine year old whose parents are non-native English speakers and is the only proficient English speaker in the household, the adoption process was almost entirely up to me.

Throughout the first consultation at BAAS, I was in charge of making sure my parents understood the information that was being given to them. From the list of countries, the length of the process, the cost and other legal fees it would involve, I made sure there was a mutual understanding between the adoption agent(s) and my parents.

After weeks of meetings, consultations, and back and forth emails between my parents (with me interpreting of course), the process finally began. The meeting to finalize all the details and begin the two year adoption process took place at Bay Area Adoption Services headquarters,
with the director of the agency, Aki, mostly addressing me directly. My parents were comfortable enough with Aki to respond on their own occasionally, but the majority of the time, I was looked at to offer mutual understanding between my parents and the agent. Once the final details were squared away, Aki handed my parents and I a five inch binder full of forms, documents, and other paperwork to fill out over the course of a few months.

Over the next nine months, I learned more legal terms than I ever expected to know at the age of ten. My parents helped me fill out the financial sections (seeing as how I had no idea how taxes worked at the time) but I was in charge of the bulk of the paperwork. It was a slow process, as I had to dedicate a significant amount of time to researching what certain terminology meant and how to appropriately answer the questions.

After more than a year and a half, our family had received two referrals. This was devastating to my young mind, as I had hoped to have a sibling before I entered the 7th grade. To all of our surprise and joy, we finally received the referral we had all been waiting for. An eight year old girl was anxiously waiting for a home. Before I knew it, social workers and adoption agents were visiting our home, ensuring we had everything we needed to provide for a little girl.

As was explained to me, usually, social workers talked to parents and their children separately. However, since my parents struggled to fully articulate themselves, I was able to speak on their behalf. The fear that our home would not be accepted because of the language barrier was always looming in the back of my mind. But after three months, my mother traveled to China to pick up my nine year old sister.

Children of immigrant families often learn the English language faster than their parents. Once proficient (or even semi-proficient) in English, children are often called upon to translate for their parents who are unable to fully understand the language. These children can be referred
to as “language brokers.”语

Language brokers must have a significant number of skills to manage the translation and interpretation processes between their parents and/or family members and the other party(ies).

While translating, language brokers must utilize two language systems as well as employ cognitive and linguistic skills above their grade level.语

Informal translation leads to language brokers acquiring pragmatic skills their non-broker counterparts do not acquire, leading to differing effects on bilingual abilities.语

Brokering itself leads to many different emotions, both positive and negative. Some of the consequences/outcomes of brokering range from increased confidence in translation abilities, greater sense of responsibility, but also embarrassment and even having to face harsh or traumatic situations for family members.

Belem G. López and her colleagues conducted a series of interviews with ten Latino/a college students who had early language brokering experience. The purpose of the study was to “shed light on how college-age language brokers evaluate their past brokering experiences and the potential effects brokering had on their bilingual ability and their own thoughts on their interpretation (e.g., spoken) and translation (e.g., written) strategies (e.g., language knowledge, metalinguistic ability).”同一

Similarly, Steven Alvarez conducted ethnographic research over the course of five years in an after-school community literacy program in New York City. Alvarez argues that child language brokers negotiate literacies in various contexts, with different audiences, and most

importantly, under different dynamics of power. From his research, Alvarez found that language brokers use their bilingual skills to help their families.

There were a few common themes that arose in these studies. To begin, feelings of pressure and responsibility were very common throughout the participants/interviewees. There was also greater empathy for others. Increased confidence in one’s ability to speak both languages and a higher retention rate of one’s native language. Although for the most part, these feelings and results appear to be beneficial, there are downsides non-bilingual students (and even bilingual students who are not language brokers) never have to experience.

Many students in New York City reported feeling like language brokering was something they owed their parents, similar to the responsibility of doing chores around the house. College aged students reflecting back on their language brokering experience reporting that initially, brokering came with some level of annoyance or stress. But over time, those feelings became more validating and beneficial socio-emotionally and had great impacts on their self-esteem. In my own experience, language brokering did indeed feel like a responsibility I owed my parents for the sacrifices they made to get to this country. Although I did on occasion feel the stress and anxiety that came with translating, my overall emotions were of pride and a strong sense of accomplishment. Even though it was rather tedious, it was important to ensure my parents could succeed socially and financially.

Another main take-away from studies conducted above as well as other studies done previously is the maintenance of native-language proficiency, in this case, Spanish. Because translating requires so much back and forth in understanding context in one language then

explaining it in another, brokering appears to help bilingual youth maintain their native language while also acquiring proficiency in another. 26 Translating provides educational and social opportunities most students would not receive in an academic setting. As López states, “it is important to recognize the advantageous effects of language brokering as a unique skill acquired outside of the traditional classroom that may have implications for other aspects of education not otherwise noted.” 27

Although the maintenance of one’s native language is beneficial for many different reasons, there are other more serious implications translation has on these young children. Many language brokers felt pushed into adult-like figures for their families at a very young age, especially when dealing with “official” situations, i.e. applications, school permission slips, disciplinary notices, etc. 28 As stated by Alvarez, “[bilingual youths] were compelled to grow up prematurely through translating both meanings and consequences of such official texts.” 29 He continues by providing examples of youth who “explain their own or siblings' report cards to their parents, translate at doctor's offices and banks, make purchases at local drug stores, fill out credit card applications, screen phone calls from telemarketers, and translate movies and television shows for family and friends.” 30

Filling out adoption paperwork at the age of nine through twelve is just one example of being seen as an adult-like figure. Although I did not mind the responsibility, Aki directly addressing me throughout meetings and social workers relying on me to ensure my parents understood them and they understood my parents emphasizes the weight of responsibility on my

28 Alvarez, "Brokering Literacies: Child Language Brokering in Mexican Immigrant Families."
29 Alvarez, "Brokering Literacies: Child Language Brokering in Mexican Immigrant Families."
30 Alvarez, "Brokering Literacies: Child Language Brokering in Mexican Immigrant Families."
shoulders. The act of translating and knowing the importance it held shaped the way I interacted with strangers. This brings me to the last common theme in the above research, a greater empathy for others.

Both college aged students and youth from New York City reported they have helped or would help a stranger in need of translation. When in public, it is not uncommon to run into someone who needs help translating. Especially in areas with a high immigrant population, this can be a common occurrence. Not knowing how to speak English puts many people at a disadvantage and can have extreme negative consequences that can even put people’s health and livelihoods at risk. Without being able to translate or communicate with doctors or medical officials, people run the risk of being misdiagnosed, not being diagnosed at all, and not receiving the necessary care for a particular illness. Not to mention not being able to access preventative medicine.

**Putting Bilingualism Into Modern Context**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, accessing COVID tests, vaccinations, and other preventative measures has been next to impossible without fully understanding English. I have had to translate medical documents for my family members from a young age. Making appointments to receive a COVID-19 vaccine was no different. I filled out the forms, ensured all required documents were brought, and chose an appointment window that worked for my mother, aunt and myself so as to avoid making multiple trips.

I had seen the manner in which doctors or other medical practitioners had addressed my mother or aunt when I did not interpret for them. Oftentimes, they were not listened to and the concerns they raised were not always taken seriously. Because of these repeated experiences, it

---

was crucial I accompany my mother and aunt to get their vaccine. As expected, we ran into a few issues with medical documents and them being asked questions they could not answer.

While standing in line, I saw a woman and her nine or ten year old daughter behind us. The volunteer approached them and asked them the usual questions. “What is your reasoning for getting the COVID vaccine?” he asked. “Do you qualify under any of the categories listed?”

“Que si calificas bajo una de estas categorías, mama,” the young girl responded, prompting her mother to answer the man.

“Pos no dile que no trabajo,” the woman responded.

“She doesn’t work,” the little girl responded.

“Does she qualify under any medical conditions? Is she at high risk?”

“No she does not,” the little girl answered, without translating the question for her mother.

“I’m sorry but if she doesn’t qualify under any of the categories and she doesn’t have a high risk medical condition she will not be able to get her vaccine today,” the volunteer responded, clearly uncomfortable.

“Que no te la pueden poner hoy porque no calificas,” the daughter told her mom, visibly upset.

“Pos ya que ya vamonos, quizás después,” the woman responded, signaling her daughter to leave. “Thank you,” she called back over her shoulder, leading her daughter away by the hand.

I saw myself in that situation. I was not much younger than the little girl when I began to translate in medical situations for both my parents and my aunt. Although I know the woman

---

32 Translation: He’s asking if you qualify under any of these categories, mom.
33 Translation: He said they can’t give you the vaccine because you don’t qualify.
34 Translation: Alright then, let’s go, maybe next time.
would most likely be able to receive a vaccine a few weeks later, I felt sorry for her and her daughter for being unable to get it after standing in line for over an hour. I encountered many instances where I was told no. Over time, I learned to sound more mature, intelligent, and not be bullied under any circumstance. Those skills however, came with time and age, two things that little girl had not yet crossed, both of which I wished she never had to.

The reality of child translators is rather stark. The pressure one faces when being told a medical diagnosis from a doctor pertaining to parents who are supposed to take care of you is unmatched to most experiences other young children have to face. To have the weight of responsibility on young shoulders is frightening to say the least. Many bilingual students are always told they have skills that will benefit them in the future and will provide them with professional opportunities down the road. What educators and other professionals will not acknowledge (whether it be because they are simply unaware or do not feel it is necessary to mention) is the deep emotional impact and consequences being an interpreter has on young children.

Conclusion:

My experience is unique in many ways but all too familiar in others. From feeling emotionally isolated and withdrawn from classmates, to being responsible for the advancement of the family, being a bilingual Latina comes with its fair share of challenges.

Bilingualism is crucial to teach in schools for a variety of reasons. The stakes are too high for non-native English speakers. Without the ability to both obtain English proficiency and maintain their native language, bilingual children, who may be the only ones in their family, are left without resources and a great burden in order to help their family survive.
The emotional impact felt by bilingual children in early education and throughout their lives is a topic that must be studied in greater depth. There are plenty of resources that, looking back, would have made me feel more secure in my own education and linguistic abilities. Segregating students, both physically and emotionally and always placing an emphasis on English-proficiency without maintaining one's native language has severe consequences. Not having resources available puts bilingual children more at risk for losing interest in school, being left behind, being overlooked in a classroom, and potentially even dropping out of school because they feel as if they cannot master material.

Bilingualism is a gift that should be felt across different cultures. It should not just be a burden for children whose families rely on them. There is a big difference between bilingualism in a primarily English speaking household versus bilingualism in a non-native English speaking family. For those who are the only bilingual speakers in their household, responsibilities bear a great weight. More research is needed in order to assess the emotional and psychological needs of English Language Learners to promote both English-proficiency and a celebration and maintenance of a native language.
Works Referenced


https://www.azleg.gov/Briefs/Senate/FLORES%20V.%20ARIZONA%202018.pdf