

Using Child Language Brokering as a Tool to Mitigate Intergenerational Discrepancy in Acculturation Within Immigrant Families in Canada:

A Literature Review and Research Direction for Potential Intervention

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Background

As Canada continues to grow with increasing numbers of newcomers, immigrants and refugees are progressively settling in the Prairie provinces, specifically in the metropolitan cities of Regina, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Saskatoon. For instance, the 2016 census report revealed that the concentration of newcomers settling in Alberta surpassed those in British Columbia. This implies that Alberta's linguistic diversity is increasing at a fast rate. The 2016 report on language characteristics in the province indicated that newcomers who could not proficiently converse in either of Canada's official languages (e.g., those who listed Cantonese as their sole mother-tongue, followed by Vietnamese and Punjabi) has increased by 19.7% (approximately 58,000 people) since the 2011 census, making up 1.4% of the total population.

In this case and other cases of families with limited English proficiency, immigrant families are most likely to depend on their children for written and/or oral translation and interpretation. This phenomenon is referred to as *language brokering* (Tse, 1995).

The presence of child language brokering (CLB) is an indicator of different acculturation levels between parents and their children (Martinez, McClure, & Eddy, 2009) and a means through which parents socially integrate into the host culture. The combination of CLB and acculturation challenges has the possibility to impact family dynamics in either negative or positive ways, which in turn further impacts children and adolescent language brokers' psychosocial adjustment (Hua & Costigan, 2012). However, the current literature illustrates a mixture of findings; consequently, leading to broad understandings of the different processes involved in or mechanisms underlying CLB.

There are a limited number of Canadian studies specifically focusing on the CLB's relationship between youth development and family dynamics. Moreover, none have been conducted in Alberta as the limited studies only focused on well-established ethnic communities (e.g., Chinese and South Asian immigrant communities) in Canada's largest metropolitan cities of Vancouver and Toronto. The emerging geographical shift of newcomers settling in Alberta influences the need for more research into these communities since the profile of immigrant groups may differ from those who live in communities with a greater density of immigrants (i.e., Vancouver and Toronto). Thus, serving as a language broker in Alberta could potentially be more challenging as acculturation may be more stressful for families when there are less established communities of their ethnic group to pull resources and support from.

Objectives

The proposed research study aims to investigate the frequency and consequences of CLB insofar as it is utilized to facilitate social integration into Alberta's mainstream culture during immigrant families' acculturation process.

In this context, there are three levels of assessment the individual (the parent and child/adolescent language broker), the family domain, and program service providers and policy makers. The research objectives (Table 1) reflect this trilogy of needs.

Table 1: Level of Impact and Research Objectives

Impact Level	Objectives
Individual	- Identify newcomers' experiences related to acculturation challenges and CLB - Determine how social integration of newcomers in Alberta was facilitated by CLB
Family	- Determine if a wide acculturation gap negatively affects the relational quality in the parent-child dyad; and if so, how and why? - Determine the extent to which quality of communication affects CLB experiences and perceptions
Program/Policy	- Propose a direction for an intervention that can use CLB as a tool to facilitate the enhancement of family dynamics during the acculturation process

Relevance & Significance

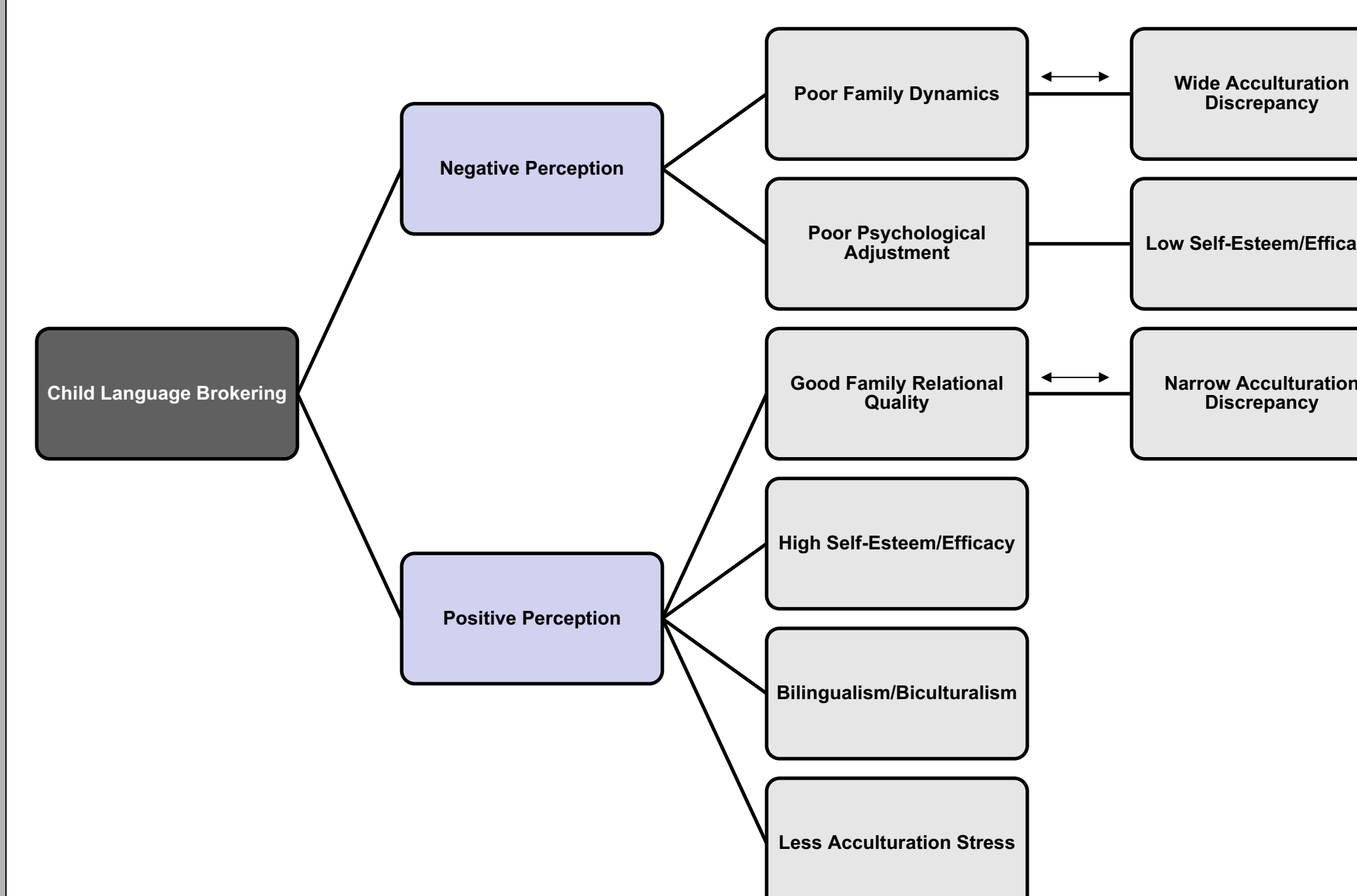
Acculturation is broadly defined as the set of cultural and psychological changes that follow immigrant settlement into a new mainstream culture (Berry, 2005). Parents and their children tend to acculturate at different rates ensuing an acculturation gap within the family (Kwat, 2003). Different rates may be attributed to factors of place of birth, age at migration, length of time in the host country, parental education level, socioeconomic status, and parental English proficiency (Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000). Conflict can intensify from the dissimilar levels of acculturation, especially when children acculturate at a quicker rate than their parents. Children tend to acculturate faster because they are more developmentally susceptible to opportunities to engage with the host culture through school and peers, and to other environmental influences (e.g., media and internet influences). Contrarily, parents may have less opportunities for interactions with the new culture (e.g., time is consumed more by employment obligations).

The intergenerational conflict stemming from acculturation is salient when pre-adolescent children and early adolescents form negative perceptions of language brokering regarding parental expectations and family values. Past literature illustrated brokers feeling anger, frustration, stress and/or anxiety from perceiving CLB duties as a sense of burden (Wu & Kim, 2009) when their attitudes and values (e.g., values of expanding peer group for identity exploration or gaining independence through part-time employment) are incongruent with family values (e.g., family obligation to always help the family). Conversely, when brokers retain higher family obligation values, this is associated with greater parent-child relational congruence and less family conflict (Hua & Costigan, 2012). This in turn may explain past evidence reporting brokers feeling a sense of empowerment and confidence with high self-esteem (Orellana et al., 2003). Collectively, this implies that if the degree to which immigrant parents' integration of Western mainstream values, beliefs, and behaviours is discrepant from that of their children's, parents are less likely to recognize or understand the challenges and developmental needs their children encounter in the mainstream culture (Kim et al., 2013). Thus, parents' less familiarity with mainstream culture may cause them to feel uncertain or inadequate in supporting and guiding their children throughout the parents' acculturation process (ibid).

Relevance & Significance Con't

Quality of communication is also related to affecting the parent-child relationship. Language use has a "critical role in family members' abilities to engage in the rich, complex changes that facilitate the development of close relationships" (Tseng & Fugilini, 2000, p. 467). However, when there is a wide acculturation gap, this can lower both the quality of communication and relational quality between family members (Shen & Dennis, 2019) as it is linked to experiences of frustration and emotional distancing due to difficulties in verbal self-expressions and comprehension (i.e., children comprehending their parents' communication in their heritage language and parents comprehending their children in English; Tseng & Fugilini, 2000). High-quality communication can be a protective barrier against the potential taxing effects of CLB (Shen & Dennis, 2019). Family members engage in clear and consistent messages, open emotional expression, and collaborative problem-solving. This is consistent with other research inferring that "high-quality communication promotes resiliency in immigrant families by giving youth more opportunities to hear their [parents'] perspectives which may help them to internalize cultural values relating to respect and family assistance." (Shen & Dennis, 2019, p. 146).

Against the negative findings in research, language brokering has the potential to enhance the parent-child relationship by providing opportunities to engage in active communication (Valdés et al., 2003). Tse (1995) infers that CLB is a means for preserving heritage language competency among children and adolescents. Moreover, language and cultural maintenance appears to sustain parent-child relationships. Consequently, CLB can be an acculturation strategy, not just in acquiring language skills but also developing an understanding of cultural practices and norms.



Conclusions

Language brokering involves complex processes from the play of cultural, psychological, and developmental aspects (Weisskirch, 2013).

It is essential to consider the family context in which is fundamental for youth development to understand the frequency and impact of CLB.

In spite of the negative consequences that arise from intergenerational discrepancies in acculturation, LB itself has the opportunity to be instrumentally used to not only enhance the parent-child relationship, but also to facilitate parents' acculturation and youth's cultivation of bilingualism and biculturalism.

Using CLB as an acculturative strategic tool could benefit immigrant families' social integration into Canadian mainstream culture, especially in areas (i.e., Alberta) where emerging ethnic communities are being established.

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