

“Mama, sign this note”: Young refugee children’s brokering of literacy practices

Introduction

One afternoon in 2006, I visited a Southern Sudanese family that I had been working with. During my visits, the adults in the family often asked me to help them with texts. On this particular visit, the father of the family, Amin, asked for help with forms and other documents related to his children. His daughter, Remaz, translated into Arabic when Amin did not understand my English questions. On this day, Amin needed to fill in some paperwork so that his young son, Remon, could continue to receive nutrition benefits from the Women, Infants and Children program. I asked Amin questions based on the form’s requirements, attempting to word them in English so that he could understand. Several times, Remaz answered the questions on behalf of her father, particularly when Amin did not understand what I was asking. Other times, he actively looked to her when I asked a question. Occasionally, Remaz would answer a question, and Amin would correct her. One question asked about medications Remon might be taking. At that time, Remon had been on some antibiotics, but Amin could not recall the medication’s name. Remaz jumped up and ran into the kitchen. She brought the prescription bottle to me and pointed to the label, so I could copy the medication’s name onto the form.

While this brokering event is similar to many that involve immigrant families (e.g., Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003; Morales & Hanson, 2005; Tse, 1996), it is noteworthy for several reasons. First and foremost, the broker in this situation, Remaz, was a kindergartner, and the brokering event described above occurred in March, two weeks before her sixth birthday. Also, Remaz had been in the U.S. for only about two and a half years, yet she was already a fluent speaker of English, and her father clearly viewed her as a competent translator. And, while she was still emerging into print literacy, the brokering event demonstrates both her understanding of the function of print in the world and her ability to incorporate texts into brokering communication between her father and me.

Language and Literacy Brokering

Children commonly provide translation in immigrant households (Morales & Hanson, 2005; Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003), but as Morales and Hanson (2005) noted, “Little is known, at this point, about the process of language brokering and its effect on children and their families” (p. 473). Even less is known about *young* children acting as brokers, as most research has focused on children older than 10. In addition, little is known about brokering in African families, as existing studies predominantly have examined brokering within Latino and Asian communities (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Despite the paucity of studies regarding child language brokering, Morales and Hanson (2005) note several important points of consensus:

- Most immigrant children and youth act as language brokers
- Children may begin to broker as soon as one year after they arrive in the U.S., and immigrants often recall beginning to translate as young as 8 years old
- Brokering occurs in a variety of settings, and children broker for a variety of people, including parents, other family members, and school officials; and
- Child brokers are expected to help in “very complex, ‘adult-like’ situations” (Morales & Hanson, 2005, p. 472).

What is the impact of brokering on children and families? Some researchers assert that brokering can be burdensome or problematic for child brokers and for family dynamics in immigrant communities (e.g., Tse, 1996; Umaña-Taylor, 2003), while others suggest that brokering is beneficial to children and their families (Halgunseth, 2003; Morales & Hanson, 2005). Umaña-Taylor (2003) takes a particularly critical view of child language brokering. Child brokering, she argues, can strain family relationships “because of the role reversal that takes place when parents become dependent on their children for communication with people outside the family” (p. 157), disrupting adults’ assumed authority over children. Others argue that brokering offers benefits to both children and families. Although Tse (1996) found that some students disliked brokering, the vast majority of adolescents in her

study indicated that they enjoyed brokering and that they were proud of their abilities. Similarly, Orellana and her colleagues found that youth brokers “experience much of their translating work as ‘just normal’” (Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003, p. 516). Halgunseth (2003) argues that language brokering positively impacts cognitive, social, and cultural development of children who act as brokers, for example, by allowing them to acquire sophisticated vocabulary that can transfer to academic contexts.

Although researchers acknowledge that language brokering sometimes involves printed texts (Morales & Hanson, 2005), the focus in these studies has tended to be on oral translation of texts, rather than the genre or textual features I saw being brokered. Orellana and her colleagues (Orellana et al, 2003) focused on textual aspects of brokering, which they argue is an important aspect of family literacy in many immigrant communities that exposes children to a wide variety of genres that they might not experience in their classrooms. Child brokers, therefore, have opportunities to engage with sophisticated genres and literacy practices when they help their families understand texts. While emergent readers, like Remaz, may not be able to read all of the texts they broker, they nevertheless may supply their parents with important knowledge about those texts.

Studying Literacy in Refugee Families

I spent five years working with the Sudanese refugee community in Michigan, conducting two different ethnographic studies of literacy practices (Perry, 2007, 2008, 2009). Remaz and her family participated in the second study, in which I was interested in (a) the ways in which adult refugees navigate differences in literacy practices as they change contexts, and (b) the ways in which young children might emerge into literacy given these diverse literacy landscapes. Ultimately, as I observed more and more instances of adults seeking help with different texts, including the help their young children provided, I focused on the literacy practice of brokering.

Three focal families representing different levels of parents’ education participated in the study, all of which had children in kindergarten or first grade. I selected four focal children from the three

families, one boy and one girl each in kindergarten and first grade. I collected observational, interview, and artifactual data over a period of 18 months, visiting each of the families' homes at least once a week and visiting each focal child in her or his classroom at least twice a month. I focused my data analysis around *literacy events*, or observable uses of text, and *literacy practices*, or the connections of those events to larger aspects of the context (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Heath, 1983).

Although the parents had differing levels of formal schooling and different English proficiency levels, all were literate in Arabic. Interestingly, I found that parents' level of education made little difference in terms of brokering activities – all of the parents, regardless of education or English fluency level sought language and literacy brokering for various texts and literacy practices they encountered in their daily lives in the U.S. I also found that, while the parents utilized a variety of literacy brokers, their young children provided one valuable source of brokering.

Types of Brokering

As I analyzed the data, I found that many different aspects of texts were being brokered among the families, occurring in three broad categories: (a) lexico-syntactic and graphophonic brokering, (b) culture brokering, and (c) genre brokering. Examples of the types of brokering are in Table 1, categorized by whether the broker was an adult or a child.

Although the parents in the families were literate in Arabic, they often needed help with English literacy. *Lexico-syntactic and graphophonic brokering* occurred as participants sought help with the *vocabulary, syntax, or letter-sound relationships* of English. For example, participants might ask for the meaning of a word like *rhyme*, how to spell a word like *newspaper*, or for help in composing a note to a child's teacher so that it would "sound nice" in English. Thus, lexico-syntactic and graphophonic brokering often had to do with the mechanics or correctness of the English language.

Culture brokering occurred when participants needed help with cultural aspects of written texts, such as *cultural content knowledge* specific to the U.S. context and institutions; *beliefs, values, and practices* common in the U.S.; or *cultural expectations*. An example of cultural content knowledge might include culturally-specific information such as U.S. holidays, historical events, and national symbols. *Cultural beliefs and values* typically involved understanding the underlying belief/value related to the text, such as knowing that U.S. teachers privileged reading books at home over watching TV. An example of *cultural expectations* involved discerning the difference between parent participation that was highly expected by schools, such as attending parent-teacher conferences, and more optional participation, such as a holiday party. In culture-related brokering of a text, participants often wondered, "Is this a good thing?" or "What should I do?"

Genre brokering, the majority of brokering events in the study, related specifically to textual genres and was closely connected to *literacy practices*, the ways in which people use texts and literacy in their lives to accomplish particular goals. In genre-related brokering, participants needed help related to the *purpose* of the genre, the reason a given genre exists, and the *use* of that genre, or what people actually do with it. Typically, the parents needed help with these texts because they were not genres encountered in their previous lives in the Sudan, such as phone books or crossword puzzles. For example, a participant might understand that coupons allow one to save money, but she might not know where to obtain coupons or how to redeem them. Genre-related brokering sometimes involved

specific features of a genre and how they are organized within the genre, as well as the *function* and *use* of those features.

The kindergarten and first-grade children often engaged in genre-related brokering around the many school-related texts that they carried home in their backpacks. The flurry of papers that arrived home each week could be overwhelming for the parents, as they attempted to determine what each text was, which texts were more important than others, and which texts they needed to respond to. For example, during one of my visits, a child's backpack included the following documents, in addition to his regular homework assignments:

- A newsletter from the teacher;
- a permission slip and envelope requiring \$2.50 for a field trip;
- a "Mark Your Calendar" flier announcing in-service days and times for Parents' Night;
- a Scholastic book order form; and
- a pamphlet from the neighborhood community center.

Many of these texts required some sort of important action: the permission slip needed to be signed and returned along with money for the trip. Parents also needed to be aware of days when school was not in session. The Scholastic form could be returned with money, but only if parents wanted to purchase books for their children – and they needed to understand that this was optional instead of required. Similarly, the parents also needed to understand that the community center pamphlet was not actually connected to the school.

As the children handed over these texts, they often prefaced the texts with explanations about what the texts were *for*, and their talk about the papers in their backpacks suggested an awareness of the texts' purposes, which they framed for their parents. "I have something for my mom that she sign," one of the children said one day. "I have something for my mom that she read it," he noted as he

rummaged around in his backpack. I noticed that he did have two separate texts – a permission slip for a field trip and a flier on a community fire safety program — indeed, one to sign and one to read.

The children’s framing of these texts’ purposes may have helped their parents to better focus on the more important texts. Additionally, this kind of brokering also helped to alert the parents to what they were supposed to *do* with the texts (such as read them or sign them). The children also seemed to understand different features of texts they brought home, frequently pointing these out to their parents, such as parts of forms that needed to be filled in or signed. I often observed that the focal children seemed to play an important role in their families as they helped their parents understand the texts, and technologies, they encountered in the U.S. Despite the fact that the children still were emerging as readers and writers, my observations suggest that they nevertheless provided important knowledge about the purpose, use and features of different genres—especially those that schools sent home. Although these child brokers did not broker all aspects of genre, they nevertheless appeared to provide important genre knowledge to their parents. In the following sections, I provide a case study of one family.

A Family Portrait

Remaz and her family came from the Nuba Mountains region of central Sudan. In Sudan, Akhlas attended school through the seventh grade, where she consistently performed at the top of her class: “Always I *love* school...My mom, she’s so happy when I come from school. My paper is always—I get first or second in my school.” Unfortunately, Akhlas was unable to continue her education because her parents could not afford it. In Michigan, Akhlas worked as a seamstress at a local company that employed many refugees. Like many rural Sudanese children, Amin, cared for the family’s cattle as a herder as a child. Amin attended school through one or two years of high school. Before he married Akhlas, he had been shot—a casualty of the ongoing civil war in Sudan. Having an injury as a result of the civil war automatically allowed Amin and his family to claim refugee status, and the family sojourned

in Egypt for two years before they were approved to come to the U.S. In Michigan, Amin worked as a part-time dishwasher at a local hotel, often working the night shift.

Both Akhlas and Amin continued to further their education once they came to the U.S. Amin enrolled in ESL courses through a local adult education program, intending to earn a GED diploma. Giving up her lunch hour, Akhlas participated in ESL classes that were offered through her workplace. She seemed to have a natural knack for languages, and she learned to speak, read and write English very quickly. Both Akhlas and Amin regularly studied for their coursework, and it was common to see family members gathered in the living room, working on their respective assignments.

At the time of the study, Akhlas and Amin had two children: Remaz, the focal child from this family, was a five-year-old kindergartner. Their son, Remon, was a month or two shy of his third birthday when I first started visiting the family. Remaz was a bright and friendly child with a gap-toothed smile. At only five years old, Remaz already had a deep intellectual life. She spent a great deal of time wondering about the world, and she loved learning. Following in her mother's footsteps, Remaz was at the very top of her class. Also like her mother, Remaz had acquired English quickly in the two years that she had been in the U.S. She not only spoke without an accent, but her vocabulary was so sophisticated that her kindergarten teacher actually had no idea that Remaz spoke another language at home until I provided this information: "I wouldn't have guessed," her teacher said, "You would probably think that she's American. A lot of people probably would think that." Reading and writing also came very easily to Remaz, and she was in the most advanced reading group in her kindergarten. Remaz was so advanced, in fact, that at the end of kindergarten, her teacher recommended that she be placed in a mixed first and second grade classroom to ensure that she would be challenged academically.

"My Best Teacher!"

Akhlas often referred to Remaz as her teacher, because the child taught her much about English. "I like to speak English with them [Remaz and Remon] because I learn," she explained, "I'm learning

from Remaz a lot!” Once, over dinner, Akhlas listened as Remaz shared information that she had been learning at school: “Fruit has a little bit of sugar, sugar that’s good for you,” Remaz explained. In response, Akhlas exclaimed to me, “She teaches me. My best teacher—Remaz!”

Vocabulary, Spelling and Sounds

Remaz frequently provided brokering related to English letter-sound correspondences and vocabulary for her parents, particularly her mother. During one of my initial visits to the family’s apartment, before Remaz had even started kindergarten, Akhlas mentioned that she wanted to get some books to read. “I have a problem with reading,” she said. Her children had acquired many books from church friends, and I suggested she could practice English by reading some of their books. Remon ran into the kids’ shared bedroom and emerged carrying a board book, *Baby Bop’s Toys* (Dudko, O’Brien & Kearns, 1993), based upon the Barney TV show. Remon nestled into her lap as Akhlas opened the book and began to read it out loud. Akhlas stumbled over some of the words, and Remaz, who was familiar with the book, helped during her mother’s reading. When Akhlas stumbled over the word *hug*, for example, Remaz called out that word for her.

Remaz also liked to help Akhlas with her ESL homework. In September, shortly after she began kindergarten, Remaz helped her mother spell words. As Akhlas sounded out words she needed to include in her responses, Remaz hovered by her mother and started saying the appropriate letters. For example, Remaz said “B” when her mother sounded out /b/ and “T” when her mother sounded out /t/. Later that day, Akhlas told me that she did not know how to spell the word *newspaper*. Remaz sat up on her knees to look at her mother’s writing. She excitedly called out, “N! N! Make an N, Mommy!”

Akhlas seemed to enjoy the fact that her daughter—a young child who was just beginning to read and write herself—could provide homework assistance. On the same day when Remaz had helped her mother with letter-sound correspondences in English, I had been helping Akhlas with vocabulary words for depicted objects. Akhlas looked at one picture, but was unsure of the name of the object it

represented. Before I could look at the illustration, Remaz glanced over Akhlas' shoulder and said, "Tire." Remaz continued to observe as her mother worked, watching as Akhlas read quietly to herself, "This is..." Remaz repeated, "This," and looked at her mother's paper. She said, "Yeah," just like someone who is confirming an answer. Akhlas laughed and said, "She's my teacher! She always tell me the question [*sic*]," meaning that Remaz always provided her with the answers to her homework.

Purpose of the Text

In addition to providing brokering around vocabulary and letter-sound correspondence, Remaz also provided explicit knowledge about a text's purpose and features. For example, she once handed her mother a half-sheet of paper her teacher had sent home, asking parents to sign to indicate that Remaz had done her daily required reading: "Mama, sign this note," she said. Akhlas took it and said, "Okay, I will sign." On another occasion, toward the end of her kindergarten year, the class planned to visit the local university's farm, but Akhlas apparently had not yet returned the requisite permission slip. Remaz came home from school one day and reminded her mother, "I have to bring the paper that you signed." She would not be allowed to go on the trip, she added, without a signed permission slip. Akhlas must have returned the signed form, because Remaz did go on the trip. Because Remaz was her oldest child, Akhlas had little prior experience with U.S. school practices; permission forms likely were a relatively new genre for her, because they probably were not something employed in Sudanese schools. When Remaz explained why she needed to return the form, she provided Akhlas with helpful knowledge about the purpose of permission forms in U.S. schools: They allow a child to participate in a highly-valued event.

As these examples with Remaz suggest, much of the child language brokering that occurred in these families was more related to teaching parents about the English language than to simply translating for or speaking on parents' behalf. In addition to providing *oral* English support for their

parents' literacy events, child brokers supplied their parents with specific knowledge about *written* English.

Unsuccessful Brokering

Although I often observed Remaz and the other young Sudanese children help their parents with English, texts, and literacy practices, they were not always successful in their brokering attempts. Around the U.S. winter holidays, for example, I was surprised to note that Akhlas' family had put up a Christmas tree. Although Akhlas and her family were Christians, putting up Christmas trees was not a Sudanese tradition. I wanted to know why they had decided to participate in this U.S. tradition; Akhlas attempted to explain that someone at their church had talked about Jesus and green trees in the winter, but she did not know how to fully explain this to me in English. Akhlas turned to Remaz and spoke with her in Arabic. Remaz listened to Akhlas' explanation before saying, "Because I want one?" Unsatisfied with this explanation, Akhlas shook her head and said that she would get someone else to translate for me later. In this instance, it is unclear where the communication breakdown occurred – did Remaz misunderstand her mother, not know the Arabic terms she was using, or have insufficient English knowledge to translate the concepts? Was Akhlas unable to explain the concept to her daughter, or had she possibly not fully understood the church member's original (English) explanation?

On another occasion, I visited Akhlas shortly after learning that the elderly grandmother of another participating family had been hospitalized for a heart condition. I did not know the specifics, however, and asked Akhlas what had happened. The grandmother had some problem with her blood, Akhlas explained, but she did not know the words in English. She consulted Remaz, asking her to translate. Remaz thought for a moment and then tentatively said, "It's dry?" Akhlas said that might be it. "I don't know English," she explained to a Sudanese friend who was also visiting, "Remaz, she my teacher!" Thus, even when Remaz's attempts at brokering were less than successful, her parents often commented on their pride in her translating abilities.

Brokering at School

Although they were valued as teachers, translators, and brokers at home and within the Sudanese community, this was not the case when Remaz and the other focal children went to school. Remaz, a bright and linguistically talented child who was used to being viewed as a teacher, always was eager to help her classmates in school. She often tried to help her peers with literacy in the same way that she helped her parents at home. Many times, her (and other focal children's) attempts at literacy brokering resulted in the teacher's admonitions for being off-task or for not allowing others to do their own work. Remaz's school-based brokering attempts were much more successful when they occurred "under the radar," unnoticed by the teacher, or if they occurred during times when the teacher offered free choices of activities, including games or creative play.

Most of Remaz's brokering attempts involved helping peers to sound out or spell words, but she also brokered genre knowledge. For example, I visited Remaz's classroom on a day when the teacher opened her "class store" and allowed children to purchase items with points they had earned as rewards. One girl had bought a small notepad in the class store, in which she had written her friends' phone numbers. When she showed the notebook to Remaz, Remaz pointed to one phone number and asked, "Whose phone number is that?" When the girl supplied the child's name, Remaz said, "You need to write his name." Remaz understood that a list of phone numbers alone would not be very useful and that the genre of an address or phone book required that names accompany the phone numbers. Just as she had with her mother, Remaz was supplying genre information – in this case, about the purpose of essential features of a particular genre – to someone who needed that information.

Discussion: "It's not a bad thing"

The portrait I have painted of Remaz and the support she provided to her family suggests that even very young children can act as brokers. Moreover, even very young children can provide important knowledge to adults about written texts, in addition to providing oral translation: as Akhlas reported,

“They teach us everything.” The value that Sudanese parents placed on their young children’s support complicates the findings of other research. As I have already described, some researchers have claimed that child brokering may be problematic in many cultural communities (Morales & Hanson, 2005; Tse, 1996; Umaña-Taylor, 2003). Problems arise, they suggest, for two reasons: (1) traditional family hierarchies are disrupted when children possess knowledge or skills that their parents do not and thus are placed in positions of power over them; and (2) children often broker in sensitive and potentially embarrassing situations, such as medical examinations. Because I did not observe the children brokering in sensitive situations, I cannot speak to the latter point. However, it is clear that child brokering is not necessarily problematic for family relationships.

Family roles and relationships do not look the same across all communities (Rogoff, 2003), and what is problematic in one community is not necessarily so in another. Children in many cultures actively contribute to essential household functioning (Orellana, 2001; Rogoff, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999), for example, found that Mexican immigrant youth served as tutors/teachers, advocates, and surrogate parents within their families. In many African cultures, children take on great responsibility within their families very early in life (Rogoff, 2003). Even young children are expected to help with cooking and other household duties, as I experienced both with the Sudanese families and during two years of living in southern Africa myself. In southern Africa, I commonly saw four- or five-year-olds caring for infant siblings—and doing so quite competently – and the children in the Sudanese families also reflected this cultural pattern, taking on responsibilities that may differ from children in other cultural communities. One focal boy was quite good at caring for his infant brother, and his mother reported that when the baby woke in the middle of the night, “he never calls me,” noting that her son fed the baby and went right back to sleep. In another family’s home, responsibilities for cooking, housecleaning and caring for younger children were often performed by older children. I

frequently observed as a 13-year-old boy voluntarily and tenderly cared for his three-year-old sister, and he also got up in the middle of the night to tend to her, rather than waking his mother.

Based upon what I observed, child literacy brokering seemed to be a natural, and potentially important, extension of family roles, responsibilities, and contributions for the young children in these Sudanese families. As Orellana (2001) suggested,

Translating work makes particularly evident the fact that the work children do is not trivial.

Children are not minor players or “peripheral participants” (Wenger, 1998) gradually being integrated into cultural practices that adults in their community have mastered. In many ways *they* are the experts, and their ability to engage successfully with the complex demands of modern life matters for their families’ well-being and integration into U.S. society. (p. 378)

Indeed, Akhlas and the other Sudanese parents in the study actively positioned their young children as experts and as teachers, not just as interpreters. A mother in another family explained to her son that she did not know about things in America: “I don’t know—you teach me!” I observed as her kindergarten son taught his father the English names of colors. To me, he explained, “When the refugees come to America, all the kids teach the father,” and his wife chimed in, “All the kids [who] come from Africa help their moms.”

The snapshots I have provided suggest that these families not only were proud of their children’s brokering abilities, but they also expected them to provide this sort of language and literacy support. Toward the end of the study, I shared my emerging findings about brokering with Akhlas. Was it normal, I wondered, for Sudanese children to help their parents? Even in Sudan, she replied, children sometimes knew more than their parents:

In Sudan...the mother help the kids...you must teach your daughter. [But] some kids are smart. When you don’t know something, they know better than you and they’re helping. [Our] kids here, they’re so smart, because we are in a different culture and a different language. Kids,

their minds are so fast! That's why they help us here in America. The kids, they help a lot. When I questioned how she felt about her children's help, she responded, "It's really good thing...It's good thing for me. It's not bad thing. I'm really happy about that." I explained that some people believe it is a problem for children to teach parents, because then they do not respect their elders. However, for Akhlas, this appeared to be a non-issue. If parents raised their children well, she believed, it did not matter if children acted as teachers: "In Sudan, the kids always respect. When you teach the kids the good thing, they always respect you. My daughter, she tell [teach] me. It's not a bad thing. Some culture is different. But, I know when you teach your kids good thing, they always respect you."

Child brokering very well may be problematic in some contexts, when brokering truly does disrupt traditional family hierarchies or when children are asked to broker in sensitive situations or situations in which they may not be truly capable of brokering. But, we cannot assume that all cultural communities respond to child brokering in the same way.

Brokering and Literacy Development

In addition to being a natural extension of Sudanese children's expected family contributions, brokering also supported literacy development for both parents and children. Part of emergent literacy learning includes knowledge about the reasons why people read and write in their lives, and about different types of textual genres and features (e.g., Clay, 1998; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Although the Sudanese children were still learning early literacy skills, they certainly appeared to be aware of the purpose of the texts they brokered and how to use them to accomplish important goals, such as providing consent to attend a field trip. Like adult brokers, young children in this study provided important knowledge about texts, especially knowledge about a text's purpose, its use, and its various features. Sometimes, they provided explicit genre knowledge, as Remaz did when she explained why she needed to return the permission slip to her teacher or when the children in another focal family showed Akhlas how to set up an email account.

The parents, too, learned much about English literacy practices from their children. They learned about genres and literacy practices they had not encountered in the Sudan, and they learned about aspects of U.S. culture and schools. Parents and children were drawn together into authentic literacy practices that exposed them to multiple texts and real-world purposes for reading and writing that were valued in the U.S. Thus, through brokering, the parents gained information about language, culture and genres in the U.S., while the children simultaneously had rich opportunities to develop and practice their emerging literacy skills out of school.

Brokering and School

Many brokering events in this study involved texts that came home from the Sudanese children's schools, a finding which offers many implications for teachers. Educators want parents to be involved and express frustration when this expectation is not met. However, teachers should be aware that, instead of being unable to speak English, let alone disinterested or lazy, parents like Akhlas may not understand the purposes of different texts that are sent home, or they may be unfamiliar with the texts' embedded expectations for parental response or participation. Akhlas and the other parents needed to be able to make sense of flyers, newsletters, permission forms, notes, letters, homework and other texts that make up the mountain of paperwork sent home by schools. Of course, Sudanese parents are not the only ones who face these challenges; English-speaking parents may not understand what texts mean or know what schools expect (Purcell-Gates, 1995; Rogers, 2003).

How can educators support parents like Akhlas? Sometimes, parents struggled with understanding English in documents, and schools commonly provide texts translated into other languages (although it is important to note that school text never were sent home in Arabic, and indeed, some of the children's teachers did not know that the children spoke Arabic at home). Translating may not be helpful, however, when families come from small language communities – as do many refugees – or when they are unfamiliar with cultural aspects of the text that is sent home or with the genre's

purpose or use. First, teachers must recognize that a parent's understanding of a text involves language, culture, and genre. Educators may need to be explicit about assumptions and expectations that may be culturally unfamiliar, and they should recognize that immigrant and refugee families may have little knowledge of some of genres. They may not understand the function of a permission slip, or they may not know what to do with the little squares in the crossword puzzle that their child brings home to practice her spelling words.

In addition to carefully thinking about the texts they send home, educators can also capitalize on an incredible resource they have in their own classrooms – children. My experiences with the Sudanese families have shown that even very young children can competently support their parents' understandings of some texts. Teachers can spend a few minutes going over the various texts they send home. In addition to drawing children's attention to the content of those documents, teachers can help the children distinguish which texts are more important than others, including which are related to the school and which are from outside organizations such as a community program. Teachers also should point out various features of the different genres, such as signature lines or portions of forms that must be filled in, and be explicit about the purpose a text serves and how it is actually to be used. In this way, educators not only support parent participation in their children's education, but they are able to support the literacy development of children and parents alike.

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Table 1. *Examples of adult- and child-mediated literacy brokering.*

Brokering Category	Brokering Sub-type	Adult brokered example	Child-brokered example
<i>Lexico-syntactic & graphophonic</i>	<i>Vocabulary</i>	Providing the meaning of <i>rhyme</i> in child’s homework instructions	Supplying an English word for parent’s homework
	<i>Syntax</i>	Making a letter “sound nice” in English	(none directly observed, but reported by Akhlas)
	<i>Letter-sound relationships</i>	Spelling ingredients on food labels for a church-sponsored African cultural festival	Providing initial letter as parent sounds out a word
<i>Cultural</i>	<i>Cultural content knowledge</i>	Explaining what the Cub Scouts are, from a sign-up form sent home from school	Explaining that a note from school is about what will happen at a Valentine’s Day party
	<i>Beliefs, values & practices</i>	Helping parent determine which Scholastic books are “best” to order for a child	Providing information about an ID card program for kids
	<i>Cultural expectations</i>	Explaining whether or not attendance at a school event is expected by teachers	Explaining that a teacher is requesting parents donate snacks to the classroom
<i>Genre</i>	<i>Purpose of genre</i>	Explaining what a yearbook is	Explaining that a permission slip will allow one to go on a field trip

	<i>Use of genre</i>	Explaining where to get and how to use grocery coupons	Showing parents how to sign up for an email account
	<i>Specific features</i>	Explaining what elements should be included in a resume	(None observed)
	<i>Function of features</i>	Explaining difference between white pages and yellow pages in a phone book	Indicating signature line of permission slip
	<i>Use of features</i>	Showing someone how to fill in the boxes on a crossword puzzle	Pointing out word list in back of easy-reader book for parent to use with sibling