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**The impact of language brokering on Hmong college students' parent-child relationship  
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### **Abstract**

Using children as language brokers is a common practice in many migrant families. However, the particular contexts for language brokering and cultural impacts vary depending on migrant groups. Much of the literature on the impact of children's language brokering on migrant families has focused on Latinx families and some Asian (predominantly Chinese) immigrant families. This study is the first, to our knowledge, that focuses on the impact of language brokering among Hmong refugee families in the United States. Using multi-method studies, we administered an online survey and conducted focus group interviews to understand Hmong college students' language brokering practices in one Midwestern university and the impact this practice had on the relationships with their parents. Our results showed the diverse situations in which the students provided translations for their parent(s). Students also felt that language brokering helped them become bicultural and bilingual and that it brought them closer to their parents and Hmong culture. Student perspectives on the impact of language brokering on family relations and academic persistence are further discussed.

*Keywords: Hmong, language brokering, parent-child relationship, acculturation gaps, academic persistence*

## **The impact of language brokering on Hmong college students' parent-child relationship and academic persistence**

### **Introduction**

The Pew Research Center (2017) reported that in 2015, 299,000 Hmong lived in the U.S. The Hmong community consists of the first-generation who are born outside of the U.S., the second-generation who are born in the U.S. to refugee parents, and the third-generation who are born to second-generation parents (P. Vang, 2014). In 2015, 39% of all Hmong in the U.S. were foreign born, and 82% of the foreign-born Hmong population reported that they had lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years (Pew Research Center, 2017). Yet only 40% of foreign-born Hmong ages five and older reported that they were English proficient (Pew Research Center, 2017). For immigrants and refugees, language acquisition is crucial for their social interaction and acculturation in the new environment. Previous studies, which have focused on specific ethnic groups, have reported how children serve as language brokers for their parents in that process (e.g., Buriel, Love, & De Ment, 2006; Chao, 2006; Hua & Costigan, 2012). According to Tse (1996), language brokering is an act of “facilitat[ing] communication between two linguistically and/or culturally different parties. Unlike formal interpreters and translators, brokers mediate, rather than merely transmit, information” (p. 485). Often, when the first-generation does not speak (or is less fluent) in the language of the host country, the parents rely on their children, who were born in the host country or are at least more acculturated and can translate for them. Using children as language brokers or translators is a common practice in many immigrant families. However, the particular contexts for language brokering and cultural impacts vary depending on immigrant groups. Much of the literature on the impact of children's language

brokering on immigrant families have focused on Latinx families and some Asian (predominantly Chinese) immigrant families.

When Hmong refugees resettled in the U.S., they did not receive adequate language lessons or cultural orientation courses (Moore-Howard, 1987, p. 37). Hmong refugees were reported as “having more problems acculturating into U.S. society than any other recent immigrant group” (Tatman, 2004, p. 230). However, a recent study of first-generation Hmong refugees and second-generation Hmong Americans show medium to high rates of acculturation to U.S. society (P. Vang, 2014). Vang’s (2014) sample was relatively young (18-42 years old) and while she argues that the first-generation Hmong refugees’ length of time in the U.S. was not related to acculturation status, the sample size was small. It did not address whether older first-generation Hmong refugees are as acculturated as the younger first- and second-generation Hmong in her study. Nevertheless, according to Vang’s (2014) research, the Hmong are adapting to the dominant culture while maintaining their traditional culture (p. 12). Our study investigated Hmong college students who volunteered to, or through a sense of family obligation, language brokered for their family members and how that may have impacted the parent-child relationship. We also asked why the students brokered for their family rather than use professional translation services. In addition, the study explored how the students’ experience of translating or interpreting for their parents and family impacted their academic persistence, and whether there was a gender difference in language brokering frequency.

### **Impact of Language Brokering on Family Relations, Academic Persistence, and Gender Roles**

The literature review of language brokering by Morales and Hanson (2005) revealed positive and negative impacts of children serving as translators or interpreters on the parent-child

relationship. Some studies demonstrated how language brokering is seen positively by the brokers as it gives the children a chance to connect more with their parents (Morales & Hanson, 2005). Similarly, Chao (2006) found that language brokering increased the children's respect for their parents. However, other studies reported children's language brokering as negative due to the stress children experienced as a result of translating and interpreting (Morales & Hanson, 2005), its negative impact on parent-child relationships (Guan & Shen, 2015), and higher levels of parent-child conflict (Hua & Costigan, 2012). In addition, Guan and Shen (2015) found that higher frequency of language brokering was associated with lower levels of perceived support from the parent, which was explained by the parent's lack of praise (p. 1334). Guan and Shen (2015) also argue that the negative impact on parent-child relationships may be a reflection of intergenerational cultural conflicts (p. 1340). Other literature focused on the impact of children's language brokering on the parents, such as Ali's (2008) investigation on immigrant parents' loss of parenting efficacy. The incompatible results may have come from differences in situations or contexts. Recently, Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, and Little (2015) stressed the importance of including specific brokering situations and contexts when analyzing the impact of language brokering. Thus, our study examines diverse translating situations to better understand the impact of language brokering on Hmong college students' parent-child relationship.

There has also been research on the impact of language brokering on children's academic performance. According to Morales and Hanson (2005), there is no consensus on whether language brokering impacts academic performance. Earlier studies did not find correlations between language brokering and academic performance, while Umaña-Taylor (2003) argued that language brokering may negatively impact the academic performance and occupational opportunities of children (Morales & Hanson, 2005, p. 493). On the other hand, Buriel, Perez, De

Ment, Chavez, and Moran (1998) demonstrated language brokering as being a strong predictor of academic performance. Similarly, Orellana's (2003) study showed that children who language brokered performed significantly better in standardized tests (Morales & Hanson, 2005, p. 493). However, no studies thus far investigated the relationship between language brokering and academic persistence for Hmong college students. Hmong parents value education, and invest time and money in their children's learning (Xiong & Lam, 2013; Y. Xiong, 2013). At the same time, Hmong students are expected to help their parents and contribute to their family while doing well at school (Ngo & Lor, 2013). Therefore, our study focused more on Hmong college students' feelings toward language brokering as it related to academic persistence rather than their academic grades.

When analyzing why children language broker for their family, the question arises of why they do not utilize professional translation services. Most of the scientific research on the use of professional translators and interpreters has been conducted in the field of healthcare. For example, Flores (2005) conducted a systematic literature review on the impact of professional translation services in healthcare for Americans with limited English proficiency (LEP). While patients may sometimes rely on their family members to translate medical problems, Flores' (2005) analysis demonstrated that the patients' quality of care was compromised when they did not receive translations or when they used untrained interpreters (such as family members, untrained medical and non-medical staff, strangers, and friends). On the other hand, there was positive impact on the patient's quality of care when trained, professional, and culturally sensitive interpreters were used. Similar to healthcare, Culver (2004) reported the practice of police officers reluctantly using bilingual children and other family members as translators in law enforcement situations when department interpreters were not accessible. Therefore, we

wanted to find out if Hmong families are using professional translation services for critical situations such as doctor's visits. Furthermore, it is important to understand the reason why Hmong college students translate for their parents and relatives when professional translation services are available.

In terms of one of the characteristics of who translates for the family, research shows that brokers are predominantly female (Morales & Hanson, 2005, p. 491). In addition, while gender roles are changing, studies have discussed Hmong cultural expectations on women (D. Cha, 2013; Moua, 2007). Therefore, in our study, we wanted to find out whether female Hmong college students translate more frequently than the male students.

### **Characteristics of Hmong Americans**

This is the first study, to our knowledge, that focuses on the impact of language brokering on Hmong families in the United States. Hmong are refugees from Laos who, due to their collaboration with the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, have arrived in the U.S. starting in 1975, to escape persecution from Lao communist forces (Y. Cha, 2010; Chan, 1994; Moore-Howard, 1987; C. Vang, 2010). The federal resettlement policy of the 1970s and 1980s dispersed the Hmong throughout the U.S. to accelerate their assimilation and to prevent job competition and financial burden in specific local communities (C. Vang, 2010). The Hmong continued to resettle in the U.S., with a lower percentage of Hmong migration occurring in the last part of the 1990s after the refugee camps closed in Thailand (C. Vang, 2010, p. 46). The last resettlement of 15,000 Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand in 2003 were placed in ethnic enclaves that had formed as a result of the secondary migration of Hmong from their initial settlement within the U.S. (C. Vang, 2010, p. 62; Yang, 2013).

Yang (2013) describes the three stages of Hmong arrival to the U.S.: the refugee years (1975-1991), the transitional period (1992-1999), and the Hmong American period (2000 and ongoing). When the U.S. resettlement programs did not provide adequate support for the Hmong refugees, they created their own ethnic organizations, based on Hmong identity and social structures, to help those within their community (C. Vang, 2010). As second (and third) generations of Hmong Americans adapted more to American culture and English became the dominant language, Hmong families experienced more cultural and intergenerational conflicts (Lee, 2001). For example, earlier studies showed that Hmong traditional expectations for girls to marry young led to their higher dropout rate from schools, while more recent studies have shown that both men and women are pursuing higher education by negotiating Hmong traditional values and education as a way for social mobility (D. Cha, 2013). Similarly, the Hmong American leadership is diverse and changing. While earlier Hmong organizations reflected the traditional social structure and had clan elders in leadership positions, more recent organizations would increasingly have college-educated and bilingual individuals from the younger generations (C. Vang, 2010; Yang, 2013). Despite the difficulties of resettlement and acculturation, Hmong communities are maintaining as well as transforming cultural values as they adapt to the U.S. (C. Vang, 2010).

For migrant families, the generational divide is often observed as a result of different acculturation levels. For the younger generation who were born and raised in the country their family migrated to, speaking the dominant language in the host country is easier as they use the language at school to communicate with their peers, teachers, and other people they come into contact with. On the other hand, the first-generation migrants struggle to acquire the language skills in the new place. The migrants who cannot function in society are not considered fully



adjusted to the host culture (Martin & Nakayama, 2010), which may be due to language barriers. The acculturation literature argues that the language people use plays an important role in their identity development (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1990). Thus, the youth, having parents who rely on their children to translate, are expected to experience many complications in their family such as identity and acculturation issues.

In particular, because of the Hmong's stateless condition and diaspora, their situation may be unique in terms of their stance toward having a stronger desire to retain their ethnic culture and language. Pfeifer (2013) argues that due to their historic minority identity, Hmong parents insist on the use of heritage language at home to maintain Hmong identity in the younger generation (p. 57). Even then, the Hmong diaspora has led to some of these Hmong traditions to transform and adapt to the new environment (C. Vang, 2010). The analysis of the impact of statelessness on the language loss or retention in the Hmong community is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the Hmong, as with other refugee and immigrant groups, are also expected to experience language loss as later generations begin to adapt and assimilate to U.S. culture. As the children become more acculturated to individualistic values of the U.S., they might begin to experience more conflict with their parents (Guan & Shen, 2015). However, "when parent and child values are aligned, there seems to be reduced conflict and negative feelings associated with language brokering" (Guan & Shen, 2015, p. 1335). While the various problems facing Hmong refugees may be due to different levels of language proficiency among family members, the need for language brokering by children might, at the same time, actually provide a greater opportunity for the family to communicate. Some identity literature show that bilingual ability is associated with ethnic self-identification and academic achievement (Bankston & Zhou, 1995). Therefore, the fact that the parents need the children to translate for

them provides an opportunity for Hmong and Hmong American children to retain or learn the Hmong language and culture.

Language brokering practices have been seen widely among migrant families of different cultural backgrounds. Youth from Asian and Latin American backgrounds may experience “language brokering as a form of family assistance” because it aligns “with values of familism and family obligation” (Guan & Shen, 2015, p. 1334). However, the influence of language brokering should not be generalized. We believe that the impact of language brokering should take into consideration the specific cultural, historical, and social background of each migrant group. The aim of this study is to understand Hmong college students' language brokering practice and its effect on family relations and students' academic persistence, while accounting for the Hmong's cultural, historical, and social backgrounds. While this study focuses on a small sample of Hmong college students in the Midwest, it provides insight into the experiences and impacts of language brokering on Hmong students at college and at home.

Based on the literature review, the following research questions were developed.

***RQ1:*** How does language brokering influence Hmong college students' parent-child relationship?

***RQ2:*** How does language brokering impact Hmong college students' academic persistence?

***RQ3:*** Are there gender differences in terms of frequency of language brokering?

### **Research Design**

To our knowledge, there are no studies that analyzed the impact of language brokering on Hmong refugees and Hmong Americans. Because this is a new research area, a multi-method research design was used to address the research questions. This study used a concurrent design, “where the qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed separately” (Creamer,

2017, p. 176). Figure 1 illustrates the steps taken in the process of data collection and analysis. Each of the quantitative and qualitative sections will be divided into the method and results portions, with the general discussion to follow.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at a predominantly White public university located in the Midwest, in a state which has one of the largest Hmong populations. While the university does not collect ethnic data, from observation, the Hmong are the largest Asian ethnic group at this university. The online survey (quantitative study) was conducted first and the focus group interviews (qualitative study) conducted the following semester. From the online survey, we collected data on the practice, frequency, and contexts of language brokering as well as the participants' feelings towards translating, including their perception of the parent-child relationship. Based on the survey results, we then developed focus interview questions to help us understand further the impact of language brokering on the parent-child relationship and students' academic persistence. We also wanted to find out if other issues emerged from the focus interviews.

### **Method: Online Survey**

For the quantitative portion, we conducted an online survey. The survey data were used to find out the frequency of language brokering, the students' perception of language brokering on the parent-child relationship, and the attitude toward language brokering among Hmong college students. Because we were unable to send the survey specifically to Hmong students, the authors visited multiple student organization meetings, where we introduced ourselves, explained our research project, and encouraged students to participate in our study. While we individually knew some Hmong students, neither of the authors is from the Hmong community. Therefore, in an effort to build a positive, trusting relationship with the Hmong students, we strove to be as

transparent as possible by answering any questions or concerns potential participants had. The study was approved with exempt status by the university's Institutional Review Board. After sending the survey link to the student organizations, the Hmong students from these organizations either took the survey themselves or referred the survey to other Hmong students who attended the university. Seventy-nine Hmong college students participated in the online survey.

## **Measurements**

***Language brokering experience.*** Language brokering experience was measured in multiple ways. First, the overall language brokering experience was measured by a single item asking the total numbers of translations conducted in the past. Second, we measured the frequency of language translation in the previous month. Third, based on studies by Hua and Costigan (2012) and Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, and Little (2015), we measured the various contents and locations of language brokering. The participants were asked what, where, and for whom they did language brokering. Participants responded on a 5-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*.

***Language brokering attitude and parent-child relationship.*** The language brokering experience was measured using Kim et al.'s (2014) seven language-brokering scales (children-focused burden, parent-focused burden, disrespect of parent/role reversal, positive relations with parents, negative feelings, students' efficacy, and students' independence) for Chinese American adolescents and their parents. Participants answered all items using the Likert Scale (1 = "*strongly disagree*" and 5 = "*strongly agree*"). Cronbach's alpha, mean, and standard deviations for the seven language-brokering scales are presented in Table 1.

Using and adapting Kim et al.'s (2014) seven language-brokering scales, four items

measured *feelings of burden for children* (e.g., “It is stressful to translate” and “I feel pressure to translate for my parent”). Four items measured *parent-focused burden* (e.g., “My mother doesn’t need to learn English because I translate for her” and “It is my obligation to translate for my father”). Seven items measured *disrespect of parent or role reversal* (e.g., “I do not have respect for my mother because I translate for her” and “I feel more knowledgeable than my father because I translate for him”). Three items measured *positive relations with parents* (e.g., “My mother praises me [thinks highly of me] because I translate for her”). Six items measured *students’ negative feelings* (e.g., “I feel helpless when my parent asks me to translate” and “I feel hopeless because my parent asks me to translate”). Three items measured *efficacy of the students* (e.g., “I am good at translating”). Lastly, *students’ independence* was measured with three items (e.g., “I feel useful when I translate”). Table 1 shows cronbach’s alpha, mean, and standard deviation for students’ frequency of language brokering for their parents, perceptions of language brokering on academic persistence, perceptions towards language brokering, as well as perceived impact on parent-child relationship.

**Table 1. Cronbach’s alpha, mean, and standard deviation for each measurement**

Measurement	Cronbach’s alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation
Frequency of language brokering for their parents	N/A	1.28	.45
Negative impact of language brokering on academic persistence	N/A	1.48	.71
Feelings of burden for children	.84	2.34	.88
Parent-focused burden	Mother .70	2.54	.79
	Father .72	2.02	.74
Disrespect of parent	Mother .79	1.31	.48
	Father .88	1.31	.56

Positive relations with parents	Mother .62	3.10	.81
	Father .82	2.84	1.02
Negative feelings toward language brokering	.94	2.18	1.06
Efficacy of language brokering	.94	2.84	.84
Feeling independent	.79	3.59	.74

*Note: The following applies except for "Frequency of language brokering for their parents."*

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither disagree or agree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

***Impact of language brokering on students' academic persistence.*** The impact of language brokering on students' academic persistence was measured by one item developed by the authors (i.e., "I feel that translating for my parent took time away from studying and has negatively impacted my academic performance"). The participants answered the questions using a Likert Scale (1 = "*strongly disagree*" and 5 = "*strongly agree*").

### **Online Survey Results**

#### **Descriptive statistics**

Out of 79 responses, 77 (97.5%) reported that both of their parents were born in a country outside the U.S., and two (2.5%) reported that one of their parents was born in another country outside the U.S. Seventy participants (88.6%) said they were born in the U.S., while eight (11.4%) said they were born elsewhere, and one did not respond. The average age of coming to the U.S. was six ( $SD = 2.93$ ,  $range = 1-9$ ). Thirty-two students identified as male (40.5%) and 47 students identified as female (59.5%). The average age of participants was 20.60 years old ( $SD =$

2.49, range = 18-32). The participants mostly used Hmong (63.3%) when communicating with their parents, followed by a mixture of Hmong and English (25.3%). However, when we asked for the primary language at home, contrary to their parents, most of the students (59.5%) reported they used a mixture of Hmong and English language. Almost 90% of the participants reported that they had experience with language brokering. Other demographic information such as father's job (Table 2), mother's job (Table 3), annual household income (Table 4), parents' education (Table 5), language proficiency of students and parents (Table 6), and specific contexts in which translation took place (Table 7) are listed in the following tables.

**Table 2. *Father's Job***

<b>Father's Job</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Factory worker	17	21.519
Unemployed	10	12.658
Driver	4	5.063
Farmer	3	3.797
Retired	3	3.797
Machine operator	3	3.797
Company	3	3.797
Auto mechanic	2	2.532
Medical assistant	2	2.532
Stay at home	2	2.532
Engineer	2	2.532
Other (Security guard/ Information systems/ Job coordinator/ Chef [business owner]/ Housekeeping/ Deceased]	6	7.595
No answer	14	17.722
N/A	5	6.329
Don't know	3	3.797

**Table 3. *Mother's Job***

<b>Mother's Job</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Assembly worker	19	24.050
Unemployed	13	16.456
Stay at home	6	7.595
Medical assistant	5	6.329
Company worker	5	6.329
Machine operator	2	2.532
Entrepreneur	2	2.532
Other (Driver/ School administrator/ Director of adult daycare center/ Farmer/ Translator/ Housekeeping/ Chef [business owner]/ Banking accountant/ Retired/ Sewer/ Insurance advisor)	11	13.924
No answer	10	12.658
N/A	6	7.595

**Table 4. *Total Annual Household Income***

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
< \$10,000	17	21.5
\$10,000-\$49,999	41	51.9
\$50,000-\$99,999	16	20.3
≥\$100,000	2	2.5
Missing	3	3.8



**Table 5. Parents' Education**

	Father		Mother	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Less than High School	12	15.3	26	32.9
High School	34	43	33	41.8
College Degree	16	20.3	7	8.9
Professional Degree	2	2.5	1	1.3
Master's Degree	0	0	0	0
Doctorate Degree	0	0	1	1.3
Unknown	13	16.5	9	11.4
Missing	2	2.5	2	2.5

**Table 6. Language Proficiency**

	Student		Father		Mother	
English	$M = 4.26$	$SD = .91$	$M = 3.18$	$M = 4.42$	$M = 2.75$	$SD = 1.21$
Hmong	$M = 2.87$	$SD = .93$	$SD = 1.17$	$SD = .92$	$M = 4.39$	$SD = .95$

- 1 = Very uncomfortable
- 2 = Uncomfortable
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Comfortable
- 5 = Very Comfortable

**Table 7. What/Where/Who do the Hmong students translate? (Top 3)**

Where do they translate?		Who do they translate for?		What do they translate?	
Doctor's Office	$M = 3.32,$ $SD = 1.26$	Mother	$M = 3.36,$ $SD = 1.36$	Medical forms	$M = 3.20,$ $SD = 1.24$
Restaurants/stores	$M = 3.31,$ $SD = 1.15$	Grandparents	$M = 3.32,$ $SD = 1.54$	School letters	$M = 3.19,$ $SD = 1.38$
Over the phone	$M = 3.09,$ $SD = 1.23$	Father	$M = 2.75,$ $SD = 1.32$	Instructions for a new appliance or equipment	$M = 3.12,$ $SD = 1.29$

- 1 = Never
- 2 = Rarely
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Often
- 5 = Always

**Research question one: Impact of language brokering on parent-child relationship**

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed among the following variables: the frequency of language brokering for the parents in the previous month, student-focused feeling of burden, mother-focused feeling of burden, father-focused feeling of burden, efficacy, independence, disrespect of mother, disrespect of father, positive relationship with mother, and positive relationship with father. In order to control Type I errors, we used .001 as a threshold for significance.

The frequency of brokering in the previous month itself was not significantly correlated with any of the variables above. However, when including the variables of location (situation) of students' language brokering, the perception of independence was significantly correlated to many different language brokering situations, such as post office ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ), ceremonies ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ), stores/restaurants ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ), government offices ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ), and banks ( $r = .42, p < .001$ ) (see Table 8).

In terms of the relationship between the content of their language brokering, translating instructions for a new appliance/equipment ( $r = .47, p < .001$ ), bank statements ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ), immigration forms ( $r = .42, p < .001$ ), utility bills ( $r = .47, p < .001$ ), and rental contracts ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ) was significantly correlated with the perception of independence (see Table 8).

Thus, the survey data revealed that the frequency of translating was not significantly correlated to disrespect of parent or parent-child role reversal. Student-focused feeling of burden, parent-focused feeling of burden, positive relations with parent, negative feelings, and student's efficacy were also not significantly associated with the frequency of language brokering. However, the frequency of language brokering in certain situations and contexts related to the students' perception of independence.

**Table 8. Zero-Order Correlations among Variables**

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Perception of independence	–									
2. Post office	.52**	–								
3. Ceremonies	.48**	.72**	–							
4. Stores/Restaurants	.48**	.51**	.46**	–						
5. Government offices	.43**	.79**	.66**	.48**	–					
6. Banks	.42**	.74**	.59**	.56**	.77**	–				
7. Instructions for a new appliance	.31**	.48**	.36**	.51**	.49**	.49**	–			
8. Bank statements	.49**	.69**	.58**	.41**	.77**	.74**	.53**	–		
9. Immigration forms	.42**	.64**	.63**	.48**	.65**	.69**	.49**	.81**	–	
10. Utility bills	.47**	.63**	.59**	.47**	.59**	.57**	.52**	.71**	.70**	–
11. Rental contracts	.44**	.69**	.66**	.45**	.68**	.61**	.39**	.68**	.70**	.86**

Note. 2-6: The frequency of brokering in the previous month at each location. 7-11: Contents of language brokering. \*\* $p < .001$ .

### **Research question two: Impact of language brokering on academic persistence**

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed among one academic persistence variable and eight different situation variables. In order to control for Type I errors, a p value of less than .001 was used for significance. Students felt that language brokering impacted negatively on their academics when they translated more often at stores/restaurants ( $r = -.41, p < .001$ ).

### **Research question three: Gender difference in language brokering frequency**

Research question three asked whether gender difference existed in terms of the frequency of language brokering among Hmong college students. A two-proportion Z-test was calculated to see whether female Hmong students translated significantly more than male Hmong students. Among 30 male students who answered the question, 19 reported that they currently translated for their parents and relatives. Among 46 female students, 36 reported that they currently translated for their parents and relatives. The result for gender difference was not significant ( $Z = 1.42, p = .16$ ).

### **Method: Focus Group Interviews**

In order to further understand Hmong college students' perspectives toward language brokering, and the impact of translating on their academic persistence and family relations, two focus group interviews were conducted. Before the focus groups interviews, a set of questions were developed by the authors, which were approved with exempt status by the university's Institutional Review Board. During the interview sessions, we asked follow-up questions to acquire further details and clarification if needed. We also revisited student organizations to specifically recruit students who had experiences translating for their family to sign up for the focus interviews.

During each one-hour interview, the lead author introduced the questions and moderated the discussions, while the second author managed the logistics such as tracking time and overseeing the recording equipment. The interviews in the first group, with four students (two men and two women), were transcribed into 23 pages of single-spaced text. The second interview, with eight students (seven men and one woman), were transcribed into 19 pages of single-spaced text.

To further analyze the impact of language brokering on parent-child relationship and the student's academic persistence, the focus group interview questions asked for students' thoughts on the following issues: 1) the frequency of translating for their parents/relatives, 2) students' feelings towards language brokering, 3) the benefits as well as challenges of language brokering, 4) the impact of language brokering on maintaining Hmong culture/language as well as learning English and adapting to U.S. culture, 5) the impact of language brokering on their parents' English language acquisition process and adaptation to U.S. culture, 6) language and cultural barriers within the family, 7) whether students ever felt isolated because of language/cultural barriers and whether they had a support system, 8) whether language brokering allowed students to become bicultural and bilingual, and 9) why parents choose their children rather than professional services to translate for them. Using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), the authors open-coded the raw texts, created categories, and identified the emerging themes. A selective coding system was then used to find more specific themes. As a result, six key themes emerged from the two focus group data: 1) difficulties of language brokering, 2) cultural and language barriers within the family, 3) language brokering as maintaining heritage, 4) the impact of language brokering on their parents, 5) lack of academic support in the family, and 6) use of

family members as interpreters as a result of ineffective professional translators. The focus interview responses have been lightly edited for ease of reading.

### **Focus Group Interview Results**

Overall, the focus group interviews revealed more specific information on the practices surrounding language brokering and its impact on Hmong college students. Parents who came to the U.S. at an older age and had limited English proficiency relied on their children (i.e. the Hmong students), the students' siblings, or other family members for translations. How frequently students translated for their parents and relatives depended on whether the students lived with their parents, whether they were older among the siblings, whether their parents required language brokering, or whether the students had fluent speaking ability in Hmong. If the students lived with their parents, the frequency of language brokering increased compared to those who lived away from their parents. Even when students did not live with their parents, some students, on occasions, were asked to translate documents. Other students mentioned that their parents also depended on siblings who still lived at home, or other siblings who lived closer to the parents, for the language brokering. Students with parents who had arrived in the U.S. at a younger age, and therefore spoke fluent English and were educated in the U.S., did not translate for their parents. However, these same students mentioned that they sometimes translated for their grandparents or other relatives.

#### **Theme one: Difficulties of language brokering**

In general, the students were willing and happy to translate for their family members. For example, Student G commented:

I have no problem translating for my parents, but at times I feel like I don't know terms for some words to translate as accurately to them. At times, I feel like I can't translate it

correctly to them. Sometimes I feel like I'm not helpful, but I'm always willing to translate whenever I can.

The negative feelings associated with language brokering was directed more towards the difficulties with translations, as it required them to have some fluency in Hmong. Student D said:

It's embarrassing to say, but I get really frustrated sometimes. Speaking in Hmong, I'm really fluent in the basics. I just speak it like that [snaps fingers]. But when things start to get technical, and they start throwing big English words, I just can't do it and I get frustrated. It makes me realize how bad my Hmong language is, which I feel kind of embarrassed and sad at the same time. I feel like I am letting [my mom] down at the same time. So I'm not really frustrated with my mom, or the language brokering, I'm just frustrated at myself. I feel like I can do better.

It was when they had to interrupt their busy course work to go home and translate that the students sometimes felt that language brokering was a burden. Also, students felt high expectations from their parents when they had to translate. According to Student L:

If I was unable to translate something for my parents and they put me down for that. Why can't you translate this? Don't you go to school for it? Or don't you go to school, so shouldn't you know it? And I feel kind of down because I'm not able to translate. But I do go to school and they don't realize that it's not the thing I'm learning. But I still have that sense of feeling that I'm not able to do anything for them.

It was evident that when students expressed frustration with language brokering, it was not directed towards their parents or relatives, but rather towards themselves for their lack of Hmong language proficiency and being unable to properly translate the words. In addition, students were also afraid of disappointing their parents when they were not able to translate well.

Despite the difficulty of translating, language brokering was also about maintaining connection to their culture as well as their family. For example, Student C said:

I'm really not good at Hmong. I think I am just OK, minimum speaking level. But I do still feel connection to my culture. And I do try to translate. It makes me feel like I am helpful when I can translate. And there is that connection between me and who I am trying to translate for.

These student comments revealed that language brokering was more than the act of translating. While it was not an easy task, it was also about being a contributing member of the family as well as maintaining connections to Hmong culture and language.

### **Theme two: Cultural and language barriers within the family**

Related to the difficulty of language brokering, students also brought up cultural differences, such as the different perceptions towards hugging and going to sleepovers as well as the Hmong taboo against marrying somebody who shares the same last name (i.e. from the same clan). Student B also mentioned that his parents didn't understand sarcasm or analogies. These cultural barriers were compounded by the language barrier, which made it difficult to provide explanations for these cultural differences. When asked whether the language barrier affected the relationship or communication with their parents, students' answers varied. Student B said, "I don't think it creates any conflict. If anything [our relationship] gets closer, because I use it as kind of a bonding experience." In addition to closing the generational as well as emotional distance as a result of translating, Student D talked about how the act of language brokering physically brought families together:

I think it helps bring siblings back. . . All my sisters are older, they're all married now, and all have families of their own, so language brokering really forces them to come back



and reconnect with their mom. I feel like it makes my mom happy because she gets to see her daughters again.

However, Student C said that the language barriers did affect her relationship with her mother because she expected her mother to have better command of English as she came to the U.S. when she was young: "It makes me feel a little frustrated that, or it just questions me, why couldn't she learn English when she was younger? . . . I do get frustrated at her, which is bad."

Students were asked whether they sought help when they encountered cultural differences with their parents. Some commented that they did not seek help even when they did not fully understand their parents' Hmong ways of thinking. However, others, such as Student L and H, said that they usually went to older siblings for help and advice because they understood American culture better than their parents.

The language and cultural barriers between the generations was not just about the parents' unfamiliarity with American ways or English, it was also about the younger generations losing contact with the Hmong culture and language as a result of assimilation. Student E made the following observation:

The one thing I see keep happening is that as the younger generation grow up, their Hmong is less and less, so they can't really communicate with their grandparents. And that creates a big gap between communicating, and they become shy and they don't want to talk. Another gap I've seen is the more English they have, the more successful, too.

While learning English (and becoming successful) should not be at the expense of maintaining Hmong language and relationship with family, this is a reality in many immigrant and refugee families where assimilation in the U.S. often comes with the cost of losing one's culture and language.

### **Theme three: Language brokering as maintaining heritage**

When asked whether there were benefits to language brokering, students mentioned that the experience helped them maintain connection to Hmong language and culture, encouraged them to practice Hmong, and improved both their Hmong and English language abilities. For example, Student D said:

Nowadays in college, we don't use Hmong that often because English is the number one language. But we have to use it back at home because [my parents] don't speak English, so it forces us to use Hmong and practice it so that we don't forget it, which is not a bad thing. It's definitely a good thing.

Similarly, Student L said:

I feel like it definitely helps learning again the Hmong language because when you're learning English education, then you already kind of know the English word, but you have to somehow translate that into Hmong. Then you would have to beat around the bush and really find your Hmong words to exactly match that. Then it helps you think about it and you learn a little bit more Hmong while trying to translate that.

In addition, language brokering was also about maintaining identity as a Hmong. Student D said:

If there was no language brokering, I wouldn't have to translate for my mom all the time. That means I won't be speaking Hmong at home. And then that would have led me to eventually losing my Hmong heritage all together. And just not being able to know what Hmong is.

Students also stated that language brokering was beneficial because it helped them to be bilingual and bicultural, encouraged them to be open-minded towards a third culture (besides American or Hmong) or other Asian cultures, and brought family members and relatives closer

to one another. Student A said, "For me, translating is really nice because it just makes that connection between me and my family." Students felt that language brokering created an opportunity for communication to start between them and their parents.

#### **Theme Four: The impact of language brokering on their parents**

When students were asked whether language brokering prevented them from learning American culture or English, students said that it helped them learn both English and Hmong. For example, Student D said:

If anything, it benefited us, or me. Personally. Just because my translating English into Hmong, you have to think about all these words. You actually have to understand it so that you can translate it for your parents, or your siblings. You use what you learn from trying to translate English into Hmong. You are usually there to learn new words in the English language.

For the parents, the question of whether language brokering prevented them from learning American culture or English was a little more complicated. Some students who had parents who had arrived in the U.S. at an older age had a more difficult time learning English. Others, such as Student D, felt that the parents' priorities were to survive and pave the way for a better future for their children. Gender roles and the need for an at-home parent to care for the children (while the other parent worked) led some of the mothers to be less fluent in English as it limited their contact with English speaking situations. However, Student G said, "When you are interpreting for them you are kind of teaching them a little English." Several also noted that language brokering wasn't just about the students learning Hmong, but also an opportunity for their parents to learn English. As student L said, "Besides just your parents learning, you also learn yourself." Language brokering became a learning experience for both the students and their

parents.

### **Theme five: Lack of academic support in the family**

Language brokering had positive impacts such as encouraging bilingualism and biculturalism as well as increasing communication with their parents or other relatives. But the language and cultural barriers also created a sense of isolation for some students, more so in relation to the lack of academic support they received from their parents. Students who had parents who did not receive education in the U.S. felt disadvantaged compared to White students because of their parents' limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system. The parents would encourage their children to do well in school and support them, but some Hmong students felt that their parents could not provide specific academic support. For example, Student D said:

Academically speaking I struggled a lot at high school. Coming home we don't have that academic support from parents. Let's say hypothetically, a White kid comes home, his parents had gone to college, graduated, and got their degrees. They come home from school, or they need help with this and that. Their parents know how to get that resource, how to get them the help that you need. While living in a non-English speaking household, you come home, you struggle. The only thing your parents can do is feed you, clothe you, and say, "work hard." And that's probably the only advice you get from them.

Student A also said, "The fact that since our parents didn't go to school to learn, if we were struggling, all they can say is . . . 'just try hard in your education.'"

However, rather than being upset, students voiced compassion for their parents and family about the language and cultural barriers. Student H said that he should learn more Hmong and create more occasions to talk to his parents. Similarly, Student L said that he was going to

ask his parents to teach him Hmong. In general, students had a strong awareness of the difficulties that their parents have gone through during the Secret War, life in refugee camps, and starting a new life in U.S. as refugees, and that they wanted the best for their children.

**Theme six: Use of family members as interpreters as a result of ineffective professional translators**

In terms of who was doing the language brokering in the family, the focus group interviews revealed that parents relied more on students and their siblings who were working towards, or had already received, a college education. The interviews also indicated that students were not the only ones who translated for their parents (or other relatives). The participants who self-reported as being a younger sibling, claimed to not translate as much, because the parents relied on the older siblings who were more fluent in Hmong. In some instances, one spouse translated for the other. Several students mentioned that their father translated for their mother. The father who needed to work outside of the home exposed him to an environment where he had to learn English, whereas the mother who stayed home to care for the children was less fluent in English. In another case, the mother translated for the father because she had a higher educational degree than he did.

It was interesting that these Hmong families relied on each other despite the availability of professional translation services. When asked about why they didn't utilize existing professional translators, students pointed out some of its problems, such as the need for more translation services for the public, not just in hospitals but also in government institutions. Several students also noted that despite the professional translators' knowledge of both Hmong and English languages, sometimes their accents, their inaccurate translations, or lack of knowledge of technical terms created problems in the translation process.

Many Hmong students were concerned about the professional translators' ability as a language broker. Student H's comment illustrates the above points well:

I used to work at the bank. Their regular social worker [translator] would come in and interpret for them and I'm [thinking what] you are saying is totally wrong to your client. Let me rephrase it for you. Because I work there I have an understanding of whatever they need an interpretation on.

As a bilingual and as a person who works at the bank, he was more knowledgeable about the banking system than the translator who may know two languages but did not have expertise in the field.

Because of these issues, students said that their parents brought family members who had college degrees/higher education, and who they had a bond or trust with, to do the translations.

Student I said:

So my dad asked my mom to go for that level of importance, rather than us kids. My parents would never ask for an interpreter. That my dad will always ask my mom is because my mom had a higher education than he had. I think that they do that, so they will actually communicate with each other, since they live with each other and have that bond to trust each other to know how to translate.

Student A said that when she would go to the hospital with her mother, the translators would interpret incorrectly. That is why, "even if there is a translator, she would also bring one of us kids to go with her. Because she knows that we can't lie to her."

Student D commented on how he felt that the translators needed more sensitivity and cultural understanding to develop more of a personal relationship in the translation process, especially in hospitals. Translation is not a simple process of converting one word or phrase into

another language, but involves an in-depth knowledge of the cultures involved. As Student D said, “[translators] are that bridge between one culture and another, one language and another.” The importance of intercultural competence in the language brokering process as well as the need for trust and bond was what had led this particular group of Hmong families to rely on family members (such as their children) to translate rather than using professional translation services.

## **Discussion**

### **Impact of Language Brokering on Parent-Child relationships**

The multi-method research revealed Hmong students' perceptions of language brokering and its impact on their relationship with their parents. The findings showed that the Hmong students' feelings towards language brokering varied depending on the content and context of translations. When students translated important documents such as instructions for a new appliance/equipment, bank statements, immigration forms, utility bills, and rental contracts, they felt more independent. Also, in terms of locations, translating in the post office, ceremonies, stores/restaurants, government offices, and banks was correlated with the perception of independence. At the same time, students felt translating in stores/restaurants took up their time and negatively impacted their academic studies. While translating in stores/restaurants gave students a sense of independence, this negative feeling could possibly be explained by how the content of translating in stores/restaurants was not seen as important as immigration forms or bank statements. The students' varied perceptions towards language brokering supports the importance of analyzing specific contents and contexts of translating as pointed out by Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, and Little (2015).

Our most striking finding was that language brokering had mostly positive impacts on the

Hmong college students. Intergenerational and cultural conflict existed between the parents and the children. However, we found that the frequency of language brokering was not related with disrespect of parent or parent-child role-reversal and parent-focused feeling of burden. In fact, the connection to, and understanding of, Hmong culture as well as the act of language brokering itself became a bridge for students to having a better relationship with their parents.

While the language and cultural barriers between parents and children created difficulties, the act of language brokering increased students' connection to Hmong culture and language as well as served as a bridge between generations. According to the interviews, the acculturation gap between their parents and the students, and the lack of Hmong proficiency felt by the students did create some confusion and misunderstanding at times. However, students tried to understand cultural differences by relying on older siblings for help or by increasing communication with their parents. Students felt that the language brokering situations created an opportunity for parents to learn English and American culture, and for students to learn more about Hmong language and culture, improving their relationship with their parents.

Our findings showed that language brokering led to students' positive relations with their parents and family members. While language brokering felt burdensome when students had other commitments, they felt that it brought them closer, emotionally as well as physically, to their family members. Students' frustration towards translating was more towards feeling insecure about their own Hmong language ability, difficulty of translations, and fear of disappointing parents. In most cases, students were willing to translate for their parents, and felt that it increased their connections with their families as well as their connection to Hmong language, culture, and identity.

In fact, because of the trust that existed between family members, we found that Hmong



students often translated for their parents despite the availability of professional translation services. The quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the intergenerational acculturation gaps made it difficult to broker languages. Language brokering does not mean simply translating between two languages. In order to broker the two languages, the translator needs to mediate the cultural norms, characteristics, or sometimes, political, social, or economical rules and systems. In spite of the challenges of language brokering, these Hmong families preferred to have family members translate or interpret for them rather than using professional translation services. The online survey revealed that 40.5% of the students who had translated had various reasons for not using professional translation services despite their availabilities, mainly that they were inconvenient, inadequate, and that family and relatives felt uncomfortable using them. The focus interviews revealed that parents were using college-educated family members to translate because of the professional translators' lack of cultural sensitivity and knowledge of technical terms. While the students were willing to translate for the parents and relatives, they felt that the existing professional translation services needed improvement. They thought there was need for Hmong-English translators who are proficient in both Hmong White and Hmong Green, who have cultural sensitivity, and who have specialized knowledge of the field in which translation is needed. This highlights the important fact that translation is not simply about converting words from one language into another but requires cultural knowledge and familiarity with technical terms.

However, using family members rather than professional translators was not just about lack of efficiency. More importantly, student comments from the focus interviews revealed that language brokering was not simply about translating words but was also a demonstration of trust and reinforcement of relationship between family members, which drew them closer together. As

such, the students' sense of being an ineffective translator led to them to feel that they were letting their parents down.

### **The Impact of Language Brokering on Academic Persistence**

According to the online data, Hmong students felt that language brokering for their parents took them away from their time to study. They especially felt that translating more often at stores/restaurants negatively impacted their academic performance. Thus, the frequency and the location as well as the content of translation affected the relationship between language brokering and academic persistence. Compared to language brokering at the doctor's and government offices, translating at a store/restaurant might not seem as important. In addition, visits to stores and restaurants can occur more frequently than visits to doctor's and government offices.

The focus interviews also revealed that students who had parents with language barriers and were unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system felt that while they received emotional support from their parents, they didn't receive much academic support. Our study is consistent with the research by Ngo and Lor (2013) and Lee (2001) that demonstrate how Hmong students struggle with balancing family obligations and their academic work. Even if parents may not have provided academic support specifically, studies by McClain-Ruelle and Xiong (2005) and Lor (2008) show that even when Hmong parents have "limited or no formal education in the US" they have "a positive impact on their children's educational pursuits" by giving financial and emotional support to their children (Xiong & Lam, 2013, p. 140). Ngo and Lee's (2007) thorough analysis of Hmong Americans in education shows that earlier studies focused on cultural issues as the reasons for the success or struggles of Hmong American students, while "research since the 1990s explores both cultural and structural issues that Hmong students

encounter. The post-1990 literature also reveals the way Hmong culture has been both maintained and transformed in response to cultural, economic, political, and social forces in the United States” (p. 432). The reasons for the perception of lack of support from parents could have more to do with structural issues, such as language barriers, poverty, or not having experience in U.S. higher education, rather than simply cultural differences. Despite this, the students were very willing to translate for their families.

Future research needs to explore more how the structural issues impact the academic persistence of Hmong students. Educational institutions will need to provide more academic support for first generation college students as well as children of non-English speaking parents. In addition, if Hmong students are being asked by parents and family to translate despite the existence of professional translation services, future studies need to find out the impacts of language brokering on students' attendance in schools as well as their academic performance.

### **Gender Difference in Language Brokering Frequency**

The online survey revealed that there was no gender difference in terms of the frequency of translating for their parents and relatives. Similarly, the focus group interviews (which consisted of 75% male students) revealed that the male students also translated for their parents and relatives. While much has been written on the cultural expectations on Hmong women and the impact on their education, a study on a small sample of Hmong high school boys revealed the expectations that are also placed on Hmong American young men and boys, such as being a positive role model to younger siblings, providing language brokering, contributing in ceremonies, and helping their families economically (Ngo & Lor, 2013).

Overall, the study revealed that language brokering did not negatively impact parent-child relationship. In fact, the act of language brokering increased their connection not only to

their family but also to their Hmong culture and language. However, students sometimes felt a sense of isolation, specifically in terms of feeling that they did not receive adequate academic support from their parents. The pressure to not disappoint their parents, the sense of obligation to their family, and the level of sensitivity and difficulty involved in these translations (especially government documents, hospitals, etc.) could possibly have negative impacts on these students and should be investigated further.

### **Limitations**

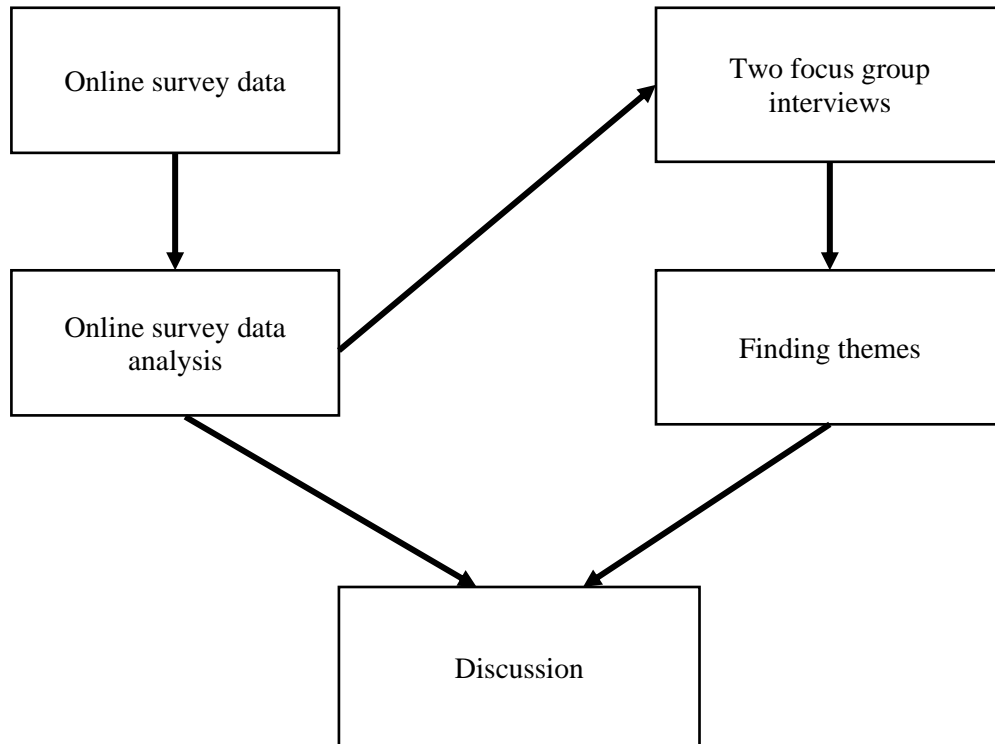
Although the study is carefully designed, this study is not without its limitation. First, this study used a convenience sample of Hmong college students who attended one university located in the Midwest. The sample size for the quantitative and qualitative studies were limited reflecting the small number of Hmong students in this predominantly White institution. A larger sample is needed for advanced data analyses and generalization of the results. Also, because of the lower statistical power, we could not find significant gender differences in terms of the frequency of language brokering for parents and relatives. Second, as noted in previous literature on the Hmong (e.g., Lee, 2001), there are gaps between Hmong youth who are doing well academically and successfully graduating from high schools; and those who drop out from high schools or do not pursue college. The focus on college students may not reflect the general experiences of Hmong youth and we recommend future research on those who do not attend college or are younger than college age. Third, there might also be regional differences compared to Hmong students who live in more diverse locations. Fourth, this study found that Hmong students felt language brokering took time away from their studying. However, in order to better understand the impact of language brokering on Hmong students' academic persistence, future research should collect data on students' academic grades. Finally, future studies need to include

the parents' perspectives on their children's language brokering in order to get a full picture of the impact of language brokering on parent-child relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, this multi-method study offers important insights into the impact of language brokering on Hmong college students. This study found that among Hmong Americans at one university in the Midwest, using children as language brokers is a common practice, partly due to the lack of adequate, accessible, and convenient translation services, and also because parents trusted their family members more for translating important issues. While students sometimes felt that translating for their parents took time away from their academic work, this study found language brokering to have a positive impact on parent-child relationship among the participants. Data from both the online survey and focus group interviews suggest some intergenerational gaps in terms of language and culture. Because Hmong college students interact with students from other cultures, especially mainstream American culture, they at times struggled between traditional Hmong cultural norms and dominant cultural norms. However, the focus group interviews revealed that translating helped parents learn English at the same time that it helped students maintain Hmong language and culture. Language brokering also increased and deepened the relationship between family members. Overall, this multi-method study revealed Hmong college students' mostly positive feelings toward, and experiences, with language brokering.

**Figure 1.** *Research design: Illustrations of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses*



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