

## **A day in the life of an immigrant child language broker in Los Angeles**

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*Many children of immigrants serve as translators, interpreters, or “language brokers” for their families and for others. They use their knowledge of two languages to speak, read, write, listen and do things for their parents, siblings, peers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, service providers and many others. These language brokering activities are embedded in everyday life, from the mundane, at home (e.g. reading cereal boxes and things that come in the mail) and in school, to more specialized encounters in the public eye (e.g. at hospitals, clinics, or in public spaces). In this chapter, we tell the story of a day in the life of one young child in Los Angeles, as she moves through her day and helps broker between Spanish and English for others.*

The alarm startles Ana awake. She looks below her bed to see her sister Luz still asleep.

Climbing slowly down, she makes sure to hold onto the metal railing of the bunk bed ladder so she doesn't slip. Mornings are busy for the bathroom and she knows she must be quick to make sure Luz will have enough time to shower and be ready before it is time to go to school. Ana bathes quickly, brushes her teeth, and walks into the living room where the girls' mother, Lily, is sipping on cafe con leche. Their father, Eddy, is folding up their sofa bed. Lily comments that Ana is always on time, and Eddy chuckles that Ana is never on time because she is always early.

The family takes turns in the bathroom. Lily fixes Ana's hair as Luz finally makes it to the living room. Ana pours milk and cereal for Luz. They sit for a minute looking at the back of the cereal

box. Luz points to the word “gluten” on the cereal box and asks her sister what gluten is. Ana says “I don’t know, but we can look it up.” She borrows her mother’s phone, types in the password, pulls up the Internet, and googles “Gluten-Free.” Ana puzzles over the first entry she finds on google. “I think it’s something in cereal. It makes people sick.” She thinks to herself, “I wonder why the gluten is free?” But she doesn’t have much time to think because her mother is hurrying her out the door. Lily likes to be at the bus stop early so that they are guaranteed a seat near the driver, where her husband Eddy says it is safer.

They hop on the bus. Lily says “good morning” and the bus driver replies “Hola!” Ana knows that the bus driver does not *really* speak Spanish, but he always greets them with a friendly “Hola” and adds “Adios” when they exit at their stop.

Luz looks out the window and asks Ana, “what are those signs and circles next to the chicken?” Ana responds “I think they are words.” Luz waits for Ana to read the strange letters and words for her. Ana replies “I don’t know. Mama, what does that sign say?” Lily explains it is a different language, not English or Spanish, but Korean. This confuses Luz, but Ana understands because her teacher Ms. Kang is from Korea. Ms. Kang taught the class how to say hello in Korean: Annyeong Haseyo. Anna likes how hello sounds in Korean.

As they hop off the bus, the bus driver says “Adios!” The girls reply “Thank you!”

Outside of the school’s main entrance, parents and children gather waiting for the gates to open at 7:30. Lily talks with other parents, while Ana and Luz socialize with their friends.

While they wait Lily receives a message on her phone. She asks Ana to help her write a reply: “Text her that I will make sure to bring in the trash bins, walk the dogs, and pay the gardeners -

and remind her that today I need to leave by 12pm so I can take Luz to the dentist.” A few seconds later she asks, “Did you write it?” Ana says “SENT!”

Lily works for a lady in a big house with a big fluffy dog. Her “patrona” always sends messages to her cellphone. Lily understands the texts but she doesn’t like to text back because she isn’t sure how to spell everything in English. Ana helps her text responses.

When the gates open, parents and children assemble in line. Children say goodbye to their parents in a hurry, as they eagerly find their seats for breakfast and await the chance to play with their friends in the school yard after finishing breakfast. The children are served a breakfast of fruit and yogurt. Lily sneaks in one more kiss and hug before she leaves and reminds the girls to listen to their teacher and keep their sweaters on when outside.

After breakfast the children play before being called to line up for their teachers. Luz’ teacher is a very nice woman named Ms. Marks. Ana and her mother had been a little nervous when they first met Ms. Marks because she has tattoos on her arms.

Ana’s teacher is Ms. Kang. Ms.Kang is kind to her students and likes to remind them that like many of them, she came to America when she was their age. In class Ana loves to help and because of this Ms. Kang made sure to seat the new student, Maricela, next to Ana. Maricela and Ana work on their class assignments together. Ana explains to Maricela the English words in Spanish. Sometimes Ana has a hard time explaining things to Maricela in Spanish because they do not always use the same words.

Once, Ana was translating a math problem about the number of car parking spaces and used the word “parqueo.” Maricela did not know what a “parqueo” was but understood when Ana pointed

to the school parking lot. Maricela asked if Ana meant “estacionamiento?” They were surprised at the different Spanish words for the same English word.

This happens often. Sometimes Maricela says words in a way that sounds funny to Ana. Once she asked her to come over to her by saying “Venite pa’ca.” Ana’s mother says it is because Maricela uses different Spanish words because she is from Guatemala, and Ana and her family are from Mexico.

Lunch time is the best part of the day because it is the longest recess. Ana and Maricela play tetherball together, and Ana tries to talk Maricela’s Guatemalan Spanish as she tells her what she can’t and can’t do in this game.

After lunch Ms. Kang transforms the room into math class by sliding the chalk boards to reveal warm up math problems. Math is Ana’s favorite subject because students can talk to each other while they work. Ana works quickly in order to finish her class work and then get started on her math homework. She is almost finished when she is called to the front office to go home early. When she walks into the front office she sees her mother talking to the front office lady and Luz is patiently listening to their conversation.

The three of them walk to the bus stop and wait for the bus. The bus they get on is smaller than their morning bus and goes a different direction. On the bus they go from their neighborhood of colorfully painted homes, dirt front lawns, and busy sidewalks to a neighborhood with tall buildings and no homes at all. They get off the bus and walk towards a large building that reads “Children’s Hospital.” Ana asks her mother why they are going to the hospital if Luz has a

dentist appointment. Lily explains that for Luz, the dentist is in the hospital. This puzzles Ana. She and Luz have the same doctor, but not the same dentist.

Inside the dental clinic children play with toys scattered on a rug printed with the alphabet and parents watch a cooking show on the silent television. Ana and her mother wait to speak with the receptionist while Luz joins the kids on the rug. They hand the receptionist a yellow card with a white sticker, and the receptionist hands them a clipboard and pen to fill out the paperwork. Ana sits next to her mother as she fills out the forms. One is in Spanish. Lily fills this form quickly, with names, phone number, address, age and other basic information. The second form is in English. Lily studies the form and points to the first question: “This is asking if she has any ...” She stops at the word pain and looks to Ana for the translation. Ana says “pain, quiere decir dolor.” Lily repeats the word with raised eyebrows as if to say she is surprised the word means pain. The next question asks whether Luz has any false teeth. Her mother understands this one without help. The following are a series of questions that read:

|                                       |   |   |    |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|----|
| How often in a day does your child... |   |   |    |
| Brush teeth                           | 1 | 2 | 3+ |
| Floss                                 | 1 | 2 | 3+ |
| Eat sugary snacks or drinks           | 1 | 2 | 3+ |

Lily recognizes some words, and asks Ana to help her fill this portion of the form. Ana says the question is “Cuántas veces al día su hijo... se cepilla los dientes... usa floss... come azucar...” Lily fills out each question and asks Ana “Floss es qué?” Luz responds “Es como un pelito blanco para limpiar entre los dientes, así como Papi.” Lily chuckles and says “Hilo dental! No pelo!” They both laugh.

The wait seemed to last forever to Ana, but finally Luz' name was called. Luz walks with her sister and mother through a door, following a nurse down a long hallway. Ana has gone to the dentist various times. She and her parents all have the same dentist - a tall pale-skinned man who works in a big trailer that comes to their church. People usually do not have to wait outside the trailer, they come at whatever time their appointment is scheduled. Ana prefers her dentist because there is no wait.

Luz' dentist speaks English and knows some Spanish. He greets the family, and asks basic questions about Luz in Spanish "Cuantos anos?" "Cuantos veces al día Luz cepilla los dientes?" and "Tiene dolor dental?" He uses his hands for gestures, and exaggerated facial expressions that make Luz giggle.

Ana and Lily sit in the two chairs behind a curtain in the exam room. Ana can hear all kinds of sounds and wonders if Luz is scared. The doctor stops and pulls back the curtain to explain "Todo está muy bien! Pero, Ana needs a *crown*." He points to his own teeth, then to his head, as though placing a crown a king or queen wears. Lily asks Ana what the dentist says Luz needs. Ana, remembering that she needed a crown once, tries to think of what her dentist called it. Once the word comes to her, Ana exclaims "casco!"

The dentist says "yes 'casco!' crown for the tooth."

Ana asks her mother why they are called crowns in english, and helmets in spanish. Crown translates to "corona" and helmet translates to "casco" in spanish. Lily says they are almost the same.

The dentist finishes with Luz, and gives Ana and Luz each a bag with toothbrushes, paste, and floss. He asks Lily if she wants one too.

They walk out the hospital building into the warm late afternoon and are happy to see that their father is waiting for them. In the car everyone takes a sigh of relief. Luz is happy she no longer has to worry about going to the dentist. Ana is happy she finally gets to go home and do her homework. Lily is relieved the appointment went well. And Eddy is relieved that he got there on time to pick up his daughters and wife, despite traffic.

Once home the dinner table becomes a home work space for Ana, a desk space for Lily to record the documents from the dentist visit, and a gathering place to eat and watch television.

Eddy reviews the mail carefully, sorting it into two piles. He asks that Ana and Luz each help with specific things. Ana wants to help but Eddy tells her to let Luz help first. Luz is eager to translate, but has fewer opportunities since Ana is older.

Luz sits next to Eddy. Holding a letter that came in the mail in her hands, she points to words she recognizes and says them in English and then Spanish. Luz begins, “Please call. Por favor llame...” Eddy replies “Aha...,” prompting Luz to translate longer phrases. Luz continues, “Por favor llame antes de Jueves Marzo 20, para... para...” She stops reading and points at a word. Eddy continues reading where she stopped: “to enroll, es inscribir.” Luz repeats “inscribir.” Eddy nods for Luz to continue. Luz reads “enroll in medical benefits, inscribirse en medical benefits.” Eddy responds, “aha, thank you mija.”

Ana sits on the other side of her father and asks if she can try to read the letter. She reads aloud, “You must enroll in time to have benefits starting April 1st. Tiene que inscribirse en tiempo para

tener beneficios Abril primero. We will pay 80% of EPO, 70% of HMO, or 60% of PPO rate monthly. Nosotros pagamos el 80 por ciento de EPO, 70 por ciento para HMO, o 60 por ciento para PPO cada mes.” Eddy replies, “Okay, esta bien, cual debemos de escoger?” Ana responds “El EPO porque usted paga menos?” Eddy explains “Sí, es verdad, pero EPO quiere decir que es exclusivo - solo podemos ir a un hospital, y con el HMO podemos ir a diferentes hospitales.” Luz chimes in “Y con Pepo?” Ana corrects her younger sister “P-P-O.” Luz revises her question “Y con P-P-O?” Eddy explains that with PPO they could see any doctor at any hospital or private clinic. Luz exclaims “Okay! P-P-O! P-P-O!” Eddy laughs and Lily shakes her head.

Eddy looks to Ana again, “Cuál escogemos?” Ana asks “Cual es más importante, ahorrar dinero o tener más doctores?” Lily enters the conversation “Bueno, tenemos que ahorrar dinero. Pero también tenemos que poder ir a un hospital cerca de casa. No podemos tomar mucho tiempo del trabajo para ir a un doctor lejos!”

Eddy announces they will have HMO insurance, explaining that it is more affordable than PPO, and more flexible than EPO. The girls cheer “HMO, HMO!”

Ana continues reading the letter: “Your co-pay will be determined by the coverage you choose. Please speak to a provider representative. Dice que su co-pay depende del coverage que escoja. Por favor hable con un... provider representante.”

Translating this letter is hard, not just because there are a lot of confusing words in it that Ana doesn't know (in English, or the Spanish equivalents), but also because she doesn't really know what it's about. But her parents know how their insurance works, and they tell her she can skip some words that they understand in English, like co-pay and coverage. They also teach her some

words she didn't know in Spanish. They look up the word "provider" on their phone. Between the three of them - Ana and her father peering at the letter as they sit side by side on the couch, and her mother looking over the notes from an employee workshop event they attended - they figure out what her father needs to know.

Lily declares "Es hora de dormir, vamos." The girls get up and kiss their father on the cheek. Eddy tells Ana she will help on the call tomorrow to the insurance company. Ana nods in agreement.

The girls brush their teeth and get ready for bed. It is never challenging for Luz to fall asleep. Ana, on the other hand, has a harder time settling down. She likes to replay the day from beginning to end in her head. Depending on the day's events, she is reminded of how different things were back home in Mexico. In Mexico all the doctors and dentists spoke Spanish. She never had to translate. She imagines what it would be like if she did not need to translate for her parents. They could go to places without her, like parent nights at school, with her teacher Ms. Kang. She could play with the other kids in the yard waiting for their parents on parent night. But she likes hearing all the things Ms. Kang says to her parents. Ms. Kang is really nice and cares about Ana, and this makes Ana feel special.

Finally, her thoughts begin to slow, and she falls asleep.

Ana's dreams are as vibrant as her daily life. She dreams of driving the bus. She greets each passenger in a different language. She says "Hola! Hello! Annyeong Haseyo!" Ana likes how she looks in her uniform, and feels excited to drive the bus. In the big rearview mirror she sees her family sitting together. She can feel her feet pushing with great strength on the pedals. In her

dream she drives through streets she has never seen before, until finally she comes to a railroad crossing where she brings the bus to a stop. The loud train whistle startles Ana awake. Ana awakens to her alarm. She turns the alarm off and looks below her. Luz is sound asleep.