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The bilingual researcher's dilemmas: Reflective approaches to translation issues

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Abstract

Research conducted by English-speaking researchers about other language speaking subjects is essentially cross-cultural and often multilingual, particularly with qualitative research that involves participants communicating in languages other than English. In research using non-English data, scholars have noted that the translation process can be problematic, and is often glossed over. Thus, they call for greater transparency in accounting for translation decisions. This article is a reflexive account of the author's doctoral research about international EAL (English as an Additional Language) students' informal academic learning practices. Nine of the ten research participants were of Chinese ethnicity and, consequently, a substantial portion of the data collected was in Chinese.

I am a Chinese Singaporean who is bilingual in English and Chinese. I discuss the dilemmas faced when interpreting and translating data from the Chinese participants, each of whom had his or her own particular social and cultural backgrounds. The dilemmas I faced were related to i) immediate understanding of interview responses, ii) interview transcription for member checking, and iii) translation of data. I argue that these dilemmas can be resolved by member checking during data collection and analysis, and the use of professional translators. However, I also caution against an idealised notion of objective meaning in translation. I conclude that cross-cultural research should take into account the researcher's cultural and language identity in understanding how data from research participants is represented.

Keywords

Cross-cultural research; international students; language biography; reflexivity; translation

Introduction

Increasing enrolments of international EAL (English as an Additional Language) students in English-speaking universities in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand have led to a large quantity of research investigating students' adjustment issues, often pertaining to their academic challenges. Students' English language proficiency levels and ability to adjust to a different pedagogical environment are often cited as contributions to their academic success (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Much of the discussion about international students' academic learning is in the context of classroom interactions such as asking questions and



participating in group discussions (Campbell & Li, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Lee, Farruggia, & Brown, 2013). Several studies have recognised that out-of-classroom interactions are important contributions to students' academic learning (Barnett, 2010; Barron, 2006). However, the importance of informal academic learning has largely been overlooked in the research on international students.

My research focuses on examining the informal academic learning practices of international EAL students, in particular, their help-seeking interactions with others as they take place outside the boundaries of formal instruction. These help-seeking interactions can be termed *brokering* interactions. The aim of the research is to understand students' brokering practices in their initial period of study.

Prior to data collection, there was some consideration as to what language the research would be conducted in. As I was competent in the Chinese language, I gave Chinese participants the choice of using either Mandarin or English during interviews. However, I did not anticipate the implications of conducting research and collecting data that was in more than one language.

In the course of data collection, regular interviews (approximately four or five over the semester of 15 weeks) were conducted with participants, enquiring about their brokering interactions with others. Four of the Chinese participants spoke in English while five of them spoke in Mandarin. In addition, from three of the ten participants, I obtained records of their brokering interactions with others—the majority of which were in Chinese. One of the main findings was that brokering interactions occurred mostly with peers who could speak the same language as the participants. In other words, a common language was a key factor in successful brokering interactions. Evidence of this was found in interview accounts (both in English and Chinese) as well as textual records and audio recordings of interactions (some in English but mostly in Chinese).

As a bilingual and the sole researcher, I was the primary instrument through which the Chinese language was interpreted, translated and understood during data collection and analysis. As Hennink (2008) points out, “[l]anguage and communication are ... fundamental to qualitative research as they represent the dual functions of data and the method through which data are generated” (p. 24). Therefore, in communicating my research findings to an English-speaking audience, an important consideration was ensuring the quality and validity of the translation and analysis of Chinese data. One important way of doing so was to engage in reflexivity, that is, recognising the influence of the researcher's perspectives on the research process (Finlay, 2002; Tracy, 2010).

While there are multiple approaches to reflexivity, such as engaging in “a confessional account of methodology or as examining one's own personal, possibly unconscious, reactions” (Finlay, 2002, p. 536), the following two approaches were most pertinent to discussing cross-language research: i) presenting my language biography as a context for translation processes (Temple, 2006), and ii) including methodological transparency by providing details of the challenges and resolutions regarding translation dilemmas (Hennink, 2008; Temple & Young, 2004).

In presenting my language biography, I demonstrate that I was both a cultural insider and outsider, and discuss how using a common language belies the differences in socio-cultural-linguistic backgrounds between participants and myself. In discussing the translation dilemmas that occurred in the course of the research, I highlight my particular approaches to understanding interview responses in Mandarin, preparing transcriptions of interviews and translating the Mandarin/Chinese data for an English-speaking/reading audience. In conclusion, I aim to show how reflexivity is an important means to interrogate how my involvement in the language translation process influenced the research process and outcome (Finlay, 2002).

Research context and participants

The profile of international students at the university where I conducted the research was varied. During the planning phase of the research, staff members communicated to me that the demographics and enrolment of international students in their courses changed from cohort to cohort and thus they could not predict what the profile would be like in advance. As I needed a certain number of participants at the start of the semester, I decided not to limit my sample based on particular nationalities, but open it to all nationalities who were EAL students.

While the intention was to have a mixed group of nationalities, the eventual make-up of my participants was mostly East Asian, and the majority of them (nine out of ten) were Chinese. This was likely a result of two factors: i) in two of the four classes I recruited from, most of the students were Chinese, and ii) participants were likely to have identified with my Chinese ethnicity. Among my Chinese participants, seven were from Mainland China from different provinces, one from Taiwan, and one from Malaysia. Age wise, one was in her 30s, another in his 40s, while the rest were in their early 20s.

The research was a *focused ethnography* that involved collecting data related to participants' brokering interactions within a limited period of time. (See Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu, 2013 and Knoblauch, 2005 for detailed discussions of focused ethnography as a methodology.) As the research was interested in brokering interactions related to academic concerns, such as seeking help with assignments and preparing for tests, the research timeframe was limited to the academic semester, which was a period of 15 weeks. Each participant was interviewed at regular intervals, with a total of four or five interviews per participant. In addition, attempts were made at observing and/or obtaining records of their brokering interactions related with seeking academic help within the same timeframe.

Rapport was thus a significant factor in the process of data collection that relied on being able to collect significant data within a limited period of time. Details of the data collection process have been reported in Lee (2017), highlighting the intense and challenging process of accessing private exchanges between participants and their peers. In order to encourage participants to be forthcoming about their experiences in seeking academic help, exercising sensitivity to their language preferences helped to facilitate open sharing. Although my initial interactions with participants were in English, I expressed to them that I was both able to, and comfortable with, speaking in Mandarin. While I expected that all my Chinese participants would prefer to speak in Mandarin during interviews, four of them chose to use English, citing several reasons such as wanting to make it easier for me to understand them, and being able to practise speaking in English.

Challenges and responses to issues in cross-cultural research

Although I did not initially conceive of my research as being cross-cultural, the first round of interviews highlighted for me the complexity involved in using two languages, English and Chinese, during interviews and during the transcription process. This prompted me to review the literature on international EAL students, focusing on how researchers addressed cross-cultural aspects such as using multiple languages and translation. It then struck me that many studies did not explicitly refer to their research as being *cross-cultural* even though research on international students was essentially so. Studies concerned with particular learning preferences and social behaviour were, in fact, comparing behaviours and attitudes between two cultures (i.e., the dominant English-speaking culture and the other non-English speaking culture/s). The researchers themselves, as representatives of institutions and addressing the larger audience of similar institutions, belonged to a culture different from that of their research subjects.

A methodological concern, then, was how researchers addressed cross-cultural issues of understanding and presenting data. As an English-speaking bilingual with native proficiency in English and a working knowledge of Chinese, I was particularly interested in strategies that other bilingual researchers used in navigating two languages on their own, and how they presented their data to an

English-speaking audience. It was literature that specifically discussed methodological concerns with language and translation that provided answers to my questions.

Language biography

In terms of issues faced by bilingual researchers, one of the concerns highlighted is the perception that bilingual researchers have “a direct access to the views of supposedly homogeneous communities” (Temple, 2006, p. 3). However, such a perception underestimates the broad variations within ethnic groups (Shklarov, 2007). Another concern is that translation done by bilingual researchers themselves may be viewed as ethically ambiguous since they take on a dual role of researcher-translator who interprets/translates their own research findings (Shklarov, 2007). In order to mitigate these concerns, several scholars have called for greater detail in the reporting of the translation process (Shklarov, 2007; Srivastava, 2006; Temple, 2006). In addition, including the language biography of bilingual researchers provides a context from which to understand their perspectives “and the ways in which they use language” (Temple, 2006, p. 12).

One important aspect of the researcher’s biography to consider is the researcher’s epistemological stance. Researchers who take a positivist approach treat researchers/translators as “neutral transmitters of messages” and assume that translation can be done objectively (Temple, 2002). Those who take on an interpretivist approach, on the other hand, recognise how different individual perspectives of reality interact to produce knowledge. Researchers/translators therefore “produce texts from their own perspectives” (Temple, 2002, p. 846).

Another important consideration in the researcher’s biography is how insider status is conceived. Often, the perception of bilingual researchers is based on the notion that the researcher’s insider status with the participants’ linguistic and cultural background is advantageous to translation. However, Temple (2006) points out that it is simplistic to assume that researchers who share the same ethnicity and language with their participants belong to a single language community or share meaning. Each individual has a particular language history within a socio-cultural context and therefore cannot share a single uniform cultural perspective. Furthermore, with the inherent complexity of either insider or outsider status, it may be more useful to reframe the insider/outside status “in terms of one’s positionality vis-à-vis race, class, gender, culture and other factors” (Merriam et al., 2001).

Translation dilemmas

Another concern about reporting cross-cultural issues was about where such issues could be found in the first place. Since qualitative research reports generally did not detail translation issues (Esposito, 2001; Hennink, 2008), it was literature that focused specifically on these issues that illuminated such cross-cultural processes. Thus, one of the gaps in cross-cultural research, as Esposito (2001) points out, is to present details of translation issues within the research report so as to “acknowledge the challenges we face in ensuring the truth-value of cross-language research, develop the discussion regarding innovative approaches, and establish the credibility of the work we present” (pp. 577–578).

Reflexivity

Writing a biography and reporting on dilemmas are both reflexive approaches in communicating research as they both draw from the researcher’s personal involvement with the research process. Reflexivity requires researchers to be introspective, reviewing how their own biases and motivations, their strengths and weaknesses, have influenced the research process itself. Finlay (2002) distinguishes between *reflection* and *reflexivity* as being on two ends of a continuum. In the reflection process, the researcher is distancing him/herself, the subject, from the object of reflection, and thinking about it after the fact. The reflexive process, on the other hand, is a lived experience—“a more immediate, continuing, dynamic, and subjective self-awareness” (Finlay, 2002, p. 533). While it is impossible to

fully experience and to be fully aware in the same instance, it is possible to have a reflexive awareness through an ongoing conversation with oneself in attempting to “capture some of the connections by which subject and object influence and constitute each other” (Finlay, 2002, p. 533), and in this case, the subject being the researcher, and the object being language and culture. This conversation with myself was made possible through journaling—making notes on methodological issues, as well as detailing personal (intellectual and emotional) responses to incidents or events soon after they have happened (Etherington, 2004).

A reflexive account of language and translation in my research

I now provide a reflexive account of the translation process undertaken in my research. I start first with my language biography to set the context for how I use English and Chinese (and Mandarin when spoken) in the course of data collection and analysis. I then highlight particular interpretation or translation dilemmas and the steps I took to resolve them.

Language biography

I am a Chinese Singaporean, where Chinese refers to my ethnicity, and Singapore refers to my birth country and citizenship. My ancestors were from the southern part of China and I am a third generation Singaporean who identifies herself as Singaporean first, and Chinese second. Within the Chinese community in Singapore, there is a further differentiation between those who use English and those who use Chinese as their dominant language. I am what others in Singapore would identify as English-speaking in terms of family language background and communication preferences. I learnt Chinese as a second language in school but to me it was more foreign than second and I treated it no more than an academic subject that I had to pass. Thus, in my formative years, English was my predominant language of thought and expression and this was reinforced by interactions with my family and friends.

It was only when I started university that I had an epiphany regarding my Chinese identity and felt the need to increase my Mandarin-speaking proficiency. I was exposed to a greater variety of social groups, including those who preferred to communicate in Mandarin. This was even more apparent as I entered the workforce. I made a personal effort to increase my Chinese language competence, most notably by switching from attending an English congregation to a Mandarin congregation in church. The Mandarin congregation was made up not only of Singaporeans, but also immigrants from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and China. As I interacted and formed friendships with different Mandarin-speakers, I began to appreciate the differences among speakers from different social and cultural backgrounds, even Mandarin speakers within the same country.

This realisation of diversity within an ethnic group was most acutely lived out during the two years I was in China as an English teacher. While I initially thought my time in China would help me ‘return to my roots’, my experience was more akin to culture shock. On the one hand, I improved my Chinese language skills, particularly in speaking and listening. On the other hand, I also became more sensitive to the differences in language use between China and elsewhere. There were also times where I felt that certain cultural concepts such as *guan xi* (relationships or social connections) had social and moral implications that were antithetical to my personal values.

After returning to Singapore and as I started my own family and participated in community service in church, my language usage and preferences were now different from before. I had married a Mandarin speaker whom I communicated with predominantly in Mandarin; with our children, my husband used Mandarin while I used English as an extension of our respective home languages. In church, I mixed with both the English and Mandarin speaking communities, and was an English teacher to Mandarin speakers in church community programmes. As before, English was still my predominant language of thought and expression, but Mandarin had now become a part of home and used naturally in certain social settings. The Chinese language was no longer a distant foreign language but an authentic means of expression.

The purpose of my language biography is to illustrate how my own sense of being bilingual shifted from childhood to adulthood, and how this accounts for the way I view languages in the research. English is the primary language for thought and expression, while Mandarin is the language for social purposes. In contrast, it was unlikely that my participants shared a similar linguistic history, as all of them originated from countries different from mine, in addition to being from different age groups and social backgrounds. Furthermore, while Chinese is spoken by the Chinese diaspora in different countries, a common language does not translate to identical cultures as I had personally experienced. Thus, I was conscious of questioning any assumptions of a homogenous culture of like-mindedness and value systems between myself and participants, and among participants themselves.

Languages in use

Considering that my Chinese participants were from three different countries, it is perhaps more appropriate to refer to myself as a diasporic researcher, rather than a bilingual researcher, as the term diasporic invokes multiple notions of being Chinese with communities in various countries. To signal the languages used in my research, I extend the phrases Srivastava (2006) uses to talk about the different languages a diasporic researcher uses—‘the language of the data’ and ‘the language one thinks in’.

In Srivastava's (2006) case, Hindi was “the language of the data” and English was “the language one thinks in”, but it was not a straightforward affair of translating spoken Hindi into its written form, nor was it a strict separation between data in Hindi and analysis in English. Srivastava (2006) reports “slipping between languages” in the process of translation (p. 217). For example, when observing interactions in Hindi, significant quotes “were often recorded in English through a process of automatic simultaneous translation, i.e. the ‘language [one thinks] in’ became the ‘language of the data’” (p. 217). At other times, while there was a conscious effort to retain the language of the data during the transcription of interviews, much of the initial analysis was done in English.

Similarly for me, English is ‘the language I think in’. In terms of data, Chinese was the ‘language of the data’ for interviews with Mandarin-speaking participants. With regard to translation, I, too, slipped between languages, using English and Chinese in the process of translation.

Translation dilemmas

In using both languages to aid translation, I faced dilemmas in the following situations: i) understanding interview responses, ii) transcribing interviews for member checking, and iii) translation of textual data.

i) Understanding interview responses

During interviews that were conducted in Mandarin, I often made my notes in English. At times, my notes included the Chinese words of what I thought were words or phrases that I was less familiar with, or if I thought they were significant to my research topic. In order to understand such terms, one option would be to check the meaning after the interview so as to not disrupt the flow of the conversation. I was also conscious of not appearing linguistically inadequate and potentially position myself as an outsider. Alternatively, I could have checked the meaning directly with my participants—which would be preferable, as it facilitated immediate understanding and I could ask follow-up questions where needed.

During the first round of interviews, I was less inclined to ask about the meanings of what Mandarin-speaking participants shared. This was particularly so with reticent participants whom I felt it was more difficult to build rapport with. Thus, initially, I would take down notes and use online dictionaries to check or verify meaning. However, often, I felt that the result was unsatisfactory

because I knew I only had a literal meaning, and did not establish the meaning as it was used in that particular context at the time of the interview.

As I felt more comfortable with my participants, I was more willing to assume the position of the less knowledgeable outsider as it did not appear to threaten rapport building. I made it a point to clarify with participants the meaning of terms that were unclear to me, or what seemed to be important words or phrases to them, for example, because of emphasis or repetition. In the process of clarification, both participants and myself used other Chinese words to describe the term, or referred to English words as a direct translation. I used a similar approach during interviews with Chinese participants who spoke in English—where there was potential confusion in understanding what they said, I asked if they would like to express it in Mandarin for clarity.

ii) Transcribing interviews for member checking

After interviews were conducted, I transcribed them and provided copies to participants for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This had to be done as efficiently as possible as the transcripts needed to be checked before the next round of interviews and while the interviews were still fresh in participants' minds. For interviews in Mandarin, I automatically transcribed them into English, thus turning the 'language of the data' into the 'language I think in'. This was a result of two reasons: i) I treated transcription as part of the analytical process and therefore used 'the language I think in', and ii) it was more time efficient for me to translate and transcribe the data in English than to transcribe it in Chinese.

By immediately translating Mandarin data to English data, I did consider the possibility that the accuracy of meaning could be compromised. This was particularly true for parts of the interview where the participant was sharing personal opinions, describing how they felt and other more subjective content. Asking participants to check my transcripts was an important step to mitigate the possibility of inaccuracy. This was done as soon as I had completed each transcription, requesting the participant to review the document and inform me if they were satisfied with what had been reflected or if they had any comments or required changes to be made. Among the participants who were presented with translated transcripts, no one raised any issue. Apart from presenting the transcripts to participants for checking, I also had the opportunity to clarify my understanding of what participants had previously shared during subsequent interviews. In addition, I provided a sample recording and transcript to a certified translator to verify the accuracy of my translation.

In order to maintain a close understanding of the original data in Mandarin, I engaged in translanguaging, "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages" (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012, p. 641). I referred back to the original recordings during subsequent stages of analysis, once again going back and forth between 'the language of the data' and 'the language I think in'. Like Srivastava (2006), I was slipping between the two languages during this process of translation, transcription and analysis. Thus, accuracy was enhanced through a conscious unpacking of meaning by working in two languages throughout the research process.

iii) Translation of textual data

In the course of data collection, I obtained records of participants' interactions with their peers in the form of text messages in Chinese. The fixed form of text messages appeared to be easier to translate, compared with conversations which had additional features such as overlaps and pauses and tone of voice. However, there were often terms or phrases that were difficult to verify the meaning because the literal translation did not make sense. I did not have sufficient contextual understanding of the interaction, particularly in terms of how these young Chinese participants used language.

While I had initially thought that textual data could be translated more easily and objectively, I realised that it was not the case. I realised that it was not so much the form of the data that made translation more or less difficult, but the familiarity with a particular set of vocabulary and responses used by particular participants. While it was relatively easy to clarify meaning during interviews, it was much more difficult to do so regarding a social interaction I had not participated in.

Hence, just like the interview transcripts I provided to participants for checking, I provided my initial translation of these text interactions to participants for checking. During this stage of member checking, I explained to participants that I was not entirely sure of the accuracy of my translation and requested that they check my translation for any errors. I also highlighted parts of the data which were problematic for me. In response, participants not only corrected misinterpretations or clarified my doubts, they also suggested alternative translations that they felt were more suitable. For example, a participant commented that my English translation 'old man' would be more appropriately expressed as 'grandpa'. This process of verification was important in increasing my cultural understanding of the language used by particular participants. Asking the participants themselves to verify the meaning of their interactions further provided a level of accuracy that would not have been possible by depending solely on an external translator.

Concluding thoughts

Taking on the dual role of researcher and translator enhanced my understanding of my data. Being able to have a relatively immediate understanding of the data, that is, without having to depend on external translators, allowed me to analyse my data on an ongoing basis.

Where there were doubts over my understanding and accuracy of translation, the process of member checking was the most useful process in establishing a trustworthy record of the data (i.e., transcripts and translated text) that was accepted by both myself and my participants. Although using an external translator also served to validate translations, certain data required an intimate knowledge of contextual information and specific language use among participants themselves.

The process of undertaking translation of data provided by Chinese participants from different parts of China or different countries, of different age groups, and with different social backgrounds, reinforced the reality of a heterogeneous culture. Thus, it is impracticable to pursue the notion of a single version of translation based on a common understanding of the Chinese language. This point is especially important when communicating translated data to an English-speaking audience who may hold different assumptions about bilingual researchers and translation.

It is hoped that this reflexive account of the translation process undertaken by a bilingual or diasporic researcher will contribute to the discussion of translation practices. The aim of translation is to provide an accurate reflection of the original data. In my research I found member checking to be of primary significance for increasing the trustworthiness of my translation and therefore my analysis.

As suggested by my language biography, each researcher will experience being bilingual in different ways, and subsequently hold different attitudes towards the languages they know. I believe that articulating on one's language and cultural background and detailing the translation process will provide an important context for the English-speaking audience to judge the validity of the research report. Although presenting a language biography requires some degree of self-disclosure which may be discomforting for researchers, it is precisely this reflexive action that will mitigate against false assumptions about language and representation being made.

Although I initially did not think of myself as a bilingual or diasporic researcher, the process of data collection and analysis has made me realise the importance of questioning the assumptions behind cross-cultural research. I hope that other bilingual or diasporic researchers will see the value of unpacking the cross-cultural elements in their research. Cross-cultural issues are not limited to translation, but can and should be extended to other aspects of research that further intercultural understanding in the field.

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