Developing communicative competence: Methodological considerations for conducting qualitative research with Spanish-speaking adult learners

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Abstract: This article analyzes how we responded to socio-linguistic challenges in our research with Spanish-speaking adults in the U.S. and El Salvador. Our respective racial/ethnic identities, first language, and insider or outsider status created distinctive challenges and communicative strategies. We argue that cross-cultural researchers must recognize socio-linguistic variation within groups and develop communicative competence.

Despite the growing prominence of cross-cultural research in adult education (e.g., Alfred, 2003; Sparks, 2002), both adult education and qualitative methodology scholars have overlooked how socio-linguistic differences (i.e., the ways language intersects with class, gender, nationality, geography, etc.) between researchers and participants shape the research process. The purpose of this paper is to examine the importance of developing communicative competence (Hymes, 2001) when undertaking cross-cultural research in languages other than English. We discuss the similarities and differences in how we—two scholars with distinct national, ethnic, and linguistic identities—responded to socio-linguistic challenges during our research with Spanish-speaking adult learners in the U.S. and El Salvador, respectively. We conclude with implications for research, teaching, and advising.

Communicative Competence in Cross-Cultural Research

The theoretical framework integrates literature in linguistic anthropology and qualitative, cross-cultural methodology. Linguistic anthropologists contend that linguistic and socio-cultural patterns are inextricably linked (Briggs, 1986; Duranti, 2001; Gumperz, 1964), and that language is a form of social action that alters one's worldview (Hymes, 2001). Thus, researchers should study linguistic messages "within the contexts in which they are produced and interpreted" (Duranti, 2001, p. 30); recognize how words and expressions encode cultural values and meanings (Bonvillain, 1993); and "learn how to ask" by paying "more attention to the communicative norms and speech forms used in a community" (Briggs, 1986, p. ix). According to Hymes (2001), communicative competence depends on both tacit knowledge and the ability to use language appropriately. Like children learning the language(s) and norms of their community, cross-cultural researchers must acquire "competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (p. 60).

Cross-cultural qualitative methodologists underscore the role of language translation in conducting culturally sensitive research with language-minority groups such as Latinos/as in the U. S. (e.g., Esposito, 2001; Lange, 2002). Many scholars, however, emphasize adequate translation for data collection purposes (Lugo Steidel et al., 2002). We argue that to develop communicative competence, qualitative researchers studying phenomena within "speech communities" (Morgan, 2004) using languages other than English must make methodological

decisions regarding translation and interpretation at various stages of research, including data collection, analysis, and representation.

Methods: Research with Spanish-Speaking Adult Learners

The two qualitative studies with Spanish-speaking adult learners were conducted separately by two bilingual researchers, one European American ("Ruth") and the other Latin American ("Carmen"). Carmen conducted a 15-month life story and phenomenological study (Atkinson, 1998; Seidman, 1998) that explored how five Central American immigrant women in the Midwestern U.S. experienced and gave meaning to adult learning. A series of three in-depth interviews was conducted with each participant; all but one interview series were conducted and inductively analyzed in Spanish. Carmen crafted first-person narratives capturing the participants' stories of learning and inductively analyzed the data by coding, developing categories, and identifying common themes. The life stories were represented in the original interview language with English translations. The themes were supported by quotations in Spanish with English translations.

Ruth combined both ethnographic and participatory methods (Robinson-Pant, 2001; Tedlock, 2000) to examine how participation in a literacy program in El Salvador shaped men's and women's personal, relational, and collective empowerment. The program was implemented by a Salvadoran non-governmental organization (NGO) in two rural villages. The study employed the following methods, among others: participant-observation of classes and village life; focus groups utilizing gender analysis (Leach, 2003) and participatory rural appraisal (e.g., mapping) (Chambers, 1997); and interviews with learners, facilitators, and staff. Ruth lived with the family of a literacy facilitator. She conducted the study in Salvadoran Spanish, which is characterized by distinctive terminology, slang, and verb forms (i.e., use of *el voseo*). Learners and facilitators spoke the campesino (rural, peasant) variation of Salvadoran Spanish, which features unique colloquialisms and pronunciation. Learners occupied the bottom of the national linguistic hierarchy, as campesino Spanish is widely considered informal and uneducated.

Findings

In this section, we highlight both similarities and differences in our experiences and communicative strategies during each phase of research.

Preparation for Research

Knowing that *confianza* (trust) and prolonged engagement were prerequisites for conducting research with Latinos/as, we interacted informally with learners in order to establish trust, gain access, and gather data. In both of our studies, the trust-building process cut across each research phase. Prior to data collection we also conducted preliminary research regarding the socio-cultural, political, and economic factors shaping learners' lives. For instance, Carmen interviewed community leaders regarding issues facing Latinos in their state. Ruth conducted pre-dissertation research in El Salvador and had followed Salvadoran politics and events since living there for six months in 1993. Lastly, in designing the study, we both drew upon our prior knowledge of participants' language and culture(s). Ruth was familiar with Salvadoran slang, largely because of her prior visits to El Salvador. Carmen's understanding was informed by her own ethnic identity and 4 years of participant-observation in a Bible study attended by Spanish-speaking immigrants of different national origins and social-class backgrounds.

Our preparation differed according to our insider or outsider status. As a Latin American, native Spanish speaker conducting research in a familiar community, Carmen relied on her

intuitive understanding of Latina immigrants' language and cultures. Since Ruth's research entailed linguistic, geographical, and cultural displacement, she employed a more strategic approach to learning about communicative norms among Salvadoran campesinos/as. Briggs' (1986) book, *Learning to Ask*, prepared Ruth to learn the social norms guiding communicative interactions (e.g., public interaction between men and women, the use of indirection) and to pay attention to how local residents asked questions and expressed concepts relevant to the study.

Data Collection

During data collection we sought to make our questions in interviews and focus groups comprehensible (1) in Spanish and (2) to campesinos/as and working-class participants. For example, we discovered that we used words and phrases that were too broad, abstract, or unfamiliar for people from rural areas, especially those with limited schooling. Native Spanish speakers had reviewed Ruth's interview guide for accuracy, yet some terminology was inappropriate for campesino learners. Ruth committed some communicative faux pas, such as the use of overly formal language, which limited coherence and interviewees' responsiveness (Briggs, 1986). In such cases, word choice and understanding signaled social class differences.

Our respective identities and research locations necessitated adopting distinct approaches to communication. Carmen wrote the interview questions in English for her advisor and then translated them, resulting in awkward phrasing. She was surprised to find that conceptualizing the interview protocol in English had negatively influenced her ability to communicate in Spanish. It was only after reviewing the protocol with another Latino researcher that Carmen was able to retake her knowledge of the participants' language and culture for developing appropriate interview questions in Spanish.

While conducting interviews, Carmen also found unexpected rural/urban linguistic differences that led her to use member checks regularly to clarify meanings. For instance, one participant used the term *solemne* (solemn) for describing her childhood rural environment. Had Carmen not asked for further clarification, she would have misinterpreted *solemne* to mean ceremonious, somber, or gloomy as it is commonly understood in urban settings. Instead, she learned the participant had used *solemne* to mean uninhabited. Another example of rural/urban linguistic differences was the use of negation to express assertion by participants with rural backgrounds as illustrated in the following statement. "I grew up with an elderly couple, who were not my grandparents. My mother knew them as her in-laws, but they were not her in-laws."

As a non-native Spanish speaker, Ruth became a "student of language," an approach that helped her phrase questions appropriately, use humor, and better understand the layers of meaning in daily life and research activities. Ruth asked key informants to explain new words and recorded them in fieldnotes. For instance, one entry read, "[I] learned that euphemisms for prostitutes or loose women are 'mujeres locas' and 'mujeres que andan para'quí y para'llá (also pa'rriba y pa'bajo')." When a learner used these phrases in an interview, Ruth was able to ask probing questions. Ruth's prior knowledge of Salvadoran Spanish and living with a local family enabled her to use common slang and colloquialisms (e.g., *bolo* rather than *borracho* [drunk]), which lessened the social distance between herself and participants. Ruth believed that she needed both to be herself and to respect local ways of communicating. Thus, she did not "go native" by mimicking campesino pronunciation and grammar, as she felt this approach would be inauthentic. However, because campesino speech is often a source of shame (Bartlett, 2001), Ruth chose not to correct learners' non-standard pronunciation or grammar.

Code-switching in note-taking and fieldnotes aided Ruth's understanding and use of language. She took observational notes in Spanish and English, recording oral speech in Spanish,

and typed the notes into English fieldnotes, with some quotations and terms in Spanish. The following fieldnote entry is typical: "'Si uno le caía mal a alguien' [if someone didn't like you] they would tell the militares [military personnel] to go get them." Using Spanish in fieldnotes helped elucidate subtle meanings and preserve language in context.

Finally, knowing that the interview, as a communicative event, was not part of the local communicative repertoire (Briggs, 1986), Ruth used research methods that facilitated informal interaction (e.g., visiting people at home). She interviewed learners at the end of fieldwork, once they felt more comfortable talking to her and responding to questions. She created the interview guide using phrases she had heard learners, facilitators, and villagers use, and asked the transcriber to preserve participants' speech, including campesino pronunciation and grammar.

Data Analysis

Rather than translating interview and focus group transcripts into English and analyzing the English texts, we both worked with the Spanish transcripts to preserve participants' nuanced language and remain "closer" to the text. However, our communicative strategies reflected our distinct ethnic and linguistic identities. Ruth found it easier to read the data in Spanish and develop codes and themes in English, except for concepts that didn't translate well, such as "*pena*" (shame, timidity, embarrassment). Both during fieldwork and upon returning to the U.S., Ruth asked a Salvadoran friend and linguist to clarify the meanings of ambiguous or unknown terms. The transcriber's parenthetical comments explaining unique campesino phrases also aided data analysis. Because Ruth had limited time and wanted to analyze the transcripts in Spanish, she translated only the excerpts she used in her dissertation and subsequent publications.

Carmen analyzed in Spanish, but translated codes and themes to English for regular peer debriefing and reporting. Initially, Carmen tried analyzing in the two languages, but she found that code-switching altered her cultural frame of reference. She then decided to analyze in Spanish because it seemed congruent not only with the participants' and her own cultural identities, but also with an important research goal: to represent the participants' life stories in their own words. Despite its methodological advantages, this process was complicated by Carmen's need to constantly translate theoretical insights into English to make journals and progress reports accessible to non-Spanish speakers. Translating doubled her work and made the process extremely time consuming.

Working in two languages affected our processes differently: Whereas Ruth used code-switching between English and Spanish to clarify meanings, Carmen avoided code-switching because naming concepts in English hindered her ability to draw from an emic or insider's perspective. At this stage, Carmen's translation of codes and themes into English was externally determined by her periodic meetings with monolingual English-speaking advisors and peer debriefers.

Writing and Representation

Representing findings from research conducted in Spanish has been challenging for both of us. The inclusion of Spanish quotations would enrich our work, yet manuscript length limitations make it nearly impossible to include Spanish and English. In articles and presentations Ruth uses Spanish only for cultural concepts (e.g., *confianza* [trust]*, educación* [social conduct, moral upbringing]) and expressions that convey local color. In presentations, Carmen generally uses only English translations with occasional reference to Spanish words when she knows there is bilingual audience. Writing for publication in English while seeking to

convey meaning constructed in Spanish has been especially challenging for Carmen. Her writing process has been complicated by revisions involving the assistance of both Spanish and English native speakers, as well as bilingual colleagues.

Both of us use meaning-based translation (Larson, 1984) to provide close English equivalents, relying on our intuitive understandings, peer debriefers, fieldnotes, interview notes, and the work of scholars with expertise in Latin America. For example, Ruth's post-fieldwork discovery and usage of academic scholarship on relevant Latin American cultural concepts (e.g., Valdés, 1996) has enriched her writing and analysis (e.g., by confirming the intuitive, contextualized understanding she developed during fieldwork, by aiding translation of key concepts, and by linking the socio-linguistic patterns of Salvadorans and other Latinos/as).

Discussion and Implications

This study suggests that researchers must not take language, translation, and interpretation lightly. We discovered that fluency in Spanish per se did not make us communicatively competent or prepare us for socio-linguistic difficulties such as understanding rural/urban and class variations. As well, our ethnic identities, first language, and insider or outsider status created distinctive challenges and, in turn, communicative strategies. Researchers who share learners' language, nationality, or race/ethnicity may have more inside knowledge and establish rapport more easily, yet they may also be surprised by, or less strategic about analyzing, within-group socio-linguistic differences such as social class (see Few et al., 2003, on insider status based on race and gender). While relative outsiders may experience more socio-linguistic distance and displacement and have less intuitive knowledge, they may also be more aware of the need to study intentionally participants' communicative norms and patterns.

In sum, speaking participants' language or sharing their national or ethnic origin is insufficient; rather, adult education scholars must account for socio-linguistic diversity within groups (Hymes, 1972) and use strategies to develop communicative competence. We suggest the following strategies, among others: (1) choose research methods based on prior investigation of participants' communication repertoires (Briggs, 1986); (2) ask key informants to explain terminology and the norms guiding in/appropriate social interactions, and to gently inform the researcher of social and communicative blunders; and (3) supplement interviews with methods that illuminate the relationship between language, thought, and culture (e.g., participant-observation, informal conversation). This recommendation is based on the assumption of linguistic anthropology, that "to understand the meaning of linguistic messages one must study them within the contexts in which they are produced & interpreted" (Duranti, 2001, p. 30). Believing that "Linguistic patterns cannot be understood independently of social and cultural patterns and vice versa" (Briggs, 1986, p. 29), we urge researchers to learn as much as possible about participants' norms and values before undertaking research.

Our research has important implications for graduate study. Coursework should equip students to develop communicative strategies for cross-cultural research and to anticipate how they will resolve socio-linguistic challenges. Graduate students should not assume that either familiarity with a given culture or sharing some aspect of research participants' identity means they will "speak the same language." Faculty should also be prepared to help language-minority students navigate the distinct challenges they will face while undertaking research in one language and reporting it in their second language (e.g., English). In conclusion, we emphasize that in order to develop communicative competence, scholars conducting qualitative research in

another language must make careful methodological decisions regarding translation and interpretation, recognizing how such choices shape both the research process and findings.

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