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“ASÍ VAMOS A CONVERSAR EN LOS DOS IDIOMAS”: REFLECTIONS ON INTERVIEWS IN THE CONTACT ZONE

Abstract:

This reflection draws from humanizing research, a methodological stance that pursues ethical representation and interpretation in language research. Working from a pilot study to examine the impact of a community-based program for English conversation in a linguistically diverse community, analysis of three interviews between the author and contributor reveals a narrative about ethnicity, language, and belonging in the US, and illuminates the interview process as one in which the agency of the “researched” shapes what is learned.

Keywords: narrative analysis ♦ análisis narrativo ♦ community-based learning ♦ qualitative research

“Would you like to interview in English, or Spanish, or both?” I asked. We were two women of approximately the same age, parents of grown children. We were sitting across from each other, out of place at the college-town Starbucks on a Saturday morning. Sara’s skin is brown, mine is white. Sara was born in Ecuador, I was born in the United States. The university where I was teaching was part of a small, East Coast city, a hub for immigration, most recently from Latin America. My goal as a teacher and researcher in language education was to understand the impact of a pilot university-community partnership for English conversation. The program aimed to honor both community *investment* in English and community languages; thus, participants were encouraged to learn with each other—for instance, through collaborative dialogue (Swain 2000) in their family languages—as well as with their English conversation partners from the university.

Curtis, Jessie H., with Sara I. Noboa. “Así vamos a conversar en los dos idiomas’: Reflections on interviews in the contact zone.” *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 7:1 (2019): pp. 98–104. ISSN 2325-2871.

The pilot study sought the perspectives of community participants and their interlocutors, the university students, to learn how an approach that prioritized access to multiple flows of language learning could be improved. At that time, Spanish was the community language of participants who attended the weekly English conversation practice. I had already translated the protocol into Spanish as a first step toward aligning the research methodology with the program's aims. I believed that by recording interviews with community members, whether in Spanish or English or both, I would be able to learn from these interviews through careful transcription. Using English and my rehearsed Spanish to explain the pilot project and study, I invited Sara, a community participant, to join the research.

Research in Applied Linguistics has increasingly employed ethnographic methods, and interviews have become central to these inquiries, yet such research may not fully examine issues of power encoded in ancestry / ethnicity, socioeconomic status, institutional status, and ideologies of language (Talmy 2010). In multilingual contexts, questions have arisen about interpreting interview data across languages and cultures (Gibbs & Iglesias 2017; Holmes 2016). This essay centers on such questions of representation, tacit assumptions about the neutrality of language that clash with positionalities of “native” and “non-native” speaker, the “researcher” and the “researched.” In writing this essay, we discussed ways of including *los dos idiomas* to illustrate our collaboration and repositioning. We settled upon “a true story,” as Sara put it. In so doing, we aim to build on research methodology that has pushed against inequities in representation and interpretation in language research, highlighting the potential for building relationships of care through the research process itself (described in Paris & Winn 2014). With these considerations in mind, this essay represents a reflection on our positionalities in the interview process, how power differentials may be renegotiated, and how truer stories may emerge.

What and how we learned

I learned within a few minutes into our first interview that Sara was a P-3 teacher; she had earned a Master's degree in education. This revelation brought me back to the English conversation group where months earlier, I had noticed her teacherly strategies but failed to connect the glaring dots that were so evident in my field notes:

6:45PM. I'm with 5 people – Sara, Cecilia, Rosario, Lionel¹ and one university student....

7:15PM. Sara says, “I would like to show this picture.” Other women ask Qs. Cecilia too!
C, novice to English, and usually quiet, asked questions ... I ask Sara where she studied

¹Names of participants other than Sara are pseudonyms.

English. Sara, “I used to live in Brooklyn. I went to L.I. University.” ... “I want to lose my accent.” (Author’s notes, Conversation Class, October 2012).

Sara had brought her diplomas and teaching credentials to our first interview in a three-ring binder, placing the binder on the wobbly table between us. She was looking for work. A franchise had taken over the elementary school where she taught and offered to retain the teachers, but with fewer benefits. At that time, I understood I might be a resource for Sara – she had questions about obtaining a bilingual teaching certificate at the university where I taught. Months later, with further reflection, I still wondered about the binder. I asked why she had brought her credentials with her that Saturday morning.

“I really wanted to show you that I was really a teacher. I didn’t know you that well,” she said.

In the teacher lounge at her school, Sara had gradually revealed to me, the white, English-speaking teachers had asked, “Are you in the right place?” And, among themselves, “Does she really speak English?” Sara had come to our first interview prepared to demonstrate her authenticity to me, a white person who might question her credentials. English would inevitably be the language of our first interview, not only because I was unsure of my ability to speak Spanish *con fluidez* beyond academic settings. Sara had experienced the dangers of the teacher lounge – a *contact zone* of languages, cultures, and power relations, “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1991: 34) – a zone in which Sara’s legitimacy had been threatened. For Sara, a meeting with me could become such a zone.

Negotiating identities in the contact zone

I also learned at our first interview that Sara’s only opportunities for extended conversations in English were linked with her work at the elementary school, for instance when she reviewed her daily lesson plan with the school director. “She speaks only English. She is only English-speaking,” Sara said of her director, reversing the conventional dynamic of symbolic power. “Everything is in English. Although when I talk to the children, if they do not understand English, I have to explain to them in Spanish.”

J: That’s great that you can use both at work.

S: I think that they need that bilingual teacher in the pre-school.

I supported her bilingualism and Sara broadened the conversation to the need for bilingual teachers in a neighborhood school that primarily served Spanish-speaking families. Sara’s move to teach bilingually was a risk in an environment where “everything is in English.” Re-reading our

interview transcript, I realized that as I was focusing on the impact of the English conversation program, I had overlooked this evidence of her leadership and care for the young children in her charge – and of our shared passion for bi- / multilingual education. And as I transcribed the interview, questions such as why she had not explained during the conversation classes that she was a teacher stayed with me. When we met for the second time, I gave her a copy of our transcript, inviting her to read it, comment, and / or ask questions in the language she chose. Reading the transcript silently for ten minutes or so, pausing to comment or ask questions, became part of our routine. Although the transcript was in English, the language of our first interview, taking time to expand from it in two languages became an opportunity to reinterpret an imperfect instrument deployed across fissures in our language knowledge and chasms in our experience. Having also learned from Sara in that first interview that university students, the English conversation partners in the program, “keep asking me where I am from,” I opened the conversation to language and identity. Sara described herself as a New Yorker (having lived in New York City half her life), an Ecuadorian, and an American.

“I never choose,” she said.

For me, too, I explained, a singular national identity has not been an option. When people ask, “Where are you from?” I usually answer “New York City” not only because I was born there, but because it is easier than explaining a peripatetic childhood in my immigrant family’s social network in Europe and the US. I asked Sara if the word “immigrant” made sense to her.

“I don’t like it specifically, to say that word. Unless you’re talking politically, it’s not necessary, because some people see that you’re excluding that person. ... It’s some kind of belittling that person.” Through Sara’s aversion, I realized I had avoided material and symbolic harm that people of color may not avoid, my whiteness a camouflage that allowed me to be a New Yorker if I chose. She continued:

Some people think that all immigrants take advantage of this country, living with all the good things from this country, but some of them don’t want us. They [immigrants] want to be educated too and be part of the progress of this country. I always remember the President John F. Kennedy said something like do something for this country don’t ask what the country can do for you....

I remember one day my husband came from work and he told me, and I was ready to go to my class, after my factory [work], and he said, “Are you planning to go to class? Look how the weather is outside.” I said, “I don’t care,” I put my boots, and I went to class. I know it’s hard, but I had to do it.

Kennedy’s 1961 call to participate in civic life and his inaugural pledge “[t]o our sister republics south of our border ... to convert our good words into good deeds in a new alliance for progress,” the *Alianza para el Progreso*, were memorialized in Sara’s footfalls to work and school. The historical authenticity of Sara’s membership in the US—desire to be part of progress, evoked in the voice of this president—were realized in the tread of quotidian life. The president’s voice, speaking directly to southern neighbors in the Americas, also became an intermediary through which Sara addressed “some people” in the US who “don’t want us” – in that moment represented by me, a white person like those in the teacher lounge who would not be required to authenticate their US membership.

The conversation ended, the summer passed. Seeing myself through Sara’s gaze, feeling my limitations as a researcher, and desiring language to traverse the ravines, the fissures, las quebradas, between our experiences, I took another Spanish course. I emailed, “How was your summer, have you found work yet?”

Hi Jessie, I am still substituting. I have found some Pre-K jobs (far away, lower paying, same responsibilities). With all my ups and downs, I went to Buenos Aires, Argentina for a week in the summer. My niece took a post-grad course in one university and now is working in that country....I had a marvelous time. It's a beautiful country with all its European style buildings, its bohemia's nights and delicious ‘parrilladas’ ¿En donde pasaste el verano? Espero que te hayas divertido también.... Sara

En el verano, yo visité mi hijo y su familia en California.... Quizas podemos reunir para tomar un café en la semana que viene. Gracias por la práctica en español! Jessie

Me dices cuando podemos tomar el café. Así vamos a conversar en los dos idiomas. Los viernes? Sara

I experienced this initiative to conversar bilingually en los dos idiomas as an agentive action that worked to reshape our interviews, and as evidence of friendship. Since beginning the interviews, we had already met for the English pronunciation practice, las prácticas de inglés, that Sara desired. These prácticas led to conversations about our shared interests and exchanges of advice (e.g., Sara: “You should advertise [the program] more.” Jessie: “You could learn about more teaching jobs if you joined a professional association”).

Sara confirmed later, “Yo sentí que eres mi amiga hace un tiempo. And I knew that you wanted to practice Spanish.” We met for un intercambio de idiomas, a language exchange, on a morning that happened to fall on a US holiday weekend; only a few shops were open downtown, where Latino-run businesses thrived.

11:30AM. We found a small coffee shop. I had not been there before and was surprised to see that the place was busy, a large family seated at one of the tables. They were speaking Spanish. I ordered eggs Benedict, Sara asked what it was. The waiter, also speaking Spanish, commented that Anglos order this, but no one else does. Everybody laughs. (I'm Anglo!) Somewhere in this stream Sara said, "Now we are going to continue in Spanish." I have my notes with me from the last meeting. I brought a copy for her. When she asks for a copy, I am able to say to her, yes, this is for you. We continued in Spanish. The waiter noticed our bilingual conversation.... Confused, he wanted to know if I am teaching Sara English. I say it's both, she's teaching me Spanish. (Author's notes, November 2013).

Toward collaborative readings and interpretations

Humanizing research (Paris & Winn 2014), pushing back against English teaching and language research rooted in and shaped by histories of conquest and colonization, entails not only building relationships of trust, but also willingness to rearrange our stories, to re-tell them from multiple perspectives, to reflect on participation in English teaching and research in order to construct truer stories (Borjian 2017). In this case, our positionalities as researcher and the researched, as "native" and "non-native" speakers (of English and Spanish), were reshaped as we revisited words and actions captured in our interview transcripts, gradually revealing awareness of the gaze of one upon the other. Our collaboration, one that employed bilingual negotiations of meaning, allowed for revelations and reinterpretations of events over time. While the iterative methodology described here—one that involved shared reading, reflection, and inquiry—may not be applicable to every interview situation, our interview transcripts were opened to reinterpretation and our conversations generated incremental steps toward understanding.

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