

Methodological issues concerning research of plurilingual online communication

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This paper explores methodological issues concerning research of plurilingual online communication in the context of student mobility, drawing on data gathered from a doctoral project on the adaptation process of Erasmus students.. The qualitative longitudinal data was collected through interviews, weekly accounts of experiences and, in the case of eight participants, the online social tool Facebook. The inclusion of this tool brought to the fore some additional issues concerning the linguistic dimension of the research from a methodological point of view.

A prerogative of Study Abroad has always been the possibility of full-immersion in the target culture. However, as a result of the increasing popularity of the Erasmus programme throughout Europe, what used to be an opportunity to spend a full-immersion period in the target culture has been supplanted by the experience of immersion in plurilingual, multicultural communities in which the “local culture” (and language) often fades into the background. In addition, technology enables individuals to take part in transnational social fields and networks where choice of language(s) is negotiated within the specific context.

It is also important to remember that, by fraying the concept of geographical distance and border-crossing, social media such as Facebook have contributed to creating a virtual space of real (not virtual) social networking. Through Facebook, contacts among students locally are facilitated, but so are those between new friends in the host environment and old friends back home. Facebook, as a form of ‘lifestreaming’, with its conversations, postings, photos, music files, hyperlinks, etc., leaves behind a trace of those fleeting social events, of those identity constructions and reconstructions.

From a linguistic point of view, Facebook can be considered as a virtual water-cooler, a space which seems to encourage much inane conversation, but in fact offers the opportunity to practice authentic ‘social chit chat’ in various languages, and therefore promotes plurilingualism in individuals who, perhaps a few months before, would never have dreamed of writing on their

“walls” (or those of others) in languages other than their first.

The use of a tool such as Facebook in the study of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication requires the researcher to tackle crucial methodological issues, especially when research findings have to be reported in a language different from the one used by the informants. Some of these are common to other contexts of cross-language research, and concern negotiating cultural meanings, the need to make explicit the dual role of the bilingual researcher as researcher and translator of his/her research, the acknowledgement that translation cannot be limited to its technicalities, and the difficulties involved in allowing the individual voices of participants to be heard (Jagosh & Boudreau, 2009; Kamler & Threadgold, 2003; Shklarov, 2007; Temple & Young, 2004). In addition, multilingual communication across transnational social fields, such as those created in this type of online environment, brings up the issue of how to analyse plurilingual data, and how to report research in which the use of different languages, code-switching and mixing are part of a process of a plurilingual identity construction.

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