"Translating" insights into practice across languages: the case of a narrative study

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This paper presents the methodology I adopted in a narrative study, which was informed by insights from related literature written in English and issues arising from the Mandarin-medium research context. The expanding body of literature in narrative inquiry details the meaning and forms of narrative and its value for understanding life experiences. This literature also offers a wide range of narrative "products" that contribute to our understandings of certain human phenomena. However, the methodological aspect of narrative inquiry is not so often addressed. My own research experience made me aware that the process of generating and dealing with narrative data is not as straightforward as what previous studies seem to suggest. In particular, compared to the richness of multi-*disciplinary* insights that researchers draw upon when working narratively, there is not as much discussion about methodological issues arising from multi-*lingual* research contexts. Therefore, in this paper, I try to add some thoughts in this regard by presenting the study in question. In this study, I attempted to "translate" conceptual and methodological insights from the bilingual, but mainly English, literature available to me into appropriate practices of generating, processing and analysing narratives in a monolingual (Mandarin) context.

First, I set out the context for my central concern with an introduction to the study itself and a brief review of the bilingual literature in narrative inquiry that inspired my subsequent exploration. Second, I focus on the data generation process. In particular, I discuss a dilemma that shaped my decision-makings at this step, one between the "English" voice to encourage empowering participants in narrative inquiry and the need I somehow perceived to increase researcher intervention vis-à-vis the Mandarin-speaking participants' "resistance" to story-telling. Following this discussion, I present the actual methods I created and used to elicit narrative performances with the participants through interviews, including "narrative training" sessions that facilitated our negotiation of purposes and expectations. Third, I report on my practices of transcribing and re-storying the audio-recorded interviews into textual narratives, which reflects a link I tried to build between English-medium guidelines for rigorous data treatment and the unique features of the Mandarin-medium text. Fourth, I discuss the language choices I made and managed when working towards rich as well as rigorous analysis of the narratives, especially in terms of reflexivity. Finally, I draw together the common threads running through these methodological steps and discuss the implications of my bilingual practice for both the English-medium and Mandarin-medium literature. I end the discussion with the argument that researching mulilingually is a challenging process that not necessarily baffles researchers, but may, instead, inspire them to think deeply and generate new insights.