

Representational positions in bilingual research: a case study

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Abstract

This paper reports on the representational considerations that informed the reporting of a multilingual project investigating English Language education in Greece. The project was a case study focusing on a language school that provides English as a Foreign Language courses in Greece, and it formed part of my doctoral studies in a UK university. The research participants – myself, teachers and learners – were able to communicate our experiences and beliefs by drawing on our shared native language, Modern Greek, as well as various degrees of competence in English, but the research had to be reported in English in ways that were consistent, transparent and ethical.

The paper begins by looking into the competing intentionalities that impacted the data representation. Prominent among these were the lingua-political imperative to preserve the visibility of languages other than English in research, and the ethical imperative to preserve the participants' 'voices'. From a methodological standpoint, I was concerned about the compromising the trustworthiness of the research by introducing my perspectives through the translation of data. In addition, the frequency of code-switching, which was sometimes theoretically significant, weighed for displaying the original data alongside translations. On the other hand, the faithful reproduction of data, which sometimes contained linguistic infelicities, could adversely impact the participants' professional image, confidence and sensitivities.

Taking these intentionalities into account, in the second part of the paper I describe a continuum of representational positions. In order of increasing opacity, these include: presenting unedited data in the original languages (Greek or English), and translating the Greek texts in ways that preserve linguistic inconsistencies; presenting data bilingually but omitting performance-related features in the English versions; presenting data monolingually (in English); and summarizing the data in English. I discuss the procedural, methodological and ethical implications of each position with reference to illustrative examples, and I conclude by arguing for a flexible and transparent positioning that is responsive to the particularities of the each instantiation of data.