

Intercultural Awareness and Language Learning: What do Students Say?

Sue Train, Kingston University, United Kingdom
Catherine Wilks, Kingston University, United Kingdom

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Abstract

We present the preliminary findings of our qualitative research into the difficulties encountered by different types of foreign language students in a multicultural, multi-identity Higher Education context. We have conducted a series of interviews intended to expand on our quantitative research presented in “L'hexagone: Not Just a Pretty Shape”(Train & Wilks, 2017). We intend to analyse the results using narrative analysis techniques to gain insight into the problem of whether different categories of students can be used to help teachers anticipate learner error, perhaps by identifying those aspects of the experience of moving towards intercultural competency which students of the same category might have in common. Participants were interviewed individually, having earlier completed a vocabulary exercise eliciting both explicit understanding of French vocabulary items, and wider associations. Our paper shows key extracts from the interviews, categorised according to our earlier classification by native language and level of both L1 (English) and L2 (French). These findings will help us to evaluate the categories chosen and to posit learning strategies which could be adopted by teachers to allow smoother progress towards intercultural competency by students of each category. In a changing educational environment both at Higher Education Level and in view of changes to Secondary MFL syllabus at GCSE and A2, we aim to provide an insight into the skills required by students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Language learning, student diversity, translation, qualitative research, intercultural competence

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Introduction

In the undergraduate French language classes we teach, language heritage and student identity is not homogeneous. English can often be a second or third language and French a second, third or fourth language. Some students are native French or English speakers and a few are bilingual or near bilingual. Some students' first or native languages are far removed from European language groups. Our students have also often lived in a variety of cultures and countries. Other students have lived for a short or longer period of time in a French speaking country such as DRC. So the range of language and cultural experiences is vast. All bring their own individual perspectives to bear in the language classroom, and all are required for assessment at all levels to move between French and English and translate between these two languages with a high level of competence. In "*Hexagone: not just a pretty shape*" (Train and Wilks 2017) we tested a range of strategies, including targeted vocabulary and back translation tasks, designed to extend cultural awareness and competence in translation. Our conclusions led us to take this further. In this paper we add to the preliminary findings of our quantitative and qualitative research into the difficulties encountered by different types of foreign language students in a multicultural, multi-identity Higher Education context by interviewing a group of final year students to try to assess their self-awareness of how much their own linguistic and cultural influences impact on their approach to translation.

1.Theoretical context

In our paper *Intercultural awareness and language learning: what do students say?* (Train & Wilks 2017) we continued to draw on theoretical frameworks for the understanding and relevance of intercultural awareness and competence for language students as put forward by Byram & Kramsch (2008), Byram and Zarate (1997), Kramsch (2013), Olk (2009) and Porto (2013) in terms of broadly influencing the aims we have for our students. For our current study our approach has also incorporated notions of crosslinguistic influence, in particular the idea that "Crosslinguistic influence can be due to linguistic, experiential, and input factors, not only typology". Slabakova, R. (2016).

Furthermore, we have taken into account the opinion of linguists such as Fouser (1995) who say that often the descriptive studies in this field rely too much on contrastive analysis: such studies explain, but are less helpful in predicting, problems due to interference, because they often focus on discrete point errors alone. Our objective to move beyond a single focus, by taking a more personal and overarching approach, which attempts to assess the interplay of diversity in language and cultural backgrounds, aims to improve the element of prediction of error aspects. This follows Ringbom (1985) who noted that crosslinguistic influence studies often focus on lexis alone. Our approach in the series of interviews undertaken, is more holistic and gave participants opportunities to reflect, sometimes using narrative, on the role of intercultural issues in their development as translators.

2. Research question

Our study was designed to determine how aware our students are of how much their own linguistic and cultural influences impact on their approach to translation. Whilst

our previous study has assessed this both quantitatively and qualitatively, this study aimed to elicit information on an individual level, allowing a deeper insight into the processes each student adopted or perceived in their journey towards intercultural and linguistic competency, and maybe even fluency.

3. Details of the study

Each student was asked questions concerning their language heritage including the range of languages spoken/written, how they had been learned, when they use them, self-assessment of their level in these languages, and in particular in French. A second group of questions concerned the student's approach to translation between French and English and required the respondent to reflect on practical, classroom, cultural and intercultural issues involved in moving between languages. These oral interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. As we began to analyse the data and read the resulting responses and narratives a sorting process emerged, with 4 overarching themes becoming evident.

4. Participants

In our previous work (Train & Wilks, 2017) we established the following categories as useful for examining students' intercultural awareness:

- Category A: English native
- Category B: French native and education including bilinguals
- Category C: French post colonials
- Category D: students who have studied both French and English as additional languages.

We continued to use these categories in this study as they best reflect the cohort interviewed. The students surveyed were taking French as a Minor Field component of an undergraduate degree and were in their final year of three. Some had spent time in a francophone country as part of their studies. The participants' routes into the course were diverse. Even within the broad categories described above there was much variation in levels of language competence, ranging from near fluent to competent post GCSE level.

5. Results

When we came to analyse the results we found that responses could be grouped according to certain characteristics which revealed levels of understanding in different aspects. Those aspects are outlined below and illustrated by quotation from the interview transcripts.

a) Revealing acquired cultural knowledge

Participants described changes in their cultural awareness which they themselves perceived as they approached the end of the course. Sometimes this took the form of a comparison with previous modes of study.

For example, a Category A student considers the diverse population in the translation class as follows:

“I think what’s nice at university is you’re all from different areas, you know, you could even have someone from a different country, and when they translate it back you think oh yeah, that’s how you could say it too; knowing that there’s different ways of saying the same thing is really important because it broadens your vocabulary at the same time, so it’s really important.”

This student’s comment on discussing translation in class reveals awareness of the benefits of the diverse language group. However, it was not always the case that students’ grasp on the movement between cultures was clear. In some cases, an increased level of confusion was perhaps the result of moving away from a francophone environment and into the English-medium context of the university:

“Yes. I feel that my English when I do translate I think from English to French. I kind of think of the French sentence in English which is wrong. I think I should be thinking of it in French, and that confuses me a lot.”

By expressing dissatisfaction and even frustration with his methods this Category D student shows self-awareness – a first step towards intercultural understanding.

b) Revealing lack of cultural knowledge

“But it’s like you swap the cassette over and the language comes out”

Surely this is the aim for all language speakers? This French post-colonial student (Category C) describes their ease in switching between two near native languages. However, when applied to translation, is this really possible? Can fluency sometimes detract from self-awareness when approaching translation? It was our contention in our previous work that awareness of the students’ own cultural “icebergs” (Hall, 1976), was an essential step towards awareness of the L2 culture. Many students also mentioned unprompted the importance to them of not causing offence through cultural insensitivity or lack of awareness.

c) Unchallenged stereotypes

“It’s thought that with the English languageis a little bit more chilled out, calm, it’s quite polite whereas the French language has more feeling behind it, there’s more passion to it I guess you could say.”

Some comments made by students, such as the one above (Category A), revealed the fact that cultural stereotypes still inform their general views of different languages. Such statements may also reveal a muddling of thoughts relating to politeness codes, intonation and vocabulary use or register, all of which could have an impact on decisions when moving between languages. They reveal a lack of close attention to messages.

d) Formation of practical approaches

“So, GCSE is more translation whereas A level to degree is culture and that helps.” (Category A student). We have classified this as a practical approach, as the student shows that they understand that culture needs to be taken into account. This student sees the process of improving language competence as moving from a functional equivalence of meanings at a more basic level to needing to understand and be knowledgeable about cultural aspects at a more advanced level. However, it is interesting that the student sees translation and culture as being different.

“...it’s always best to read the whole text to understand what it’s about even in general I found that very useful and to find the context of the text and the background. And also to do some research about the text” (Category D student). This student understood the importance of taking context and background into account when translating. It seems to be a systematic procedure which the student adopts for all texts.

Conclusion

Some advanced level students, and often to our surprise those with the greatest number of languages and intercultural experiences, still fall back on stereotypes. A tentative explanation for this could be that because these students’ language skills have been acquired less formally, often for functional purposes, in order to be able to communicate on a purely oral level, or in a specific role, they have not had to reflect on intercultural issues beyond the more obvious or situationally expedient aspects. Others, who have reflected more systematically on crosslinguistic and intercultural interference in their approach to translation are more able to identify and deal with such issues. There is a difference between those who approach advanced language skills acquisition as an academic study and those who rely on a less formalised approach because they feel more confident in their ability to “se débrouiller”, to get by, pretty well, in more informal situations or when precision is not an overriding concern.

Whilst a limitation of this study may be that the sample size is relatively small, it does nonetheless reflect our typical student groups. Students sometimes gave unsolicited anecdotal/narrative examples and it would have been good to have elicited these from more students to have a wider bank of data for comparison. Encouraging deeper reflection by explicitly asking for more examples from classroom and life experiences would enrich the data. Those students who tended to illustrate more freely were also often more revealing of their own circumstances and experiences. Adopting a more free flowing open-ended dialogue to allow narrative analysis would enable us to probe student attitudes and approaches more deeply and we intend to adopt this approach in our subsequent study. We intend to continue our studies by interviewing non-specialist linguist undergraduates to assess interference from students’ other languages and main degree subjects. We will also extend the project to cover school age language learners as translation becomes established in the new GCSE and A level courses in the UK.

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Contact email: s.train@kingston.ac.uk, catherine.wilks@kingston.ac.uk

Appendix 1

Poster overview of *Intercultural awareness and language learning: what the students say*.

Intercultural Awareness and Language Learning: what do students say? 37657

Catherine Wilks, Kingston University, United Kingdom Catherine.Wilks@kingston.ac.uk
Susan Train, Kingston University, United Kingdom S.Train@kingston.ac.uk

Background and theoretical context

The language heritage and student identity of our groups are not homogeneous. This interview-based study builds on our previous research into the difficulties encountered by French language students in a multicultural and multilingual Higher Education context.

- Slabakova, R. (2016): "Crosslinguistic influence can be due to linguistic, experiential, and input factors, not only typology".
- Fouser (1995): many studies rely too much on contrastive analysis and are less helpful in predicting problems due to interference.
- Ringbom (1985): crosslinguistic influence studies often focus on lexis alone.

Participants

In previous work we established the following categories as useful for examining students' intercultural awareness:

- Category A: English native
- Category B: French native and education including bilinguals
- Category C: French post colonials
- Category D: students who have studied both French and English as additional languages

Details of the study

- **Individual interviews** with final year students taking French as a minor component of an undergraduate degree.
- **Questions on language heritage** (range of languages spoken/written, how they had been learned, when they used them, self-assessment of their level in these languages, and in particular in French).
- **Questions on approach to translation** (reflection on practical, classroom, cultural and intercultural issues).

How did our participants reveal their....

Question:
How aware are our students of how much their own linguistic and cultural influences impact on their approach to translation?

Acquired cultural knowledge, insight or awareness

Benefits of a diverse language group:
"I think what's nice at university is you're all from different areas, you know, you could even have someone from a different country, and when they translate it back you think oh yeah, that's how you could say it too; knowing that there's different ways of saying the same thing is really important because it broadens your vocabulary at the same time, so it's really important."
Category A

Self-awareness:
"Yes, I feel that my English when I do translate... I think from English to French. I kind of think of the French sentence in English which is wrong. I think I should be thinking of it in French, and that confuses me a lot."
Category B

Lack of cultural knowledge, insight or awareness

Unaware of the need for reflection:
"But it's like you swap the cassette over and the language comes out"
Category C

Seeing methodological differences between cultures where not appropriate:
"Obviously me having been in a French school I just learned it the French way...it was a bilingual school as well so they must have taught us more of the English way to translate."
Category C

Unchallenged stereotypes

Revealing cultural stereotypes which impact on translation decisions:
"It's thought that with the English language is a little bit more chilled out, calm, it's quite polite whereas the French language has more feeling behind it, there's more passion to it I guess you could say."
Category B

Formation of practical approaches

Demonstrating awareness:
"So, GCSE is more translation whereas A level to degree is culture and that helps."
Category A

Leading to developing a practical approach: "...it's always best to read the whole text to understand what it's about even in general I found that very useful and to find the context of the text and the background. And also to do some research about the text"
Category D

Limitations

Narrative analysis: the study was not designed for these purposes and could only be applied post hoc. This approach could be illuminating if we design the study as more of a free-flowing dialogue.

Small sample size: reflects our typical student groups.

Conclusions

Some students, often those who are multilingual and with more intercultural experience, **still fall back on stereotypes**.

Others reflect more systematically on cross-linguistic and intercultural interference in their approach to translation and are better at addressing such issues.

Native speaker/ bilingual learners' awareness as compared with that of **non-native learners'** emerged as being equally variable across both populations.

Future research

Evaluating teaching strategies to help more students develop awareness.

Working with school age language learners as translation becomes established in the new spec GCSE and A level.

Interviewing non-specialist linguists in the HE population to assess interference from students' other language or main degree subject.

Adopting a more free flowing open-ended dialogue to allow narrative analysis.

Appendix 2

Interview questions

1. Your languages background:

- a) What is your maternal or first language?
- b) How, for you, is it qualified as your first language? (first language learned/language of school/language used exclusively at home/bilingual context?)
- c) How much do you associate (this) language with your own cultural identity?
- d) What is your second language? How would you describe your level in that language? When do you use it? (in class/at home/on the phone/only with specific people/internally etc..)
- e) What is your third/fourth...language(s)? How would you describe your level in this/those languages? When do you use it/them? (in class/at home/on the phone/only with specific people/ internally etc..)
- f) Would you say that your different languages interfere with each other in everyday life? If so, in what ways? (vocabulary use or range / structurally/culturally) And in which situations?

2. Specifically when you are studying or using the language you are learning at university:

- a) Which aspects of learning another language at undergraduate level have been the easiest and the hardest?
- b) How would you assess your level in translation?
- c) Can you describe the process you use or the strategies you adopt when undertaking translation?
- d) What tools do you use?
- e) In a classroom situation how much do you listen to and learn from your peers?
- f) How useful do you find classroom discussion in translation exercises?
- g) Which teaching strategies do you find the most useful or helpful when doing translation work?
- h) Which teaching strategies do you find less useful or helpful when doing translation work?
- i) Would you say that your different languages interfere with each other when you are doing translation work? If so, in what ways? (vocabulary use or range / structurally/culturally/grammatically)
- j) Thinking about language only, can you give any examples?
- k) Thinking about “cultural” interference, can you give any examples?
- l) Do you think/ are you aware that you make any assumptions about meaning when you are translating?
- m) Do you think about your own cultural assumptions when translating?
- n) Have you ever been made aware of these during a teaching session?
- o) Is there anything that has made you wary of making mistakes in this way?
- p) Do you try to research into deeper cultural associations of words and phrases when you work on a translation?
- q) What do you use for research?
- r) How important is intercultural awareness when you are moving between languages? And specifically when translating?