ROUTLEDGE

RESEARCHING ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

A guide to doing research interculturally

Anna Robinson-Pant and **Alain Wolf**

We are working within an increasingly globalised knowledge economy, where researchers collaborate in cross-cultural teams, collect data in a variety of languages and share findings for international audiences who may be unfamiliar with the cultural context. *Researching Across Languages and Cultures* is a guide for doctoral students and other researchers engaged in such multilingual and intercultural research, providing a framework for analysis and development of their experiences.

Demonstrating the link between the theoretical approaches offered by the authors and the practical problems encountered by doctoral researchers, this ground-breaking book draws on research interviews with doctoral students from around the world. Students' written reflections on their experiences are presented as interludes between the chapters. A practical, hands-on guide to planning, conducting and writing up research, the book explores the crucial roles involved in interpreting data across cultures within doctoral research.

Key topics include:

- The role of the interpreter and/or local research assistant in the research process and the ethics of translation
- Constructing knowledge across cultures: addressing questions of audience, power and voice
- Academic literacy practices in multilingual settings
- The doctoral student's role within the geopolitics of academic publishing and forms of research dissemination
- The pragmatics of mediated communication (implicatures, intentions, dialogue).

Researchers who come from and work in monolingual societies often forget that their context is unusual – most of the world live in multilingual contexts, where linguistic shifts and hybridities are the norm. Two authors with extensive experience, together with a number of their existing or former research students, share insights into these issues that surround language and culture in research.

This book will be a useful guide for academic researchers, doctoral students, research supervisors and Masters students who carry out empirical research in multilingual or multicultural contexts and/or are writing about their research for a diverse readership across the world.

Anna Robinson-Pant is a Professor of Education and holds the UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation at the University of East Anglia, UK.

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Anna Robinson-Pant and Alain Wolf

with reflective pieces from Achala Gupta, Eleni Konidari, Gina Lontoc, Joanna Nair and Pu Shi

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FOREWORD

Alan Rogers

In 1988, working in Bangladesh without the benefit of language, I experienced the following exchange when interviewing a leader of a women's group about literacy.

Me to interpreter: Ask her if she is literate or illiterate.

Interpreter to the women's leader . . .
Woman back to interpreter . . .

Interpreter to me: She says she has never been to school.
Me to interpreter: I did not ask her that; what did you ask her?
Interpreter to me: I asked her if she can read and write – for, you see, there is no word in Bangla for illiterate!

I realised then some of the jumps that researching through translators involves. The interpreter jumped from 'literate' to 'reading and writing'; the group leader jumped from 'reading and writing' to 'being educated' and from that to 'school', and so she replied accordingly. All the jumps were justified but together they took the discussion away from the key issue. I was seeking to find out how she dealt with the everyday literacy tasks involved in being the leader of a women's group in her context (she got her ten-year-old son and other group members to help).

(And we did manage to go on to have a long and fruitful conversation.)

This kind of situation which occurs frequently in intercultural research is an example of the questions with which this book deals. Of course, there are many deep issues around the spaces in which different cultures encounter each other in development programmes and inter-community research; but in language lies a large territory of potential misunderstandings – especially as 'language' is no longer seen by many as 'a fixed, static and clearly delineable object' bounded with a

locality and a population, but as 'fluid, dynamic and practice-based', constantly on the move (Stroud and Prinsloo, 2015: 56).

Researchers who live and work in monolingual societies often forget that their context is unusual – most of the world live in multilingual contexts, where linguistic shifts and hybridities are the norm and conducting research in such contexts brings to the fore certain facets which are the focus of discussion in these pages. Two authors from different disciplines but with extensive experience, together with a number of research students, share their insights into some of the issues around language in research – not just international, for language can be an issue in intra-national research as well. At the heart of the discussion lie two concepts – context and communication. The variable and changing contexts (plural, for the researcher brings a context as well) determine to a large extent the nature of the research exchanges; and communication involves not just words but meanings, intentions and even assumptions. And as the authors point out, research is not just a twosome, the researcher (and their team) and the researched (whether individual or group or whole community). There is at least one other main party (sometimes overlooked) – those to whom the researcher(s) need to submit their report in thesis, publication or policy statement, such as funders, doctoral supervisors and examiners. Some of these third parties join (often unconsciously) in the construction of meanings of the research – so there are potentially three languages involved. My exchange above was in the context of making a video in English about literacy, to be shown to people in the UK who have never been to Bangladesh or any other so-called 'developing country', and they were in my mind all the time, co-constructing the research.

These are some of the complications the authors unravel in clear stages – the data collection (the authors focus on qualitative research, especially ethnographic, but the same issues face quantitative researchers using large-scale data collection methodologies); the use of field notes; and the writing up. Translation of course is the key element – whether word for word or sense for sense (Alain Wolf's use of historical religious examples is both illuminating and amusing). Deciding which principles to adopt within an ethical framework; finding equivalents which convey not just the meaning but also something of the atmosphere; judging whether 'I have never been to school' is adequately translated as 'I am illiterate' – these are the daily decisions of researchers in interlingual contexts, as is shown by the supplementary pieces providing short accounts of practical experience written by recent or current doctoral students each with his or her own research story. And the book takes the process beyond the research and report-writing-up stages into writing for publication; here Anna Robinson-Pant draws on the recent experience she and her colleagues have acquired through running training workshops for academics in writing for publication.

This book is particularly timely – for international research, especially using teams of researchers from different institutions, is growing exponentially in the search for evidence-based policy-making. But this book is not just for those who research across languages; I would recommend it to all researchers in the social

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science fields. For there is always a gap between researcher and researched, even in the same community – the researcher is *ipso facto* seen and felt to be a different person from the researched (usually richer, urbanised, more educated and with greater measures of freedom than the researched), speaking a different kind of language. Bridging this gap is not easy. And there is always the issue of interpreting your findings in such a way that someone who was not there will enter into the field as at least an observer, if not a participant observer. Dealing fully with such issues, this book will be a useful item in the toolbox of social and cultural researchers.

PREFACE

Why this guide to researching across languages and cultures?

Collaborating on research in cross-cultural teams, collecting data in a second language, working with translators or writing up findings for an international audience unfamiliar with the cultural context. These are common experiences of today's researchers working within a globalised knowledge economy. Increasingly, doctoral students and other researchers find themselves working in multilingual contexts – possibly acting as or through translators and making choices about which language/s to use in fieldwork and writing up. In these situations, doctoral field research often involves learning informally about intercultural communication and how to translate and interpret both written and spoken texts across cultures.

This book provides a guide for doctoral students and other researchers engaged in such multilingual and intercultural research. Collecting and interpreting data across cultures demands sensitive understanding of different roles and research practices which standard research methodology textbooks rarely touch on. How do local participants, the researcher, an interpreter/translator, and an academic supervisor engage in a process of mediating different meanings? The book identifies a number of themes and concerns that have arisen in discussion with international researchers/supervisees through our own experiences in UK higher education, including: conventions of academic literacies in English as compared to languages in which data was collected, the power differentials related to the choice of academic sources, the semantics and pragmatics of mediated communication (humour, politeness, implied meaning), the role of the interpreter and/or local research assistant in the research process, the ethics of translation and forms of research dissemination.

Recognising that methodological critique and reflection is an essential element of the doctoral process, we aim to do more than simply offering practical advice

on how to conduct multilingual fieldwork. By introducing theoretical concepts from the fields of intercultural communication, translation studies, academic literacies and postcolonial theory, we set out to provide a framework for researchers to analyse and develop their own experiences of researching across languages and cultures. It will soon be apparent to the reader that both authors come from a qualitative research background. Whilst this has inevitably influenced the approaches we introduce and the examples of field research and writing drawn on, we believe that the book will have much relevance for those using quantitative approaches in intercultural research too. In particular, we hope that the book will encourage doctoral students to write about and share their insights into multilingual and intercultural research – having noticed that this is a dimension frequently hidden or missing in accounts of methodology within the final thesis. Recognising that the doctoral degree is usually one step on a longer research journey, we invite the reader to take up the challenge to explore innovative ways of constructing and disseminating knowledge beyond the PhD.

Origins and form of the book

The idea for this book emerged from developing advanced doctoral training workshops together at our university on 'Researching across languages and cultures'. As will become apparent in the book, we have quite different disciplinary backgrounds and this has been a rich source of learning from each other: Alain in linguistics and theology; Anna in education and development studies. This has influenced the material we have drawn on as illustration - whereas Anna has discussed situations that arose when conducting empirical fieldwork in the South, Alain has taken excerpts from religious texts to develop his analysis of approaches to translation or discourse analysis. Our interaction through the planning of the workshops enabled us to share and bring together different methods and concepts that have shaped our understanding and research approach.

After each workshop, student participants were invited to write about their research experiences. Those responses were of particular interest because they demonstrated the link between the theoretical approaches offered by us as workshop convenors and the practical problems encountered by the doctoral researchers. These reflective pieces form interludes between the various chapters in this book, offering a different perspective from that provided by us as authors and doctoral supervisors[1].

We also draw extensively on interviews, email correspondence and focus group discussions conducted with doctoral students over the past year. Semi-structured interviews were held with current doctoral and some Masters/MPhil students in anthropology, education, sociology, linguistics and development studies in two universities in the UK, as well as in universities in Iceland, Nepal and Korea. This research was approved by the research ethics committee in our respective university departments. As well as following the standard ethics protocols, we tried to maximise opportunities for research participants to 'speak back' to us as researchers.

Immediately after each interview, students were invited to read and comment on a summary or transcription of the discussion and to give any further reflections. We also sent drafts of the chapters to those being quoted there and had many interesting conversations about our differing interpretations or readings of the data. The participants were then able to make a more considered decision about whether they would prefer to be anonymised (and to suggest a suitable pseudonym if they wished) or for us to use their real names. All of these interactions have influenced this final version of the book and we are grateful to the doctoral students who engaged in this process at a very busy time of their lives.

Having conducted research with doctoral students since becoming a university lecturer in 2000, Anna also returned to interviews and writing conducted previously. This was especially useful for gaining a longitudinal perspective on doctoral research experiences and what students did next, as in the examples in Chapter 6 which build on her book, *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Educational Research* (2005). Some of the examples were taken from interviews conducted for a joint paper with Dr Tesfay Tsegay at the British Association for International and Comparative Education conference in 2012 (updated through email discussion with participants in 2016). Data cited from 2010 was collected and analysed collaboratively with Dr Anna Magyar as part of a university teaching fellowship, benefiting greatly from her insights from a long experience in academic literacies research. This project led to us making a DVD with international doctoral students – several of whom are quoted in this book.

Writing this book has meant engaging directly with many of the issues that we discuss around researching across languages and cultures. Coming from quite different academic disciplines with differing expectations regarding academic voice, literacy conventions and audience, we first had to decide whether to present a unified authorial voice and presence throughout the book. Finding it impossible to develop a single voice throughout, we opted to retain our individual voices and identities in most of the chapters but have written this introduction and endpiece together as 'we'. So Chapters 1, 5 and 6 are written by Anna, and Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are written by Alain. We hope that retaining our two voices in this way will also give the reader a sense of the initial dialogue we engaged in. The central theme of moving from a cross-cultural to an intercultural perspective on research is re-visited throughout the book through our differing theoretical resources and experiences as researchers and doctoral supervisors. The structure of the book is informed by the conventional chronology of a research process, with the aim of integrating an intercultural and multilingual perspective. So we start from theoretical conceptualisation of the research problem in Chapter 1, moving to data collection and analysis in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 (in relation to translation in data collection and interpretation) and writing/disseminating research (Chapter 5 and 6).

Finally, there is the question about who will read this book? Whilst we started off primarily with doctoral students in mind, as we moved into the context of the geopolitics of academic publishing and dominance of English language research literature, it became clear that the book has a wider potential audience. A central

argument of the book is that supervisors and other faculty can learn much from engaging in critical discussion with students researching across languages and cultures - particularly international students with their experience of mediating different academic literacy practices and languages in the UK academy too. As the voices of students engaged in intercultural research are such a rich resource within the book, we hope that established academics will find much to reflect on here too.

Anna Robinson-Pant and Alain Wolf
April 2016

Note

1 The full set of unabridged reflective pieces was published as a Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) Working Paper 1, available to download at: https://www.uea.ac.uk/documents/595200/0/CARE+Working+Paper+1.pdf/e2b7032b-c7e8-4fff-9b0e-f6fb8e10c486

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Above all, we would like to acknowledge all the doctoral students and other researchers in universities around the world who were so generous in sharing their ideas and time with us through interviews and informal discussion during the later stages of finalising this text. We have learned so much from interacting within this global community which formed around the book. We were delighted that Prof. Alan Rogers agreed to be our 'critical friend' at the last stage. His insightful comments helped us identify gaps and ways in which we could develop stronger connections across the book.

Finally, the dedication of this work goes to our respective partners and family, without whose forbearance and inspiration this study would never have seen the light of day.

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