

A Symposium Abstract

The Benefits of Code-Switching in the Interviews of Cambodian Refugees in Dunedin, New Zealand.

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss about the benefits of being able to conduct the interviews of Cambodian Refugees in Dunedin in four different languages (Khmer, English, Thai and TaecheW).

The New Zealand Government has assisted a considerable number of Indo-Chinese Refugees to resettle in New Zealand since 1979. The Cambodian Community is the biggest group of Indo-Chinese refugees in Dunedin. An open-ended questionnaire was used in order to encourage more flexibility for participants to respond from their own cultural and social perspectives.

People who have been exiled from their birth countries because of political conflicts and who have had to look for asylum in a third country, find adjusting to a new environment and its language a major problem. This is especially true for those who can neither read nor write their own language.

The results of making four choices of different languages available during the interviews have shown tremendous benefits toward collecting data in terms of an accurate picture of the culture and society of the interviewees.

Background of Study

Language can be a bridge and also a barrier. My experience in New Zealand since 1987 has been among authentic English speakers either in society at large or in the educational system, I always have the feeling that there are still many difficulties I have to struggle with even after several years of living in New Zealand. I could not help myself feel that way even though I have been in education for such a long time. How much greater this feeling must be with people with little formal education but have to survive in a new country where things and culture are so different? Few people would be concerned with these unfortunate people and also few people would be interested in learning their background. How many people would be realized that the reaction towards the way they speak or behave has left the experience of shock and fright?

Purpose of study

My experience of having helped overseas friends and some refugees in either teaching them the survival English language or interpretation, this challenged me to find out difficulties experienced by members of the Cambodian refugee group within the New Zealand education system and identify particular needs of the refugees, especially with respect to language learning and employment.

How was the study conducted?

There have been Indochinese refugees in Dunedin for many years. At the time of the study, Cambodian refugees comprised the largest group. Research conducted with Indochinese refugees in New Zealand (Andrew, 1985; Henderson, 1988; Kennedy, 1990; Delaval-Willis, 1990), it is

clear that none of the studies studied the whole community nor did they conduct in-depth interviews. Therefore, because of the manageable size of the community and my own relationship to this group of people, it appeared that this was an excellent opportunity to use in-depth interviews in order to find out the difficulties that the Cambodian refugee community had with language learning. The information was obtained from the entire community of some 97 households, in order to provide an opportunity for every body to be heard. I made a direct approach to the community to gain personal consent to collect information from individuals. In addition, I was able to encourage the Cambodian refugees to talk freely about their feelings and difficulties in a friendly atmosphere because I shared a similar cultural background and the difficulties of learning English as a second language. Since this study dealt with people who have had traumatic experiences where their families had encountered death, the method of data gathering needed to be as non-threatening, non-intrusive and as culturally sensitive as possible. Consequently, I preferred to avoid the use of tape recorders.

Parents, children from primary and secondary schools, young adults and relatives or friends who were living in the same house were involved in the focus group interviews. The consent of each individual was sought before the interview started (Burgess, 1984). I took seven months to complete data collection.

Conducting the Interviews

Regarding the interpretation of key incidents within participants' responses, more detailed qualitative data were required. Filstead (1979) claims that a good qualitative researcher who can grasp the meanings of events is better able to comprehend the actions of the participants as well as his or her own involvement in the process. Burns (1990) and Fox (1982) suggest that using

open-ended questions produce very full verbal responses and descriptions. This is supported by Mishler (1979) that the implications of contexts provide an important way of understanding of events and experiences which the researcher should not ignore.

Setting up the interviews was carefully designed. The interviews were conducted in four different languages (Khmer, English, Thai and Taechew) that I know and typically, each took at least two hours excluding the social time afterwards. I can neither read nor write in the Khmer language fluently but I am able to pick up what is said in conversation. Because of the similarity of Cambodian and Thai culture and also some part of the language, this provides a good opportunity for me to develop a good relationship with participants. Most contacts were initially made by telephone either by me or one of the interpreters. I introduced myself and told them what I was doing in New Zealand. I tried to use the language they were comfortable. Ackroyd & Hughes (1992) emphasizes that the language used should be as simple as possible. Then I asked them for a consent whether I could come to visit them. Timing was left to participants' convenience rather than being specified by me. After having been in Thai camps for a number of years, most Cambodian refugees are able to understand Thai. Once they found out that I came from Thailand, this even has given them the excitement of refreshing the Thai language again.

The atmosphere

The research team consisted of the researcher, a research assistant and an interpreter showed their cultural sensitivity by performing their traditional greeting instead of shaking hands. We showed our respect by gathering two hands and bowed. We removed our shoes, walked into the house and sat on the floor where older people preferred to do so. There were a few houses where they did not have much furniture. We tried to ensure a more relaxed atmosphere rather than making

things too formal. The interview was carried out in a normal conversation. Certainly, we took notes but we made them feel free whatever they likes instead of conveying the feeling that they were being studied. Typically it took two hours for each interview excluding the social time which the research team spent with the families afterwards. Sometimes the interview took longer if unplanned events occurred. For instance, old people liked to show photos of their family when they were asked about number of children they had. To respect their wishes and to express our interest we usually stopped the interview for a little while and continued the questions later on. The responses were thought to be more reliable if the information was collected in a socially comfortable context.

Benefits

Conklin & Lourie (1983) define code switching as "All fully equilingual bilinguals, those who genuinely command two languages equally well, have the ability to code-switch, alternating from one language to the other out of communicational convenience or preference. Code-switches may take place between conversations as a new speaker takes a turn from one sentence to another, or even within sentences."

Because of making the choice of language available, the research team had learnt and gained so rich information. The time passed so quickly. There were all sorts of different things to do after the end of the last question. A cup of coffee or tea was always prepared for each of us including some sweets. Cambodian people liked to continue talking about their lives in Thai camps or Cambodia, friends or relatives who were left behind or scattered around the world. Some would very proudly show the video of their son or daughter's wedding or other wise talk about the differences between Cambodia and New Zealand. We exchanged ideas for various things in a

language they were comfortable. It was such a good opportunity to share our experience.

Hutchinson (1988) claims that it is also appropriate to observe people's patterns of behaviour. A number of things which did not appear in the questions, have been found out. I have learnt so much of what they have felt and thought, how much they have wanted to practise their culture but it has been looked too much different. How did they feel about the teacher who had been teaching them English and yet the things taught were not needed? What did they feel about the programmes provided? What reaction did they have towards their home tutors and sponsors? What did they expect to be changed or improved? It was such a wonderful time to learn to trust one another because we can convey in the same language. As a result, my study has contributed a better understanding on Cambodian refugees's needs especially in these four areas of concern:

1. adequacy of government support programme
2. emotional adjustment of refugees.
3. educational achievement
4. opportunities for employment.

The researcher can be such a good bridge if one has put their effort to learn the participants' language or otherwise at least to understand their culture and humbly pay a respect to what they think and feel.

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