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FREE to Communicate in Operations Management: Facilitating Research in Emerging Economies

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Abstract

For those wishing to undertake research in emerging economies, language will become a major obstacle. The problem of interpretation has been addressed within social sciences; however, it is thought that different considerations may exist when interviewing in a business situation. Conducting case study (CS) research at a large automotive parts manufacturer in Slovenia, the language issues involved in interpretation for interviews were addressed. Findings show that, in order to successfully obtain the desired information from the case, significant planning and consultation is required to find a local, external interpreter, with the right experience and approach to facilitate data collection. This will enable interviewees to speak freely and, moreover, provide information on cultural issues that may not be immediately obvious to a visiting researcher. Contribution from this paper is primarily a suggested guideline for those wishing to undertake research in emerging economies, while adding to the extant literature on CS research methods.

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Introduction

At present, most academic research published comes from the United States and the United Kingdom [1]; countries with rich and diverse cultures, but with English as the first language and for many the only language. As more research is undertaken in the Emerging Economies (EE) of the world, language will become a greater issue. Statistics show that in the largest EE countries, English speakers are not common. For China, it is quoted that there are 200-350 million English learners/users [2], but in a population of over 1.3 billion, this equates to only 15-27%. Likewise in India [3], only 21% of the population speak English as either a first (0.02%) or second language. The situation is not greatly increased in the EE countries of Europe, with percentages of English speakers at 29% in Poland, 24% in the Czech Republic and only 17% in Turkey [4]. In an ever shrinking world, where mobility is everyday and networking frequently takes place across national borders, it is becoming more common to form research links with companies overseas. This can add to the potential research possible in EE countries, which currently do not have the capability to exploit their potential alone, and the use of '*outsiders*' could provide additional insight when working in a foreign culture [5,6].

With researchers speaking, and publishing, in English an added challenge is placed on the methodological issues of research [7]. Those who have set out to work across language borders have been faced with a lack of guidance, as little extant literature exists in this field [5,6]. What does exist is primarily in the field of Social Science, clustered around the issues of healthcare [7,8,9,10,11,12] and interviewing migrants living in English speaking countries [5,6,8-11], which leads to a lack of published case studies on conducting research in non-English speaking countries, with non English speaking participants [5]. Those who do publish on overseas research often do not fully explain their methodology [12], or the involvement of interpreters in the interview process [7] and the effect this may have on the process and final

conclusions [6,12]. Additionally, in the many eminent published texts on case studies and interview techniques [e.g.13,14,15], the subject is not even discussed.

It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to introduce a case study, undertaken in a business research situation, to provide both an account of cross-cultural, cross-language interviewing and to use what was learned to compare the experience with those of social scientists to create a guide to those wishing to embark on operations research in the Emerging Economies of the world.

The Case

The study took place in 2009, involving UK researchers with a history of collaboration with the UK arm of a global organisation. Having experienced the effects of the economic downturn faced by world-wide economies, the UK base was being restructured and was therefore no longer considered appropriate for the forthcoming study. A decision was taken by the Lean Director for Southern Europe to move the next phase of research, known as the NIMBLE project, to factories in mainland Europe. The initial study undertaken on the project took place in Slovenia; a country moving towards EE status, with a limited number of English speakers. Adopting a case study methodology, the research involved interviewing shop-floor staff and their supervisors on the relationship experienced between leaders and their subordinates.

The interpreter used was a professional multi-lingual interpreter with many years experience in both live interpretation and translation of documents. Well respected in her field, she holds a PhD in linguistics and is a regular interpreter in both the Slovenian Parliament and works as a court appointed interpreter.

Experiences gained during the research field work will be used to contrast with the advice and experience presented by other researchers in extant literature.

Planning – The Approach

Why Use an Interpreter?

It has been shown that the numbers of English speakers in EE countries are limited, and even where the percentages seem high the level of language skill may not be near to fluent. This leaves a researcher undertaking field work in these countries with a decision on how to approach this added challenge; an issue that should be resolved early on at the research design phase. Although many participants may feel willing and able to conduct the interview in their second language, and do not want to put people to extra effort [11], their accounts may be poorer for their lack of language skill and accuracy of the data may be questionable [5]. However, in a business situation this may not be the case, as English becomes a widespread common language for global communications. At the Case organisation one interviewee expressed the desire to conduct the interview in English, and apart from the occasional prompt from the interpreter, who remained present, the interview proved one of the richest. It would therefore be advisable to obtain as much information as possible about the participants before planning the interviews, as interpretation may not be necessary.

For those who are not capable or unwilling to conduct their interviews in English, the use of an interpreter must be considered, to allow participants to fully express themselves, as language is power [16] and without giving the participant a voice, they will feel disempowered and unlikely to share in detail. The researcher may also feel disempowered if they are unable to communicate their research needs and are held back from expressing themselves effectively [6]. Employing the services of an interpreter will address these issues and help to “*manage the communicative exchange between the researcher and participants*”

[5]. These considerations make the selection of an interpreter vitally important for the research [17], as much of the power in the situation will be held by the interpreter and must be used appropriately. It will also be necessary for the researcher to consider the interpreter as a valuable part of the process, rather than a '*necessary evil*' [8].

Is a Bilingual Speaker Enough?

In an ideal world our language skills would be such that we could communicate with any section of the population, anywhere in the world; unfortunately this is not the case and the advantages of being an '*insider*' [16] are not always available to us. However, it may actually be the case that differences can stimulate research in a way that similarity cannot. Similarly, consideration of the characteristics of an interpreter must be given to identify where similarities and differences can play a part; and whether familiarity or independence will yield the best rewards.

For many, the contracting of a professional interpreter has the potential to use a significant proportion of the research budget, and it may therefore be considered prohibitively expensive. So what are the alternatives, and the consequences of their use? Much of the extant literature from social sciences deals with immigrants to an English speaking country; many of whom do not speak the language but have people in their community who do, and can act on their behalf [5,6,7,8,11]. Cohen et.al [18] considers these individuals as '*informal*' characterising them as having some, potentially limited, skills in translating, but are not formally trained. For some, especially in the social sciences where topics can be personal and traumatic, having someone familiar with them who they can trust, brings comfort and can actually facilitate the interview process [5,8,11]; however, it has been shown that in many cases the problems outweigh the benefits. Often the use of a family member or member of the community can inhibit a participant from sharing information, either because it is a topic they

would not normally speak about with that person, or because they are concerned that the information shared may not be kept confidential, or may negatively influence the impression that person may have of them [5,6,8]. This may also lead to false interpretation as the lay-interpreter tries to protect themselves or the participant from judgement [11]; additionally those who are very familiar may just cut the participant out of the process and begin to answer for them [7]. These issues can lead to errors [10] and can unfavourably affect the dynamics of the interview [7].

Although this situation is unlikely in business based research, the equivalent of utilising bilingual staff represents similar issues. When working with organisations, they may insist on using their own staff for confidentiality reasons; where the topic is not of commercial sensitivity this should be avoided whenever possible [7]. Experience at the case company showed that staff who are sufficiently proficient in a second language are often very senior in the organisation, and therefore are more likely to be viewed as a threat than as reassurance for participants, leading participants to carefully choose what they reveal in front of them. Additionally, where organisations do not gain from the research, or the staff member may feel the company's reputation may be damaged, there is also the potential for false interpretation.

In addition to these personality based factors, the lay-interpreter may simply not be up to the job. Professional interpreters have developed skills that allow them to work in this kind of situation that lay-interpreters just do not possess. Baker et.al [19] noted that the ability to hold conversations in two languages is not the same as interpreting, which also means that they are not reliably able to ensure that both the researcher and participant have understood each other correctly [10]. Additionally, lay-interpreters do not have the concentration span required [7], especially for a series of interviews or lengthy one-offs. Career interpreters, such as the one

used at the case study organisation, have an expanded memory that allows them to retain information before it can be relayed and, when this is extended, a 'shorthand' is used to keep notes in order to keep the accuracy of translation. An additional skill they possess is that of judging when it is appropriate to break off to relay information and when the conversation is flowing such that it should be allowed to continue. These individuals also bring the benefit of impartiality; meaning that the participant is unlikely to feel inhibited as they recognise that as a professional, the interpreter is there just to carry out that role, and that if there is a risk to their confidentiality it is more likely to come from the researcher, whose job it is to reassure them. In terms of the research itself, it is far more likely that a professional interpreter is familiar with the research process and is therefore less likely to exert any influence over the proceedings and could prove a valuable asset, not just in interpretation. If the interpreter is a native of the country being researched, it may be that they can give additional insight [5,6,7, 9,12], particularly into the cultural and socio-economics of the surrounding area. In the Slovenia case, the interpreter was able to explain how through the generations people in the locality had been farmers, but the land could no longer sustain extended families who had then sought work in the large engineering works that had grown up with the town. The general desire to stay close to home meant that many felt a sense of loyalty to the organisation, which was in part due to the fact that it facilitated their staying in the area. It was also possible for her to highlight where the literal translation of questions did not work as different meaning was ascribed to the phrasing, such as asking about employee commitment to the organisation, which did not work as the concept of commitment in Slovenia was something based around the family and not often associated with work. Whilst similar insight may be available from lay-interpreters, it is unlikely that it would be offered as unsolicited advice and there may not be sufficient time and opportunity outside of the interviews for additional discussion.

Problems Finding Suitable Interpreters

One challenge that must be faced by those wishing to take on an interpreter, is that of actually finding one. Within social sciences, the selection of an interpreter is closely tied in to the concept that participants are most comfortable with researchers and interpreters that share similar characteristics to them, such as age, gender, ethnicity [6,7,12], some even suggest the use of multiple interpreters to accommodate this [7]. This was not found to be necessary in the business case conducted, where participants were mostly male, ranging in age from 20's to 50's, working in shop floor level positions at the organisation, whereas the researcher and interpreter were both female, 30's, with PhD level education and professional level jobs. Ultimately, all of the suitability criteria may have to be compromised simply to ensure that someone is available to do the job [7]. However, Kahn and Cannell [20] reassuringly state that this can be overcome if an interviewer is able to demonstrate their ability to understand the participant.

Planning – The Preparation

Preparing the Interpreter

It is well acknowledged that steps should be taken to prepare the interpreter before the interview takes place [5,6,7,11,16]. Some recommend an induction process [6] but it is generally accepted that some form of prior discussion should take place, in order to create an understanding between the researcher and the interpreter and to ensure that things run smoothly. It is suggested that the views of the interpreter should be discussed, especially on sensitive issues, so that the researcher can gain an understanding of the way the interpreter is likely to phrase the translation across the languages [16]. In practical terms, it allows the researcher to inform the interpreter of the purpose [5] and subjects [11] of the interview and the research rules under which it will be conducted [7], not least of which is the need for

strict confidentiality [7,11]. This also gives an opportunity for the interpreter to give their impressions of the phrasing of questions and how they will work when translated [5,7]. At this point the schedule for interviews and the anticipated length of each should be discussed [7,11], so that the interpreter can consider their approach. It may also provide a chance to discuss where the interpreter can help facilitate the process in other ways, such as speaking to others on behalf of the researcher [7].

As with the Slovenian case, time and geography may prohibit the idealised preparation described by social scientists. In order to achieve the best possible results, and prompted by the experience of the interpreter, as much information was sent by email a few weeks in advance of the field study visit; this allowed her to be as prepared as possible and able to concentrate fully during interviews. A brief description of the project and its objectives was sent along with the proposed questions that had been developed, although this was accompanied by an explanation that the interview would be semi-structured and the questions would not necessarily be strictly adhered to. This was followed up with telephone conversations and emails to confirm that there was an understanding. The day at the organisation began with a presentation to the management board and the supervisors involved, which also gave the interpreter further explanation and was followed by a brief discussion before the interviews commenced.

Setting out the Roles and Establishing Control?

Before interviews begin there is one further issue that must be addressed with the interpreter; that of roles. Literature offers several roles that an interpreter can take such as advisors, or advocates, as well as the neutral position [16] most envisage, all of which bring different expectations. The traditional role, sometimes known as the '*conduit*' [21], transmits messages between the two parties without distortion, where the interview takes place through the

interpreter, rather than with them, acting as a 'neutral mouthpiece' [12]. In practice it may be difficult for an interpreter to perform only this role, especially if they have not been briefed correctly as to what is expected of them, or where they lack training in the skills of interpretation [9]. In order to come to a common understanding [7] of the roles within the interview situation and how the exchange of information should take place [5], it is necessary to present interpreters with guidelines [17] and realistic expectations, with the means to accomplish them [9], to reduce the possibility that they may deviate from them. Consequences of the interpreter not fully grasping their role can result in them becoming too involved and making up their own questions [5], or choosing not to translate and, therefore, excluding the researcher from the conversation [17] and other actions, all of which can lead to conflict and poor data collection.

At the case study organisation, this was a lesson that was learned in practice rather than planned in advance; which it will always be in future. The professionalism and experience of the interpreter helped a great deal, as it was her prompt that began the discussion of roles. Working in the parliament and courts of Slovenia, she was well experienced in the practice of neutral interpretation, taking on the '*conduit*' [21] role for most of her contracts. In fact, it would have been unfamiliar for her to have taken on a more involved role and one that she may not really have been comfortable with. In her experience, the ideal way of achieving the best results would be to use a remote system, with the researcher and participant wearing microphones and earpieces so that the interpreter effectively became invisible and the two were able to 'virtually' talk to one another. Obviously, this is not often possible, but the approach taken allowed the closest to the ideal. Although ideal in a business situation, which would be mostly devoid of emotion or upset, the '*conduit*' model is not always applicable. In cultures such as China, it would be considered ill manners for an interpreter not to be a visible part of the process, as much is placed on interaction in person [9]. This highlights a

further cultural issue where a professional interpreter from the target country would be able to provide further insight.

The issue of control is one that comes up repeatedly in extant literature, even after the advice on preparing and setting out roles. There are several approaches to control of the interview, depending on how directive the researcher wishes to be. In their 2001 paper, Murray and Wynne [5] contrast two approaches and their subsequent results. The first interpreter was simply given a list of subjects to be covered and directed the interview in the way they thought best, which allowed for flowing conversation, with the researcher only intervening when issues were not being covered. In the second interview the interpreter was briefed to translate what was spoken and not add anything themselves, termed '*verbatim style*' [7], allowing the researcher to play a more direct role, although restricting the conversation. The first scenario, termed '*independent intervention*' [7] is not one that many researchers would consider, especially in business research, because although the interpreter may be knowledgeable and, as some suggest, able to decide what needs to be asked [6], it takes away all of the control from the researcher. However, it must be acknowledged that allowing the interpreter to perform an agreed role that falls between the two extremes [6,7], actually allows the researcher to maintain control, as this is what they desire and will not be against the interests of the research.

In the discussion of roles, it is essential that the interpreter understands that they are not permitted to deviate from what has been set out, and any attempt by them to dominate inappropriately should be dealt with at the earliest opportunity. Failure of the researcher to communicate their position can result in situations where, like in the study by Birch et.al [17], the researcher was made to ask for translations every time they wished to know what was said; rendering the researcher helpless, dependant and with '*third party status*' [6]. It should

also be remembered that this is a complex three-way process with the participant also having power of the direction of the interview.

Ideally, the researcher and interpreter should act like a team [7], which was exactly the situation in the Slovenian case. The interpreter and researcher were able to come to a clear understanding of the roles of each in the interview and the interpreter followed this exactly. Translating '*verbatim style*', the interpreter only deviated from the neutral role to give brief clarification or rephrasing of the questions asked to the participant, in order to make things clearer for them. Having been given information prior to the interviews, the interpreter was sufficiently au fait with the subject that she was able to do this without referring to the researcher.

The Interview

When in the interview itself, there are certain specific instructions that will help facilitate the process. A triangular seating arrangement is suggested [6], which gives the opportunity for the researcher to face the participant, with the interpreter centrally between them, but off at the side giving the perception of neutrality. This may also build some sense of rapport with the participant, which is considered to be important in social science and more so in medical consultations [5,7]. At the start of each interview, the interpreter should be introduced to the participant, explaining the role they have and that they too are bound by confidentiality [11], and making it clear who will be privy to the information gathered [5]. The researcher should address questions directly to the participant, ensuring they keep eye contact when the answer is given, giving the impression that the researcher is actively listening, even when they cannot understand the language [6,11]. It is important for the researcher to purposely pause for translation, especially when complex issues are discussed [11], to allow the interpreter to retain as much detail as possible for the translation. At the end of each interview, time should

be allowed for a short debrief [6], which can be followed up with a full debriefing session after all interviews are completed.

The Slovenian interviews were, in part, planned by the organisation prior to arrival, lining up the participants and informing them of their time slot. Setting up the interview room to create the triangular formation was felt to be beneficial by both the researcher and the interpreter and reinforced the explanation of her neutral role given at the start of each interview. Before the first participant arrived, the interpreter explained the two potential options for translation: simultaneous 'whispering' or waiting until pauses in the conversation. Although whispering may allow the conversation to flow, it was felt that listening to two people speaking may require too much concentration for the researcher through many interviews and off-putting for the participant; it may also hinder the transcription of recorded interviews. Having chosen to wait for the translation also posed challenges for the researcher. Reading the advice on staying focussed, keeping eye contact and reacting to non verbal cues sounded straightforward; however, in practice it was difficult to stay focussed when the two other people were speaking in a language where nothing was recognisable. All answers were related in the first person and it was found that the physical reactions came when the answers were translated and at those points, where the researcher was essentially listening to the voice of the participant, a conscious effort was made to look at the participants in order that they see the reactions. Although the interview was conducted in this way, the researcher often felt left out of the conversation, finding that a visible rapport was being established between the interpreter and participant, which it was concluded was hard to avoid. The only downside came when the same questions were repeated through several interviews, which the interpreter could predict and at times cut off the researcher from adding extras in anticipation that the question would be the same as when previously asked. As this was an occasional

rather than regular occurrence it was felt that the 'team' atmosphere between the two would be better served by not bringing it to the attention of the interpreter.

Equivalence

Once at the stage of the interview, many of the hard decisions have been made by the researcher, but for the interpreter the decisions are just beginning. Although neutral, the interpreter does not perform a passive role in the interview [5]. Instead, they constantly make decisions about equivalence and cultural meanings that the language carries, making them more of an analyst in the process [16]. Although advised to stay as close to the words and meaning when translating [5], extant literature suggests that communication between languages involves more than the literal translation of words and, rather than being an exact match, the interpreter is faced with a vast array of potential phrases that could be selected [12]. It is not merely the words that are important, but both the subject and cultural context has an impact on the correct choice [22]. Although it may be necessary to use other words to effectively translate the correct meaning, Temple [23] provides reassurance that researchers should not be anxious. It is unlikely anyone can be sure which words and subjects differ in meaning from one language to another [16] and the interpreter's manipulation of the language is always covert to the researcher, which confers significant power on them.

This leads to the issue of trust and whether the interpreter is giving a truthful account of the answers of the respondent [6]. Some suggest that interviews should be recorded, allowing not just for its common use in verbatim transcription for analysis, but to allow for post interview verification of the translations [5,7,23].

As is inferred in the literature, it is almost impossible in practice for a researcher, without any grasp of the language being spoken, to be able to be sure whether the translation being given

by the interpreter is correct. However, careful selection of the interpreter using the guidelines based on the experience of others, careful planning and personal intuition that they have chosen well, should give the researcher confidence. It is the researcher who has full knowledge of the subject, is able to evaluate the answers against what they know of the organisation and who should be able to get a feel for the reliability of answers. Non verbal cues can also give insight; if the participant looks relaxed and happy but all of the answers are negative, for example, it perhaps should cause the interpreter to add questions that may confirm the reasons for their current good mood in unfavourable conditions. The rapport built with the Slovenian interpreter, and her experience and standing in the interpreting community, meant that the researcher had little doubt that she would be reliable, especially as there was nothing to motivate her to deviate from the truth.

Writing Up

When the interview process is over and writing up begins, the researcher is faced with a further decision; that of visibility. The issue of visibility of interpreters is a fairly contentious one in extant literature with convincing arguments on both sides. Traditionally interpreters are taught to translate answers in the first person [6], giving the impression that the researcher is hearing the participant, creating the illusion that there is a conversation between the two, minimising the presence of the interpreter. When interviewed, professional interpreters viewed themselves as invisible, actually using covert strategies to reinforce this, such as *“I am sat in the background, I am the voice, I try to be faceless”* and *“the goal would be to perform such a job it would be as if I were never there”* [9]. However, this is not how many researchers in social science view the role of the interpreter. They champion their cause for visibility [6,12,23] as though they were put upon, seeing them as *‘used’* or even *‘abused’* by their concealment [6]. The reality is that involving a third person in the interview does have

an impact on the process [6,16,23] and this should be acknowledged in the dissemination of research findings. Interpreters are often viewed simply as instruments [7], but they always have an influence over results whether it is considered and acknowledged [12] or not, and it may be difficult for readers to fully engage with the work when the methodology used is not exposed [16]. During the research process this can be achieved by asking the interpreter to translate in third person [5,16], so that their presence cannot be hidden [6] when verbatim transcripts are used in the write up.

Although in the business interview situation it is desirable for the interpreter to take on the '*conduit*' role, translating as close to verbatim as possible, it must be accepted that their influence is just not that simple. Even when translating closely there is always an impact that changes the dynamic and the text from that which would be experienced in a one on one interview, where researcher and participant speak the same language. At the Slovenian case all answers were delivered in the first person, which was considered best to facilitate the process; however, at the dissemination phase it will be acknowledged that the words described as those of the participant will always be those of interpreter. This is felt to provide the best compromise between invisibility of the interpreter at interview stage, but visibility of influence at the results stage.

Lessons Learned

Wherever possible a professional interpreter should be employed as they can bring so much to the process on top of their ability to reliably translate data. The use of lay-interpreters provided by an organisation should be avoided, as it is unlikely that they will possess the skill, concentration and full understanding of the role: it is also very possible that their presence will impact significantly on the willingness of participants to open up fully, especially on controversial issues.

Planning is key. The more information that can be given to the interpreter prior to the interviews, the more informed they will be, enabling them to concentrate fully and enhance their capability to facilitate the interview process, while keeping to their ascribed role.

The success of the Slovenian case came partly from preparation, partly from the professionalism of the interpreter and partly from luck; a factor that will not need to be relied upon in future endeavours.

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