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4 Reciprocity and challenge in researcher–student collaborative labour in a multilingual secondary school

Abstract: This chapter focuses on challenge and reciprocity in researcher–student *collaborative labour* (Zigo 2001) in a large multilingual secondary school in Sweden. The school was recruited for a larger longitudinal study of classroom language policy. For the purposes of the present chapter, we analysed ethnographic data to shed light on the well-known challenge of recruiting and retaining students to participate in longitudinal research, and on aspects of reciprocity, which was operationalized as benefits that both parties, i.e. students and researchers, needed or desired (Trainor and Bouchard 2013). Results show that of the 43 students who were present in the classrooms studied, 35 (81%) provided written, informed consent to fill in a language-background questionnaire and participate in an interview. Fewer students with low grades consented to participate, but those who did provided data no less rich than that provided by students with top grades. As to reciprocal benefits, the researchers secured the research data needed, but also new knowledge about students’ heritage languages and the multilingual territories they had left prior to settling in Sweden. Another benefit relates to empowerment. The researchers were empowered by learning culturally appropriate terminology to use when communicating about multilingual and multi-ethnic territories; and interview data suggest that students were empowered when positioned as experts on their multilingual repertoires and the language ecology in their prior home territories. Finally, the chapter reveals that researchers’ stance of reciprocity evolved organically over time through their ethnographic engagement in the classrooms.

1 Introduction

School-based research provides rewarding opportunities to learn from the work that students, teachers and other school staff do. On the way, however, one may encounter considerable challenges such as negotiating access, building rapport and gaining

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informed written consent from participants (Spada 2005; Warriner and Bigelow 2019). In this chapter we elaborate on the well-known challenge of recruiting student participants for classroom research, and on reciprocal benefits for researchers and participating students in a sub-study of MultiLingual Spaces (Källkvist et al. 2022). The school was an urban lower-secondary school where the majority of students had a migrant background. Following prior research in education, we apply the concepts of an *ethical stance of reciprocity* (Trainor and Bouchard 2013) and *collaborative labour* (Zigo 2001) as conceptualizations of reciprocity. Below, we elaborate on these concepts, followed by descriptive quantitative data of student participation. We then analyse ethnographic data, aiming to elucidate reciprocal benefits that emerged over the course of seven months through the researchers' stance of reciprocity.

2 Reciprocity: Conceptualization and prior research

Reciprocity in the researcher–participant relationship has been defined as one ‘in which each contributes something the other needs or desires’ (Trainor and Bouchard 2013: 986). The contribution *per se* has been conceptualized, for example, as an exchange of goods, labour or money as reimbursement (Trainor and Bouchard 2013; Zigo 2001). In the context of qualitative inquiry like ours, Trainor and Bouchard (2013: 989) advanced a conceptualization of reciprocity as an ethical stance rather than an economics-oriented exchange of goods, describing it as ‘a broader and more comprehensive approach to reciprocity throughout the research process’. Prior research has revealed the following as examples of reciprocity in classroom research: contributing to a greater social good (Zigo 2001), empowering the immediate participants by affording them opportunity to express their ideas (Eder and Fingerson 2001), exchange of labour by the researcher also serving as a teaching assistant (Bernstein 2019; Zigo 2001) and exchange of goods (Trainor and Bouchard 2013). We begin our analysis below by attending to the omnipresent need in education research to obtain written informed consent prior to data collection involving human participants.

3 Participants: The need to gain written informed consent

We recruited the school through an e-mail to the City Council, asking for access to a lower-secondary school where there would be a substantial number of students of a non-Swedish-speaking background, typically due to migration. The language

of schooling was Swedish, as is the norm in Sweden, but at the time, this particular school was in the process of establishing an English-language profile, offering a fast-track EFL (English as a foreign language) option and a CLIL (content and language integrated learning) option where three content subjects were taught in English. This chapter focuses on two Year 8 classrooms both taught by a lead teacher (*förstelärare*) whom we call Vincent. One class was the fast-track EFL class in Year 8, referred to as *8 FT*. The other was a Year 8 class in which students were studying EFL at the regular pace, here referred to as *8 R*.

In Table 4.1 we present the total number of students in each class, followed by the total number of students from whom we obtained informed written consent to a) fill in a five-page questionnaire on their language backgrounds and current language practices, and, later on, b) to participate in an audio-recorded interview with one of the researchers. These data thus address the challenge reported on in this chapter: securing informed written consent from students, in our case aged 14–15.

Table 4.1: Number of students in each class and number of students consenting to participate.

Class	Number of students in the class	Number of students providing informed written consent		Data collected		
		Questionnaire (five pages)	Interview (audio-recorded)	Number of completed questionnaires received	Number of interviews conducted	Number of lessons observed
8 R	23	17 (74%)	15 (65%)	17 (74%)	10 (43%)	7
8 FT	20	20 (100%)	20 (100%)	16 (80%)	9 (45%)	5
Total	43	37 (86%)	35 (81%)	33 (77%)	19 (44%)	12

Table 4.1 reveals that all students in *8 FT* consented to participate whereas in *8 R*, 65% consented to both the questionnaire and the interview. The students in *8 R* who declined to participate had in common the relatively low grade of D in EFL (the top grade being A). Due to students in *8 FT* being absent from some of the lessons, in the end we actually received more questionnaires in *8 R* (17) than in *8 FT* (16). Fewer students were interviewed, which is common in ethnography (De Fina 2019). The reason we did not interview all students who consented was lack of EFL lesson time at the very end of the semester when the teacher had completed grading. We refrained from interviewing students prior to grading being complete, leaving two weeks during which we asked students to be interviewed individually during an EFL lesson. Table 4.1 also shows that we conducted more lesson observations in *8 R* (7) than in *8 FT* (5) since our research questions required

data in mainstream EFL classrooms with the normal range of student proficiency levels, here operationalized as their grades (Table 4.2).

With the overall qualitative design, we intended to explore language practices in EFL classrooms in their full complexity, for example in terms of the range of students' prior languages and their varying proficiency levels in English. Thus, ideally, we needed students in the complete range of grades, A–F (A–E are pass grades whereas F equals *fail*). Table 4.2 provides a breakdown of student numbers relative to their grades.

Table 4.2: Grades in EFL in the two classes; A = the top grade; E = the lowest pass grade; F = fail.

Grade	8R		8 FT	
	Number of students receiving each grade	Students consenting to participate	Number of students receiving each grade	Students consenting to participate
A	0	n/a	8	8
B	7	6	12	12
C	4	4	0	n/a
D	11	4	0	n/a
E	1	1	0	n/a
F	0	n/a	0	n/a

As illustrated in Table 4.2, all 8 FT students had top grades (either A or B), which is probably a reflection of them having passed an admission test as an entry requirement for doing fast-track EFL. Data in Table 4.2 suggest there was a relationship between grade and consent to participate in research. In 8 R, virtually all students with a B or a C consented, whereas fewer than 50% of students with a D did. The student in 8 R with the lowest grade (E) stands out as opting to participate despite their low grade. This student was generous with their time and sharing relevant details about their learning of English in the interview despite being very quiet in class.

Due to lack of time to interview all students who consented to being interviewed, we applied criterion selection of students, asking those who were users of a heritage language at home and attending mother-tongue tuition in their heritage language to be interviewed. Tables 4.3 and 4.4 list the students who were interviewed, including details of their language background, choice of language in the interview (English or Swedish) and the duration of the interview. In total, 19 students were interviewed, eight of whom were girls and the rest boys.

Table 4.3 reveals that, across the ten students, they spoke seven different heritage languages and their grades ranged from B to E. Seven were born in Sweden whereas three were born abroad.

Table 4.3: Students interviewed in 8 R.

Pseudonym	Heritage language	Age of first exposure to Swedish	Choice of language in the interview	Grade in EFL	Duration of interview (minutes)
Abdullah	Arabic	1	Swedish	B	23
Masoud	Arabic	10	English	D	34
Lea	Arabic	1	Swedish	D	53
Sagal	Somali	1	Swedish	E	36
Ines	Arabic	1	Swedish	B	44
Hasin	Urdu	4	English	D	29
Fredrik	Greek	0	Swedish	C	22
Yasna	Turkmen	5	Swedish	C	31
Saman	Sorani (Kurdish)	2	Swedish	B	42
Nila	Serbian	1	Swedish	B	38

Table 4.4 provides the same details about students interviewed in 8 FT. It shows that three different heritage languages were represented among the nine students. Four were born in Sweden whereas five were born abroad. They all had top grades, either an A or a B. Four opted to have their interview in English compared to five choosing Swedish. Tables 4.3 and 4.4 also reveal that the interview lasted between 22 and 54 minutes.

Table 4.4: Students interviewed in 8 FT.

Pseudonym	Heritage language	Age of first exposure to Swedish	Choice of language in the interview	Grade in EFL	Duration of interview (minutes)
Rim	Arabic	1	Swedish	A	44
Adnan	Arabic	11	Swedish	B	42
Amir	Arabic	11	English	B	31
Hamid	Arabic	1	English	B	47
Hero	Sorani (Kurdish)	6	Swedish	B	43
Barzan	Sorani (Kurdish)	7	English	B	33
Amir	Arabic	3	Swedish	B	28
Sirwe	Southern Kurdish	1	English	B	54
Jamal	Arabic	1	Swedish	B	31

In sum, the challenge of securing student participants manifested itself in 100% consent to participate in 8 FT, where all students had top grades, and in lower levels of consent in 8 R, where 15 out of 23 students (65%) consented to both the questionnaire and the interview. Among those interviewed, four had low grades: three had a D whereas one had an E. Hence, our data suggest that students with higher

grades are more likely to consent to being research participants. Even so, students with Ds and an E did consent to being interviewed, and two of them had long interviews; for example Lea (Table 4.3), a girl in 8 R with the low grade of D, spent 54 minutes being interviewed and Sagal (Table 4.3, 8 R), the only student with an E, spent 36 minutes being interviewed. No student in these two classes had an F (fail), which is due to students with an F in EFL being taught in a separate small group by another teacher. We attribute the high level of consent to participate on the part of the students partly to their teacher, Vincent, who generously explained the value of research to the students at crucial moments in the classroom when we were recruiting for the interviews.

Next, we turn our attention to reciprocal benefits, beginning with benefits gained by the researchers because we have reason to believe that we gained more than the student participants, a finding that we share with Pettitt (2019), discussed also by Zigo (2001).

4 Reciprocity for the researchers through collaboration in labour

The concept of *collaboration in labour* applies here as we sought to position the students as experts at knowing how to use their prior languages as an aid to enhance their communication and learning of English. This, in turn, would narrow the power gap often inherent in youth–adult communication, particularly in institutions like schools (Zigo 2001). In other words, the students' job was to learn English and ours was to understand whether and how they used their prior languages to do so, including the complexity inherent in language-diverse classrooms. Prior research has shown that collaboration in labour can emerge in qualitative research contexts where a researcher is 'present, attentive, and fully engaged as a co-member of the participants' immediate community' (Zigo 2001: 352). Moreover, researchers tend to gain concrete benefits whereas participants' gains are more in the abstract (Zigo 2001).

On entering the classrooms for fieldwork, we began enacting our stance of reciprocity, stating that we were joining classes to learn more about how skilful teachers teach EFL (Vincent being a lead teacher of EFL). Three months later, we felt that we had developed rapport with the teacher and students to the extent that we could go ahead with our data collection plans to the students. We were careful to explain that we were eager to learn from them about whether and how they used their prior language(s) when learning and using English, thus positioning them and their multilingual repertoires as resources. Initially, we communicated this in

English, but when repeating the information later on, Vincent asked us to use Swedish to ensure that all students would understand. We continued in the same vein a further three months later when conducting the student interviews: we positioned students as experts when explaining their language backgrounds and current language practices, including their perceptions of mother-tongue tuition of their heritage language and their need to use a stronger language than English to facilitate their comprehension or learning of English. This provided the benefit that we *needed*, i.e., the research data.

Over the course of the seven months, we also gained knowledge from both the teacher and the students, knowledge that we *desired*, because of our interest in it and because we are EFL teacher educators. We found the opportunity of spending time in classrooms highly rewarding, particularly meeting refugee-background students whom we would otherwise have limited opportunity to encounter, let alone have dialogue with.

We found the interviews particularly meaningful, which is an observation we share with Young Knowles (2019), because we could talk about shared classroom experiences and we could hear students' perspectives in their own words. Qualitative coding (Saldaña 2016) of our fieldnotes and transcribed interviews enabled us to identify topics (themes) about which we had dialogue.

From the classroom observations, we learnt about *the nature of EFL lessons in a multilingual school taught by a young lead EFL teacher*. Seated at the back of the classroom, we were able to view not only Vincent's teaching practices but also students' behaviour. Students addressed us on numerous occasions, usually in English. They were curious as to why we were there; in particular, they were wondering whether we were assessing Vincent's teaching skills. They were careful to let us know that Vincent was a very good teacher.

The interviews were semi-structured and, in addition to providing research data, they afforded the opportunity of asking students follow-up questions about matters we were keen to know more about. At the very end of the interview, students were explicitly provided with time to ask any question that they might have had. Thematic content analysis showed that we learned about the following diverse topics:

Language practices in territories that are multilingual, including intercomprehension of closely related languages, different spoken varieties of Arabic, and whether English would serve as a lingua franca, for example in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, whether speakers of Southern Kurdish and Farsi can understand each other, and whether you can rely on English as a lingua franca when travelling in the Greek archipelago.

Student preferences as to labels of their territorial origins, for example whether a student preferred to be referred to as a Kurd or an Iraqi when coming from Iraqi Kurdistan. The student answered that he saw himself as 'a Kurd from Iraq'.

Students' perceptions of EFL teaching methods, grading, and their attitudes to mother-tongue tuition in their heritage language (for example Somali and Sorani) and the second foreign languages taught at the school (French, German and Spanish were on offer).

How the 8 FT students learned English to such a high level and whether code-switching/translanguaging practices in their daily life were perceived as efficient means of communication. We now turn to our analysis of what we perceive to be students' benefits from being part of our research.

5 Reciprocity for students through collaboration in labour

Prior interview research has found that reciprocity on the part of children and adolescents may be the *rewarding experience of feeling a sense of empowerment* (Eder and Fingerson 2001) and a *greater understanding of their own life experience as a result of having the opportunity to think through ideas and issues of importance to them by speaking to an interested adult* (Eder and Fingerson 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). In our research context, an additional benefit may be the opportunity of *interacting in English or Swedish individually with a researcher*. From research in psycholinguistics, we know that input is necessary for language development, that is to say, changes in a language system (Mitchell, Myles, and Marsden 2019). From a sociolinguistic perspective, we believe that students were introduced to new discourse practices, the practices of explaining research and of participating in a research interview, i.e., practices where they normally would not find themselves at age 14–15. Thus, we have reason to believe that the interview provided a context from which learners could potentially learn English through a new discourse practice, and Swedish for those who chose to speak in Swedish. This would be something that students may need and desire.

Our analysis involved thematic content analysis of the 19 interview transcripts to see whether themes emerged that would suggest that students may have felt empowered and shown signs of a greater understanding of their own life experience as outlined by Eder and Fingerson (2001) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2019). Many migrant students are language-minoritized in school when they cannot use their strongest language(s) in the classroom. For example, having an opportunity to speak about the potential issue of being language-minoritized in an interview may engender a sense of empowerment. Content analysis yielded four themes:

If I am in my home country then it is great for me to use it – Multilingualism beyond English and Swedish as a resource: In connection with asking questions about the use of their heritage language, we often provided comments from our own lives where knowledge of a language in addition to English had been an asset, or else we pointed out to students that their heritage language may be a resource. In Excerpt 1 below, the researcher positioned Ines’s command of Arabic, her heritage language, as a resource (original in Swedish, English translation in italics):

Excerpt 1

- Researcher** Ja (.) men engelska är (.) det finns något väldigt positivt med engelska
Yes (.) but English is (.) there is something about English that is very positive
- Ines** Ja
Yes
- Researcher** Jag kan tänka mig att det finns något väldigt positivt med arabiska också fast kanske på ett annat sätt
I am thinking that there is something very positive about Arabic too but perhaps in a different way
- Ines** Ja alltså (.) till exempel jag bor ju i Sverige (.) jag kan inte riktigt (.) alltså (.) du vet att alla kan inte arabiska så jag kan inte ha någon användning av det men om jag nu är mitt hemland och så (.) så är det väldigt roligt också att använda det (.) då kan jag hela tiden tala arabiska och det är också bra
Yes ok (.) like I live in Sweden (.) I can't (.) ok (.) we know that everyone cannot speak Arabic so I cannot use it but if I am in my home country like (.) then it is great for me to use it (.) then I can speak Arabic the whole time and that is good too
- Researcher** Ja (.) det är ju fantastiskt för det öppnar upp en stor del av världen för personer som dig
Yes (.) that is fantastic because it opens up a big part of the world for people like you
-

This is one of the most obvious examples of what may be interpreted as student empowerment, and the student responded by reflecting on the researcher’s comment that Arabic is useful, remembering occasions when she was using Arabic in her previous home country, where everyone understands it.

The most common theme in students’ questions was to do with our research – ‘Why do you do this?’ – the process and benefits of doing research. Of the 19 students, twelve asked questions at the end of the interview whereas seven did not. Excerpt 2 provides Sirwe’s (8 FT) question:

Excerpt 2

- Sirwe** Why do you do this?
- Researcher** We do it because we train English teachers at Lund University and they ask us many questions (.) so one question they ask is (.) is it important when we teach grammar to use Swedish in the classroom (.) for example to explain difficult things like grammar and difficult words (.) it’s the most frequent question that I get asked
-

Other themes emerging through student questions included asking the researcher *How many languages do you speak?* and *the use of English at university*. We now turn to discussing our findings.

6 Discussion and concluding remarks: Challenge and reciprocity in the EFL classrooms

In this chapter, we have brought our data to bear on a challenge well-known in classroom research: gaining a sufficient number of student participants to address research questions. In total, 33 out of 43 (77%) of the students in the two classes provided consent *and* filled in the questionnaire. Of those who did not, six did not consent, whereas the remaining four were absent from class. Due to lack of time at the very end of the school year, fewer (19 out of 43, 44%) were interviewed, which is common in ethnography (Da Fina 2019). Fewer students with a low grade consented, although as many as four students with a D or E did participate. Thus, we have data from students in the entire A–E grade range, which we needed as our research questions required data from students of different proficiency levels. However, we do not have data from students with an F, the reason being that students with an F at this school were offered remedial EFL teaching in a small group. Also, most of the participants had a high grade (B), due to one of the classes being a gated, fast-track EFL group. In terms of the overall level of participation, attaining 100% participation among students is unrealistic (cf. Trainor and Bouchard 2013). In 8 FT, where 20 out of 20 (100%) students consented to participate, absence in the final couple of weeks of the semester resulted in questionnaires from 16 (80%) of them. Also, given that interviews had to be carried out in the final two weeks of the semester in order not to remove students from lessons prior to grading being complete left us sufficient time to interview in total 19 (44%) of the students. Analysis of the interviews suggested that, with this sample, we were reaching a level of saturation (Dörnyei 2007: 127), which in qualitative research means that collecting more data would yield similar findings to those already analysed. The 44% participation level may provide sufficient qualitative data to answer MultiLingual Spaces’ research questions, given that participants in the grade range of A to E were interviewed and generously responded to the researcher’s questions.

Turning now to reciprocity, we drew on the definition of each party contributing ‘something the other *needs* or *desires*’ (Trainor and Bouchard 2013: 986; our italics) and the conceptualizations of *a stance of reciprocity* and *collaboration in labour*. We had ideas about providing students benefits in return for their participation prior to

engaging in our fieldwork, but once we were in the field, we developed a stance of reciprocity of the kind described by Trainor and Bouchard (2013). We believe that we gained more than the participants did in view of the fact that we collected concrete research data, in the longer term yielding research publications, which was our immediate need. What the participants gained was more in the abstract as mentioned by Zigo (2001). When enacting our stance of reciprocity in student interviews, thus trying to benefit our *'immediate participants'* and not only 'a greater good' (Zigo 2001: 352), we positioned their multilingual repertoires beyond English and Swedish as a resource in their present and future lives. Also, we positioned them as a great deal more knowledgeable than us about their heritage languages, the multilingual ecologies of their original home countries and about mother-tongue tuition that they were attending. We believe we killed two birds with one stone: the student was empowered by explaining matters to us, who in turn were learning about languages and countries of origin among the linguistic minorities in Sweden. This knowledge comes in handy not only in our profession as EFL teacher educators, but also in general in social encounters in present-day multilingual Sweden, for example in referring to people of migrant backgrounds in culturally appropriate ways. Thus, we found it useful to learn from Saman (8 R), a native speaker of Sorani (the Kurdish spoken in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq), that he himself referred to Kurds living in northern Iraq as 'Kurds from Iraq'. Learning about the different varieties of spoken Arabic used among the students interviewed was equally useful, as was learning their perceptions of the mother-tongue tuition they were receiving, which is a topic often debated in Swedish media. The most valuable abstract benefit for us was the encounter and the dialogue we were able to have with young people with whom we rarely cross paths due to housing segregation in Sweden.

As to benefits for the students, we hope they felt empowered by being positioned as having important knowledge of their heritage languages and us taking an interest in language(s) spoken in their countries of origin and attitudes to the teaching of languages in their school. All students present in the classroom were exposed to descriptions and explanations of the research we were doing, including the practice of written informed consent, which we believe was a discourse practice that was new to them. In the interviews, their most frequent questions indeed pertained to our research: why we were interested in their language practices, where we were collecting data and what we were going to do with it over time. As we ended our engagement with them, at the end of the school year, we brought chocolate for them as a concrete token of gratitude and told them to get in touch should they want to study at Lund University. This may serve as an example of a 'stance of reciprocity [that] calls us to become available to our participants' (Trainor and Bouchard 2013: 1000). We stepped into future time, saying

that we would be available in the future, engendering a discourse of a prestigious university not far away being interested in seeing them as students.

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