REVIEW ARTICLE

Handling translations of data for qualitative research

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Abstract: Qualitative research conducted in a non-English speaking setting requires the researchers to prepare and present translations of data, and then to report on the project in English to reach a global audience. This paper considers the process and ethical considerations involved in such an invisible methodological phase. This includes activities undertaken before data analysis and at the point of data presentation in order to convey participants' original meanings and fulfil translation ethics. It focuses on educational research using the constructivist-interpretive paradigm on the grounds that its knowledge construction process involves different parties and demands both researchers and the researched to co-construct knowledge. Therefore, researchers in this paradigm might encounter dilemmas around translating data generated from interviews with non-English speaking participants. This paper offers strategies to address translation dilemmas for bilingual researchers based on the existing literature and own experience.

Keywords: ethical translation; bilingual researcher; constructivist-interpretive paradigm; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

Empirical research undertaken in settings beyond English-speaking contexts requires the additional work of data translation but is necessary to contribute to the international literature and to correct Anglo-centrism in scholarly fields. Such research will also contribute to broader engagement with research-based knowledge from non-Anglo-phone settings to enrich, challenge, and develop social theory. More importantly, better recognition of research conducted in non-Anglo-phone settings will encourage the emergence of theories of knowledge from many different contexts. Despite a huge amount of research in non-English speaking contexts over the past 100 years, literature addressing the ethical issues related to data translation still needs to be explored.

This paper reviews and presents the intersection between translation, research paradigm, and bilingual research. It identifies the dilemmas that qualitative bilingual researchers face when presenting the data in English. Alongside this, the paper attempts to offer solutions to the difficulties based on my experience and the existing literature.

Since this paper is based on my experience when handling qualitative data that I collected in a non-English speaking context, it is crucial to describe the research paradigm that guides my research. It requires an account of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm and then the ethical issues attached to it. It is vital to discuss because there is something distinctive to be learned from looking at translation issues in these terms. Next, approaches in maintaining ethical translation are described. Then, it is followed by a discussion section to draw the intersection between translation philosophy and the constructivist-interpretive paradigm's principles.

2. Rigour in qualitative research

Researchers might judge some qualitative research studies to be better than others based on the validity dimension. The question of validity for qualitative research examines whether such research is plausible, credible, trustworthy, and defensible. Such criteria are mostly seen as relating to the "procedures employed in carrying out the research, on the implicit assumption that these determine the validity of findings" (Hammersley, 2007).

However, as can be seen previously, the epistemological stance of qualitative research is different from that of quantitative research. The distinction leads to different ways of assessing qualitative research rigour and the truth-value of qualitative research endeavors' (Holloway and Todres, 2003). In this way, philosophers replaced reliability and validity dimensions with criteria and standards for the evaluation of the overall significance, impact, relevance, and utility of completed qualitative research (Morse et al., 2002). Although Morse et al. (2002) disputed the replacement of reliability and validity dimensions in qualitative research, this paper argues that since a qualitative epistemological stance is about understanding rather than finding the truth, the terms validity and reliability are less appropriate to use. For example, Johnson describes descriptive validity in qualitative research as the actual accuracy of the account as reported by the researcher (Johnson and Christensen, 2019), and argues that one effective way to obtain descriptive validity is investigator triangulation. Investigator triangulation involves the use of multiple observers to record and describe the participants' behaviour and the context in which they were located.

Investigator triangulation reflects conditions associated with research stemming from a positivist paradigm that aims to find the truth and to present the facts. Investigator triangulation is not necessarily used in qualitative studies, especially ones using the constructivist-interpretive paradigm that is better assessed with reference to criteria such as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Investigator triangulation seems to ignore what methodological literature has noted about the role of researchers in qualitative data production. The researcher in a qualitative study is considered to play a pivotal role, and who the interviewer is will impact the interviews between the researcher and the participants in subtle ways. For example, Muslim female interviewees were more inclined to express their thoughts and experiences more freely when they were interviewed by another Muslim female. In contrast with quantitative inquiry which mainly relies on the use of instruments such as questionnaires, checklists, scale tests and other measuring devices, qualitative research adopts the design of "researcher as data gathering instrument" (Hatch, 2002: 7). The data in qualitative research, such as fieldnotes from classroom observations as well as transcriptions of interviews, are gathered directly by the researcher and processed using the "human intelligence" of the researcher (Hatch, 2002: 7). Such data collection methods correspond with the philosophy underpinning qualitative research, that is, to understand rather than to discover truth. Therefore, investigator triangulation does not seem to be appropriate to this paradigm because different researchers might not see the same event in the classroom observations, nor respond in the same way in the semi-structured interviews.

In a similar vein, Sutrisno et al. (2014) present different translation procedures for cross-language research conducted by bilingual researchers. They highlight how researchers' roles in the translation process need to be carefully considered to maintain trustworthiness in data translation.

However, the authors then revert to a more quantitative stance. In this way, they discuss the importance of validation conducted by objective translators as a matter of "transparency" in interview data translation. This idea suggests a realist epistemology. The point here is that a researcher's paradigm should have been taken into account before approaching translation as part of data generation and analysis processes.

3. Researchers' role in the constructivist-interpretive paradigm

In terms of ontological stance, my conception of the social world and its nature understands that there are multiple realities constructed by social actors rather than a singular reality to "discover". This position has led me to adopt the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, a paradigm informing qualitative research that assumes a relativist ontology, a subjectivist epistemology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Mills et al., 2022). In contrast to the realist stance that is typically linked with quantitative research, proponents of a relativist ontology acknowledge that there are multiple social realities at play in society rather than only one truth. Proponents of a subjective epistemology consider knowledge of social realities needs to be created between the researcher and the subject of research through a naturalistic set of methodological procedures that apply methods such as interview, observation, and analysis of existing texts to understand social realities and processes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

This paper is developed based on my experience when conducting research about English language teachers' work under conflicting reforms in Indonesia. My research was designed as a sociological study of how teachers adapted to curricular reforms. It involved nine EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers working in Indonesian secondary schools. These teachers were interviewed on two occasions, and their classrooms were observed over two weeks. These data collection methods were designed to illuminate how teachers understood the current education policy environment and how they implemented the reforms in their classroom practices.

Although the teacher participants could speak both Bahasa Indonesian and English, they preferred the unstructured interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesian, for ease of communication. Regarding translation, these languages thus served as the source language and the target language respectively. In the study, I was the researcher as well as the translator. However, other studies working with translated data might not have this capacity. For example, monolingual English-speaking researchers might rely on a bilingual interviewer, and a professional translator. This paper will also suggest how far a translator, either as a professional-independent translator or as researcher-as-translator, might go in the process of data translation.

4. Translation and ethical translation in trans-national research

Translation is defined as "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text" (Newmark, 1988: 5).

Translation is a complex process, and the criteria that make a good translation are difficult to define. Similarly, Halliday (2001: 14) argues that it is "notoriously difficult" to say why something is a good translation since this "must depend on a complex variety of different factors". Various aspects of text may need to be transposed in the translation process, including linguistic fidelity, form, cultural content or a combination thereof. In this way, a translator must account for appropriate methods for particular text types. It is suggested that a translator explores and weighs up the different translation dimensions offered by theorists in the translation field, such as "word for word" versus "sense for sense" or functional translation, to render the closest equivalent meaning possible and appropriate to the task (Doyle, 2012).

Ethical translation, however, is more than just a matter of strategy but of attention to context and recognition of the source text. Recognition of the source text in data translation refers to identifying and acknowledging the original source of the text being translated. In this case, it can include identifying the context in which the respondents live, the tone and style of their language, as well as any cultural references or idiomatic expressions that may be present. Recognizing the source text is essential in the translation process, as it allows the translator to convey the meaning (Hodges, 2016) accurately.

Additionally, the translator must welcome the source language as it arrives in the target language and culture (Jansen, 2019). Regarding attention to context, Venutti (1995) underlines the contrast between the two translation strategies of fluent and foreignizing. The former aims to translate the source language through the process of acculturation. This approach will produce a fluent target language purposed specifically to satisfy the international audience and seek to elide the difference between texts produced in different contexts. On the other hand, the latter strategy of foreignizing translation aims to keep cultural aspects of the source language.

Venutti (1995) advocates foreignizing translation as a political response to the global politics of knowledge imbalance. Venutti considered foreignizing translation more ethical than the acculturation "fluent" strategy (1995: 20) and, therefore, a more appropriate approach to redress the cultural domination of English. In other words, translators need to work with regard to the cultural context in which the source text was generated and make an effort to understand and represent the Otherness.

Venutti's foreignization aligns with Spivak's argument to "translate literally" or "surrender to the text" (Bassnett, 2013: 65). According to these two theorists, translators are required to surrender to the text, as opposed to the strategy of domestication that erasing the traces of otherness in the original. Foreignization, therefore, could raise problems for an audience if not implemented carefully since it gives a higher priority to respecting that source culture than providing fluent target text. Then Spivak (2012: 205) warns that the translator can surrender to the text only if they have earned "the right to become the intimate reader". The word "intimate reader" implies extensive interaction between the translator and the source text in order to reach a deep understanding so that the translation result is readable and makes sense for an international audience. In addition, it is necessary for translators to learn the to-be-translated texts in advance. The more difficult the text is (linguistically, culturally, and referentially, that is, in subject matter), the more preliminary works the translators must do before they start translating. On this point, researcher-as-translators will benefit from her dual positioning as they have extensive prior interaction with the script. Still, the researcher is not free from further dilemmas.

5. Maintaining ethical translation

A set of potential dilemmas in translating qualitative research data has been outlined in a previous study by Temple and Young (2004). Though Temple and Young's (2004) work was interested in translating between dominant English and "dependent" British sign language, their dilemmas were all equally relevant and present in my study. Therefore, this section provides a discussion around the ethical tensions encountered and adds to the set of dilemmas in translation Temple and Young outlined. These dilemmas that I found when conducting my research include: should I explain the process of translation to the reader; how to proceed if the identity of the researcher and translator are the same, and how to proceed if they are different; how far into analysis a translator should become involved; and how the translated interview/observation data should be presented.

5.1. Reporting the translation act

Despite the essential role of the translator and the increasing number of trans-national qualitative researchers, not all qualitative research conducted in non-English speaking contexts accounts for translation in their methodology. Information regarding how researchers dealt with data taken from different languages is important to allow readers to understand whether the language issues were addressed carefully. The audience will easily cope with the text if there is available information that "the source language or languages of the research are seen as problems that have been overcome or appropriately managed" (Temple and Young, 2004). It is suggested that researchers provide information regarding the stages at which the interviews were translated and transcribed, and the translation issues emerging during the process, as well as the information regarding the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees.

By accounting for language issues and translation processes, the researcher engaged in ethical conduct by giving respect to the participants' cultural background, describing power relations between the researcher and the researched, and, more importantly, letting the readers know how the power relations had been managed by the researcher. Such information also helps qualitative researchers build credibility. For example, if both the researcher and the participants are bilingual to some degree, the researcher needs to report whether it was participants' choice what language was to be used in their interviews. Despite the researcher and the participants' bilingualism, any decision made regarding the language to be used in the interview will matter for generating the data (Goerman et al., 2021).

5.2. Independent translator or researcher-as-translator?

A translator plays a very important role in the production of data and therefore who undertook the translation needs to be accounted. This is because, underpinning these choices is the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher.

In many cases, a transnational researcher employs independent translators to protect or enhance notional research transparency, validity, and credibility. In this way, the researcher could validate a translation by back translation, or translator triangulation. Back translation is a method of checking the accuracy of the translation. For example, the first translation might translate an item, for argument's sake, from the source language to English as the target language. Then a second translator translates the English translation back into the source language, and then the two texts are compared. Hence, back translation involves at least two translators: the forward translator and the back translator. From this point, a back translation approach reflects a more positivist stance since the technique makes general assumptions that the same meaning in the source language can be found and expressed easily in the target languages (Jagosh and Bourdeau, 2009; Larkin and Dierckx de Casterlé, 2007). Therefore, a common result in the back translation of qualitative interview script has been "confusion over whether a particular finding should be attributed to lack of cultural equivalency or substandard translation" (Jagosh and Bourdeau, 2009).

Similarly, Ozolins' (2009) study on back translation which presents a case study of the translation of a medical diagnostic tool for prioritising hip and knee surgeries in Australia highlights the unexpected effects of back translation. The study indicated that despite efforts to protect validity, the second translator, in particular, saw this methodology "as inevitably being flawed, breaking from a detailed comment on an item to make a more general point" (Ozolins, 2009), more specifically, because the second translator in the study never saw the full original document. It is reported that the feeling of being "ambushed" was apparent several times in this approach. Further, the method of back translation can perhaps unexpectedly put the translator in a position of having a voice *vis a vis* the researcher as their client (Ozolins, 2009).

I found that back translation to assure validity in translation reflects an effort of collecting the truth rather than seeking understanding, and therefore the employment of a notionally objective translator can contradict the philosophy of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. Bilingual researchers whose epistemological stance is informed by the constructivist-interpretive paradigm would better serve as translators and conduct the translation themselves. The paradigm's philosophy of understanding the people being studied means the qualitative researcher (as translator) is required to consider the cultural context of the researched. Hence, translation of interview data can be accomplished directly by the researcher and be processed using the informed human intelligence of the researcher, alongside their philosophy of understanding multiple social realities. Additionally, when it is presumed that "only a native can know the scene" (Spivak and Arteaga, 1996: 15), a bilingual researcher-as-translator strategy is more relevant.

As I was the translator in my study, I benefitted in two additional ways. Firstly, my intensive interaction with the data lead to my thorough understanding of the data. In this case, I was doing the interview, interpreting, and translating the interview script. These multiple roles reduced the complexity of translation since a translation is "the manifestation of one reader's interpretation of a text, the final product of a creative process that may involve many stages of rereading and rewriting" (Bassnett, 2013: 106). Secondly, the deep understanding of transcribed interview data could benefit me not only in the translation process but also in the analysis stage. My understanding of the data set and the subject matter, as well as my similar professional background to the participants, helped to minimise lost or distorted meanings of teachers' various specific expressions that an "objective" translator might not grasp.

5.3. Dilemmas on how far into analysis a translator should become involved

However, as the researcher-as-translator in my study, I found risks in dealing with my emergent interpretations and analysis. When researchers translate interview data before data interpretation, they may inevitably influence their choices in the data translation process. Hence, the subjectivity of the researcher-as-translator in making judgments around wordings could inevitably flavour the translated scripts. The influence of the researchers' subjectivity could challenge the product of translation. In this case, it could lead to "over-subjectivity", that is, the extent to which the researchers as translator believe they have knowledge they actually do not have. Over-subjectivity should be avoided as it could mislead the research result (Bazzul, 2018).

To minimise such tension, I argue that although my research paradigm has a subjective ontological stance, a strategy to avoid the researcher-as-translator's dominance needs to be performed through rigorous and ethical translation, and reportage of the participants' interview accounts. Therefore, besides the researcher-as-translator's subjectivity, I need to account the voice of the participants in the process of data translation. The possible solution to eliminate the tensions is by involving participants in member checking of translation.

So far, member checking is regarded as an activity in data transcription in terms of double checking transcriptions of verbal data. In member checking, a researcher gives the transcription of an interview back to participants to ask for their confirmation (DeCino and Waalkes, 2019), and it is crucial technique for establishing credibility. Besides research rigour and credibility, member checking enhances mutual trust and respect between researchers and participants as there is evidence in the process of how researchers share their power with the researched. Through activities such as peer debriefing and member checking, qualitative methodology provides a "function for the Other in the research process" (St. Pierre, 1997: 183; Hawley and Potter, 2022). More importantly, member checking is a suitable approach to use in such study (Harvey, 2015).

As a bilingual researcher-as-translator who worked with bilingual participants, I used member checking not only in data transcription but also in data translation. Member checking for interview data translation enhances the credibility and rigour of translation since this helps to clarify areas of miscommunication, as well as to confirm the participants' comfort with the translations of their interviews. In this way, I gave my research participants an opportunity to check both the transcripts of interviews (in Bahasa Indonesia) and their English translation for a period of time, then asked them for their feedback or confirmation.

Member checking for translation also mitigated my dilemmas regarding ethical translation. It could reduce the tremendous influence of my subjectivity in the translation process. The epistemological and methodological challenges were reduced since the researcher/interviewer and the participant could both speak the same language (Temple and Young, 2004).

5.4. Presenting the translated interview data using translation conventions

The richness of the data that is collected from interviews and observations led to tensions in its presentation. Such tension continually arose around whether to keep the Bahasa Indonesia's word-ing/colloquialism to retain its original meaning, or making the expression appropriate to the target language reader. To address such tensions, foreignization approach can be applied (Deganutti, 2022). Despite the lack of further explanation regarding the implementation of foreignization in translation practice, the idea of foreignization can be understood as follows: the researcher-as-translator would not necessarily translate participants' *untranslatable* utterances/words into English, but rather keep the words as they are while giving a glossed explanation of such utterances in brackets (see **Figure 1**). Besides meeting ethical translation requirements, this method helps a bilingual researcher in the analysis process since it enables them to retrace the original meanings of the words. Further, the explanation assists the audience to understand those specific terms while reminding them of the work of translation.

Another important aspect to consider is the transcription and translation conventions. The preparation of a detailed set of conventions prior to presenting the data enables researchers to self-regulate at the data presentation stage. **Table 1** presents an example of the translation conventions that I made for my study.

Table 1. Transcription and translation conventions

Underline	*Untranslatable* Indonesian Expression
(parentheses)	The closest meaning in English or English explanation
[…]	Additional information
'quotation'	Name of stipulated or intended values in Indonesian curriculum
…	Beginning or continuation of talk omitted
"double quotation"	Participants' utterance in English
{ … }	Gesture/unspoken language

Researcher: What values do you want to teach most?

Astuti: 'Religiousity' {pause} and 'honesty'. Although I did not put them in my lesson plan I implicitly teach these values in my classes. Students should be honest, especially when they have to work on tasks individually, that is, not to cheat. For 'religiosity', we always model it through our daily activities. For example, teachers greet the classes with Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarokatuh [Arabic language for May God gives you safe, bless and goodness] rather than Selamat Pagi [Indonesian greeting for Good Morning]. Before commencing the classes, I always read Alfatihah [an opening verse of Quran]. We always recite Al Qur'an verses in the morning. Before we finish our schooling, we pray like good Moslems usually do and recite the short verses of Qur'an.

Researcher: Can you explain more about why you need to do this?

Astuti: I think we need to introduce religiosity from childhood, whatever the religion they have, to avoid kemerosotan moral (moral erosion). Now, there are more and more anak yg nakal sekali (very naughty/problematic children). Hence, we need to teach them about religion. That is why they are accustomed to recite Qur'an, {pause} to make them familiar with it. Many Muslims do not understand the core value of Islam; I think it is important to introduce such habits to the children.

Figure 1. Example of data reporting.

I decided upon the above transcription and translation conventions. Likewise, any researcher could devise their own transcription and translation conventions because there is no established practice yet for such conventions. No matter what the convention is, the most important thing is to consider the consistency of the use of the chosen convention. Once the transcription and translation convention is established, it is necessary for the researchers to follow the rules consistently.

Additionally, to enable readers to experience participants' voices and personal meanings, as well as the premises for interpretations, the prior utterances of the researcher need to be purposefully included, either in terms of direct or indirect speech displaying the interview question generating the participant's response. By presenting the preceding question, the researchers enable readers to make links as their eyes move line by line down the excerpts. When the readers have not understood the research participants' utterances, they are able to look back to the immediately preceding line.

The example of my data presentation can be seen in Figure 1.

As can be seen in Figure 1, I included the interview question when reporting data excerpts to help readers understand the generating context of the participant's utterance. Also, the transcript was written and arranged based on my translation and transcription conventions such as underlining and double brackets. I kept the Bahasa's colloquial meaning and gave them the closest meaning. These are indicated by underlining alongside the possible translated meanings in parentheses.

6. Discussion

Researchers working in the constructivist-interpretive paradigm with bilingual participants find dilemmas in almost every stage of the study. The decision to include translation as an important part of the research process should lead to the supply of a detailed account regarding the planning, organisation, and conduct of translation in the methodological design. Then, during data collection and analysis, researchers need to solve dilemmas about who the translator will be, and what translation approach will be used. These dilemmas could be resolved by the role of the researcher-as-translator, member checking translations, and by applying foreignization. Dilemmas on how to present the translated data in analysis chapter could be resolved by the provision of transcription and translation conventions and consistency in their use. **Table 2** is a summary of dilemmas and resolutions.

Table 2. Ethical dilemmas in translation and resolutions

Ethical dilemmas	Resolutions
Should the translation process be acknowledged?	Participant's choice of language and the translation of interview data should be regarded as important research methods considerations.
How is the translation process to be acknowledged?	Detailed information regarding translation should be presented in the methodological design.
Who is the translator?	Researcher-as-translator is preferable if possible.
How can translation credibility be enhanced?	Member checking of both transcription and translation.
How will translated interview scripts be presented in research reportage?	Foreignization Develop an explicit set of translation conventions and be consistent in their use.

Although the dilemmas and resolutions drawn in the table are classified into three different rows, there is no necessary order. Dilemmas around data translation could emerge at any time through the research process. Likewise, one resolution offered might mitigate more than one dilemma. More importantly, the resolutions identified in the table comply not only with the demand of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm but also with the principles of ethical translation.

The resolutions of the first dilemmas—accounting for the translation process in any research methodology—could satisfy ethical trans-national research. Once translation is regarded as an important part of research design, the researchers are required to let the readers know details regarding how the translated data was generated and managed. Then, the resolutions of researcher-as-translator and member checking for translation meet the demands of both the paradigm and the translation theory in terms of knowledge creation and respecting the participant. The philosophy underpinning qualitative research—including the constructivist-interpretive paradigm—suggests that researchers and the researched co-create meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and produce knowledge (Temple and Young, 2004). This resonates with translation's fundamental epistemological dimension: translation does not merely reflect existing knowledge, but it can also precede knowledge and can be "a mode of discovery used to create or amass knowledge" (Tymozcko, 2006: 455). If researchers subscribe to this view of social reality, they have to be aware that "translators must also form part of the process of knowledge production" (Temple and Young, 2004: 164). The new knowledge created, in turn, could challenge existing theories that are typically derived from Euro-centric experiences (Tymozcko, 2006).

Researcher-as-translator and participants in member checking for translation could help participants voice their meanings better than a notionally "objective" translator and the back-translation technique. As mentioned previously, the back translation attempts to find some parallelism between two different languages and underestimate the nuanced original concept derived from the source culture (Mandal, 2018; Jagosh and Bourdeau, 2009; Larkin and Dierckx de Casterlé, 2007). The use of researcher-as-translator and member checking can avoid the loss of meaning while respecting participants' culture. In terms of respecting participants, post-colonial theorists have argued that translation does not always involve equal terms for participants' culture, but risks privileging the cultural frame of the dominant language over the less dominant, English and Bahasa respectively in my study. In this way, the call for methods to respect participants and their culture becomes morally important for both translation and the constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Tymozcko, 2006).

This paper argues that foreignization is as the most appropriate approach for trans-national research in the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. It can be implemented by presenting a translated text which maintains respect for the source language, as well as making sense for the audience—but presumably not with every word. When necessary, translators can choose to leave the untranslatable utterances as they are to allow participants to speak with their *genuine* voice.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper suggests that the ontological and epistemological stances of the researchers will inform methodological choices, including ethical data translation. More importantly, I found that the constructivist-interpretive paradigm and translation theory have much in common with regard to respecting other cultures, and the creation of new knowledge. Translation aims to speak for the other (Rosile et al., 2021), so does qualitative research that aims to speak for the participant as the representatives of particular society, especially those who are marginalised or powerless (see also Holloway and Biley, 2011).

Therefore, a strong principle regarding the ethical treatment of research participants and data should infuse all stages of data management. The involvement of research participants, in terms of member checking, is crucial to respect and convey participants' voices. In terms of knowledge construction, foreignization of translation or surrendering to the text can enhance ethical translation. Foreignization reflects not only a researcher's respect of participants and to the source language's culture but also as a way to build new knowledge.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by the author.

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