

A Proxy of Social Justice? A Co/Autoethnographic Account of Language Testing and Translation Training for Migrant Workers in Thailand

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This article explores the possibilities and limits of advancing social justice through language-related support for migrant workers in Thailand. Using collaborative autoethnography, we reflect on our experiences in two university-led initiatives with Myanmar migrant workers: healthcare translator/interpreter training and Thai language proficiency testing, with *ad hoc* translation support. We show that language access depends not only on the provision of translation or interpreting, but also on migrants' everyday constraints and on the institutional and bureaucratic conditions under which support is organized. Our analysis highlights that researchers, positioned as proxies for university commitments to inclusion, must negotiate tensions among ethical responsibility, organizational procedures, and the symbolic value of socially engaged projects. These tensions constrain what language-based interventions can realistically achieve, even when they are intended to promote inclusion and access to knowledge. The article contributes to debates on translation, migration, and social justice in Southeast Asia by demonstrating how institutional mediation shapes the practical reach of advocacy-oriented language support.

Keywords: Co/autoethnography; Language Testing; Migrant Worker; Socially Inclusive; Translation Training



INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Thailand has accepted an influx of migrant workers into its labor market, predominantly from Myanmar. This group of workers, mostly manual laborers, often faces exposure to hazards, abuse, and victimization due to their low status at work (Chaichanavichakit, 2016; Jampaklay et al., 2022), and is often considered of lower social status in public discourse (Phanthaphoommee & Doungphummes, 2025). Despite having the legal right to access the healthcare system in Thailand, migrant workers in dangerous industries may find it hard to communicate with Thai medical professionals if they have not mastered at least basic Thai. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Thai government to make public services inclusive, this

underprivileged group continues to struggle to access appropriate services across a range of public settings seemingly reserved for the local population (Kyaw, 2021).

Although the Thai Ministry of Public Health granted migrant rights to healthcare coverage (Harris, 2013), language support for those with limited Thai language skills remains an obstacle to accessing public services. The situation was exacerbated during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disease prevention and control measures in the country are often communicated to the public in a language migrant workers do not speak, and even when translated into the workers' mother tongue, they are not widely disseminated (Phanthaphoommee, 2022). National policies to improve the lives of migrant workers seem to fail to recognize the significance of providing information in migrants' native language. This is arguably because the dominance of "Thai linguistic nationalism" has long persisted, inadvertently conveying a notion of "foreign contamination" associated with the presence of these "inferiors" in Thailand while contradicting its cross-border linguistic reality (Techawongstien & Phanthaphoommee, 2022, p. 196), simply by their relatively inexpensive labor force.

Among many Thai social science scholars, there exists a culture of fostering engagement in migrants' issues. Thai universities, guided by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adhere to this policy with hands-on commitment (e.g., Draper & Selway, 2019; Tejativaddhana et al., 2018). Thus, the central problem addressed in this article is not whether migrant workers in Thailand face structural vulnerabilities (as this is well established) but how scholarly advocacy projects, often framed as socially inclusive interventions, are constrained in practice. As a group of researchers acting as a proxy of universities' commitments to social inclusion, we must navigate institutional targets, reporting requirements, and standardized procedures that can narrow what is possible and reshape what 'support' looks like. By 'proxies', we mean researchers representing the university's broader commitment to inclusivity in society. Researchers' work and their methods are often – if not always – influenced by the values and goals of their university, thereby underscoring the institution's certain ideological stance. As such, the way researchers interact with marginalized communities to help them is not only a personal or academic pursuit but a manifestation of their institutional morals.

This article asks how and why university-led advocacy projects encounter limits in practice when researchers are positioned as institutional proxies working with marginalized migrant workers. Drawing on co/autoethnography (CAE), we analyze our views and feelings recorded in the field notes regarding inherent limitations and their implications for research aimed at improving migrants' lives and livelihoods. We seek to reflect on and interpret our first-hand experiences in supporting vulnerable migrant workers in Thailand through two translation-related activities: (1) training healthcare translators/interpreters among Myanmar migrants; and (2) organizing their Thai proficiency testing while also assessing their ad hoc translation abilities in light of constraints such as limited learning time, age, and project management conditions. These activities reveal, in different ways, how migrants' constraints and university goals/procedures shape what advocacy work can realistically achieve, and how translation/interpreting interventions can both enable and complicate access to essential knowledge. In overseeing communication-assisted activities, we consider our co/autoethnographic account grounded in human rights and moral obligation in the face of organizational support or the lack thereof. It prompts us to examine more closely the collective journeys of the various actors involved, particularly how we, as the researchers who initiated the translation project, made sense of our roles and experiences throughout the process.

This article is thus organized around our central concern: how translation/interpreting-mediated knowledge access shapes social-justice efforts with Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, and where such efforts meet practical and institutional limits. We first situate translation and social justice in relevant scholarship, then outline our CAE approach and lenses (fieldwork, reflexivity, positionality). Next, we analyze episodes of researcher–migrant interaction and the dilemmas they generated. We conclude by synthesizing how these experiences reveal the constraints shaping advocacy work and researchers’ proxy roles in this context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Justice Through Translation

Studying societies in transition, as Marais (2013) maintains, can shed light on the role of translators in shaping emergent social realities. This perspective enables scholars of translation and interpreting studies to continue a long tradition of activist research, which emphasizes a social investigation of how activists-*cum*-academics can address power inequalities in discourse and praxis. Taibi (2014), for instance, calls attention to community translating and interpreting practices in the Arab world to investigate the prerequisites for social justice and fair access to legal, educational, and other social services. Doerr (2019) demonstrates how translation communities may contribute to the democratization effort by supporting grassroots-inspired global debates. Similarly, Ghessimi (2019) focuses on the political participation of translators as creators of new knowledge who were shown to circulate new information as cultural capital and facilitate socio-political transformation.

In a special issue on development and translation, Todorova and Marais (2022) distinguish between accessibility and development studies, arguing that the latter covers a wider range of topics. Among these are questions of social justice, in which translation and interpreting studies highlight both the transformative potential of language mediation and the need to protect the professional integrity of practitioners involved in institutional implementation (Skaaden, 2019). As Boéri (2023) also argues, social justice is more than just the welfare state’s ability to maximize citizens’ material and psychological well-being; it additionally pertains to communicational and social performance to adjust the state’s moral compass in a more equitable direction. Tesseur (2023) engages non-governmental organizations in theorizing social justice as a process and a goal in connection to recognition and inclusion, with the latter aiming to provide members of historically excluded groups with a pathway to ownership of information, impartial conversation, and transparent processes. Tesseur (2023, p. 11) agrees with Melkote and Steeves (2015) that translation is a form of empowerment, for it is a social process that challenges the hegemonic relations that shape people’s lives and opportunities. This shows that translation studies have increasingly aligned with social justice philosophy, viewing translators as active agents of change instead of merely neutral intermediaries. Translation can help guarantee fair access to necessary services, a means of inclusion that allows individuals to engage in legal, educational, and healthcare systems. This places translators as moral agents with an intention to help create conditions in which everyone can live a decent life.

Looking at Thailand, recent scholarship has examined various dimensions of migration, including issues of transborder well-being such as the involuntary return of undocumented migrants (Nurick & Hak, 2019), gender mobilities and tourism (Sunanta, 2020), Thai-Western migration pathways (Howard, 2009), and the transcultural lives of migrant youths (Stange & Sasiwongsaroj, 2020), to name but a few. Yet there seems to be a dearth of studies relating to language-related services and knowledge-building for migrants in the Thai context. In addressing

methodological concerns related to researching vulnerable migrant populations, scholars in language-related fields have engaged with approaches such as multi-sited fieldwork (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2006; Inhetveen, 2012), ethnography for intercultural negotiation (e.g., Reynolds, 2020; Suppatkul, 2020; Lu & Lu, 2022), translation/interpreting activism for migrants and refugees (e.g., Gibb & Good, 2014; Inghilleri, 2016; Todorova, 2019; Phanthaphoommee et al., 2026). However, there appears to be a gap in understanding how researchers navigate both explicit and implicit value conflicts that arise between them and migrant participants during fieldwork encounters. This article thus offers a fresh perspective from Southeast Asia, where highly dynamic economic migration has resulted in various precarities in workers' living conditions and their language needs in the host country. In the next section, we present a review of the epistemic approach we used in this study.

Researchers' Lived Experiences as Data

We, as researchers, need to remain aware of our positionality and research practices, as they shape our narratives and meaningful scholarly engagement (Coia & Taylor, 2009, p. 4). Using the lives of researchers as data is more than just anecdotes; it entails well-organized data gathering and an appraisal of the researcher's attitude and behavior (Francis & Hester, 2012). Reflexivity can provide meaning in how research identifies us as university-sanctioned investigators, as well as in the scholarly constructs of fieldwork positionality (e.g., Liong, 2015; Wargo, 2020). In this study, we thus engage in a collective reflection led by each self-narrative. This approach has the potential to yield a wealth of qualitative data to support a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-political repercussions of research on target communities (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). The resourceful co/autoethnographic forms of observation notes, conversations, audio recordings, vignettes, and photos of activities allow us to uncover and analyze different perspectives across multiple interactions (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2021). For example, Rostami et al. (2024) used this approach to study personal experiences and the challenges of female solo travelers interacting with tourism stakeholders in Penang, Malaysia. Co/autoethnography, as defined in this paper, is a methodological inquiry where researchers share their personal narratives to lay bare their socio-cultural or political views, creating meaning, standpoints, and connections through discussions and information from various sources, such as field notes or diaries. This approach is important to our argument because it allows us to reflect on how our positionalities shape both the research process and our relationships with migrant participants, while also helping us make visible the social gaps and inequalities we encountered in the field.

In translation/interpreting studies, this narrative approach, to a certain extent, bears a resemblance to professional narratives, as defined by Boéri (2008), in that they are accounts and justifications that professionals make for themselves and others regarding the essence and spirit of their work. Boéri and Giustini (2023) assert that it is possible to learn about how social actors' actions, beliefs, and emotions are narrated in their words, and how narratives of the workplace and the professional community are negotiated in everyday practice. Our case, however, illustrates the narratives of the researchers' own experiences, feelings, and viewpoints, as opposed to those who are traditionally considered participants. We agree with Rothman's (2007) assertion that researchers' narratives are not only accounts of individual incidents but contain a well-planned study design that methodically acquires and scrutinizes data; it means "your life is data" (p. 14).

By focusing only on researchers' views, one could reasonably argue that the perspectives of participants are overlooked. However, our research question specifically examines how we,

as researchers, navigate institutional constraints, value tensions, and power asymmetries in the field. Co/autoethnography is therefore appropriate because it enables us to critically analyze our own positionality and decision-making processes. To further justify the use of critical self-reflection as a systematic methodological approach, we follow Francis and Hester (2012), who assert that the researcher is an integral part of a wider society, and the social context is an equally important component of our internal and external experiences. They reason that, “If inquiry requires data [...] then why not take our own experiences and actions as our data? All you need is ready to hand – your capacity for self-reflection” (p. 35). As autoethnographic data can provide a glimpse of our socio-cultural concerns (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Roy & Uekusa, 2020), we justify the use of CAE as an appropriate research method to study migrant workers’ language (in-)justice, explore the possibilities of community engagement, and negotiate the positionality of the ‘helper’ vis-à-vis the marginalized.

Wargo (2020) has advised reflecting on different points in applying co/autoethnography. Following this line of thinking, we incorporated ourselves into the data collection process by considering migrant workers’ viewpoints and discussing the culled moments of collaboration with regard to (1) our positionality as ‘outsiders’, (2) our interactions at communal boundaries, and (3) the social gaps observed in the fieldwork.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Places and Participants

From April 2022 to September 2023, we took our co/autoethnographic notes to track our physical and virtual observations and writings to explain our involvement in humanitarian projects and to find meanings in human actions (Chang et al., 2016). We chose our research site in Samut Sakhon province, particularly the Mahachai area, where hundreds of thousands of migrant workers are located (Samut Sakhon Provincial Labor Office, 2024). Mahachai is a coastal industrial hub southwest of Bangkok, known for its thriving seafood processing and manufacturing industries. Its long-standing labor demand has made it a major destination for migrant workers, particularly from Myanmar, who are drawn by higher wages and supported by established ethnic networks. Migrant workers have become indispensable to sustaining Mahachai’s economy and Thailand’s export-oriented industries (Beesey et al., 2016; Areeprachakun, 2020).

The study site is a two-hour journey from our university. Upon four full-day visits, we documented our impressions of the workers through photo images, audio recordings, and detailed notes, replete with our views, notes, and feelings derived from each encounter. Using smartphones and laptops, we documented moments of interaction and the migrants’ participation in project activities, creating an archive of materials both on site and online.

For our visits, we had planned two related activities: Thai language testing and a training program for healthcare translators/interpreters. For language testing to develop additional *ad hoc* skills as a translator/interpreter, we recruited two groups of migrants, with 20 people in each group: one group between the ages of 18 enrolled in non-formal education at schools of lifelong learning supported by the local municipality, and another around the age of primary school – offspring of migrants – who study in NGO-sponsored schools. The language used in the proficiency test is Thai. The institution with which we are affiliated has established a Thai Language Testing Center for foreigners, and the test materials used in this study are provided free of charge by the center. The test comprises sections assessing listening, reading, and writing, while the speaking skills section takes the form of an interview. After the test, we arranged informal interviews with participants to gain a basis for evaluating their speaking proficiency

and, hopefully, data for reflective analysis within our research. We asked about community outreach events, language needs, and education, noting verbal and nonverbal communication, and obtaining their permission to photograph (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A Thai testing session at a non-formal school. (photo by Kwanchit Sasiwongsaraj; permission granted).

The second activity is the development of a training program for healthcare translators and interpreters to supply the local public hospitals. According to the plan, we started with a comprehensive review of medical translation/interpreting to later prepare a course with a handbook for a small group of volunteers. Unfortunately, we were forced to organize the course online due to the pandemic. Using the snowball technique, we recruited 20 volunteers from the local hospital, who have already been working as interpreters but without professional training. This group had non-formal Thai education, where classes were typically held in the Buddhist temple compound. This training involved a different sample group from those participating in the language proficiency test. It specifically targeted those with advanced proficiency in both Thai and Myanmar languages but lacking formal skills in translation/interpreting. Our institution's role was to pilot this capacity-building program to equip migrants with basic competencies to help other workers access public services. Our introductory course included 20 hours of training in basic translation/interpreting, enabling participants to apply the knowledge as mediators between migrant patients and Thai medical professionals in their respective healthcare centers (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A role-play training session for healthcare interpreting. (photo by Narongdej Phanthaphoommee; permission granted).

The Researchers

In a typical CAE project, three to five researchers who cherish diverse perspectives, the efficacy of teamwork, and ethical research are the ideal number for research teams (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 389). Our team comprised three researchers working in the same institute: Two researchers, Narongdej and Koraya, are translation studies scholars with more than five years of research experience, while the third, Kwanchit, has over twenty years of research experience and acted as a mentor with expertise in minority health-related cultures. We are three scholars at Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, which specializes in language and culture, community engagement, and social development. Our roles in these language testing and translation/interpreting training projects were predicated on a university grant allocated to a research initiative aimed at influencing positive change in migrant communities. Following Pithouse-Morgan et al.'s (2021) suggestion, we each penned a narrative describing the reasons and motivation for our academic passion. We read aloud while debating these works, asking and answering questions to develop and enrich the narratives to ensure we come to a shared conclusion about what we experienced during the site visit.

We kept in mind the CAE principle of inviting colleagues to explore shared memories and balance individual narratives with larger group experiences (Blalock & Akehi, 2018, p. 94) as frequent communication among researchers is what makes collaborative autoethnography a reliable qualitative approach (Roy & Uesuka, 2020, p. 387). Online and on-site meetings, anecdote and idea exchange, and joint examination were conducted to coalesce opinions. During the course of research, our group met once a month in an approximately 30-minute semi-formal meeting to share and discuss interpretive observations based on our areas of expertise. We often shared notes in advance to allow ourselves more time to reflect on each other's observations. We conferred among ourselves on some similar occurrences and highlights in our notes.

We conducted an inductive analysis of the data through repeated comparisons. As we sought recurring themes through repeated comparisons of field notes, transcriptions, and self-reflections, we double-checked to ensure we were identifying the same patterns, focusing on interactions with migrants, emotional responses, and internal reflections. By pondering on the research process, we better understood how individuals' lives influence their worldviews and

how certain moments influence our own. Using the culled moments from our fieldwork and project management, we coded them using Wargo’s (2020) framework, enabling us to refine our attitudes towards migrants and a larger context (Table 1).

Codes	Samples
When migrants referred to researchers’ role in activities	“Teacher, I don’t understand this...” “I want to learn more from you...” “You can help us...”
When migrants commented on researchers’ motivation and assistance	“How long would you come to see us?” “I’ll just follow the teacher’s guide...” “Are there any video clips of training?”
When researchers shared their emotional responses	“I don’t understand why...” “This is too much a process...” “It is a pity that we cannot help them more...”
When researchers spoke/noted to themselves	“These people are really pitiful...” “Do I have to do this stuff?” “Next time, we need to ask more questions”

Table 2. Coding sample of culled moments in our compared notes and transcriptions. (compilation by the authors).

To ensure data viability, we adhered to triangulation and reasoning, which entails another round of comparing data across various records and identifying common patterns in our respective accounts (Coia & Taylor, 2009). We individually examined our own data, but collectively evaluated them via shared notes, and engaged in reflexive validation, all while collaborating and cross-checking to preserve our understanding of how our positionality influences interpretations. These strategies help maintain the analytical rigor and ethical integrity fundamental to CAE, thereby allowing for a nuanced understanding of their roles and interactions in the field.

Thai was the language in which we initially discussed and reflected. The English translation served as a report of the results. We safeguarded the privacy of our migrants by refraining from using any identifying terms without their permission (e.g., Konstantinou & Miller, 2022) and acknowledged the concerns and questions surrounding CAE. In the following sections, we reflect on our role as the ‘proxy’ by explaining how our educational institution influenced the work we pursued, as well as the intrinsic challenges we faced when engaging with migrant communities.

REFLECTIONS OF THE ‘PROXY’

A Social Justice Rigmarole

Sanctioned by our institute spearheading the SDG promotion, our co-experiences echo a significant burden on the researchers as a proxy for implementing socially inclusive projects. Despite the SDG advice for effective policy, we unfortunately encountered roadblocks when attempting to secure funding from our institution, which is renowned for its health sciences and is likely to foster multidisciplinary activities that incorporate medical aspects. This undoubtedly comes

with internal and external processes that slowed down the rollout of training and testing projects.

In our co/autoethnographic field notes, we documented this as an everyday administrative encounter that made our proxy position feel constrained within the Thai bureaucratic hierarchy. For instance, Koraya noted, “after months of waiting for approvals, each step required another signature, another form, another revision of the same Excel file—until the project timeline felt like it belonged more to the institution’s chain of command than to the migrants’ needs.” This is because every year the university would invite faculties and colleges to submit socially inclusive proposals. The Thai fiscal year is typically from 1 October to 30 September. To secure an allocation, those interested would have to submit drafts of their proposals months before they are due for appraisal. At the beginning of November 2021, we wrote a one-year project proposal based on our brainstorming, with a budget of around THB 200,000 (EUR 7,400). We decided to prioritize migrant workers’ well-being, which was also mandatory for us to indicate the alignment of its outcomes with the government, university, and SDGs. After submitting the Excel file to the university through our institute’s Plan and Policy Division, we waited 10 months before receiving feedback from the division in mid-September 2022. Different levels of university decision-making resulted in a budget allocation for our project that was four times lower than what we had requested. Therefore, we had to revise and reallocate our budget and planned activities before resubmitting the Excel file and the ‘proposal’ – which, at that point, no longer proposed anything new, but still required final adjustments to match the allocated budget.

Our next encounter is internal management. One of Koraya’s notes reads, “after receiving funding from the university and revising the planned budgets, we had to wait for the project to be transferred to our institute’s internal management.” That means, “we had to revise our plan again before submitting the revised Excel files along with a new Word document.” Only after submitting the Letter of Project Approval Request – with all related documents and additional signatures from authorities to certify them – to the institute’s director did we seek her approval to begin the project. For this, Koraya’s note records that, “I also had to make sure that we stick to budgeting rules and guidelines to use the allocated funds effectively.” Additionally, we were required to produce progress reports in a strict, predetermined format every quarter, and at the end of each fiscal year, we had to submit a final report.

A part of our translation and training project included translation services for life-essential documents concerning the health and well-being of foreign workers. In carrying out this task, according to our note, we needed to contact various external agencies, both in the private and public sectors. Unsurprisingly, since we primarily submitted our translated documents to Thai governmental agencies, the process took considerable time and involved a high level of formality, which further slowed things down. One example involves a governmental body directly responsible for the well-being of people residing in Thailand, both Thai and non-Thai. Initially, we made an inquiry by phone, but we were later asked to follow up via email. Interestingly, the office then requested that we submit an official letter, complete with signatures, to formalize our inquiry. Two weeks later, they responded, informing us that they were still in the selection process and needed additional time due to coordination requirements with other departments within the office.

We felt frustrated, as our project was marred by bureaucracy at various points. From the initial application for funding to the submission of the first batch of translations, we had to follow numerous guidelines and regulations, complete various forms, and manage a significant amount of paperwork. We understand the bureaucratic nature of Thai agencies – particularly

in the public sector – is crucial for ensuring that staff comply with internal guidelines and obtain the necessary approvals from supervisors or higher authorities to preclude the likelihood of graft. While we anticipated encountering some degree of bureaucracy during the project, it is undeniable that, at times, it slowed down – or even hindered – certain project activities.

Despite our efforts to bring about change with hope for clearer future policies improving migrant workers' lives, our experience demonstrates the challenges that academic communities face when attempting to support marginalized people, particularly in the context of a translation project as a resource for symbolic and material inclusion (Monzó-Nebot & Mellinger, 2022). We learned from our shared notes that compassion remained central to our interactions with and help to the migrants in finding decent lives in Thailand. All three of us, sometimes reluctant to engage in the rather discouraging internal process, felt obliged to strengthen our connections within the local communities and at our universities. Despite these trials with management, we strongly agree that supporting academic staff requires prioritizing the development of collegial spaces and promoting a sense of community (Konstantinou & Miller, 2022), albeit one limited by red tape.

Moreover, reflecting on testing and training to further develop translation skills among migrants, we recognize that the ethical principle of justice raises the question of who will bear the research's burden and who will reap its benefits. Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz (2020) make the valid argument that the transient nature of migrant participants makes it less likely that they will reap any direct benefits from the study. By the time the research is finished and affects policy development, the participants are unlikely to remain in the designated area. Due to the potential mobility of our participants, we, as the university's proxy, encounter further obstacles when attempting to reconnect with them after overcoming the delayed process of help. Here is an interesting excerpt from the record of our casual conversation with a 24-year-old volunteer in interpreter training:

The wage here is low. There is a limit to how we can be in a higher position. In a month from now, I'd take on another job once I finish training with these [translation/interpreting] skills. Maybe working in large corporations or global organizations.

This statement made us understand with sadness as to how the host country's system discourages this group of migrants, who have some proficiency in both languages, from continuing to work as healthcare interpreters. Once equipped with language skills, most of them tend to move to other places where we may not be able to reach for follow-up. This point is also linked to the intrinsic challenges resulting from the living conditions, which we elaborate on in the subsequent section.

Policy-wise, despite receiving a certain amount of resources and funding from our university, our projects appear to focus on displaying tokens for SDG-driven endeavors. Claiming these to be win-win schemes, the commissioner may satisfy the thirst for a positive reputation and a world-class ranking, but may not fully engage the marginalized in long-term implementation when they move out of the research area designated by our university. This must also be considered in light of the nationalistic mentality of Thai authorities in wider social discourse. Techawongstien and Chittiphalsri (2023) caution that the Thai state tends to adhere to sociocultural and linguistic divides rooted in a nationalist mentality. Our comparative notes come to a similar view: Once a proxy like us understands the nationalistic influences that perpetuate social injustice, we can take on a more tactical role in addressing various challenges to better assist the underprivileged in light of the host country's neglect of social justice. The next section details the challenges we faced when introducing the two related activities in the field site.

Intrinsic Challenges in Migrants' Living Conditions

Our reflections on the two related activities highlight various challenges that arise from the ways of life and environments in which migrants reside. Of particular note is the healthcare interpreting project, which aims to equip migrant workers with advanced intercultural communication skills. In this development effort, our affiliated university's notable expertise, particularly within the medical domain, presents a substantial prospect for a constructive influence on healthcare accessibility and fostering intercultural understanding in Thailand and the wider ASEAN region.

After finishing the training on healthcare translation/interpreting skills with the selected participants, we had a series of meetings. In one of these meetings, reminiscing about the abrupt change in the training plan, Narongdej raised the point that, "our training project was not devoid of obstacles. This issue may be due to a lack of participants and the presence of varying levels of translation and interpreting knowledge". That is, the training had to be conducted online because of the COVID-19 situation and the limited time they had to join the class. We felt that there were not enough employees to perform the duties at their workplaces. To further complicate this issue, Narongdej recounted that the reason for the low number of volunteers was the poor pay for the position. During a conversation with a 20-year-old participant, Narongdej noted in his notebook that after completing the online training, the participant's role as an interpreter "cannot get any bigger. Migrants from Myanmar are not allowed to supervise managerial tasks." Following the hospital administrative system, the participant could only work as a coordinator, but not as a supervisor or manager. When this case was brought to the team meeting, it prompted us to think of a recent publication we read about Thai public service translation/interpretation (Techawongstien & Phanthaphoommee, 2022), which shows that health communication for the marginalized was put at risk because of the exclusive character of the country's professional network and the inadequate number of Myanmar interpreters. Unfortunately, even as the coronavirus crisis erupted, government-supported organizations that could have assisted these interpreters remained on the periphery.

In addition to training, several problems we encountered during the Thai language tests came to light. We administered tests to two groups of Myanmar migrants: 20 primary students in Thai formal schools and 20 adult learners in primary and secondary schools for non-formal adult education. Most primary students were born and raised in Thailand, whereas the adult learners migrated with their parents or independently to pursue employment in Thailand. According to Thai immigration law, migrant workers' children under 18 years of age are allowed to temporarily stay in Thailand as dependents. The adult students in our project have resided in Thailand for more than ten years. Therefore, all of them have some knowledge of Thai. To implement this activity, we thus considered the Thai Test – devised by our institute to evaluate Thai language proficiency – as an appropriate tool for encouraging additional skills in translation among this marginalized group. We wholeheartedly hoped that the results would help them gauge their level of Thai proficiency, and then we could advise them to take a more appropriate course in the future.

At one point, we were somewhat taken aback by the test results. Adult learners performed weaker than primary students, particularly in reading and writing. This finding was surprising, especially considering that Thailand is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and, following a Cabinet resolution in 2005, allows all children to attend public schools regardless of their legal status. After this policy, some overaged students migrated to Thailand, and they could access the public education system. The question came to our team: What

happened to their accessibility to Thai schools? The likely explanation is that there were many obstacles in the early phase of policy implementation. Lack of widespread publicity on the right to access Thai education among migrant workers and language barriers were the initial problems. In addition, unaccredited previous education with Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) and discrimination against migrant children in Thai schools at that time were the issues that made Myanmar children and their parents worried about studying in Thai schools. Kwanchit's record of her interview with migrants in December 2022 highlights this:

I moved to Thailand when I was 10. My parents didn't even know I had the right to study in a Thai school, let alone me. They worked almost 7 days a week and knew little Thai. I just stayed at home for years before starting my studies at a non-formal school. (male migrant, 20 years)

This account points to a lack of information and practical access, while the next excerpt highlights fear of discrimination and exclusion within Thai schools.

I felt scared and stressed if I had to study in a Thai school. I don't know Thai. I'm afraid of Thai friends. I felt their awkwardness when we sat next to them [...] I heard from my Myanmar friend who studied at a Thai school that some Thai friends would move to other schools the following year, as this one would be *infested* with Myanmar." (female migrant, 19 years; emphasis added)

Moving beyond the formal educational system, we wanted to examine how their informal schooling supported their Thai language acquisition. When reflecting on the examinees' responses during the test, we pondered that most adult learners were unfamiliar with the test instructions compared to younger primary students. Some explained that non-formal adult education has just opened for non-Thai learners since 2013. The scarcity of choices delayed their continuity of education and hence affected their language learning. Below are Kwanchit's notes of the participants' informal interview:

Starting to study Thai at an older than normal age is pretty hard for me. The instructions for the test are complicated. I really didn't know what you wanted me to fill in. (male migrant, 25 years)

While this participant emphasizes the difficulty of late language learning and unfamiliarity with formal testing, the next account points more directly to the pressures of adult life that constrain educational participation.

I don't have much time for my studies. I have lots of things to think about: working for five days, daily expenses, and so on. Actually, it's not the right time to study for my age. (female migrant, 32 years)

Moreover, we were astonished to find that a lack of post-arrival language training limits the effectiveness of our proxy in managing language tests and training interpreters. Those who immigrate to work are unlikely to acquire language proficiency through schooling. This made us disheartened, as skill-building in the host country's language is undervalued despite its proven importance in achieving the SDGs, especially Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth). The adult learners shared that the Thai government does not provide language training for migrant workers, but rather, only certain NGOs do. Some of their friends found enrolling in adult education to be inconvenient and chose to learn Thai through self-

study. Due to their limited language skills, many of them had difficulties communicating at work and in their daily lives. Narongdej's records of conversations with two participants illustrate how limited access to structured language support shaped both their employment choices and their everyday ability to navigate Thai society:

When I first moved here, I didn't know any Thai, and at that time, non-formal schools hadn't yet opened for migrants. Life was really difficult, and I had to find a job that didn't require using Thai. Going to the hospital was troubling; I had to ask a friend who could speak Thai to accompany me. (female migrant, 29 years)

Whereas this first account highlights the immediate difficulties caused by the absence of institutional language support, the second shows a more normalized pattern in which language learning is subordinated to the demands of work and survival.

Most people who came here mainly focus on working. They don't want to waste time sitting in class. They can learn Thai while working, though a bit slowly. I found some who have lived for nearly ten years but still know little Thai. If Thai classes had been arranged for us from the beginning, once we moved here, our lives might have become easier. (male migrant, 25 years)

Reading the above statements later in our meeting, we saw in the participants' experiences an illustration of the government's inadequate support for language learning and the role that language-insensitive policies play in the education-restricted living conditions that unskilled workers face when trying to learn a new language.

DISCUSSION

By returning to our reflections, we can see how migrant workers were drawn into participating in university-tailored activities and pushed to improve their lives as a group of researchers came to 'meet' them. As we circle back to our research questions, we realize that the roles we played in guiding language justice were hampered by two major constraints: the intrinsic challenges surrounding the lives of migrants and the hierarchical management structure, but with the institutional search for a positive image. We now discuss these constraints, considering our positionality, interactions at communal boundaries, and social gaps in the fieldwork.

First, our positionality as 'outsiders' may inform modest success in project execution with volunteer migrants. Barker (2004, p. 154) opines that positionality is an expression of epistemological concerns about who speaks, where judgments are made, and why understandings are formed. Information should not be regarded as neutral but as a sociocultural product, because the 'position' from which information is conveyed shapes the very nature of that knowledge. In our case, we found that our role as a university-linked 'proxy' helped encourage migrants to share their views after the tests and training sessions. Many participants responded with comments such as "thank you for coming" or "this helps me a lot because I don't know where to test my Thai skills". They appear to believe that, despite our higher social status as researchers in the host country, we traveled there to improve their standard of living – openly discussing with them the benefits of the projects and explaining the desired outcomes. These responses suggest that they saw us not simply as outside researchers, but as people who had come to offer practical support. Although our social position as researchers in the host country differed from theirs, we sought to reduce that distance by explaining the purpose of the projects, openly discussing their potential benefits, and clarifying the intended outcomes.

Our position as a helper converging with this philanthropist-like endeavor seems unlikely to thwart any possible unwillingness that might arise. It makes us think that the very nature of ‘doing research for’ the marginalized (e.g., equipping them with necessary language skills for a future career) may differ from the researcher’s positionality in ‘doing research with or upon’ them (e.g., acquiring knowledge from migrants for completing the research). Both ways inevitably influence the direction of research results.

Second, our fieldnotes have shown that the ‘communal boundary’ was a recurring, practical obstacle that shaped every decision we tried to make. We often encountered strict adherence to formal rules (like fixed procedures, prescribed deliverables, and approval chains), which felt redundant in the moment and slowed responses to migrants’ immediate needs. These constraints pushed our work into a liminal space where we were positioned as a humanitarian ‘proxy,’ accountable to institutional scripts, and migrants were positioned as recipients of support whose participation was conditioned by work schedules, documentation, and everyday precarity. It was in this in-betweenness that negotiation for social justice actually occurred through small, improvised acts of mediation, explanation, and adjustment made during interactions, not the official process itself. These boundary encounters resonate with Norander and Galanes’s (2014) view of social change as ongoing development mobilized through interaction, and they help specify what structural and translational modification (Tekwa & Li, 2022) look like on the ground. Our effort has not been a single reform moment, but repeated attempts to make language support usable within institutional constraints.

But at times, our detailed notes record the ongoing friction caused by imposing national/institutional support for migrant workers as a whole. We often felt obliged to comply with ‘top-down’ requirements to keep activities running, even when those requirements disregard migrants’ priorities. This is why our experience aligns with concerns about symbolic or performative social justice: institutional commitments can become bric-à-brac – highly visible in reporting and branding but less responsive in practice. Our field experiences highlight that symbolic gestures must be surpassed to establish meaningful inclusivity, which hinges on whether migrants’ urgent needs are met, and not on whether administrative procedures are finalized (Stange & Sasiwongsaroj, 2020; Tesseur et al., 2022). Through this lens, we can consider multi-party interactions as places where new knowledge is co-created, and social inclusion may begin. Even small moments, such as when migrants cross their usual social boundaries, can lead to meaningful, even if small-scale, forms of inclusion.

This leads to our last point on social gaps in the fieldwork. Despite working under the tutelage of institution-imposed inclusive campaigns, our study aligns with Chacko’s (2004) self-reflexivity for critically informed research. We agree with Krystallidou and Braun (2022) that human actors can serve as both distributors and creators of content in socially inclusive campaigns. Regarding the researcher-participant power gap, we have thus learned the importance of being transparent about the project’s goals and methods (positionality) and communicating our own thoughts and feelings pre- and post-project (interactions at communal boundaries), so as to set reasonable expectations for how we can avoid or eliminate any possible gaps during project implementation. These explicit recognitions of ourselves through lived experiences can be strategized to balance the power dynamic between researchers and participants (cf., Lu & Lu, 2022; Srivastava, 2006). Such an approach may ultimately close any likely social gaps between the researchers’ and the migrants’ lifeworld (i.e., a lack of proper Thai language education and unequal knowledge of translation/interpreting) when conducting fieldwork ‘for’ the marginalized.

Beyond our own co/autoethnographic account, this study highlights gaps in Thailand's language policy for migrant workers, particularly the lack of comprehensive linguistic support in public services. This supports Srichampa et al.'s (2018) explanation of how the absence of a defined policy to support unskilled migrant workers can harm their ability to learn the language and integrate into Thai society. Our focus on the necessity of institutional language assistance also reflects Spolsky's (2009) campaign for inclusive language management to meet the demands of all members of society, underscoring how language obstacles can sustain inequities and social injustice. Given its implications, we thus call for changes in upper-level policies that acknowledge the linguistic variety of migrant communities and guarantee fair access to language education and resources rather than perpetuating a nationalistic mentality.

CONCLUSION

Reflections duplicate any action like a mirror. By looking into the glass of ourselves, we have shown our subjective actions to gain self-reflexivity by being conscious of our place and relationships with one another. We have turned our praxis – thoughts, feelings, and actions – into a dataset that can be used for systemic, honest investigation (Francis & Hester, 2012). Understanding the self as culturally informed underpins our CAE in obtaining and making sense of human experiences. To ensure that the voices of marginalized communities are heard in research, we have upheld CAE as a useful methodological tool for 'us in the host country' to alternatively report on the overlooked different experiences of migrant workers (cf. Dounghummes et al., 2023; Phanthaphoommee & Thumvichit, 2024). This enhances our learning experience and understanding of the topic by exposing the problems of the host country, a society that tends to promote a monolingual culture.

CAE is not without limitations. First, we make no claims that our experiences are universal or that our views accurately reflect those of our colleagues conducting similar projects in other fields. Some migrants may not be interested in our projects, skeptical of the researcher's effort, or uncomfortable working with us, even if we explain our positionality sincerely – all possibly because of their prior negative experiences in the host country. Second, while our joint self-reflective study has yielded useful information and fresh views, we are cognizant of the risk of falling into the trap of excessively praising our own views or too much criticizing rules and regulations as being unjust.

Having said that, we still believe that our co/autoethnography can pave the way for a self-reflective account as "a source of empowerment" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 749) and encourage the application of this approach among scholars of translation/interpreting studies and development studies to come back to the researcher's self and reflect on what we have done. We hope that further issues relating to translation/interpreting studies can be brought into light while using this approach, including ethics, pedagogy, or even intercultural communication competence.



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