

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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Right on the Tip of Our Tongues: Considerations for Training in a Second Language

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It was obvious the facilitator wasn't catching everything. He looked back and forth from Melinda to Elvira, smiling slightly but wondering where all the laughter was coming from. He asked, in the language he didn't grow up speaking, "¿No entiendo la risa, de qué trata?" Melinda stepped in to explain, and in doing so shifted discussion away from the expected route toward a topic more in tune with the group's process. The facilitator's question, born of a self-conscious awareness of having more limited Spanish abilities than the participants, allowed the group to identify where it wanted to go and a new voice to come forward in leadership. Moments like these are common when working as a trainer in your B language.

To revisit our ABC's for a minute - your A language(s) you speak like second nature, it's the language you tell jokes in, the one you want to use when you're most frustrated or passionate. Your B language(s) you speak fluently but it isn't your "mother tongue." Your C language(s) you can get by in, but it wouldn't be a language you'd ever want to train in.

We want to present some of the possibilities and limitations of using your B language as a trainer. As we get better at building broad-based social movement, multilingual spaces should become the norm, if they haven't already, in our organizing. This reflection, stemming from our relatively limited experiences navigating between Spanish and English, is but a small part of the practice needed to recognize language as an intrinsic part of our politics, our vision, our strategies for change.

Training differs from interpretation in that it is very much about pushing participants and the group, whereas interpretation, at its best, makes barriers between languages a smoothly navigable channel of communication. As we'll see below, sometimes making a few waves as a trainer can actually serve individual and group transformation.

PREPARATION AS PRACTICE

As with any language, using training terminology, particularly in train-the-trainer workshops, can lead to obscure language that can't be easily translated. This is especially true with terms like "the container" to describe the feeling of safety that allows participants to step into their discomfort/learning zone. Budgeting for glossary prep time is important, and finding accessible terms can make a good deal of difference. But it's not always possible to find the right words on your own. One of us spent hours going back-and-forth with volunteer translators in Colombia, only to discover that terms that worked well with urban professionals there fell flat with working class Central American migrants in the US.

You can hone your "B" glossary by enlisting the group you're training with in that process, which often has rewards beyond language accessibility. For example, in a strategy session to plan an immigrant rights action in Virginia, one member, an English-dominant teacher, referenced her teacher's association. The meeting's facilitator chose a word for union in Spanish, *sindicato*, to

reference the comment later during the meeting. Another member, a recently arrived immigrant from El Salvador, who had worked for almost two decades in labor struggles there, applauded the teacher's participation in a sindicato and went on to talk about mobilizing teachers for the upcoming action. At this point it was clear there was a terminology break-down. After some group discussion the word asociación was chosen as a better marker for the thoroughly professionalized, politically-weak teacher organization existing in Virginia. But before this resolution was found, members were given a brief history of teacher's movements in El Salvador, and how labor struggles there differ significantly from what's seen in places like Virginia.

What could be seen as a simple word-choice error from the perspective of interpretation became a useful "teachable moment" in Latin American social movements when brought into the space clearly from the facilitator.

SELF-AWARENESS IN ACTION

Because we don't operate with the same nuance in our B languages, some of our conversation with participants is condensed. And although we strive to be transparent as trainers, we often want the group to think we have an ease with the language that we don't – probably because we want that for ourselves! But getting stuck on a word or phrase can be a great opportunity to practice transparency. "I'm sorry, I want to know this phrase, but I don't. Can someone help me?" or "I sometimes have trouble with gendered pronouns in Spanish. Did I write this up correctly?"

In some instances we've seen this be an opportunity for leadership from the group – a signal that, although we may be competent trainers, there's room here for outside insight. And participants who may have entered without much confidence as facilitators can find ways of being useful that might encourage more participation and risk-taking. Asking for help from the group can also undermine the dependency that some groups develop for the facilitator and encourage the participants to feel empowered around their own knowledge and agency.

This is particularly true for those of us who pass for white and for college-educated trainers when we are working with groups that have less formal education.

THE HIDDEN BENEFITS OF "B"

As with the example of practicing transparency, training in your B language(s) can be beneficial to building the container and encouraging participation. It can also inspire trust in the trainer, particularly during high-risk activities. Leading a day-long training of trainers in Bogotá, Colombia for a group of activists who didn't know each other, risk-taking was not at all a given. There were many barriers to creating safety: the government has a web of informants and many groups have painful histories of infighting. So it wasn't surprising that when told they would each have to practice leading a risky activity the group expressed confusion and doubt (common signs of resistance to risk-taking), but quickly launched into it.

Later, in the evaluation, several people commented that they were hesitant to ask for more clarification – in effect, to stall – because they didn't think they would get anywhere because of perceived language fluency on part of the trainer. They felt they had no choice but to discard their fear and take a risk. The group wisely pushed back against the self-conscious trainer during the evaluation, surmising that in this case, the trainer "being 'B'" supported their growth.

While there exists a clear responsibility to grow as trainers - including in B language proficiency - we shouldn't forget the possibility for our limits to be harnessed to serve group process. Because no matter how hard we try, there will always be some limits to contend with.

NOTES ON INTERPRETATION

We have found that the way for interpretation to equally value each language and allowing for full participation from all, is using simultaneous interpretation equipment. While it is true that much interpretation equipment is costly, and simultaneous interpretation requires specialized skills, all too often we wait until the last minute to think about creating a multilingual space, relegating it to something "extra" to think about. Language is the very medium through and in which we do our work, and the moments that happen when people who usually can't communicate with one another touch directly through the power of speech provide for great transformational potential. Part of our role as bilingual language justice workers is to advocate for ourselves and for the most ideal interpretation possible. This means putting in the organizing time to find interpreters and borrowing interpretation equipment if needed. If important work is resting, at the last minute, on the shoulders of an interpreter, there were a lot of missed organizing steps leading up to that moment. While our role may be limited while "on the mic" interpreting, it's a justice issue to bring language along for the ride from the get-go.