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Exploring the Problem of English for the non-English Speaker: Two Voices in Dialogue

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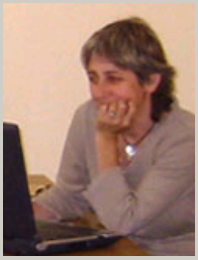
Introduction

Prof. Jos De Backer was invited by Dr. Dorit Amir to write about different aspects of using English as a first and second language. Here, De Backer (a Belgian Dutch speaker) writes with Sutton (an English speaker, but from a Cornish family where some dialect was spoken). Both authors offer differing experiences of working background and of the use of English, while also being in agreement about the major issues that will be outlined in the following section of this article. They also present a perspective that is broader than their individual countries, because as board members of the European Music Therapy Confederation (EMTC), both are involved in Music Therapy in Europe and have a good overview of the difficulties of using English as a first, second or third language. Their EMTC work involves dialogue with colleagues speaking many different languages, but where English is the working language of the Confederation. Both authors head masters level training programs in music therapy in their own country, but they also teach regularly in other European countries, again using English as the primary language. However, it was their collaboration on research writing that led to this article, the aim of which is to identify and explore a number of issues for those using English as a first, second or third language within the international music therapy community.



English as the Common Language for Music Therapy: Presenting and Writing

Frequently, English is the language of international congresses. The authors recognize that it is crucial for music therapists who want to join the international music therapy scene to be able to understand and speak good English. This is also true for publications. If music therapists want to have an international readership they have to publish in English. There are also questions such as why it has to be English (and for example not Spanish, French or German), and whether or not it is necessary to have translators at international conferences. Further discussion about these issues, is outside the remit of this article, although it is worth remembering that English-speaking music therapists need to be consciously aware of the complexity of their language for non English speaking colleagues, when they are presenting or writing.

Between them, the authors read and speak several languages. They are aware that there are many music therapists who only publish in their non-English mother language, something that can isolate them from the rest of the music therapy world. Conversely, those who cannot read these other languages miss a lot of interesting material. The authors believe that it is extremely important to write and read beyond the literature of our native countries, as it is also vital to attend international conferences. Without exposure to the ideas from different cultures we can find ourselves limited in outlook and perspective. As T. S. Eliot (1942) wrote: "We are greatly helped to develop objectivity of taste if we can appreciate the work of foreign authors, living in

the same world as ourselves, and expressing their vision of it in another great language." As well as broadening our view of music therapy, thoughts, feelings and ideas expressed in one language can reveal something new when translated into another language.

The Pros and Cons of Translating and Interpreting

De Backer: I write in Dutch and then ask a friend, a relative, or a professional translator to translate the material into English. The translator can, of course, only translate in the way that they are able to understand the text; therefore, as non-music therapists, they make their own interpretation of the text. In addition, the sound of the text itself will change during this translation process. Everyone has their own style of writing and their own way of expressing something. Some will write or speak in a more fluent way, while others write or speak in a more structured, classical (we could say, 'BBC Oxford' style) way. You can end up with a completely different text in cases when the translator is not aware of, or does not respect your style. In a way, the music of the text changes, and you are left with a variation of the composition. You have another musicality. The text will have another sound, another prosody. To continue the musical metaphor, it becomes a different composition, and a potentially boring piece of work in relation to the original vision of the author. There is an additional problem of homogeneity of style if the text is very long, and if different people are involved in the translation. This can then be very confusing for readers or for the conference audience. When the non-English-speaker writes directly into English, the reality is that they use only the words that they know. There can be difficulties with the complexities of grammar and abstract expression of abstract ideas. Here, the text will reduce in depth of thinking and it will never have the same colour and dynamic as material written in the mother tongue. For the translating author, this is a never-ending frustration." Of course, there is also a positive aspect to speaking or writing in another language. For instance, in De Backer's case, when teaching abroad in English or in German the students are also non-English speaking, and they appreciate the clear and easy-to-understand language. While there is never the theoretical depth of the mother language, almost all the students can follow the narrative because the English will never be too difficult or too complex.

There are also English-speaking music therapists who are very careful and respectful towards non -English speaking music therapists. These colleagues have two English languages - one for non-English music therapists and the other for native English-speaking colleagues. De Backer writes: "for example, every year two native English speakers teach my students in Leuven for one week. I am amazed that all the students understand their English so well. Of course they speak in a very, very clear way, and it is my experience that because of their sensitivity to the issue of language, my students feel very respected." Of this experience, Sutton writes: "In one way, my approach to teaching does not change, whether this involves native English-speakers, or those who have another first language. In each case, I want to present my thinking and ideas in the clearest and most transparent way. I also learn a great deal from students with a different mother tongue. I really need to understand my material in great depth, so that I can modify it to explain what I mean in different ways. When students are not quite sure about what I have said, they tell me at once, and we then negotiate meaning between us. I gain further perspective from their responses to my material - responses that are thought about in another culture and another language. I find this a very refreshing and exciting way to work."

It is the authors understanding that this collaborative approach is by far the best way to engage in the process of translating and interpreting.

Collaborative Work in two Languages

One of the authors (De Backer) is writing a PhD thesis in English. There can be a lot of problems when working on such a complex and extended project in another language, as De Backer states:

> "When I have to write a text in English, I still write first in Dutch. It gives me the chance to use my freedom to think in my mother language. I can choose the perfect word, even if what is required is very precise and complex. Choosing the right word to express my deeper understanding about my experiences, interpretations and insights is sometimes like writing poetry. How can I translate this into English when it is hard to find the right words in my mother language? I had the experience that some words in my language don't exist in English, and I also know that some expressions are not the same in Dutch and English.

> Language is imbedded in a culture, and we all have different and unique backgrounds - which also affects the writing process. As well as this, the translator has to understand my material in the same way that I do. He or she has to think in the same way. I am sure that work with a translator is a learning process, because it is a work of explaining again and again what is meant, until the right word or expression is found. This means that translators have to develop a space to think about the English version.
>
> I feel very happy to have English supervision for my PhD. Through this process new thoughts arise and the text becomes clearer, but there is also a danger that the writing can be changed when compared to the original text. For this aspect I write for this article directly in English, because I want to engage in dialogue on the same language with my colleague and English language supervisor, Julie Sutton."

Presenting the other perspective, Sutton notes:

> "As a journal or book editor, when I engage in this kind of work I always have great respect for the researcher and author. It is the same for the work on a thesis. It can be tempting to save time and re-write sentences using one's own writing style, but it is essential that the researcher retains their individual and unique voice. If this is true, it becomes a collaborative venture, and adventure. The researcher can then have the experience that their thesis has an interested observer, within what is an essentially isolating and solitary process2. The English supervisor can gain depth knowledge of a new research area. Ideally, it can become a kind of dialogue, where both parties are re-viewing and refining their thinking about the subject. On a personal level, there are also interesting overlaps with my post-doctorate research, so that this work on a colleague's thesis benefits and stretches my thinking. However, while there is much to gain, I also feel a great responsibility, both to the researcher (who has to trust my judgement in terms of advice about word choice, word meaning, etc) and to the primary supervisor (who is the person with the job of monitoring and guiding the research). Making sure that researcher, research supervisor and English supervisor are completely in agreement about who does what, and who 'owns' what, is essential."

Summary

From these responses, a clear collaborative working attitude emerges. It is one of clarity of responsibility, role, task, and mutual respect. The authors believe that the stance of both the native English-speaker and the non-English speaker is important - both should respect the other. It is a reality that at conferences where English is the 1st language, the English-speaker has an advantage (their thoughts and speech flow together freely). For the person speaking English as a foreign language, the process from native-language-thoughts to English-speech either takes longer, or is interrupted by the need to translate. If there is the proper respect, the native speaker will be careful how fast they speak, and how clearly they speak. The respect should always be there anyway, between people when they talk. Even during conversational talk between people who share the same first language, there is a translating process, because there is a negotiation of meaning as the conversation develops.

For writing, things can be more subtle. When working on the text from someone who is not writing in their first language, what is most important is there is a real understanding of exactly what they want to say. When this is understood, then the language itself becomes the focus (i.e. the grammar and the vocabulary). The authors believe it is essential that the writing style and use of words from the author are retained. Without this, then the translator writes for themselves and it is no longer the work of the author. It is almost like trying to find a new language - that of the author, when they write not in their first language but in English. There is a process of working out the 'new' language (or 'music') with the author, and soon, an individual style appears. In a way, the music of the new text is something that is created within the translating process.

When we write a thesis, we are always translating, at some level. We have to write in a style that is not natural to us, as in our other writing. We are also trying to translate something about

the music and about the therapy. Both these things are very difficult to do in words. When music is put into words it is 'translated'. When the mood between people is put into words it is translated. The process of translating is something that involves negotiation - we negotiate within ourselves, in our thoughts: "Is what I put-into-words something like what I experience?" "Is what I put-into-words authentic, and true to the experience?" Then, when we write, more translating happens, more negotiation, between ourselves and the page we write onto. The same kind of questions: "Is what I now write true to my thoughts, my ideas? Are the words I use a true or authentic record of my thinking?" Then, if there is a move into another language, the author has another set of questions: "Where is the word for that? What words can I use to say these things?" This is a more superficial level, away from the deeper thinking and feeling. Then, if there is an English supervisor, we have another set of questions. This time: "What is this author wanting to say? Can I be sure this is what they want these words to say? Then, how can I check this with them? The supervisor has to be aware about this and has to find out what the author wants to express. (This is not only an issue for supervisors, but perhaps also for listeners at conferences.) The next question is, "how can I make my writing clear and authentic for the author?" And so, a different dialogue happens, both internal and external; inside both people, and outside both people. It is always a process, of negotiating, within ourselves and with others. And not so different from everyday conversation and that which takes place in the music therapy room.

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