What is the role of translation in multinational user experience research studies?

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Thought Starter Questions

- When must a study be conducted in the users' native language? When might a study be conducted in the users' non-native language?

- How much fluency/proficiency must a researcher have to conduct research sessions in a non-native language? To understand sessions conducted by an in-country research partner?

- How does an observer of research sessions conducted in an unfamiliar language know what is going on?

- What are the benefits of using translators/interpreters in multinational research studies? The disadvantages? When are translators/interpreters mandatory vs. a luxury?

- How do the roles of in-country research partner and interpreter/translator compare and contrast?

- How do these considerations change for remotely-moderated sessions vs. in-person sessions?

Executive Summary

This Idea Market topic attracted researchers in user experience groups at multinational companies, as well as researchers in consulting firms who perform projects for global clients. Several had not yet conducted multinational studies but planned to do so in the future. The experience of those who had conducted multinational studies suggested:

- Always communicate with users in their native language.

- Consider engaging in-country moderator/research partners. Don't rely on local (sales) offices/staff or translators who know the language but are not trained in user experience research.

- Try to use a two-person research team (separate moderator and note-taker) to ensure best results.

- If you can communicate with your research partners and/or client in English, you may not need a translator.

- If you or the client wants to observe research sessions, you may need a translator. Be sure to brief the translator on the research goals, methods, and targeted data before sessions begin.

Discussion Details

A Chinese consultant's experience as an in-country research partner

A researcher who works for a consulting firm in China described her company's process. When a global enterprise approaches the firm to be an in-country research partner, they assemble a local team. The team includes a recruiter to find native participants, a moderator, a note-taker if budget permits, and a translator to provide concise, paraphrased summaries of the interaction between moderator and participant if the client intends to observe the research sessions. The local team uses English to communicate with the client and with other agencies in its global consulting network.

The team always conducts a pilot test and refines the session materials before the start of regular sessions. Immediately after each session, the moderator, note-taker, client, and translator debrief; this step makes the later data analysis easier. Data analysis is done in the researchers' native language, and the report is written in English.

A German researcher's experience conducting research in other European countries

To test a product in France and Italy, a German company enlisted its local sales offices. The lead researcher trained the local staff to moderate sessions, and then used her passive knowledge of French and Italian to observe the sessions and take notes. The researcher was not sure she would use this approach again, given the challenge of training salespeople to think and act like user experience researchers.

A U.S. consultant's experience conducting remotely-moderated sessions

A researcher who works for a consulting firm in the U.S. recalled the challenges of conducting remotely-moderated sessions with Chinese users. The moderator and the note-taker were in two rooms in the U.S., each with a translator: an English-to-Mandarin translator for the moderator, and a Mandarin-to-English translator for the note-taker. Using two translators proved time-consuming, and the researchers were able to collect about 1 hour of data in the 2-hour sessions. What's more, neither translator was trained in UER methodologies, and it was clear to the moderator that the English-to-Mandarin translator veered off-script, raising questions in her mind about the quality of the data.

This researcher has also conducted remotely-moderated sessions with users in Mexico, again with a note-taker and two translators. This time, sessions were completed within the allotted time, probably because translating to and from Spanish is easier than translating to and from Mandarin.

Other challenges of remotely-moderated sessions with users outside the U.S. include slow or unreliable Internet connections, and the need to carefully introduce the research process to participants. This researcher said she would use in-country research partners in the future, at least for some countries.

An English consultant's workaround

A London-based researcher described conducting multinational studies using immigrants from the target countries that have been in England less than six months and haven't "gone native." These participants experience the user interface in their native language and provide feedback in English. This approach enables the researcher to identify cultural and translation issues in the interface as it is developed; however, it is not appropriate for final validation or performance testing.