

Translate Research Documents for Non-English Speaking Participants

UCLA CTSI Community Engagement & Research Program
Partnered Research “How To” Series

BACKGROUND

[Federal regulations](#) mandate that information given to potential research participants or their representatives be in a language that they can understand. Translation of research documents, thus, is necessary to comply with such regulations in order to effectively engage non-English speakers or Limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations in research and address some of the barriers to participation.

TYPE OF MATERIALS

Questionnaires, recruitment flyers, contact letters, and consent forms are some of the documents that may need to be translated.

PROCESS

Before starting the process ensure that all documents are finalized in English and submitted to IRB. After having the IRB review and approve them, you may start working on translations to the target language.

In order to ensure that quality translations are produced, the following steps are recommended:

1

Knowing your target audience

Before translating documents try to get to know the people you are trying to reach. Focus groups could inform the research team about the communication habits, reading proficiency, diversity and cultural differences within the target audience.

Aim for a final document in the target language that is generic. Avoid using terms that could have different meanings to people from different regions. For example, the word “pen” has 11 different regional Spanish translations, a person from Argentina might call it “*birome*” whereas a person from Mexico might call it “*pluma*.” The word “*bolígrafo*” is a more neutral translation.



IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- **Anticipating the need for translations:** It is important to estimate likely proportions of potential participants that are non-English speakers. Data from the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) or the [California Health Interview Survey \(CHIS\)](#) can be used to inform the research.
- **Translating documents is not always sufficient:** The research team must include at least one person who is fluent in the target language(s), ensuring that participants can be involved during all phases of research.
- **IRB requirements vary:** Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at different institutions have varying requirements to approve the use of translated written documents. For example, they may require certified translations or a specific translation technique (see table on pg. 2). Therefore, researchers should consult with the IRB at their institution early in the process.
- **Cost:** Translation services need to be included in your budget.

2

Identifying translators

Ensure that translators are fully bilingual (in written and spoken form), bicultural, communicate well, and have knowledge of the subject being studied and of research and survey design.



Potential translators:

- Professional translators who are not part of the research team, certified or non-certified depending on the IRB requirements at your institution.
- Staff members: Principal Investigators, Research Assistants, or students, who have native or bilingual proficiency in both English and the target language.
- Translation companies



Not recommended:

- Computerized translation software or web-based translations

3

Translating the material

Translations should use simple and understandable vocabulary. The format of the translated material should closely resemble that of the English material.

4

Pilot test translated materials

Testing the finalized versions of the material translated to the target language can help ensure that they convey the right information in a manner that is easy to understand to the target audience and is culturally sensitive.

Approaches to translation	
Parallel translation	A team of at least two translators translate the same material and convene to decide on a translation.
Split translation	A team of at least two translators divide the material amongst themselves, then they convene to review all materials together and come up with a final translated document.
One-to-one translation*	A single translator develops a translation for all materials.

**Note: Although it may be more convenient and cost-effective, it has its drawbacks. If translations are inappropriate, there will be nobody to review them. Additionally, a translator working alone cannot discuss ideas with others and get input. Since translation can be highly subjective, it is more beneficial to do it as a collaborative effort.*

- Pilot testing should be done with people who speak the target language, both bilingual and monolingual individuals.
- Comments, suggestions, and questions should be noted to keep track of the corrections that need to be made.
- After incorporating these comments, revisions should be tested to assess clarity and appropriateness of the newly produced material.

Qualities of a well-translated document

- Linguistically and culturally relevant.
- Easily understood.
- It should not sound like a translation; which can lead to unintended misinterpretations by participants.
- Conceptually equivalent; in questionnaires psychometric properties should be intact.

Psychometric properties show how well a test measures the construct of interest. It refers to how reliable and valid the questionnaire is.

Translation methods	
Forward translation	Materials are translated from English to the target language.
Single back translation	The translated material produced by one translator is brought back to English by a different translator. The two English documents are compared to examine any differences and evaluate how closely the translation presents the information.
Double back translation	This method includes a forward translation of the material by a translator, a back translation of the translated text by a second translator, and a report of discrepancies done by a third translator, along with suggested comments to produce a final translation.

Potential consequences of inadequate translations

- They may impact true informed consent
Participants who do not understand procedures, or their rights as research participants are less likely to adhere to procedures, could feel coerced to participate in the study and may withdraw from the study.
- They may place subjects at risk
Participants in a clinical study could be negatively affected if they are given the wrong directions on how to take medications.
- They may undermine the integrity of the data
Questionnaires that are not translated properly cause participants' responses to not be comparable to those of participants who answered the questions in English.

UCLA CTSI Community Engagement and Research Program (CERP)

Develops, implements, and refines models of community engagement and community capacity building, and facilitates research collaborations between academics and community partners.

Services:

Dissemination of research results ▪ Advice on study design and implementation
Connecting investigators and community ▪ Grant preparation and training

Additional Resources on community engaged research:

<http://ctsi.ucla.edu/patients-community>