

## Save Time and Money Tip No 2 – In-house translations



A common misconception is that using internal company resources to work on a translation is “free.” It’s not. You’ll still have to invest your time, staff- and resources to get it done... Time is money, so any amount of time you and your colleagues spend trying to fix a bad translation instead of performing their core job tasks will be at a cost to your company. That is why you can’t say in-house translations are free. But not only that – they can cause all sorts of other problems, too. We’re going to look at just a few of these problems in this post, so here we go.

### In-house Translations:

#### The Difference between Translators and Bilinguals

Professional translators are first and foremost writers, capable of producing texts that read well in the target language. They are also fluent in their source language(s) as well. Most important of all, they are effective **bridges** between the languages they work in. They can communicate the message of the original text, with the right style and terminology, in their native language.

Bilingualism is something else. Bilinguals speak two languages fluently, but are not necessarily good at moving information between the two, especially in writing. And experience shows that many people described as bilingual overestimate their communication skills altogether.

In 2000, Lina’s, a pricey French sandwich chain, advertised for franchisees abroad with a text concocted by a self-proclaimed bilingual employee.

Slogan: “Tomorrow, we will expect on your dynamism.”

Response: Zero.

Conclusion: Bilinguals don’t necessarily produce good quality in-house translations.

**Bilingualism on its own is not a guarantee of written fluency or skill in translation.**

#### Professional Translators Work into their Native Language

If you want your catalogue translated into German and Russian, the work should be done by a native German speaker and a native Russian speaker. Native English-speakers translate from foreign languages into English. In-house translations should only be performed by native speakers of the target language. As a translation buyer, you may not be aware of this, but a translator who flouts this basic rule is likely to be ignorant of other important quality issues as well. So for example, when one of your in-house employees says they are bilingual and they promise they will take care of this product description translation into Chinese, you can be sure they have no idea what they are embarking on. You should always translate into your native language only if you expect high quality from the final text.

OK, there are exceptions. But not many. If your supplier claims to be one of them, ask to see something he or she has done. If it is factually accurate and reads well, and if the translator guarantees equivalent quality for your text – why not? Sometimes a translator with particular subject-matter expertise may agree to work into what is for him or her a foreign language. In this case, the translation must be carefully edited – and not just glanced through – by a language-sensitive native speaker before it goes to press.

**Do translators living outside their home country lose touch with their native tongue? At the bottom end of the market, perhaps. But expert linguists make a point of keeping their language skills up to scratch wherever they are.**

## Teachers & Academics: At your Peril

For many companies faced with foreign-language texts, the first stop is the language department of a local school or university if in-house translations are not an option. While this may – sometimes – work for inbound translation (i.e., when you want to find out what the other guys are up to), it is **extremely** risky for promotional texts.

Teaching a foreign language is a demanding activity that requires a special set of skills. These are rarely the same as those needed to produce a smooth, stylish translation. The risks are even greater if you opt for student translators, which may seem like a nice, inexpensive option, but may cost you even more in terms of wasted time and money than in-house translations.

**Q: Would you approve of medical students performing minor operations to pay their way through medical school? (Would you describe your brochure/letter/annual report/speech as “minor”?) Would you have your company’s financial statements prepared by business students to save money?**

## In-house Translations:

### Resist the Temptation to Do it Yourself

We have discussed this problem in our first post on the subject – [Save Time and Money Tip – Don’t DIY](#). Speaking is not writing. Oral fluency does not guarantee smooth, stylish writing. Even if you regularly negotiate successfully in French, German or Spanish, and spend lots of time in the countries where those languages are spoken, 99 times out of 100 your written command of a foreign language will be immediately recognisable as “foreign”.

**If you wish to project an international image, you will probably be better served by a less ethnic approach. In many cultures, awkward or sloppy use of the local language – especially by a native English speaker – is not amusing. It is insulting. Do you really need to insult your clients with poor quality in-house translations?**

## How Important is Style?

Some translations are no-hopers from the start.

*Tehao Rechargeable shaver RCCW-320: Smuggle the razor blade (reference value around 400 g) on your muscle vertically. Then drag your skin and shave back slowly.*

Often these are raw machine translation, or the work of non-native speakers struggling away with a grammar book in one hand and a dictionary in the other. They are good for a laugh.

Other in-house translations are technically accurate, yet the sentences do not flow as smoothly as they might; word order or choice of vocabulary may be unduly influenced by the original language. They are not particularly effective for selling, but may be good enough for readers who know the subject and can – or have time to – read between the lines.

**Many translators/translation companies often supply “for-information” translation as standard work, rather than a “rewrite” or “adaptation”. To avoid misunderstanding, clarify this up front. Get it in writing.**

## In-house Translations:

### Have Typeset Copy Proofread by your Translator

If you still decide to go for in-house translations for your next big project, at least have a translator proofread the final text. Even if you have a sound procedure in place, with reliable translation providers who know your company inside out, last-minute additions (headings, captions, word changes) by well-meaning non-linguists can sabotage an otherwise effective document.



*“Skeletons of Mothers (Foreign Companies)” reads one heading on the Tokyo Stock Exchange web site. The page itself is a well-translated outline of listing information for foreign companies. The stumble appears to have occurred when a non-native English speaker stepped in, dictionary in hand, as deadlines loomed: true, honegumi (literally “bone/assembly”) can be rendered “skeleton”, but in this context would be “outline” or “summary”. “Mothers”? The market segment concerned is for high-growth companies that need “nurturing”.*

*“Beware: there are two stops at Roissy/Charles-de-Gaulle airport” warns a sign in the rail link to the international airport north of Paris.*

**Be sure to have a language-sensitive native speaker on hand to vet final fiddling. For the same reason, do not finalise changes to foreign texts by telephone. They are almost always misheard.**

OK, there they are – the most important things to bear in mind when making the choice between using a professional translation agency or relying on your staff to do your in-house translations.