Training That Travels Well

Adapting automated training for a foreign audience means more than just hiring a translator. An experienced "exporter" tells how to prepare your programs for the trip.

"**I**'d like one of the singing dogs, please!"

I never heard anyone say this, but as I rode to work on the train each day in Japan I often imagined just such a scene. A large sign on a building near Kamakura proclaimed in English, "Singing Bird and Dog Sale."
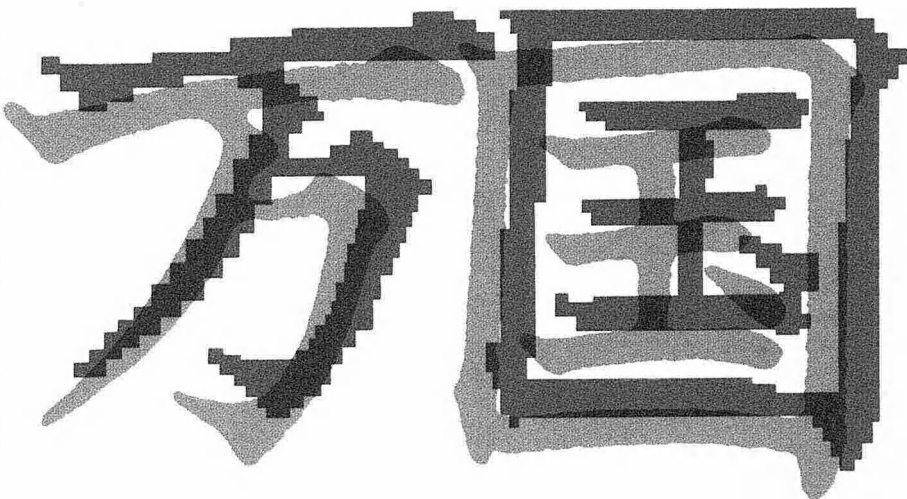
That harmless translation pales beside a famous mistake involving President Nixon. His translator rendered a comment of the Prime Minister of Japan as "I'll take care of it." A better translation would have been "I'll take it under advisement." That one created a major international incident.

The late 1950s saw the increasingly successful introduction of high-quality Japanese consumer products. Americans embraced these modestly priced, well-engineered products. But the quality of the goods was hardly matched by the instructions that accompanied them. Some user manuals (think training here) were almost unbelievable.

I have a stamp pad from that period. It was a remarkable product at a time when stamp pads had to be re-inked every few days—a messy job. But the instructions begin with, "Good for 1,000 stamp on face of abroad," and go downhill from there.

Fortunately, the Japanese have since made big improvements in adapting material for foreign use.

Training, like well-engineered products, will succeed when it is well de-

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By Angus Reynolds

signed and developed. But if automated training materials are to be exported, good design must include appropriate adaptation. It is both figuratively and literally the price of success. And while correct translation is certainly important, it's only one part of adapting training programs for use by foreigners.

Automated materials versus seminars

Many organizations export training seminars to non-English speaking countries, and they seem to survive the trip. Why would automated training be any different?

Only the most naive HRD professionals would believe that even seminar-based training can be presented "as is" on foreign soil. It can't and it isn't. No trainer wants to look like a fool by presenting inappropriate material, so the local national who delivers the imported seminar tends to provide more than a simple translation. He or she adapts the material, whether in advance or on the spot, to fit the local culture.

I once asked the director of training of Xerox do Brazil (the subsidiary in Brazil) how he uses training packages sent from Xerox's U.S. headquarters. Xerox packages were, and are, well done. He replied, "We never use them as they arrive. We always have to adapt them to fit in with our own circumstances."

With automated training programs, no local trainer can offer on-the-spot modifications. This type of training includes multimedia self-study packages, computer assisted instruction (CAI), and interactive video. In most cases, local subsidiaries or customers lack the technical capability to adapt such materials; the only recourse is to modify the materials before they are sent overseas.

Translation isn't enough

As we have seen from the Japanese singing dog, literal translation is rarely the best kind. John Eldridge, an auto- mated courseware development con- sultant, says, "The problem is not to translate the words, but to convey the ideas across cultures. Employ a writer from the other culture to write your idea in the local language."

Translation can include aspects that sometimes elude parochial Amer- icans. For example, in translating a CAI program into Spanish, a problem arose: Which dialect should be used? Depending on the subtleties of the language, the final product could be branded Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Mex- ican, rather than the desired "generic Western Hemisphere Spanish."

"Translation into Chinese" isn't suf- ficient. Which Chinese? The one spoken in Hong Kong (Cantonese) or in Beijing (Mandarin)? And that doesn't even address the problem that written Chinese characters in Beijing are not quite the same as in Taiwan. Such problems are further compli- cated when automated programs in- clude audio as well as written material.

Dean Wade, president of Learning Technologies International, warns of the importance of maintaining transla- tions at the appropriate literacy level. A well-educated native translator may "upgrade" the literacy level of the pro- gram. Make certain that the new lan- guage version is at an understandable level for the intended audience.

"It is wise to use a revision matrix to help project management," says Wade. "List the factors considered and use them as a checklist before pro- ceeding to actual revision. Depending on the number of different target pop- ulations, the matrix may be quite large, but it can be a major aid in ensuring that areas of potential concern have been appropriately addressed."

You have to test *everything* linguis- tic with the target audience, not just the text and audio. Such verification might have helped General Motors avoid its Nova predicament. The popular Chevrolet Nova was marketed in Latin America under its own name. Unfortunately, "no va" in Spanish means "it doesn't go." Would you want a car with a name that suggests it can't go? Simple translation, even when accurate, is rarely enough.

Culturalization

Culturalization is actually total trans- lation. Len Nadler likes to point out that culture and language are inex- tricably linked. Experienced interna- tional HRD practitioners understand the need to consider cultural as well as linguistic differences when trans-

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Adaptation Alerts

As long as you are going to do the job, why not do it right? Paying at- tention to the handful of ideas suggested here can make a re- markable difference.

Jargon and cliches. Unde- sirable jargon does not include technical or professional terms that are familiar to foreign users. Petroleum workers in another country, for example, may have already picked up the jargon of that work. It is "the other per- son's" jargon that doesn't trans- late. A good technique is to estab- lish a dictionary of words that may be used in lessons. Capable courseware can be produced with a surprisingly small dictionary.

Cliches, which should be avoided in English anyway, simply won't survive the trip abroad. It could take an extra session to ex- plain, "We are down on our luck," "Our managers can't cut the mus- tard," "Our division has its back to the wall," or "Now is the time to put your ear to the ground and your nose to the grindstone."

Acronyms and initials. Initials can be laden with double mean- ings and innuendo. Those that convey a wealth of information in one culture may be bewildering in another. Initials that seem in- nocuous may even spell an un- desirable word in the foreign language.

At a hotel lobby meeting in Abu Dhabi, a client exclaimed loudly and enthusiastically, "I love the CIA!" You should have seen the heads turn! He meant CAI.

As for acronyms, most of us have difficulty keeping track of our own. Any courseware with "foreign" acronyms is in for real trouble.

Numbers and money. Have you ever read a book and seen that something cost 35 thousand million British pounds? Didn't you wish the figure were given as $47 billion? Some math lessons have even been exported with ex- amples using nickels, dimes, and quarters.

The inappropriate use of num- bers can distract the learner in ways that a U.S. designer might not suspect. It can create what Cheryl Samuels, an instructional design consultant in the Carib- bean, likes to call "cultural in- terference." Working with Samuels on training materials for accountants in Barbados, I found that examples of billion-dollar industries not only ran the risk of boggling the learner, but also of being dismissed as propa- ganda—selling an image that bigger is better.

Sports. Since people in dif- ferent countries enjoy different sports, American athletic ex- amples or metaphors will seldom survive adaptation. Only a few countries share an interest in baseball and football. "We have no choice but to drop back and punt" communicates nothing to most of the people of the world.

Len Nadler tells of a consultant who used a snow skiing analogy in a Middle East desert country. Unlike a human consultant, your automated program can't recover from inappropriate examples by applying good interpersonal skills.

Humor. Humor can be dan- gerous even within our own cul- ture. Efforts to be humorous often fall flat. Also, humor is culture- related; it is often difficult to translate to another culture. It all too often leaves the foreign learner baffled or even insulted.

I dearly love the British humor exemplified by the work of John Cleese, but other people have told me that it just doesn't work with their (American) learners. Well- designed courseware can gener- ally be expected to retain its HRD value in a foreign country—even without the jokes.

lating training programs into other languages.

Learners in other countries want to feel that the people they see and the text they read in their training materials were developed with them in mind. Any bias toward U.S. culture must be removed. The need for cultural adaptation can arise even when the language remains the same.

Mike Pellet, president of M³, has prepared numerous video-based programs for foreign use. He tells of trying a particular U.S. video in Britain. It didn't work: it was too American. To solve the problem, British voices were dubbed in. To the surprise of the developers, that didn't work either. Listeners clearly identified the "Americans with British voices." In the end, the video had to be entirely re-taped using British actors.

To spot a cultural bias, you must try the lessons with real members of the target population. That may sound obvious, but it is probably the most commonly violated rule of developing training materials for foreign or domestic users.

Frank Otto is a professor of linguistics at Brigham Young University and a founder of the Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium. He converted a series of CAI lessons for use by Spanish-speaking U.S. citizens. The lessons included several situations that were obviously biased toward the predominant U.S. culture. Otto wisely surveyed members of the target groups, picked replacement topics, and redeveloped those parts of the lessons.

He says, "I'm glad we did, because the interests shown by the students on the questionnaires were quite different from what we had originally planned."

Not even your instructional strategy is above suspicion. For example, Caroline Wai-ying Sin (personnel and training manager of the International Hotel in the New Economic Zone in Shantou, China) warns that instructional games are usually not an appropriate strategy for Chinese learners.

Body language can also give away the cultural heritage of training materials. Gestures are especially risky.

I recall watching with mixed horror and amusement an incident at an international training meeting. A participant from Libya announced to Len Nadler that there was certainly one universally understood gesture. He then proceeded to demonstrate a gesture that he meant to illustrate "all right." His example has an obscene meaning in half the world! You can make no assumptions about the gestures or actions of the people shown on your video.

General and technical considerations

We have to get past the mechanics of presenting a program before we can focus on its content. The following suggestions for producing successful automated training programs are listed in ascending order of technical complexity.

Keep it simple. Simple lessons are easier to adapt. The problem is that "simple" sometimes means "boring." A directive to keep lessons simple can limit creativity, but that creative spark

is what makes training programs come alive.

Another problem is that the creative elements in a program tend to be highly culture-specific. Things that "turn on" an American learner may be the same ones that "turn off" the person overseas, even if he or she speaks English. Maintaining a balance between simplicity and effectiveness requires careful work and compromise. Keeping it simple doesn't have to mean making it dull.

Ensure clarity. A narrative or explanation that is vague or confusing in English will certainly be equally obscure in Italian or Tamil. Make sure it makes sense in English before you think about adapting it.

Anticipate foreign use. If you think foreign marketing opportunities may exist for your courseware, standardization can help avoid difficulties. Certain format standards should be in place for those who create the originals for any development project. Additional standards can be established for the training's anticipated audience.

For example, a standard might specify the size of borders or the placement of certain information. Another might apply to the display of things specific to the U.S., such as coins, dollar signs, and famous landmarks. You can standardize materials generically, but if you anticipate that a module will be used in a particular country, you can develop more specific standards.

One of the most important considerations is space. Many people don't realize that some written languages take far more space than others to convey the same information. German text, for example, requires about 30 percent more space than English.

That issue is especially important in adapting automated training. When translating a printed text or manual, you can just add pages. But in a well-conceived automated lesson, adding space could ruin the entire design. One solution is to produce a modular design, one in which you can develop modules specific to a particular country, industry, or company, according to the users' needs and demands.

Problems can also surface on individual frames, or screen displays. If the designer has to break up a single-frame design to accommodate a new language, the integrity and impact of the lesson can be lost. Or the frame may become too cluttered. Equipment diagrams, labels, and informational boxes are good examples. A frame that is crowded in English just isn't going to work in German.

Anticipate display format. The placement of English text in relation to a graphic display may not be appropriate for another language.

A common problem arises when English text is translated into Arabic or Hebrew, which read from right to left. When text is placed next to a drawing or photo, the "natural" position for each language would be reversed. To prevent such problems, the designer could reserve space on both sides of the graphic or place the text above or below it. The danger is that such limitations might impair creativity.

Consider text characteristics. Particular problems arise when you try to translate automated training from

English into Japanese or Chinese. These character-oriented languages require much different keyboard input and display.

I once tried to create an automated Japanese lesson by converting an existing program from English. The system I used did not have Japanese characters, and I had to create them—dot by dot. This was made much harder by the greater number of dots—six times more—that were required to display the complex Japanese *Kanji* characters. It wasn't possible simply to make a one-for-one trade of keyboard keys as can be done for Russian Cyrillic characters.

Then I found that the format used in the original lesson was not suitable for Japanese. Many of the displays looked odd, even before cultural considerations. At the same time, it became clear that some of the material wasn't right for Japanese users. By the time I finished, little remained of the original lesson except for the concept.

Keep that story in mind when you negotiate with a foreign buyer for a version of your automated training program. Don't base your price on the assumption that all you'll have to do is turn the English program over to a translator.

Be prepared for software snags.
Imagine the familiar Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet program. It is "application software." You can buy special software that enables your computer to display foreign letters and numbers in the Lotus spreadsheet.

For example, your Soviet customer could type on special key caps that would display Armenian script on the screen. But that wouldn't change the spreadsheet's own software: the spreadsheet's menus, instructions, and error messages would still be displayed in English. These displays are generated by the software of the application.

You neither own the Lotus 1-2-3 software code nor have access to alter it. Typically, you will not own the code for programs used to develop and deliver automated training, either, making it impossible to translate message and instruction displays.

When you consider adapting existing software for foreign use, you must answer two important questions: Is the system available in the target language? If not, can you get permis-sion to translate it?
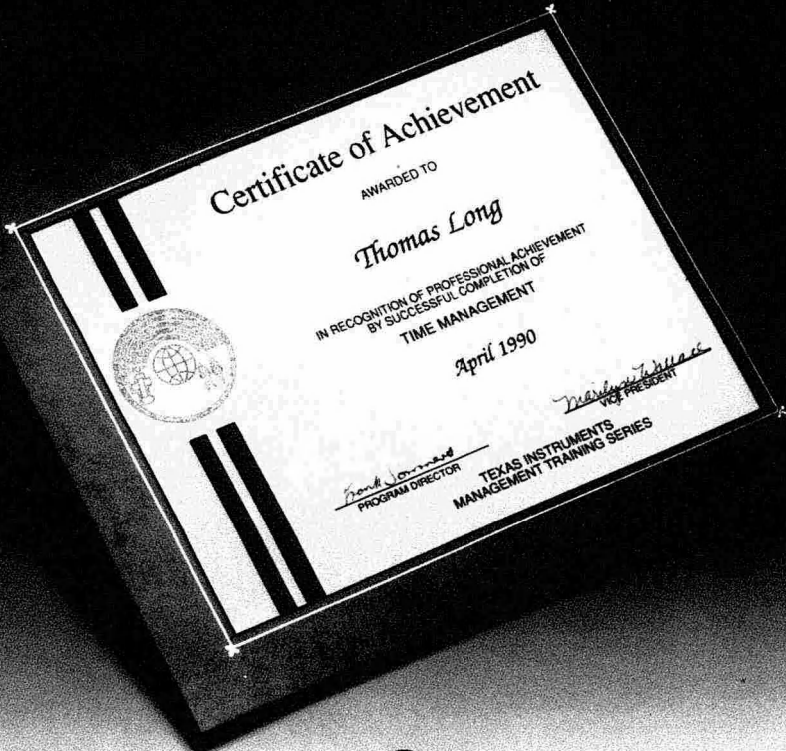
I once worked with Kingsley Wanigasundera and his Sri Lankan team, training a complete course-ware development group in instructional design. At the time, the group designed and developed computer and video lessons. The team members created a beautiful Sinhalese character set. They were granted access to change the automatic displays and did a good job. The resulting lessons were eventually driven as far into rural Sri Lanka as the roads go—and then hauled by hand to remote villages for delivery on battery-powered equipment.

Space problems also apply to application software. Jim Cilish of Computer Teaching Corporation experienced such problems firsthand. He correctly anticipated that the lesson model software he was designing would eventually be used in

Germany, so he provided 30 percent additional space. Unfortunately, the topics and lessons that were ultimately translated exceeded even that.

What's it going to cost?

What is the first question management will ask? If it isn't about cost, you work in a very unusual organization.

Automated training always costs more to develop than instructor-led programs. But the same delivery advantages that make it attractive in the U.S. apply to foreign delivery as well.

Language translation won't be expensive, amounting to about 5 percent of the original development costs of materials. But if you've read this far, you know that such a simple translation won't buy you anything but trouble.

If the target language uses a non-roman character set, implementation will be more expensive. How much more depends on a variety of circumstances. If a new character set must be created, plan on a heavy front-end cost and hope it will be amortized over many lessons.

The cost of culturalization is difficult to predict because the degree of adaptation required for different training materials varies. The more you can anticipate foreign use, the lower the cost will be.

Using modular design to prepare for customized adaptation will cost more initially, but will speed and improve the process. Culture-specific graphics or text can be costly to adapt, depending on the specific items. Eliminating jargon and cliches, acronyms and initials, sports, humor, and other problem areas should not cost anything extra (see "Adaptation Alerts"). They will be removed as part of any competent cultural translation. Generally, cultural adaptation will add 10 to 25 percent to the cost of development.

For materials with large video components, culturization costs will escalate if videos must be re-shot for another culture. The extra cost could easily run from 50 to 100 percent.

More extensive and expensive adaptation includes altering display or text characteristics or implementing changes to system- or application-generated displays. Even with the ability and permission to do so, making such changes could add 100 percent or more to costs.
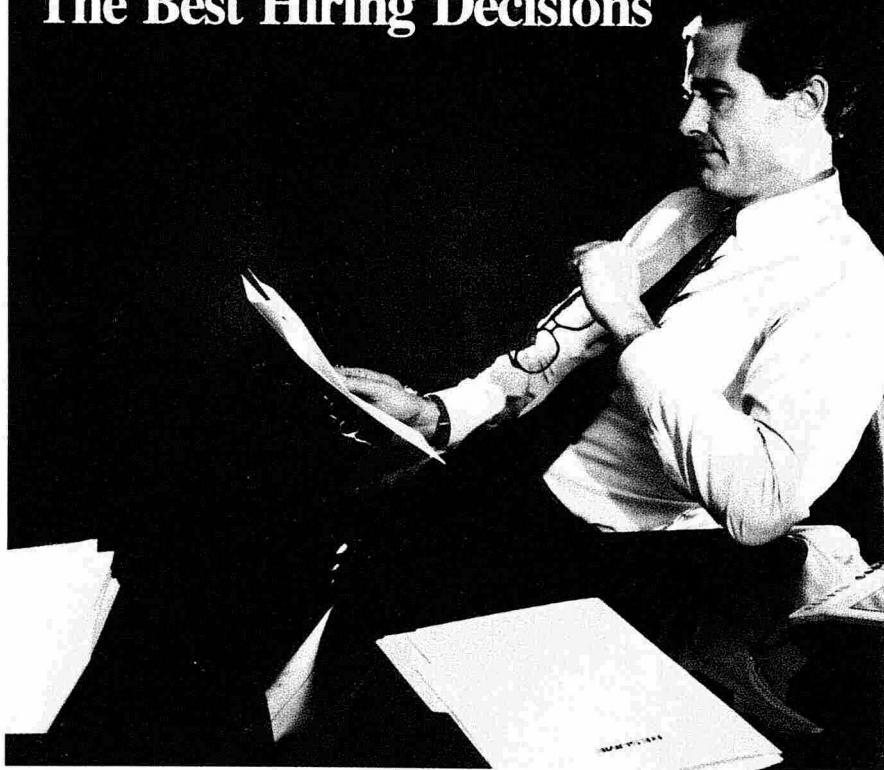
Reinventing the wheel

Once, as an attention grabber, I started an international presentation by saying that "there is absolutely no difference in designing instruction for delivery to a foreign audience." That is true, if you agree that a professional job always includes identification and consideration of relevant differences in the target population.

The principles and techniques discussed here have been applied to the successful adaptation of learning materials for print and video-based technology transfer. They have been used in pioneering efforts to adapt courseware for CAI. They work.

The automated training adaptation business is still a new one. But we don't have to reinvent the wheel. The international HRD "wheel" has already been discovered and considerably refined. Tried and true approaches are available to those who care to succeed in the international training marketplace. ∎