



# Does Cutting **Translations** Mean Compromising Quality?

What Really Happens When Respondents Don't Take Surveys in Their Native Language

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**W**ith a tight economy, researchers, like everyone else, are looking for ways to cut their costs. Many now cut translations out of their budgets as a way to reduce expenses on international projects. They look to save money by targeting only English-speaking respondents—even in countries where English is not the primary language. Is interviewing people in English rather than their native language an effective method for stretching limited dollars—or a dangerous practice that compromises data integrity?

To understand exactly what the impact of eliminating translations is on both data accuracy and respondents' survey experiences, SSI conducted a new study comparing results of English vs. non-English studies. In this article, we share the results, revealing how respondents feel about being surveyed in a non-native language... what effect not translating surveys has on drop rates and satisfaction scores...how questions in non-native languages impact brand recognition data...and what happens when respondents watch videos in languages other than their own.



## What Was the Impetus for Testing the Effects of Deciding Not to Translate Surveys—and What Was the Approach Used for the Study?

At SSI, we are noticing a significant increase in the number of researchers electing to cut translations out of their budgets for international projects. Instead of translating surveys into the native languages of their target countries, more and more researchers are requesting that we only recruit English-speaking respondents and direct them to English surveys.

There always have been some researchers choosing to take this route—but, with the current economic climate, we have seen a dramatic uptake in requests for English-only surveys, even in countries where English is not the primary language. We believe that it's not possible to get truly accurate data without the appropriate translations so decided to measure exactly what the impact would be

of interviewing respondents in a non-native language. Our hypothesis was that there would be differences—both in survey results and respondent experiences—between questionnaires administered in English and those administered in native languages.

To test this premise, we pre-screened respondents in China and Germany, identifying those who self-reported that they were English speakers. Respondents in this group received our survey in English. We also set up control groups in each country which received the exact same survey but in their native language.

In our test, we asked several types of questions that clients typically ask in their research to simulate accurately any potential data inconsistencies. For example, we included questions around brand recognition, media reactions, attitudes, behaviors and online activities. We also examined the survey experience to assess how respondents react to taking a survey in a language other than their own.



## How Do Respondents Feel about Being Interviewed in a Non- Native Language?

To understand how respondents feel about being interviewed in a non-native language, SSI used our standard QUEST™ (Questionnaire Experience Satisfaction Tool) survey that we insert at the end of every project to gauge satisfaction. Through QUEST, respondents rate the survey they just took based on their interest and overall experience. We also include an open-ended question that allows respondents to express their opinions.

In our translation study, we see that the majority of respondents are actually fine with taking surveys in a non-native language. In fact, many see this as an opportunity to practice their English skills. Others refer the experience of deviating from their native tongue as fun. In contrast, however, there also are many respondents who question why the survey is in English and describe their experience as negative, challenging and presenting obstacles.

## How Does Not Translating Surveys Affect Drop Rates and Satisfaction Scores?

When looking at QUEST results, it's clear that satisfaction scores in both China and Germany are lower for English surveys than for translated surveys. This finding proves that fielding a study in a non-native language negatively impacts the respondent experience.

Our research also shows that the drop rates are higher in both countries for the English surveys than for the translated surveys. When faced with a less familiar language, respondents are more likely to give up than to try and "decode" the survey.

In addition, in both Germany and China, the median time to complete surveys is longer for English versions than for translated versions. In other words, those who choose to continue taking the survey in English need to spend more time completing it than if they had taken the survey in their own language. In fact, one respondent even admitted to checking a question or two in a translation program.

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## How Does Not Translating Surveys Impact Brand Recognition Data?

To assess the impact of language on brand recognition, we looked at both the shampoo and the candy bar categories. We asked respondents which of the following brands they were aware of—showing the brands first as written names and then as logos. As expected, the awareness increased slightly across each brand with the introduction of the logos.

For each question, however, our findings show that German respondents receiving English surveys are more likely to choose “none of the above” on awareness and usage questions. In China, however, those who receive English questionnaires are more likely to choose the top box. This result is in line with previous studies revealing that when people don’t understand a question or response, they gravitate toward the top box or don’t know/none of the above options.

## What Did Findings Show about Non-Translated Videos?

To understand the effects of translations on spoken vs. written language, we showed each respondent a short video commercial. In each country, one group saw the commercial in English and the other in its native language. We then asked a series of questions to evaluate how well each group understood the content.

German respondents watched an automobile commercial. Not surprisingly, when asked which auto maker was shown in the video, there were no differences in responses between those who saw the ad in English, and those who saw it in German. This is likely because the ad focused on a well-known German brand.

Throughout the commercial, the auto manufacturer’s tagline was spoken—never written. As one of the follow-up questions, we asked respondents to fill in a missing word in the commercial’s tagline. This is where we started to see a significant difference. The group that watched the video in German was much more likely to select the correct answer.

We also asked respondents to tell us what they remembered seeing and hearing in the commercial. The group members who saw the commercial in English were 7% more likely to leave the text box blank or state that they did not know. Many wrote what they thought of the commercial, rather than what they saw or heard. This indicates that even if respondents can read English, they may struggle with listening and interpreting.

Our results in China are slightly different. In China, we showed a bank commercial to two groups. As in Germany, both groups saw the exact same commercial—but one group saw it in English and the other in its native language.

In China, there were no differences between groups in terms of how many selected the right word to complete the tagline. Among those choosing the incorrect word, however, there were significant differences in responses. Many of those who received the commercial in Chinese selected the word “stops” to fill in the blank—which was incorrect. (Sleep was the right response.) While we are not 100% sure why, we think it might be because of the commercial’s content, which showed people on the move, day and night. Those who received the English version spread their responses among all the potential options. When we asked Chinese respondents what they remembered seeing and hearing in the commercial, there were no significant differences between the groups seeing the ad in Chinese vs. English in the number of blank or don’t know responses.






## What Are Best Practices for International Research Projects?

In addition to the examples we've cited in this article, our research also reveals differences in translated vs. non-translated surveys on questions relating to thinking and learning styles, as well as online and social behaviors. It is clear that it is a best practice to translate surveys for international research. The cost is small compared to the price of making wrong decisions due to inaccurate data.

Researchers also should remember that choosing not to translate also can create a potentially unpleasant survey experience for respondents. Our participants are people, and we need to be respectful of their time, their opinions, and most importantly, their culture. It is important that the surveys we send them are engaging, relevant and easy for them to complete accurately. Translating surveys ensures both that researchers get the best information—and respondents get the most positive research experience.





Linda is on a

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More than three decades ago, Linda Piekarski joined SSI—and became one of the pioneers inventing the sampling industry. Ever since, she has helped us continue to lead the way, constantly innovating and advancing the field we created. But no matter how much things change, Linda is on a mission to ensure one thing remains the same. SSI stays true to our heritage of rigorous science, methodological excellence and uncompromising quality. So you know every project you trust to us—whether online or offline, global or local—is in safe hands. Linda wouldn't have it any other way.

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