

# Non-English Qualitative Research

Using a language services provider helps make qualitative research in multiple languages possible.



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In-depth interviews and focus groups – the two main methods of qualitative research – require human interaction. To effectively interact with one another, the researcher and the respondent need to speak the same language, however this is not always possible when conducting international research or when working with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) individuals in the United States. Marketing research companies rarely have the internal resources needed to conduct interviews or focus groups in foreign languages. Partnering with a Language Services Provider (LSP) makes qualitative research in multiple languages possible. Let us take a look at the resources needed for successful multilingual qualitative research.

## **Focus Groups**

In a traditional focus group, a moderator guides discussion while the participants and the client or its representatives watch and listen to the discussion from behind a one-way mirror. The discussion is typically recorded and subsequently transcribed. But what if the discussion is conducted in Japanese and the client does not understand Japanese? Marketing research companies have several options to overcome this obstacle.

One possibility is to record the session and then have the video- or audio-recording translated and transcribed. This does not allow for any interaction between the client and the moderator during the session, but it is the most cost-effective method. It is recommended to use a “speech-to-text” method to translate from the source language (language spoken by the discussion group) into the target lan-

guage (typically English) without creating a transcription of the source language. By using the recommended “speech-to-text” method, it may take approximately 12 hours on average to translate/transcribe one hour of recording. This all depends on the quality of the recording, the language and the way the group participants speak.

Another possibility is to use interpreters during the session. There are two main modes of interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive. In simultaneous interpretation, the interpreter renders the message in the target-language, while the source-language speaker continuously speaks. In consecutive interpretation, the source-language speaker pauses after each sentence or two to allow the interpreter to render the message. For focus groups, simultaneous interpreters are needed so as not to disrupt the flow of the discussion. Simultaneous interpretation is very demanding on the interpreter and the fatigue from extended interpreting can negatively affect his or her performance. A simultaneous interpreter should not interpret continuously for more than 20-30 minutes; therefore hiring two interpreters is expected. It is also difficult to find a professional interpreter who is willing to work solo. Beware of LSPs who agree to provide a single interpreter for a day-long focus group activity. The interpreter they send may be hungry for work, but probably lacks the skills needed for working successfully in this type of scenario.

There are certain technical requirements for providing interpretation services for focus groups. Some focus group facilities have the necessary equipment, but most do not. A professional LSP will provide the equipment and a technician as part of its service. Complete AV support should include a channel mixer, portable FM 3 Channel Transmitters for one or two interpreters, FM Channel Receivers for the observers, a camera with tripod for video recording and a laptop with recording software. It is recommended that audio/video recordings be made in the source and target languages. As important as using quality language professionals for interpreting is, the use of a qualified technician who understands acoustics, equipment compatibility and can deliver a quality end product is an extremely valuable asset to the effectiveness of the data collection.



### **In-Depth Interviews**

Because IDIs – like focus groups – are not structured, an interpreter is always needed so the interviewer can guide the discussion based on the respondent’s reactions. However, in contrast to the focus group situation, the interpreter facilitates two-way communication between the interviewer and the respondent. In other words, for IDIs the interpreter must switch between two languages and two speakers, whereas in a focus group setting, the interpreter relays the communication between the moderator and the participants to the client in a one-way fashion.

IDIs can be conducted in-person or over the phone. Interviews over the phone require telephonic interpretation. Simultaneous interpretation is not a good option in this situation. Telephonic interpretation is normally done in the consecutive mode, in which each speaker pauses after a sentence or another logical, but short, segment to allow the interpreter to render it in the other language. It is important to remember that using this method doubles

the length of the interview. The interview will go more smoothly if the LSP receives the discussion guide in advance, or even better, if the LSP translates the discussion guide into the target language and uses it during the interview. This is done so that the scripted portions of the conversation are uniform across multiple interviews. The interpreter can also simply read the translated introductory part(s) of the script to the respondent rather than interpreting it on the fly, which will result in both a better quality rendition in the foreign language and a shortening of the time needed for conducting the interview.

For in-person interviews, it is recommended that the interpreter also be physically present, even though the interpretation can be done over the phone.

### **Best Practices**

People fluent in two languages are not necessarily good interpreters. Working with professionals is critical to success.

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However, it is important to realize that even professional interpreters have varying degrees of qualification and that a top-notch court interpreter might not do well in a focus group situation or on the phone. Interpreters are a critical link in non-English qualitative research and careful selection of linguistic resources is crucial to the success of the researcher's efforts.

**\*\*\*Disclaimer:** *This article does not reflect the opinions or the positions of the MRA. It is solely the opinion of the author.*



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## Unotaura Shona here? Do you speak Shona? We do!

Shona, a Bantu language, is native to the Shona people of Zimbabwe and southern Zambia. The official language of Zimbabwe, along with Ndebele and English, it is the first language of over 7 million people, which is about 80% of the population.

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