

Educating the “Uneducated” Client

By Christelle Maginot



Because of the nature of our work, we translators are fated to work with clients who may not always understand what we do and often push our skills and resilience to the limit. But while some may think that difficult clients top the list of challenges translators face in the exercise of their work and business-building activities, that title is actually held by someone else: the “uneducated” client.

Appreciation: The Difference that Matters

Working with difficult clients (those with tight deadlines, last-minute changes, multiple-review-round habits, etc.) can be taxing, but as long as those clients know what translation entails, time and hard work will likely lead to a mutually trusting relationship. This is one where the client appreciates (both literally and figuratively) what the translator does, and where the translator may trust the client not to jeopardize the quality of his or her work or reputation.

Working with “uneducated” clients (who may also be difficult clients) proves a tougher challenge with deeper ramifications.

By definition, “uneducated” clients lack knowledge and understanding about what translation is, what translators do, and the challenges of intercultural communication. As a result, they are less likely than most to prepare their texts for translation, make reasonable demands, understand the choices made during translation, involve us in their projects, value our work and feedback, or treat us as partners in the quest for the perfect final text. Therefore, if we ever hope to establish a mutually trusting and beneficial relationship with these clients, education is key.

The Challenge

While client education is part of our job description and we should always be prepared and willing to provide as much information as needed, educating “uneducated” clients may take more time, patience, and effort than we have to give.

However, armed with the right tools, these clients also present an interesting challenge and an opportunity to change the perception the world has of us and our work. Doing so is not without difficulty.

One cannot fail to acknowledge that not all “uneducated” clients are created equal. There are instances when a translator will need to arm himself or herself not only with patience, but with a great deal of stoicism and humor to deal with the situation. This is even more true if that client has no intention of getting “educated,” thinks he already knows all there is to know, or enters the relationship thinking that translators are nothing more than glorified bilingual typists.

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The following discusses the different types of “uneducated” clients and how to deal with each effectively.

The Blank-Canvas Client

The Blank-Canvas Client is new to translation and, in my experience, tends to be monolingual. He has no

or little preconceived ideas about language, intercultural communication, or translation in general. This most often stems from a lack of interest in or need for our services. Or his curiosity may have led him to try his hand at a game of “Google Translate back-and-forth,” which is when he realized that things are not as simple as they look. (This is probably what convinced him to hire a professional translator in the first place!)

To a translator, the Blank-Canvas Client is as much a challenge as an opportunity to learn. Indeed, explaining the basics of our trade forces us to take a closer look at things, simplify ideas (perhaps even challenge some), and improve the way we do things when it comes to including our clients in the decision-making process.

As mentioned previously, the Blank-Canvas Client has no preconceived ideas about our work. Educating him gives us an opportunity to promote professional translation and share bona fide knowledge that will benefit not only us but the translation industry as a whole—hence the need to do it right.

The main challenge we face when educating the Blank-Canvas Client is to provide him with enough information, but not to a degree where he becomes confused with too much of it. The good news is that streamlined help is available in the form of ATA’s *Translation: Getting it Right* (available online as a free PDF), a guide that provides clients who are new to translation with basic, valuable information about the translation process, what to expect, and how to prepare their texts for translation. (An equally valuable resource is ATA’s *Interpreting: Getting it Right*.)¹

Educating the Blank-Canvas Client starts with providing him with a copy of *Translation: Getting it Right*, explaining that it will clarify the translation process and help him get the most out of his translation budget. (That latter point should guarantee that he reads it!) After

“Uneducated” clients present an interesting challenge and, with the right tools, an opportunity to change the perception the world has of us and our work.

familiarizing himself with the guide’s contents, the client should have a better understanding of the basics of translation, including the following:

- Not all translations (or translators) are created equal.
- Translation takes as much time as writing.
- Translation is about “exporting” concepts and ideas across cultures, not transposing words.
- An inquisitive translator is good news.
- Typography varies from one language to the next.

Naturally, as you work on more projects with your client and questions/challenges arise, you may need to go into detail about one point or another or address other issues. Provided that your message is clear and consistent, the Blank-Canvas Client will in time become an educated client who understands what you do and trusts you. You’ll also be in a better position to exchange ideas without fear of confusing him or jeopardizing the quality of your work. The same is achievable with our next type of uneducated client, but it will take much more time and effort.

The Biased Client

Just like the Blank-Canvas Client, the Biased Client is often (although not always) monolingual and may be new to translation. But unlike his quick-learning counterpart, he believes strongly in some widely-held translation myths that will take time and effort to dispel. While it is

always useful to share *Translation: Getting it Right* with the Biased Client, you will also need to spend a considerable amount of time disproving moderately-to-deeply ingrained *dangerous* misconceptions about translation. Dangerous misconceptions are those that have the potential of deeply and negatively affecting your relationship with your clients and the quality of your work, so it’s important to have an answer ready when specific concerns come up.

Most dangerous misconceptions derive from one myth: that translation is about replacing word A in the source language with word B in the target language. Clients who believe that translation is simply about replacing words will generally think that:

- Translation is a fast and simple process.
- Anyone who speaks a foreign language or is bilingual can translate and/or review translations.
- Machine translations are as good as human translations.
- There’s only one possible translation for every text.
- Back translation is a good indicator of the quality of a translation.
- Source and target copy are similar in length and structure.

To the Biased Client, translation is easy, fast, and predictable, and any bilingual person is as valuable and knowledgeable as the next. Hence the importance of quickly, ➔

clearly, and consistently disproving the following dangerous misconceptions one at a time:

Translation is a fast and simple process. Answer: Translation is an elaborate deconstruction-reconstruction process that consists of interpreting words and ideas and “exporting” them into another language and culture. That process is as complex and time consuming as writing (i.e., not typing, but actually writing creative/technical copy). It is also a process that may take longer depending on the level of creativity, complexity, or technicality of the text. My experience has been that professional translators will translate around 250-350 words per hour. Delivery time may be hastened, but not without sacrificing quality, accuracy, or consistency.

Anyone who speaks a foreign language or is bilingual can translate. Answer: There is more to translating than understanding and being able to speak another language. Just as being able to speak/write English doesn’t make you a writer, being able to speak a language doesn’t make you a translator. Professional translators are skilled writers with the language skills, subject-matter expertise, and the socio-cultural knowledge needed to produce an accurate text that reads well in the target language and with which target readers can relate. Even the skills required to interpret or teach another language are different than the set of skills required to translate (and vice versa).

Anyone who speaks a foreign language or is bilingual can review translations. Answer: The decisions made by the professional translator during the translation process are based on numerous factors: interpretation, style, lexical choices, research, available space, errors in the source copy, background material and reference copy, etc. Unless the reviewer is also a linguist and is aware of all the factors that the translator had to con-

sider during translation, the edits made to the text may harm it instead of improve it.

Machine translations are as good as human translations. Answer: While automated translation has come a long way and may be helpful to get the gist of simple texts, raw computer output is unviable as a finished printed product. Machine translation programs typically translate sentences word for word, failing to take context, sense, or style into account. These programs do not distinguish between different meanings of the same word. They cannot analyze technical terminology.

There is only one possible translation for every text. Answer: Translating is not about transposing words, but about expressing ideas into another language. Any idea can be phrased in many different ways. A translation may vary based on interpretation, lexical choice, style, context, available space, target readers, and many other factors. Ask 10 professional translators to translate the same sentence, and chances are you’ll get 10 different translations—all of which may be correct.

Back translation is a good indicator of the quality of a translation. Answer: A back-translation is intended only to ensure that a translation’s original meaning has been conveyed correctly. Because translation depends on many factors (lexical choices, style, etc.), a back translation will not result in a text that is identical to the source text, and therefore cannot be used as the sole indicator of the quality of a translation.

Source and target copy are similar in length and structure. Answer: Different languages follow different grammar, semantic, phrase construction, punctuation, and typography rules, which results in many differences between source and target texts, including differences in length and structure/layout. When working with language pairs with a significant dif-

ference in length, it is unlikely that same-length translation can be achieved—at least not without sacrificing content, style, or some other element of the original text. Since phrase construction differs from one language to the next, it is also unlikely that the source and target texts can be laid out exactly the same way.

Regardless of how much your client learns to appreciate you as a professional over time, it may take much repetition for the facts above to replace the preconceived ideas that have anchored themselves in his “pre-educated mind.” Though some situations can try your endurance, it is important to be patient and strive to provide clear, consistent answers. In really desperate situations, remember: a good sense of humor goes a long way, and it’s always better to laugh (at situations, never at clients) than pull your hair out.

Even after working with the same Biased Client for many years, you might still get unexpected surprises! Here are a few real-life examples that prove that even the most hopeless-looking situations are not without moments of humor:

Client: We need this in three days, but send it before if you can (concerning a 150,000-word, brand-new-content text).

Client: We noticed that the three-line burst in this ad didn’t follow the same order as the original text, but it must for artistic purposes, so we’ve moved words around (and published it without checking with you first).

Client: There’s a problem with the translation you provided. We double-checked it with Google Translate, and it doesn’t say what we want.

Situations like those might feel discouraging, especially if you’ve been working with (and educating) your client for a while, but provided that your message is consistent and you have nerves of steel, there’s hope

that your client will one day understand enough about translation to trust you and allow you to do the same. Unfortunately, the same cannot always be said of our last type of “uneducated” client.

The Recalcitrant Client

The Recalcitrant Client (who could as easily have been called the Know-Better Client) may not be as easily “spottable” as his counterparts because, unlike them, he doesn’t fit the typical profile of the uneducated client. The Recalcitrant Client is not necessarily new to translation, monolingual, badly informed, or ill advised. At first, he may even seem familiar with the target language and/or the translation process. But working with him soon becomes the utmost challenge as you realize that, to him, everything seems “wrong” (although he will seldom provide you with any direction on how to make it right). It may also take all of your skill, patience, and guile to reach a point where you may have a relatively good working relationship with him—if ever.

The truth of the matter is that when it comes to the Recalcitrant Client, you’re not dealing with someone who necessarily lacks information or has preconceived ideas about translation. Actually, what seems to drive the client to doubt your work doesn’t have anything to do with language or translation! Most often, it has to do with mistrust, and perhaps even ego and/or control. Whether the client has any knowledge of the target language or not, he believes that he knows better. He will always doubt, question, and ultimately revise your work, even if he has to resort to machine translation to do so.

Unlike his counterparts, the Recalcitrant Client seldom sees things objectively, and no evidence, explanation, or rework ever seems to satisfy him. That is, unless he feels that he’s had decisive input in the final text or got you to acquiesce to all his demands. Whether that’s something you can do depends on

Client education should not occupy most of our time or resources.

your personality, the value you put on your work and professional reputation, and how much of your livelihood depends on him.

When working as an in-house translator, you might have little choice in the matter. When working as a freelance translator on the other hand, you always have the option to “fire” your Recalcitrant Client (especially if the situation has turned abusive). The following advice about how to deal with overly difficult clients, originally written by Judy Jenner (author of “The Entrepreneurial Linguist” column in *The ATA Chronicle*), is pertinent:

If your customer makes your stomach turn, you are losing sleep, or can’t talk about anything else, perhaps it’s time to prioritize your mental health over your business’ bottom line [...].²

A translator’s job is complex enough, and while we should always be prepared and willing to educate our clients (because it’s to our mutual benefit), client education should not occupy most of our time or resources. While we can reasonably anticipate having to explain repeatedly that computer-assisted translation is different from machine translation and that we’re the ones doing the work (and therefore need time), we can’t be expected to consent to unrealistic demands, intentionally damage translations, or spend hours justifying every single word because the dictionary, Google Translate, or our client’s bilingual accountant (or plumber) “says something else.”

Ultimately, It’s All about Trust ... and Patience

When working with clients who are

familiar enough with translation and/or the target language to be able to provide constructive input, the ensuing relationship feels more like a partnership than a service provider-client relationship. That’s really what all translators strive for: trust, collaboration, and mutual respect. Getting there may take a little longer with “uneducated” clients, but it’s an attainable goal for most.

The vast majority of “uneducated” clients are “educable” (or at least willing to get educated), and even though they may never thoroughly appreciate the difficulty of our work, they’ll get to understand enough of the translation process to develop a positive, trusting, and mutually beneficial working relationship with us.

As for dealing with those few “uneducable” clients who may cross our path from time to time, the choice is ours. We may either choose to get crafty, yield, terminate the relationship, or hope and trust that “a little persistence, a little more effort, and what seemed hopeless failure may turn to glorious success.”³ Meanwhile, keeping a sense of humor is not a bad idea! ■

Notes

1. Durban, Chris. *Translation: Getting it Right. A Guide to Buying Translation* (2011) and *Interpreting: Getting it Right. A Guide to Buying Interpreting Services* (2011), www.atanet.org/publications/getting_it_right_php.
2. Jenner, Judy. “You’re Fired!” *Translation Times*, http://bit.ly/Judy_Jenner.
3. Elbert Hubbard, <http://bit.ly/quotes-Hubbard>.