

# Developing translation work in international reading literacy assessments: Translators' view

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## BACKGROUND

International reading literacy assessments have attracted wide attention in recent years. In these assessments instruments are translated into several languages. Furthermore, for the results of the assessments to be valid, the instruments have to be equivalent, or comparable in content and difficulty, across languages. However, suspicions have been aroused that there have been deficiencies in these instruments and that they may not always have been equivalent.

Translations are always the end result of and dependent on the translation process followed. This is also true of instruments translated in international reading literacy assessments. Accordingly, if there are deficiencies in these instruments these are largely a function of deficiencies in the translation procedures. Therefore, if we want to improve the quality of translated instruments we should develop the translation procedures conducive to them. To this end it is important to turn to the translators, who, as emphasised in Translation Studies, are the experts in the translation process, those actually producing the translations and making the final decisions as to how to translate.

## PURPOSE

The study explored the difficulties faced by translators when translating instruments in international reading literacy assessments and attempting to ensure equivalence between them. Knowledge of such difficulties helps to develop translation procedures that are better able to add to the quality and degree of equivalence of the instruments and, in the end, to the validity of the results of the assessment.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

**Translation difficulty:** Difficulty faced by a translator when translating instruments – ie. comprehending the source texts and items and/or producing the target texts and items – in an international reading literacy assessment and pursuing equivalence in content and difficulty.

**Participants:** The five translators taking part in translating the PISA 2009 reading literacy texts into Finnish.

**Data collection:** Face-to-face and email discussions on the difficulties encountered by the translators while translating instruments in the PISA 2009 reading literacy assessment.

**Data analysis:** Content analysis, drawing on findings from Translation Studies and test translation.

## RESULTS

Table 1 summarises the major sources of translation difficulty and non-equivalence as reported by the translators.

**Table 1.** Major sources of translation difficulty and non-equivalence

SOURCE OF DIFFICULTY	SPECIFIC DIFFICULTY
Characteristics of the source texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great diversity of texts</li> <li>• Specialised texts: different fields; compact language</li> <li>• Literary texts: stylistic and aesthetic factors</li> <li>• Wording and formulation of question items</li> <li>• Differences between languages</li> </ul>
Deficiencies in the competences of the translators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deficient mastery of the target and source languages</li> <li>• Deficient subject matter knowledge</li> <li>• Deficient knowledge of translation theory</li> <li>• Inexperience in test translation</li> </ul>
Skopos, or purpose, of the translations: equivalence in difficulty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Untypicality of the skopos</li> <li>• Difficulty of assessing text difficulty across languages</li> </ul>
Translation instructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on faithfulness to the source text</li> <li>• Not always suited to the Finnish language</li> </ul>
Translation notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restrictiveness</li> </ul>
Use of two different-language source versions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not fully equivalent to each other</li> <li>• Not used in all countries</li> </ul>
Time constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of time and stress</li> </ul>
Use of MS Word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Layout difficulties</li> <li>• Working on screen</li> </ul>
Verification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superficiality, concentration on micro-level factors</li> <li>• Against only one source version</li> </ul>

The most common end result of these difficulties, according to the translators, was that the translations ended up being too literal and therefore cumbersome and hard to understand. Other consequences were undue freedom and explicitness, and errors in the translations. All these risk jeopardising equivalence.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results show that while the translation procedures in international reading literacy assessments have developed over the years, there are still deficiencies in them which may jeopardise equivalence between the different-language instruments.

To develop the translation procedures, and to add to the equivalence of the instruments and to the validity of the assessment results, the following measures are suggested:

- Paying more attention to the translatability of the source texts and especially of the question items;
- Using only fully competent translators to translate the tests and involving them also in test development;
- Clarifying what is meant by and involved in equivalence;
- Revising and updating the translation instructions and translation notes, with more emphasis on idiomatic target language, and partly customising the instructions;
- Ensuring the equivalence of the two source versions and obligating each country to use both versions;
- Allotting more time to the translation and verification work;
- Considering alternatives to using Ms Word and to translating on screen; and
- Making the verification more thorough.

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