

Why Localisation Is More Than Translation

Preserving Learning Across Languages, Cultures and Contexts



By Rachel Smith, Founder of A Plus Virtual Solutions · August 2026 · 10 min read

Localisation & Multilingual Learning

Introduction

You've spent months creating a course, training programme or educational resource.

It works well. Learners understand it. The feedback is positive.

Now you want to make it available to a wider audience.

Perhaps that's another language, another country or another culture.

The obvious next step is translation.

But is translation always enough?

It's a simple question, yet one that led us on an unexpected research journey.

When we began investigating localisation, we thought we were simply exploring the difference between translation and localisation. Like many people, we assumed localisation was essentially a broader version of translation—an extra layer of adaptation added when necessary.

The evidence challenged that assumption.

As we examined international standards, accessibility guidance, educational research and industry best practice, our original questions began to evolve.

- What is localisation?
- How is it different from translation?
- Why do organisations invest in it?
- Does it genuinely improve learning?

By the end of our research, however, we found ourselves asking a very different question:

How can organisations preserve learning while removing unnecessary barriers for people from different languages, cultures and backgrounds?

That shift changed everything.

We realised this article wasn't really about comparing two services.

It was about understanding a shared objective.

Translation and localisation both help knowledge travel beyond the boundaries of language.

The difference lies in what happens next.

Translation enables people to access knowledge in another language.

Localisation builds on that foundation by helping learners understand, engage with and apply that knowledge in ways that are meaningful within their own context. ^{12, 13, 16}

This article isn't intended to persuade you that localisation is always necessary.

In many situations, translation is exactly the right solution.

Instead, our goal is to help you understand the role each plays, when each is most appropriate and how organisations can make informed decisions when creating learning for global audiences.

The most valuable outcome of this research was not simply answering our original questions. It was discovering better ones.

What Is Localisation?

Before deciding whether your organisation needs localisation, it's worth understanding what the term actually means.

"Translation" and "localisation" are often used interchangeably, but they solve different problems.

Understanding that difference is the first step towards making informed decisions about multilingual learning.

At its simplest, translation accurately conveys meaning from one language to another. It is the foundation of multilingual communication and a vital way of making knowledge accessible across linguistic boundaries. ^{3, 6}

Localisation builds on that foundation.

Rather than focusing only on language, localisation considers how learning will be experienced by a specific audience. Depending on the context, this may involve adapting cultural references, imagery, examples, measurements, dates, accessibility features or elements of the learning experience that influence understanding. ^{12, 13, 16, 17}

The objective is not to change what learners are expected to learn.

It is to help them reach the same learning outcomes, regardless of their language, culture or context. ^{12, 13}

Imagine a leadership course that uses baseball to explain teamwork.

For learners who understand the sport, the analogy may be immediately clear.

For learners who have never encountered baseball, the learning objective hasn't changed—but the example may no longer support it.

Replacing that example with one that is culturally familiar isn't changing the lesson.

It's helping preserve it.

The same principle applies to many aspects of learning.

Visuals, humour, colours, case studies, scenarios and even assessment activities can all influence how effectively learners engage with content.

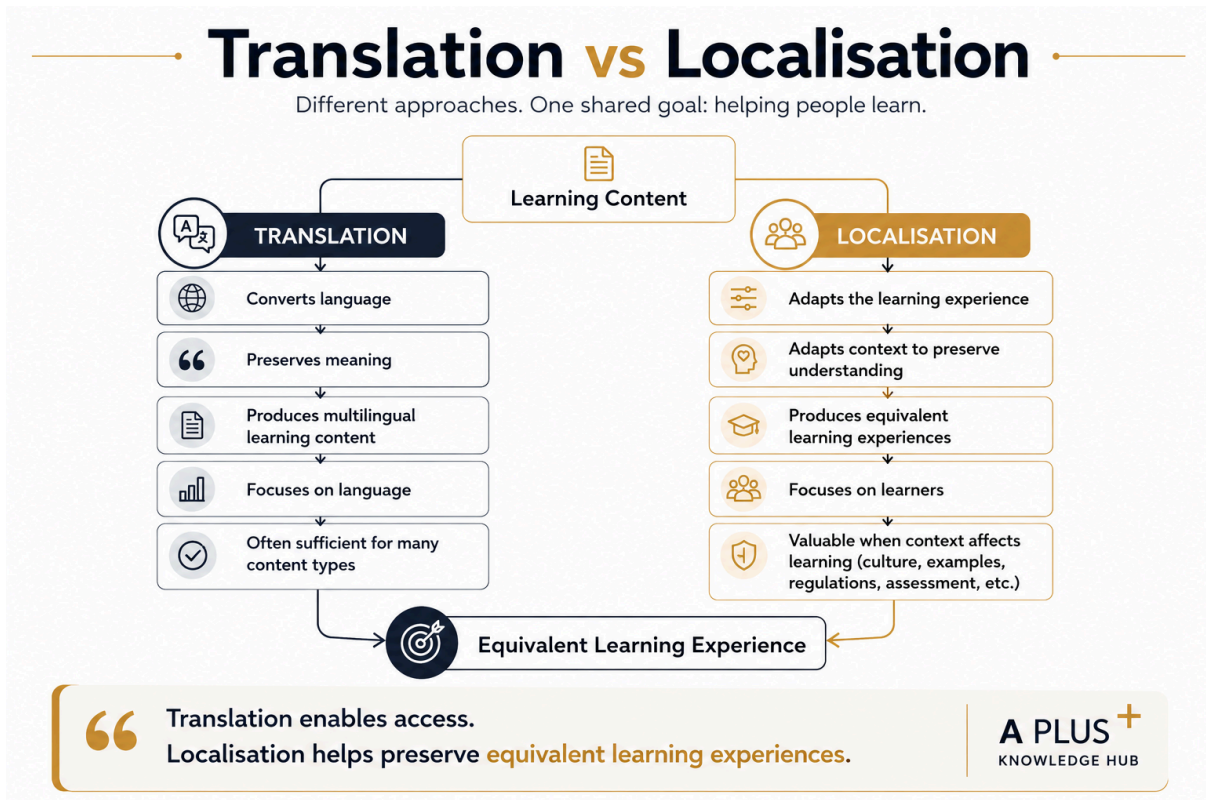
^{12, 13, 16}

Some courses require little adaptation beyond translation; others benefit from a broader localisation process. The difference depends not on the language itself, but on the learning experience you want to create.

Perhaps the simplest way to think about the relationship is this:

Neither replaces the other.

Together, they help make learning more accessible across languages, cultures and contexts. ^{6, 12, 16}



KEY INSIGHT

Translation makes knowledge accessible across languages.

Localisation builds on that foundation by helping learners achieve equivalent learning outcomes within their own language, culture and context. ^{12 13}

The following comparison summarises the key differences discussed throughout this section.

Translation	Localisation
Accurately conveys meaning between languages.	Builds on translation by adapting the wider learning experience for a specific audience.
Focuses primarily on language.	Considers language, culture, context and learner experience.

Makes knowledge accessible in another language.

Helps learners understand, engage with and apply that knowledge effectively.

Essential for multilingual communication.

Valuable when learning outcomes, accessibility or cultural understanding are important.

Best suited to situations where accurate information transfer is the primary objective.

Best suited to situations where achieving equivalent learning experiences is the primary objective.

Answers: **"Can learners access this content?"**

Answers: **"Can learners achieve the intended learning outcomes?"**

Sources: A Plus synthesis based on ISO 17100:2015, European Commission translation guidance, W3C internationalisation guidance and UNESCO multilingual education guidance.
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When Is Translation Enough?

One of the biggest misconceptions about localisation is that it replaces translation.

It doesn't.

Translation remains the essential first step in making learning accessible across languages, and for many types of content, it is exactly the right solution. ⁶

If your goal is simply to communicate information accurately, a high-quality translation may be all that is needed. ⁶

For example, translating straightforward documentation, policies or reference materials often requires little or no additional localisation. The priority is ensuring the information is accurate, clear and faithful to the original. ^{3, 6}

Learning, however, presents a different challenge.

The objective isn't simply to communicate information.

It's to help people understand it, remember it and apply it.

That's where organisations need to think beyond language alone.

Imagine you've translated a course perfectly.

Every sentence is accurate.

Every instruction is grammatically correct.

Yet learners still struggle to connect with the examples, misunderstand a scenario or find certain activities unfamiliar because they rely on cultural assumptions that don't exist in their own context.

The translation hasn't failed.

The learners haven't failed.

Instead, the learning experience has revealed barriers that language alone cannot remove.

^{12, 13, 17}

This is where localisation adds value.

Rather than asking:

"Have we translated the content accurately?"

localisation asks:

"Will learners in this context have an equivalent opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes?" ^{12, 13}

Sometimes, the answer will be yes.

Many courses require little more than excellent translation.

At other times, small, thoughtful adaptations can have a significant impact.

- A familiar example.
- A more appropriate image.
- A region-specific case study.
- Additional accessibility features.

None of these changes alters what learners are expected to achieve.

They simply help more learners reach the same destination. ^{12, 13}

Thinking about translation and localisation in this way removes the need to position them as alternatives. Translation provides access; localisation helps ensure that access leads to meaningful learning. ^{12, 13}

Practical example

Imagine a health and safety course created for employees in the UK. The translation into Spanish is accurate, but the course still refers to UK legislation, workplace signage and emergency procedures that differ in Spain or Latin America.

Learners can read every word. That doesn't necessarily mean the learning is equally relevant or applicable. Localisation considers these wider factors to help preserve the purpose of the course, not just its language. ^{12, 13, 16, 17}

A PLUS IN PRACTICE

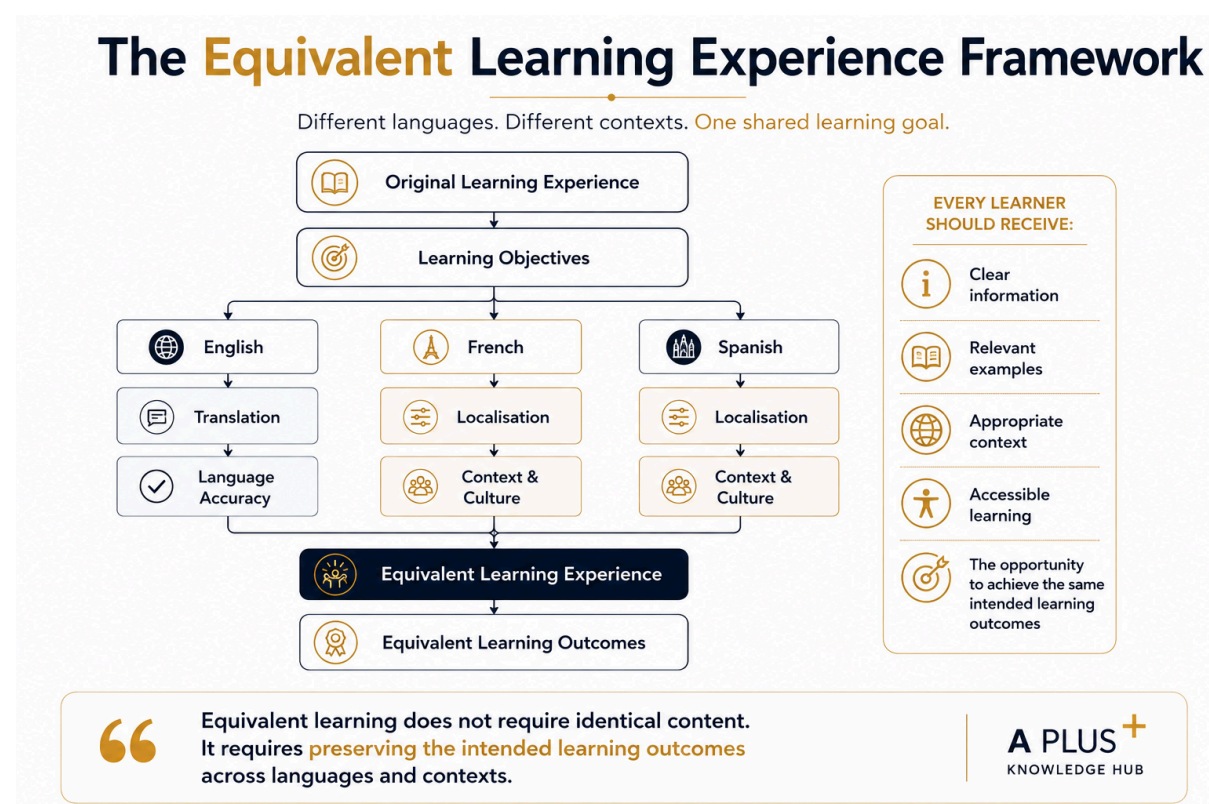
While supporting the localisation of AI learning content across seven languages, one recurring question wasn't whether the translation was accurate.

It was whether learners in different countries would experience the same learning journey.

Examples, scenarios and references sometimes needed thoughtful adaptation—not because the translation was wrong, but because the goal was to preserve the learning experience rather than simply reproduce the original wording.

That experience reinforced one of the strongest conclusions from our research:

Successful localisation is about preserving learning, not simply reproducing language. ^{12, 13}



What the Evidence Shows

This raises an important question: how can we be confident that this is the right way to think about localisation? Rather than relying on assumptions or industry opinion, we examined what the wider evidence suggested.

We reviewed international standards, accessibility guidance, educational research and recognised industry practice. While these sources approached localisation from different perspectives, they consistently reinforced several common themes.

Learning outcomes came first

One of the clearest findings was that successful localisation begins by understanding what learners are expected to achieve.

Only then does it consider whether language, examples, imagery, activities or cultural context might need to be adapted to help learners achieve those same outcomes.

That distinction may seem subtle, but it fundamentally changes the purpose of localisation.

It shifts the conversation away from translating content and towards preserving learning. ^{12, 13}

Accessibility and localisation often support the same goal

Another unexpected finding was how frequently accessibility appeared alongside localisation.

Although they address different barriers, both disciplines ultimately aim to make learning more inclusive and effective.

Whether the challenge is language, disability, technology or cultural context, the objective remains remarkably similar:

Remove unnecessary barriers without changing the learning objective.

Context shapes understanding

The evidence also reinforced something many educators recognise intuitively: people do not learn in isolation. Culture, previous experience, education, environment and expectations all shape understanding.

This doesn't mean every course requires extensive localisation.

Many learning resources work extremely well with translation alone.

However, when context influences understanding, localisation provides an opportunity to support equivalent learning rather than simply equivalent language. ^{12, 13}

Technology changes the workflow, not the purpose

Advances in AI and digital tools are transforming how multilingual content can be created.

Tasks that once required significant manual effort can now be completed more efficiently, allowing organisations to reach wider audiences than ever before.

Yet one principle remained consistent throughout the research.

Technology may change how localisation happens.

It does not change why it happens.

The objective remains exactly the same:

Helping learners understand, engage with and apply knowledge, regardless of the language in which it is delivered. ^{7, 10}

Research Finding

No single study answered every question we had.

Instead, confidence came from the consistency of the evidence.

Different standards.

Different researchers.

Different professional disciplines.

Yet they repeatedly pointed towards the same conclusion:

The purpose of localisation is not simply to adapt language. It is to preserve learning.
^{12, 13}

Across the sources reviewed for this article, five themes appeared consistently regardless of discipline or publication.

Evidence Theme	What the Evidence Consistently Suggested
Learning Outcomes	Localisation decisions should begin with what learners are expected to achieve.
Translation	Translation is essential for making knowledge accessible across languages.
Localisation	Localisation supports equivalent learning experiences by adapting factors that influence understanding.

Accessibility

Removing barriers improves learners' ability to engage with educational content.

Technology

AI and digital tools improve efficiency but do not replace educational judgement or learner-centred design.

Sources: A Plus synthesis based on ISO 17100:2015, ISO 5060:2024, W3C internationalisation and accessibility guidance, UNESCO multilingual education and contextualised-curriculum guidance, European Commission translation guidance, and TAUS quality-estimation research. ^{3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17}

Why This Changes How We Think About Localisation

Understanding the difference between translation and localisation is only the beginning.

The more important question is what that understanding changes.

For us, it changes the way organisations think about multilingual learning.

Instead of asking:

"How do we translate this course?"

A more valuable question is:

"How do we help every learner achieve the same learning outcomes?"

That may sound like a small shift in language.

In practice, it changes almost every decision that follows.

It changes:

- how learning content is designed;
- how examples are selected;
- how accessibility is considered;
- how technology is used;
- how success is measured.

Rather than measuring success by whether every sentence has been translated accurately, organisations can begin asking a more meaningful question:

Did learners have an equivalent opportunity to understand, engage with and apply what they learned? ^{9, 12, 13}

That does not diminish the importance of translation; it reinforces it.

Translation remains the essential foundation that allows knowledge to cross linguistic boundaries.

Localisation builds on that foundation when organisations want learners in different languages, cultures or contexts to experience that knowledge in an equally meaningful way. ^{12, 13, 16}

Better Questions Lead to Better Decisions

One of the most valuable outcomes of this research wasn't simply finding answers.

It was learning to ask better questions.

Instead of asking: Should we translate this course?	You might ask: What learning outcomes must remain consistent across every language?
Instead of asking: Which language should we translate into first?	You might ask: Which learners currently face the greatest barriers to accessing this knowledge?
Instead of asking: How quickly can we translate this?	You might ask: How can we preserve the learner experience while making this content accessible?

Questions like these don't necessarily increase the amount of work involved.

They simply help organisations make better decisions before that work begins.

How to Decide Whether You Need Localisation

One of the questions organisations ask most often is:

"How do we know whether translation is enough?"

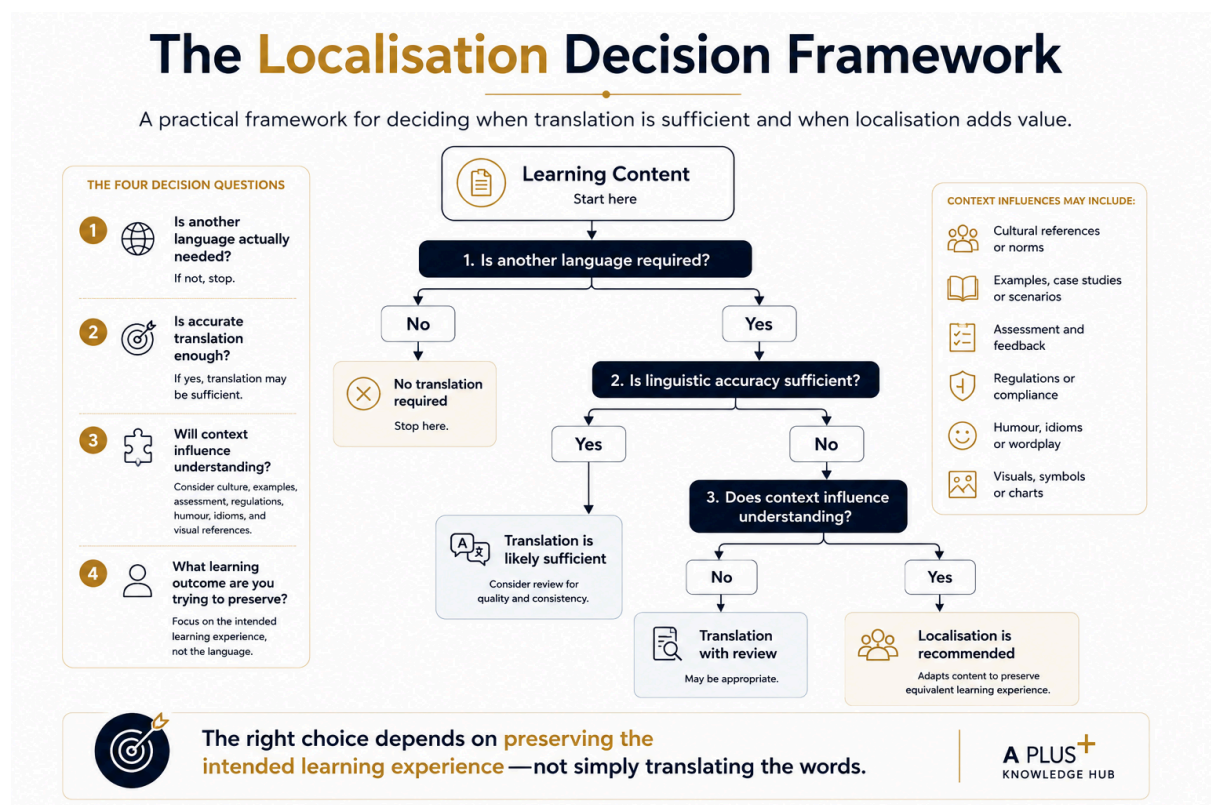
The answer depends less on the language itself and more on what you want learners to achieve.

If your goal is simply to make information available in another language, high-quality translation may be all that's required.

However, if success depends on learners understanding, engaging with and applying that knowledge within their own context, localisation may provide additional value.

Rather than thinking about localisation as an "upgrade" to translation, it can be more helpful to think of it as a decision based on learner needs.

The more important the learning experience, the more valuable it becomes to consider whether barriers exist beyond language alone. ^{12, 13, 17}



Translation May Be Enough When...

Consider Localisation When...

The content is primarily informational.

Learners must apply knowledge in real situations.

Accuracy is the main priority.

Cultural context influences understanding.

The material contains few culture-specific examples.

Examples, humour or scenarios are central to learning.

Context is unlikely to change the intended meaning.

Accessibility should be considered alongside language.

The main objective is access to information.

Assessments measure understanding and application.

Sources: A Plus synthesis based on ISO 17100:2015, W3C internationalisation guidance, UNESCO multilingual education and contextualised-curriculum guidance, and W3C accessibility guidance. ^{6, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17}

Questions Worth Asking Before Starting

- ✓ What do we want every learner to achieve?
- ✓ Which parts of this content rely on cultural knowledge or assumptions?
- ✓ Could learners interpret examples differently in another country or culture?
- ✓ Does accessibility need to be considered alongside translation?
- ✓ Are we trying to make information available, or are we trying to maximise learning?

The answers to these questions won't always point towards localisation.

Sometimes they'll reinforce that translation is exactly the right solution.

Either outcome is valuable because it helps organisations make informed decisions rather than assumptions.

A Practical Way to Think About It

If success is measured by whether people can read the content, translation may be sufficient.

If success is measured by whether people can learn from the content, consider whether localisation could help preserve that learning experience.

^{6, 12, 13}
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That doesn't mean every course needs localisation.

It means every organisation benefits from asking the question.

Why This Matters Now

AI and digital tools have made multilingual content creation faster and more accessible. Organisations that once lacked the time or budget to translate learning can now reach international audiences at greater scale. The challenge is no longer simply whether multilingual learning is possible, but whether learners in different languages and contexts have an equivalent opportunity to understand, engage with and apply what they learn. That is why the distinction between translation and localisation matters now.

Conclusion

When we began researching localisation, we expected to answer a straightforward question:

What is the difference between translation and localisation?

The evidence led us somewhere more interesting.

Translation and localisation are not competing approaches.

They solve different challenges while working towards the same overall objective: helping knowledge reach more people. ^{6, 12, 16}

Translation enables knowledge to cross language barriers.

Localisation builds on that foundation by helping learners understand, engage with and apply that knowledge within their own cultural and educational context. ^{12, 13, 16}

For organisations, the most valuable question is no longer:

"Should we translate or localise?"

Instead, it becomes:

"What do our learners need in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes?"

Sometimes the answer will be translation.

Sometimes it will include localisation.

The important point is that the decision should be guided by learner needs rather than assumptions.

Ultimately, we believe the purpose of localisation is not to change what people learn.

It is to remove unnecessary barriers that prevent them from learning it.

^{11, 12, 17}

Personal Reflection

From Rachel Smith, Founder of A Plus Virtual Solutions

When I first moved to France, I experienced something I hadn't expected.

I discovered how quickly language can become more than a communication challenge.

It can become a barrier to education, professional identity and opportunity.

My psychology qualification hadn't suddenly lost its value, but continuing that career became far more difficult because of language and the practical realities of building a life in another country.

Like many people who relocate, I found myself asking a difficult question:

How can I continue contributing in a meaningful way?

Years later, through my work with The Gen AI Academy, I experienced the opposite.

I helped localise educational content into seven languages and saw how thoughtfully adapting learning materials could make valuable knowledge accessible to people who might otherwise never have had the opportunity to benefit from it.

That experience changed the way I think about localisation.

This research reinforced something I had already begun to believe.

Every country, every culture and every language has knowledge, experience and ideas worth sharing.

Used thoughtfully, today's technology can remove barriers that once prevented people from accessing education, research and professional development beyond the limits of their own language.

If this article encourages even a handful of organisations to think beyond translating words and towards preserving learning, then I believe this research has been worthwhile.

Future Knowledge Hub research will explore how AI should support human localisation, how organisations can measure localisation quality, how accessibility and localisation should work together, when localisation is worth the investment, and how learning integrity can be preserved across cultures.

About This Article

This article forms part of the A Plus Research & Knowledge System (ARKS).

Rather than publishing opinion pieces, ARKS combines structured research, critical evaluation and practical experience to help organisations make informed decisions.

Each flagship Knowledge Hub article is developed using recognised guidance, academic literature, industry practice and real-world experience. Our aim is not simply to answer questions, but to create practical resources that remain valuable as knowledge evolves.

Where appropriate, our conclusions will be reviewed and updated as new evidence becomes available.

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