

Multilingualism in a South African e-Government Portal

Steven Edwin Vosloo
Centre for e-Innovation
142 Long Street, Cape Town, 8001
South Africa
+27 21 483 4391
svosloo@pgwc.gov.za

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the results of a user test of a South African e-government portal are briefly discussed. Of interest is the portal's approach to multilingualism, i.e. mixing different languages on individual pages. This approach produced varied responses from the test participants. Ways to improve the usability of this challenging approach were identified.

Keywords

User test, multilingualism, e-government, portal

INTRODUCTION

In June 2004, a series of user tests were conducted on <http://www.capegateway.gov.za> by Steve Vosloo, Design and Usability Project Leader at the Centre for e-Innovation (Ce-I), Provincial Government of the Western Cape. The portal was launched by Ce-I in March 2004; the tests were carried out to inform improvements for version two of the site. A limited time frame constrained the tests somewhat in terms of their rigour and has led to a less formal approach to the usability report. This short paper, based on the full report [1], focuses on the multilingual aspects of the user tests.

CAPE GATEWAY

Ce-I, the primary e-government body within the Western Cape province, drives the Cape Gateway project, which aims to provide easy access to a consolidated database of government-related information. Because of severe digital divide issues facing the majority of the citizens of the province, Cape Gateway offers three channels for information distribution: a walk-in centre, a call centre and the portal. When a citizen poses a question to the walk-in

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit of commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, to republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. CHI-SA 2006, Cape Town, South Africa. Copyright ACM SIGCHI South Africa Chapter. 2006.

centre or call centre knowledge officers, they search for the answer on the portal.

The Cape Gateway Portal

The portal, consisting of over 30,000 pages and documents, was designed primarily for the following target audience:

- All online citizens of the Western Cape.
- Online businesses of the Western Cape.

Secondary users include:

- Non-profit organisations. They are seen as “infomediaries” who provide a vital channel for information exchange between government and citizens.
- Knowledge officers of the Cape Gateway walk-in and call centres.
- Government staff.

Clearly this is a very varied set of end-users, with different levels of Web literacy and education, different first and second languages and different information needs.

The portal is available in the three official languages of the Western Cape, i.e. English, Afrikaans and Xhosa. There is currently more English content than Afrikaans and Xhosa content on the portal (for various reasons). The portal team made an early design decision to show as much content as possible to a user browsing the site, regardless of language availability constraints. Thus on Xhosa versions of the portal there will be English or Afrikaans content in places so that affected pages do not look too “empty” (content in up to two languages is shown on a page). This has been a contentious issue within the design team: mix-and-match languages to fill the gaps or only show Xhosa content when the user chooses Xhosa, while clearly communicating to him/her that there is more content for that page or section in the English or Afrikaans versions of the portal? The choice of which second language to display is based implicitly upon the browsing habits of each user as they click the “Also available in ...” language links in the footer.

While the portal was designed to be easily accessible for the widest possible audience, the primary audience should have intermediate or above Web literacy skills. It was also assumed that they would be accessing the site over a slow Internet connection such as dial-up. The main design focus was to provide readable and relevant content, easily found through intuitive navigation. Thus the design is clean, consistent and page weight is kept at a minimum. A dedicated content team has gathered and rewritten content from 13 government departments and their ministries into plain language¹.

Usability Goals of the Portal

The usability goals for version one (the current version) of the site included that:

- Content must be presented from a user's perspective, and not only reflect the structure of government. Content must be citizen-centric.
- The site must easily present content in three languages: English, Afrikaans and Xhosa.

One of the key aims of version two of the portal is to add more content in all three languages (within the given budgetary and human skills constraints).

THE USER TESTS

Because of time constraints the sessions weren't held in a usability lab and filmed; simple one-on-one discussions were held around a PC.

Profile of Participants

Thirteen participants were selected through word-of-mouth and chosen according to a number of criteria. It was desirable to get at least one person from each of the Web literacy and first language categories. Unfortunately no beginner Afrikaans users could be located (Table 1).

Table 1: Web literacy and first language profile of participants

Web Literacy	English	Afrikaans	Xhosa
Beginner users	1		4
Intermediate users	1	1	1
Advanced users	2	1	2

The language reflects each participant's home or mother-tongue language. It should be noted that the author made the Web literacy categorisation informally, after he discussed browsing habits and general Internet experience with each participant.

Further demographics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographics of user test participants

Age	All under 35 years
Gender	Women: 8 Men: 5
Highest level of education	Secondary (high school): 5 Tertiary: 8
Business owners	4
Occupation	Various, including ballet dancer, artist, students, NGO workers and volunteers, designer, project manager and travel consultant.

As expected, users with different levels of Web literacy had different experiences of the site. Two of the users had very low Web literacy and struggled with even the most basic elements of the site. It was decided that the site should not cater to beginners in future versions, but should clearly highlight the other distribution channels: email, call centre and walk-in centre. Very beginner users should use those channels to access government information.

Ideally the selection of participants should have also included pupils, teachers and older surfers.

Process of the Tests

Each user was asked to perform a series of tasks and offer their comments on certain site pages/sections. A number of general questions were also asked, including: "The portal mixes languages. Do you like this or would you prefer content to remain completely separate in distinct language versions?" After the tasks a short survey was completed.

General Feedback

In general the users were impressed with the portal and thought that it had "got it right". They found it clear and informative. There were no critical issues that made the portal unusable; all issues raised were improvements to the site.

MULTILINGUALISM

Switching Languages on the Portal

On the portal there are two ways to change language: users can click a language link in the top navigation to load that particular language version of the portal. This means that all navigation is displayed in that language and, if possible, page content too. Thus if a user is on a news page of the Xhosa portal and that news article exists in Xhosa, everything on the page will be in Xhosa. If the article is only in English, and English is set as her second language, then she will see a page with Xhosa navigation but English for the news headline, body, etc (the content part as opposed to the navigational and structural elements).

If the news article is available in Xhosa and English, and she is in the Xhosa portal, then a message in the footer of the page will indicate that the content is also available in English. If she clicks that link the page

¹ Resources like <http://www.plainenglish.org.uk> have been influential in the effort to make content simple and readable.

will display an English news article but retain the Xhosa navigation.

Thus changing the language setting through the ubiquitous links in the top navigation changes the language version of the portal, complete with navigation and page labels, but using the language links in the footer (when they are available) only changes the language of the actual content on that page.

User Feedback

Users were asked their opinion on the portal's policy of mixing content to alleviate the issue of not all content being available in all three languages. If a document or page is not available in the user's particular language version of the portal, it is shown in another language (if possible). The user responses were varied and based on the sample could not be extrapolated statistically. However, two overall viewpoints emerged:

- Some users did not have a problem with this policy. They thought that Xhosa users should be expected to understand English because that is the dominant language of the Web and the interface of almost all software used in South Africa is in English². Also, in everyday conversations in the street English and Xhosa are mixed all the time, so doing it on the portal is acceptable. It was helpful to some Xhosa speakers to be able to see Xhosa content in English. They often switched back and forth between languages on the same page because Xhosa translations are "sometimes wordy or clumsy when describing modern concepts."
- The other viewpoint, completely the opposite, can be summed up as follows: "If I click Xhosa or Afrikaans I want to see content in those languages only." These users said that mixing languages makes a very big assumption about multilingualism in the Western Cape. This is true as in many rural areas people only speak Afrikaans. In the Western Cape, Afrikaans is the home language of roughly three times (2.85) more people than English is [2]. Another user said: "I understand the 'Only available in ...' message [that accompanies links to content that is not available in the current version of the portal], but not *why* the content isn't available in my language?" There was a sense of being prejudiced against: "Why is English more important than the other languages?" An Afrikaans user on the

Afrikaans version of the homepage moaned: "Why is the Latest Tender in English? I'm not happy about it!"

Three more notable issues emerged from the tests:

- The difference between the top language links and the bottom "Also available in ..." link was not clear to most users; they did not understand why there were two links that ostensibly achieved the same result. After they understood what the difference between the links was, they recommended that this be explained more clearly on the page or that the system be approached completely differently. One option is let users explicitly set their first and second language preferences, or even whether to mix languages or not, on a new "preferences" page.
- When searching for a job some users found the mixing of languages problematic, e.g. "Why is the job title in English and the government body issuing the job in Afrikaans?"
- While most participants used the simple search (presented in the top navigation of every page) extensively, they were confused as to why the site generally mixed languages but not in the search results, i.e. when searching in the Xhosa portal only Xhosa content is returned. (Another design decision taken by the team.)

CHALLENGES OF MULTILINGUALISM

Locating the User within the Portal

The post-test survey asked users to consider the statement: "I never felt 'lost' on the portal." While responses tended towards participants agreeing with it, the single biggest category was "neutral". This was attributed largely to the users seeing content in one language while the navigation was in a different language.

CONCLUSION

Despite certain constraints, the findings of the user tests proved extremely valuable in guiding the team's thinking on the next version of the site. The tests were a reminder that mixing languages on a page presents a number of key challenges. Perhaps that is why most sites tend to follow the one-language-at-a-time approach. If it were possible to "simply publish all content in all three languages" on the Cape Gateway portal, as one user requested, then the approach of mixing languages would not be necessary. But the reality of limited financial and human resources makes this a significant challenge.

Version two of the portal needs to make it clearer that not all content is available in all languages and thus the languages are mixed, e.g. on the homepage display the following message: "This website has been

² A non-profit organisation called Translate.org.za, is translating certain open-source software application, such as Open Office, into all eleven official languages of South Africa.

translated into Afrikaans and Xhosa where possible”. Or on every page whose content is not the same as the navigation, display a prominent link: “Why is this page not in [language]?”

Version two of the portal will also reconsider the issue of consistency, e.g. think about allowing simple searches to search across languages. Currently only the Advanced Search allows for this.

The Cape Gateway portal team subscribes to the following Steve Krug [3] viewpoint:

“The point of [user] testing is not to prove or disprove something - it is to inform your judgment. It provides invaluable input which, taken together with experience, professional judgment and common sense, will make it easier to choose, and with greater confidence, between ‘a’ and ‘b’.”

There is no clear, emergent solution to the challenge of multilingualism in the portal, but the user tests did help to consider improvements and different approaches.

REFERENCES

1. Cape Gateway Portal (v.1) User Test Report. Available at http://www.capegateway.gov.za/Text/2004/8/cape_gateway_portal_user_test_report_10_aug.doc.
2. Statistics South Africa. *Census in Brief*, 2003. Available at <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census2001/digiAtlas/index.html>.
3. Krug, S. *Don't Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. New Riders Publishing, Indianapolis IN, USA, 2000.