



Pointers on effectively using On-site Interpreters



The communication process and the role of the interpreter

- Communication is the transmission of information from one party to another. What is important in any interview situation is to minimise, as far as possible, factors which may block the communication process, i.e.: the language barrier.
- The role of the interpreter is to eliminate the language barrier and thus facilitate communication between two or more parties that do not speak the same language.
- The interpreter must interpret accurately and honestly.
- The interpreter must not omit or add anything to what is said by either party.
- The interpreter must be impartial i.e. not take sides or express his/her opinion during or after an interview.

Seating arrangements

- The ideal seating arrangement is a triangle with participants at equal distances from each other, so that eye contact can be maintained at all times.
- The main point is to be able to maintain eye contact with your client at all times not the interpreter.
- Depending on the nature of the case, seating arrangements may need to be adapted.
e.g. Mental health or social work interviews
The professional may want to sit beside the patient in case he/she needs to be comforted during the course of the interview. It is the professional's job to offer the emotional support to the client not the interpreter's.

Body language

- When using an interpreter, carefully watch the body language of your client. This can often give you a feel for the overall climate of the consultation. If the person is anxious or upset you will be able to ascertain this by watching their body language.
- Watch closely as particular questions are put to the client so that you can try and determine the possible cause of your client's concern.
- Use your own body language to make your client feel welcome and at ease. A firm, friendly handshake and smile go a long way. Although you may be using an interpreter, it is up to you to make the client feel comfortable and the centre of your attention.
- If the client appears generally relaxed and confident, then all may be going reasonably well.

Eye contact

The following techniques are important to ensure that you retain control of the interview. They will prevent the client from paying undue attention to the interpreter.

- Use direct eye contact with your client during questioning.
- When asking your client a question, address the question directly to your client not to the interpreter.
- When your question or comment is being interpreted, continue to hold reasonable eye contact with your client.
- If the client seems to be looking at the interpreter rather than you, you may ask the interpreter to instruct the client to speak directly to you. Or you may simply enforce this need by striving to maintain eye contact with your client while receiving answers, information or instructions.
- Seating arrangements, if enforced by you as recommended, will assist you to prevent eye contact between the interpreter and the client while encouraging professional-to-client eye contact.
- Listen carefully to what the interpreter is saying while you look directly at your client. This will help your client to feel that his/her information is getting through. Improved rapport will follow.

Ensuring a satisfactory interview

- Employ a trained, professional interpreter.
- Ascertain exactly your client's language, and if appropriate, the dialect, before engaging the interpreter (e.g. a Chinese interpreter may speak one or more languages).
- Also ascertain, if appropriate, any cultural biases of the client which could effect the client's acceptability of the interpreter.
- Plan the interview.
- Ensure the client understands the interpreter's role as well as your own.
- Establish an appropriate seating arrangement.
- Do not usher the client into the interview area where you and the interpreter are already seated.
- Introduce each party and explain their role
- Be patient.
- Allow for more time for the interview than you would if speaking to an English-speaking person.

- Maintain the interpreter's role as an intermediary, not the focal point of the interview. Do this by talking directly to the client and watching as the client replies to you.
- Listen to your client and watch for non-verbal messages- body language, facial expressions etc.
- Use clear speech, short sentences. Avoid Australian slang or colloquialisms. Minimise jargon.
- Be aware of your own non-verbal messages.
- Ensure that the client clearly understands the questions asked and the advice given.
- Encourage the interpreter to seek clarification when necessary.

Keeping track of the interview

- One of the frustrations of using an interpreter is that you do not know with certainty that the information or question you are trying to convey is being accurately recounted.
- Keeping it simple will help you know whether the points are getting through.
- Give the interpreter one point or concept at a time. Do not ask a series of questions in one batch.
- You will be able to identify the experienced as he/she will often use a method such as counting on the fingers to keep track of what you have asked, what they have interpreted, what the client has responded and what responses have been reported.

Keep language simple

- Keep all your language as simple as possible. Express yourself in the simplest possible ideas in terms you would expect a layperson to understand.
- When a technical phrase must be used, then use it in a single sentence and have this interpreted. Warn your client beforehand that you intend to do this but will explain immediately after.

Using the first person

- Reported or indirect speech hinders the rapport which should develop between you and your client.
- Speak directly to the client and always use the first person.

For example:

“How are you?” rather than
 “Ask him how he is”.

Impartiality

- It is vital that you use interpreters who are capable of exercising trained impartiality. Some inexperienced interpreters will take a position either for or against a client.
- Relatives will often, although not inevitably, show partisanship towards your client. Information you seek may run through a filter that presents your client in the most favourable light. This is flattering to the client, if he/ she is aware of it, but unhelpful in establishing reliable facts.
- Taboos on discussing divorce, or mental illness, for example could make a relative a most unreliable interpreter. The 'interpreter' in many cases will simply decline to ask the question you put but will substitute an alternative and more 'palatable' question. The 'answer' will then be couched as an answer to your question.
- Apart from problems with relatives there are further potential problem areas. Non-professional interpreters can frequently be even less effective than usual in special circumstances. Consider the following:
 - A female interpreter in a matter questioning a male from a patriarchal family about the effect of an accident on his marital relations.
 - A child interpreting for relatives where the prestige or privacy of an adult may be exposed.
 - Do not compromise the integrity, independence and impartiality of the interpreter.

Be culturally sensitive

- Many migrant clients from countries where the legal system, for instance is considerably different from the Australian system. They may also have been exposed to a different authority structure which could prejudice their interests.
- Ask the client directly, with the assistance of the interpreter, what he/she would expect in his/her own country. For example he/she may not fully understand the role of the police.
- The interpreter may be aware of the cultural differences between people of different backgrounds, but should not be seen as a cultural expert. Traditions vary from region to region, so although the interpreter may come from the same country as your client he/she may be not be aware of the client's particular traditions or customs.

DOs & DON'Ts for professionals

- Do** Seek suitably qualified interpreters (NAATI accredited, where applicable).
- Do** Ask the interpreter about his/her training and qualifications.
- Do** Ask the interpreter for their ID card.
- Do** Brief the interpreter on the case before you commence the interview.
- Do** Introduce yourself to the client and interpreter.
- Do** Introduce the client to the interpreter.
- Do** Explain clearly who you are and what the purpose of the interview is.
- Do** Maintain control of the interview.
- Do** Maintain eye contact.
- Do** Speak to the client in the first person.
- Do** Use clear language
- Do** Use short, sentences
- Do** Make a formal complaint if you are not satisfied with the interpreter's performance.
- Do** Debrief the interpreter in sensitive or stressful cases
- Do** Remember to enter the 'finish time' and sign the Service Delivery Form (SDF).

- Don't** Ask relatives, friends or children to interpret.
- Don't** Ask the interpreter to give you his/ her full name in front of the client.
- Don't** Ask the interpreter to fill in forms.
- Don't** Ask the interpreter to conduct the interview.
- Don't** Ask the interpreter to provide cultural information.
- Don't** Ask the interpreter to omit information.
- Don't** Raise your voice- this not make the client understand you any better.
- Don't** Interrupt the interpreter before he/she has finished interpreting.
- Don't** Make private booking arrangements with interpreters.
- Don't** Discuss the performance of other interpreters
- Don't** Ask the interpreter to translate documents.
- Don't** Isolate the client by sitting too close to the interpreter.
- Don't** Isolate the client by engaging in a private discussion with the interpreter.
- Don't** Expect the interpreter to be a 'walking dictionary'.
- Don't** Engage in conversation with the interpreter, excluding the client.
- Don't** Engage in conversation with another Service Provider in front of the client and interpreter. The client will need to interpret your exchange to the client.
- Don't** Assume that an interpreter can interpret in a language/ dialect similar to the one they are fluent in.