

Using an Interpreter in ELL

Basic definitions

LEP: Limited English Proficient. Someone who is limited English proficient has difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language at a level permitting effective interaction with more fluent or native speakers.

Interpretation: oral transmission of a message from one language into a different language.

Translation: transmission of a written message from one language to another.

Why use an interpreter?

- Smoother communication and confidence from both parties involved. There won't be as much awkwardness if there is someone available who can fill the language gap. Frustrations that are felt by both parties due to their inability to make themselves understood will be minimized.
- Misunderstandings can be avoided when someone who is proficient in both languages can offer a clear exchange of messages.
- Studying a foreign language does not necessarily make one fluent. Often one hears of someone who spent a number of months or years learning a language, only to find that upon visiting that foreign country they could not understand a word. The same works for people coming to America. Even if they had the benefit of studying English abroad, they may not be able to understand the everyday speech of native speakers, or the cultural references, etc. in the speech or dialect.
- You may be able to understand someone whose native language is not English, but they may not be able to understand you. You don't think you have an accent, but to someone else's ears, you might.
- Idioms are tricky to "get". For example, "It's raining cats and dogs" has nothing to do with animals. How would someone guess the meaning from the words in that expression? Why couldn't it mean that it is not raining at all since it is an impossibility that it could rain cats and/or dogs at all?

Whom should you use as an interpreter?

- Try to find someone whose language and dialect match that of the client. A person from Mexico may have difficulty understanding someone from Guatemala, for example. Although both may speak Spanish, the dialects, cultures, and some of the lexicon are different and may interfere with communication. Also, don't assume that because someone is from a particular country or ethnicity that they will speak a particular language. (Not everyone from Mexico is Hispanic and not everyone speaks Spanish for example).
- The ethnicity of the interpreter is important. Some clients may be uncomfortable with interpreters from specific communities for political reasons or because of confidentiality fears in small communities. For example, it may be inappropriate to provide a Serbian interpreter for a Bosnian Muslim. There may be conflicts or misgivings in particular cultures that you are

unaware of that may interfere with communication between the client and interpreter. A well-trained interpreter will be able to explain this possibility and will be able to work through it in a professional manner. The client may not be willing or able to do so, however.

- Knowledge of subject matter is important. If you need an interpreter for a patient in a mental health facility, you should not assume that anyone who speaks the patient's language and is from that person's culture can be an appropriate interpreter. That person should also have knowledge of mental health issues and terminology or understanding in both languages/cultures as well.
- Simply because a person speaks the same language as the client you need an interpreter for, doesn't mean that that person can be an appropriate interpreter. That person may be well-educated and be a highly skilled specialist but may not speak English well enough to provide accurate interpretation, especially when trying to interpret field specific terms and ideas if separate from what they are familiar with).
- Having an interpreter of the same gender is important to many. In some cultures it is very inappropriate to discuss anything, especially certain personal information with the opposite gender. Be aware that it is not always appropriate for men to be talking to women (or making physical contact with them) and vice versa, especially about certain things. Some may feel uncomfortable with an opposite gender interpreter or worker. If obtaining a same-gender interpreter is not possible, ask the client if they are willing to accept the opposite gender interpreter (even if there is no other choice of interpreter) before simply proceeding.
- **NEVER use children as interpreters.** A few of the MANY reasons for this include:
 - Reluctance of clients to discuss problems of a personal nature in front of their children
 - Interpretation of serious problems may traumatize children
 - Children tend to internalize the message rather than simply delivering the message. They may feel responsible for the consequences of the message.
 - By having children serve as interpreters, it puts them in a higher position or a position of control or authority – roles of the adults. The adults are in a lower position in the family hierarchy and this can create serious problems in the family structure.
 - A child's lack of life experience, linguistic ability in either language, or sophistication required for many situations allows much room for mistakes or misinterpretation.
- Some people are more comfortable with and have greater confidence in or respect for interpreters or workers who are of their same age or older. Certain clients may trust an older or equal age worker or interpreter more.
- Do NOT use strangers or untrained interpreters. You don't know their language ability or interpret skill level or willingness to adhere to confidentiality and could be leaving yourself or the agency open to being at fault if there is a problem later on.

How do you know when you need an interpreter?

- Use an interpreter whenever a client requests one or whenever you feel that there is a barrier to clear and effective communication between you and your client. Some clients may speak a little English (or even quite a bit of English), but this doesn't mean that they don't need an interpreter. Equally, you may have taken a foreign language in high school or college, but this doesn't mean you can be an interpreter or can get along without one.
- Ask an open-ended question. Avoid questions that can be answered with a 'yes' or a 'no'.
 - Also avoid asking very familiar questions such as "How are you?" or "Where do you live?" or "What do you think of this weather?" These types of questions often have cued responses. The client may know what to say (may know the appropriate response to the cue) but may not fully understand the meaning. If the person does not answer your question appropriately, or hesitates too long, or simply does not answer at all, you need an interpreter.
- Subtly ask the person to repeat the message that you have just given in his own words. If the message is not as you intended, you probably need an interpreter.
- Other cues to needing an interpreter:
 - If someone is very slow to respond to questions or requests
 - if they hesitate unusually long when executing commands
 - if they answer inappropriately or ask about something that was previously discussed and thought to be understood
 - if they have a quizzical look on their face when spoken to or look to someone else as if searching for the answer
 - if they give the same answer to every question, or give the same answer to two opposite questions

False assumptions

- Good English comprehension or comprehensibility at a social level does not necessarily equate to ability to comprehend technical or department or field terminology and concepts well. Do not overestimate a person's language skills level. In stressful situations or when communicating outside a person's routine, it is normal for a person's command of English to be lessened. Always finding oneself in a situation where one doesn't understand how to do things or get things or find things (when in one's own country it was done without thought), and always having to rely on and trust people you don't know (especially for people from high-context cultures), is quite stressful. When under stress, it is more difficult to come up with the words or quickness of thought in another language. Language is only one of the many struggles people new to a country face. Don't expect that it is the only thing they have to learn or have to focus on.
- Language skills can also be underestimated. Do not assume a person does not understand any English at all. Often times a person learning a second language understands the language before they speak the language. Also, they may understand some things but not others, and it doesn't always appear to make sense that someone can understand this and not that. Also, learning a language is often two steps forward and one step back. What someone could comprehend two weeks ago may escape him this week. Depending on the technicality of the subject matter or the stress an individual is under at the time, a person's ability to communicate in English may vary from a previous time.
- Someone who speaks a little English may not be able to fully understand all of the message being communicated. They may focus on one or two points, but not the full message. They also may not understand idioms, humor, or metaphors, or may understand these things differently from what the speaker intended. Some may be quite convincing in their ability to communicate in certain settings (or use of certain phrases), but may lack the higher skills, experience, and vocabulary necessary when in other settings. They may not be able to fully express themselves as they would like and will therefore remain silent. This shouldn't be taken for agreeing with your position or for them fully understanding your message.
- Second language learners may be able to focus and stay with the conversation for a while, but it may soon become difficult to concentrate further, and they may begin to get lost in the conversation (burnout). At some point a client may no longer understand, but by then is hesitant or embarrassed to ask for an interpreter. It's best to take frequent breaks, keep the conversation short, or if you anticipate that the conversation will last several minutes, have an interpreter ready to assist.