

Get the Most out of Working with an Interpreter

Communication ‘mishaps’ can be costly. Patients may not mention folk medicines they’re taking. Prisoners may not understand the charges against them. Abused children may not be able to get help. International business deals may fall apart.

A trained interpreter can help avoid such disasters by ensuring meaning is clear and understanding is mutual. A professional interpreter doesn’t just convey the words spoken, he or she explains the meaning behind the words, bridging both the language and cultural divide.

The following guidelines will help you get the most out of working with a trained interpreter.

1. Meet with the interpreter, if possible, before the encounter to discuss the following:

- ☞ Any time constraints he/she may have, since ideally, the same interpreter will be there from beginning to end.
- ☞ The context and nature of the situation. For example, a health-care provider might explain that the interpreting session will be with a new patient who will be asked health history questions and given a physical examination.
- ☞ Any concerns the interpreter might have before beginning.
- ☞ The importance of feedback to let you know if he/she understands the terms you use or if they are not easily translated.

2. Allow the interpreter to explain his/her role. Choice Translating interpreters have been trained to introduce themselves and explain that they are the voice of those speaking, neither adding nor omitting anything, nor offering an opinion. They will explain that all information will be held confidential and will set clear guidelines at the beginning to prevent problems from occurring later.

3. Ask the interpreter to tell you if the non-English speaker is expressing a culturally related idea or concept that you might not understand.

4. Tell the interpreter where you would like him/her to sit or stand. You should be directly across from the non-English speaker to maintain direct eye contact at all times. To ensure the two of you address one another directly, the interpreter should stand or sit beside and slightly behind one of you. Make sure to consider the safety of the interpreter (i.e. contagious diseases, potential violence, etc.) when determining the best placement.

5. Use first-person and direct your questions to the non-English speaker.

6. Gender and age of the interpreter are very important. In many ethnic groups, same gender interpreters are best. Don’t use children as interpreters since it can distort the power relationships within families and may diminish parents in the eyes of their children.

7. Speak clearly and in short units of speech. Use simple language and avoid technical terminology, abbreviations, professional jargon, colloquialisms, abstractions, idiomatic expressions, slang and metaphors.

8. Listen to the non-English speaker and watch for nonverbal communication. This can include facial expressions, voice intonations and body movements to learn about emotion associated with the topic.

9. Verify the non-English speaker's understanding and accuracy of the interpretation. At the end of the session, ask him/her to repeat the conclusion of the session or instructions in their own words.

About Choice Translating, Inc.

Choice Translating makes it easier for you to do your job well and reduce risk due to miscommunication. With the Choice Interpreting Advantage™ we help you improve efficiency and client experience, reduce cost and deliver better outcomes. For additional information about on-site, video and telephone interpreting as well as written translation services in 176 languages, please visit www.choicetranslating.com or call 704.717.0043.

Because meaning turns on a word.™