

15 Tips for Effectively Working with Interpreters

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Interpreters are crucial partners when facilitating dialogue in multilingual groups. The goal of any training, workshop, presentation or meeting is to build understanding. This is much harder when the facilitator doesn't speak the language of the group, or a subset of the group does not speak the main language of the event. But it can be done, and language barriers may even improve dialogue when people are more intentional about really listening and trying to understand each other. Here are some road-tested tips for facilitators when working with interpreters.

Three kinds of interpretation

Simultaneous interpretation – Listeners hear a session in their own language via headphones or through someone whispering in their ear almost at the same time as the original speaker is sharing it. This allows for almost 'natural' conversation between the speaker and the group.

Asynchronous interpretation – Listeners hear a session in their own language from an interpreter at the front of the room after it is first said by the speaker. This usually means your time is doubled because everything is shared twice.

Whisper or elbow interpretation – The interpretation is simultaneous but there is no equipment or interpreters box. A whisperer literally whispers in the trainer's ear everything that is being said in the large group, or sits near a small subset of the group who don't speak the main language used in the event.

NOTE: The terms 'interpreter' is often confused with 'translator'. However, they are not the same. An interpreter works with spoken language and a translator works with written language.

The designing and planning

- 1. Budget more time.** Even if the session uses a lot of dialogue in small groups, conversations in the large group, questions, and instructions for group work take more time. Budget twice as much time for asynchronous interpretation.
- 2. Use pair, trio, and group work more often.** This gives everyone a break from listening to the interpretation (regardless of which type is used) and gives needed breaks to the interpreter. Working through interpreters is tiring work for all involved. Small group work, in their own language, will get everyone talking, build engagement and increase the energy level.
- 3. Give participants a translated copy of the workshop/course/meeting design.** Writing the entire plan, activities, and resources out on handouts or in a course binder will help the group stay on track and reduce confusion. Bilingual people often find it especially helpful to have the entire course or meeting proceedings in both languages.

The interpreter

4. **Give all of your written materials to the interpreter in advance.** The more you can give to your interpreter beforehand, the better able that person will be to effectively interpret for you. He or she can study and ask about key terms, highly referenced theories, or critical charts. A prepared interpreter is a valuable asset!
5. **Meet with your interpreter to talk through how you want to work together.** For example, the interpreter may want you to speak more slowly. You may want the interpreter to let you know (aloud and in the moment) when they sense something is still unclear in the group or if they are unclear about what you are saying. If you haven't worked with interpreters before, ask them what works well in their experience.
6. **Write up and translate all in-the-moment changes.** As we work our way through a session, we may need to make changes based on what we see and hear in the room. To minimize confusion, ask someone to write these on flip chart paper a slide so everyone knows what is happening.
7. **Ask the interpreter for advice.** Hopefully your interpreter is intimately familiar with the culture and language of the people you are working with. He or she may offer insights about how your content or activities will work with the group. This valuable information can help you plan.

The technology

8. **Budget time to test interpretation equipment.** There is nothing worse than wanting to get started and having technical difficulties! Budget time at the beginning of the session to make sure everyone has the proper equipment, knows how to use it, and knows what to do if it is not working.
9. **Check in often to be sure the technology is working.** People will experience technical difficulties. They may suffer in silence. Check in, and be sure to tell people it is okay to stop everything till the issue gets resolved. (Remember, this is about dialogue!) Once the norm is firmly established, people will help themselves when technology fails.
10. **Insist that people use their equipment when others speak an unfamiliar language.** Sometimes we get lazy or think we know more than we do, so we take our headphones off, and "wait it through" while others speak their language. This may create pressure for others to take their headphones off. Besides the obvious cost in understanding, this trend limits participation. Speakers from other language groups will soon stop speaking, when they see that others are not making the effort to listen.

The facilitation

11. **Use a 'whisperer' instead of asynchronous interpretation.** Using simultaneous interpretation is wonderful when the trainer is speaking and everyone is wearing headphones. However, if you

are working with 2-way asynchronous interpretation (often for budgetary reasons), using *whisper interpretation* when the group is speaking can keep the energy up, save time, and make the conversation more natural.

- 12. Choose your small groups intentionally.** Form small groups in a way that learners can really communicate with each other. Find out who is bi-lingual and use them as a resource. If possible, have a bi-lingual person in each group so that you have the option of joining in with groups when/if needed. This will also help when writing on flip charts or using other untranslated materials.
- 13. Trust your participants.** It can feel lonely when learners are all engaged in a dialogue and you are sitting outside of it. However, give yourself permission to see the exciting dialogue in the room as the sound of learning happening! As good facilitators of learning, we want to see learners engaged in the content – and doing this in their mother-tongue will make this easier and more engaging.
- 14. Trust your instincts.** You know the sound (and look) of people who are un-engaged. When you notice the energy in the room is going down interest is wandering, or people are finished, it is time to check in or move on or change the task. It is amazing what we can understand without knowing a language!
- 15. Don't translate all the group work.** We naturally want to know/see everything word is written on flip chart paper and other visuals, but choose carefully what you spend time translating and when. Some written work is important for the group or individual, but you only need to hear the summary shared in the large group (or maybe not at all!). Translate the written work that you need to refer to or build on later. Bilingual participants or your interpreter may be able to translate on the same paper during a break.