How to Communicate Effectively Through Interpreters
A Guide for School Personnel

As the Speaker, You Should:

- Try to spend a little time with the interpreter before the event begins. The speaker and interpreter should not work together “cold.” The interpreter(s) will do a better job for you if there is already some rapport. For example, he/she will then feel freer to ask you about anything he/she does not understand.

- Always prepare the interpreter (in person) on the subject matter to be presented/discussed, and when possible, provide written text and/or supporting documents in advance of the interpreting session, (this will further allow the interpreter to become familiar with your manner of speech and allow you to assess the interpreter’s overall competence).

- Ascertain the interpreter’s frame of reference and remain cognizant of his/her ability to deal with educational concepts and terminology. Interpreters cannot know all terminology in all fields. Even the best of interpreters may be wholly ignorant of all things educational, and the use of simple technical terms may leave him/her at a loss. The same applies for your audience.

- Always advise the interpreter, in advance, of your audience by name and title/status.

- Maintain eye contact with your audience at all times - not the interpreter! That is, talk to your audience, not to your interpreter.

- Speak in the first person.

- Speak in short thought groups and pause for your interpreter to catch up. If you do not, you may force the interpreter to omit some of your words, but you will not know which ones! Be concise and deliberate in your speech pattern, enunciate clearly, and agree in advance with the interpreter on the pace and pause intervals you will use. Be aware that in the interpretation process all information spoken is being repeated. Allow ample time for the interpreting process.

- Refrain from using high register technical vocabulary, acronyms, idioms, slang, and jargon - keep it simple and include explanations!

- Especially avoid acronyms and insider jargon. Most likely, neither your interpreter nor your audience will understand them. While an acronym saves time for those who know it, in the foreign language it must be fully explained and translated. Often a “short” acronym stands for an entire concept that must be explained. Avoid acronyms without explanations.

- Be attuned to the flexibility an interpreter must be permitted to use in getting your meaning across to the audience, a flexibility that increases when the languages in use are from dissimilar families (e.g. English and Hungarian); this affects greatly on the speed with which the interpreter can operate - do not rush him/her.

- Be constantly attuned to your audience’s comprehension level - slow down, repeat, or elaborate as needed. Test them and the interpreter. Be mindful that the interpreter speaks in the language that the audience speaks. It is critical that you speak in meaningful language that the audience understands.

- Be attuned to the varieties, dialects, and/or multi-cultural sensitivities of certain languages and your interpreter’s ability, or disability, to effectively reach your target audience (e.g. a Croatian national can certainly communicate with a Serbian audience, and a Palestinian can likewise speak with a Saudi, but neither would be the wisest choice of interpreters). Gender and generational differences also are a major consideration in some cultures.

- Plan on 10-minute breaks for every hour of interpretation to give both the interpreter and audience time to rest, as well provide an opportunity for the interpreter to go over questions of vocabulary.
During breaks, do not make the interpreter interpret – allow him or her to rest, get a drink, go to the restroom.

- Do not burn-out a good interpreter by over-dependence on just him/her. If possible, rotate interpreters or provide a 20-minute break a minimum of every two hours. Provide breaks every 15-20 minutes especially when using simultaneous interpretation.
- Do not distract the interpreter by passing notes, whispering, or carrying on side conversations. The interpreter is mandated by law to interpret everything said.
- Visual aids - a picture is worth a thousand words - but rehearse and/or translate with the interpreter in advance.
- Beware of telling jokes. Unless you have rehearsed a joke or humorous comment with the interpreter ahead of time, do not use it - jokes rarely survive interpretation! The same applies for prayers and puns!
- Do not ever assume that your audience is wholly ignorant of English and so refrain from unofficial comments to the interpreter along the lines of “Now don’t interpret this, but…..”
- Always take the time to provide your interpreter with feedback after the presentation/dialogue/meeting. Native English speakers are notorious for not correcting non-native speakers - be discrete in making corrections, but do make them.

The following link is an example showing how teachers communicate effectively through an interpreter. In this instance the interpreter is using the consecutive interpreting mode. Although the focus of this video is a special education meeting, the protocol is the same for all types of conferences.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqbTPs8o9iA

Cautionary Notes:

- Interpreting provides an immediate understanding of the spoken word in another language - do not confuse it with translating, which deals with written texts. These are complementary skills, but quite different in their requisite techniques.
- Being bilingual does not necessarily equate to being an effective interpreter. Both interpreting and translating require formal training.
- Interpreting may be simultaneous or consecutive. Simultaneous interpretation is the oral, concurrent translation of a speaker’s words from one language into another. This mode can be concurrent ‘whispering’ or via an audio/headphone system - as most commonly used in conferences. Consecutive interpretation, on the other hand, is most commonly used in meetings and dialogues, whereby the speaker(s) pauses between complete thoughts, sentences, or paragraphs for the interpreter to interpret (Consecutive interpretation is the preferred best professional practice method and is the method for which these guidelines are most applicable).
- If consecutive interpreting is to be used, then you will need to double the amount of time you would need if speaking only in English — plan accordingly.
- Cultural awareness and sensitivity - both you and the interpreter must stay attuned to this, but do not fall prey to condescension.
- If your interpreter does not look good, you do not look good. While it is his/her responsibility to do an excellent job for you, be mindful of ways in which you can become better familiar with your role in assisting him/her in doing so.
- Finally, KEEP CALM AND TRUST THE INTERPRETER.