

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Points to consider when using interpreters

1. Find out the client's first language and particular dialect, and any other languages he or she may speak fluently. The first language should be your first choice for an interpreter. Give priority to an interpreter of the same nationality or cultural group. Another issue is to match on age and gender if possible. If you do not have much referral information, a telephone interpreter can be utilized to obtain this information in a very concrete manner.
2. The most effective interpreter is one who behaves, acts, and appears neutral. You can find a professional interpreter at interpreting agencies or by asking in the local courts or at the embassy. Give preference to those interpreters with experience or training in mental health. Do not use translators of convenience and do not ask the client to bring their own translator. If you find a good one, develop a good and trusting relationship with this person.
3. Schedule for yourself at least twice the amount of time you usually need for a regular interview.
4. You need to have a pre-meeting session.
5. Familiarize the interpreter with your work.
6. Your interpreter is also a source of information and can tell you about cultural matters relevant to the client.
7. Consider to move the furniture around for a three way conversation in which everyone can see everyone else. You will talk to the client and not to the interpreter [in Australia the interpreter sits behind the client and acts as his or her voice and talks in first person].
8. Remember that having an interpreter as a mediator makes you dependent on another person, and this alters the dynamic of the interactions. Therefore, make it clear to the interpreter the objectives of the meeting, and the strategy you will need to use to control the meeting.
9. You need to choose the style of interpretation, whether to know only the gist of what the client said or every detail, depending on your goals.
10. Give the interpreter a summary of the case and issues you will try to find out.
11. Do not leave the interpreter alone with the client at any time. Even when they are honorable, interpreters are put in a very difficult position when this happens.
12. Do not expect all meanings and thoughts to be conveyed perfectly. Language is not a set of formulas and words with meanings associated, but a whole way of conceptualizing. Do not become impatient with the interpreter if they take longer than what it seemed was necessary.
13. Remember that you need to slow down your pace. If you speak for too long this makes it hard for the interpreter to remember, but if you speak in too short of bursts the thought becomes fragmented.
14. Allow the interpreter and client to introduce themselves, and then re-introduce the interpreter in your own words. Tell the client that the interpreter is independent, is not there to make any evaluations, has no decision power and is bound by confidentiality policy.
15. Try not to use any technical language. Avoid using proverbs and sayings.
16. Provide sufficient breaks during the interview.
17. Do not discuss with the interpreter issues that do not require translation.

18. Spend a few minutes with the interpreter after the interview and ask the interpreter his or her impressions of the meeting. You can also clarify cultural issues and seek meaning for anything that was not clear during the meeting.
19. Allow the interpreter to provide any criticisms of your approach or attitude, even if you do not agree with him or her. Discuss your own observations of the interpreter's performance.
20. Give the interpreter any written material from the client that needs to be translated. You may also consider another interpreter to do this if you want independent sources of information or to preserve confidentiality for the client.

Adapted from: Tribe, R. & Sanders, M. (2003) Training issues for interpreters. In: R. Tribe & H. Raval. *Working with interpreters in mental health*. pp 54-68. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
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