

Working Effectively with Interpreters

What is an interpreter?

An interpreter is someone who can convey an oral message or statement from one language to another.

“Interpreters often must convey complex information for which there may not be an equivalent word or term in the other language. Interpreters often need more information to understand the context and select the most appropriate words to convey the meaning to the customer.”
(Multicultural Affairs Queensland).ⁱ

Why are interpreters necessary?

The availability of language services for people from a non-English speaking background (NESB) is an essential element in providing equitable access to information, services, and support for people with disability and their families.

Good communication is key to the effective provision of support and services. Organisations have a duty of care to ensure their clients have equitable access to information and can make informed choices and decisions. Working with an interpreter will facilitate this for persons who have difficulties communicating in English. Agencies should develop clear policies and procedures to guide how language services will be delivered by their staff.


- It is best practice to offer all persons who may have difficulty speaking or understanding English the option of working with a certified interpreter. Ensure they know they have the right to an interpreter and that it is free.
- For those who are Deaf provide access to an Auslan (Australian Sign Language) interpreter.

Why engage certified interpreters?

Professional interpreters are certified by the National Authority for the Accreditation of Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) and are bound by a Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct.

- They are required to always maintain confidentiality and act ethically.
- They are trained to accurately relay a message from one language to another without omissions or additions.
- They are impartial. A professional interpreter does not take sides, express personal feelings, or withhold information they consider upsetting.
- Particularly necessary when discussing complex information, conducting assessments, or in domestic violence, legal or health-related matters.
- Non-professional interpreters may unintentionally relay inaccurate information.
- Family members or friends may be emotionally involved and may not be impartial or feel able to maintain confidentiality.
- There are potential legal and other adverse outcomes when working with non-NAATI Certified interpreters. According to the Queensland Language Service Guidelines (2016), failure to engage interpreters can potentially lead to agencies making costly mistakes or facing complaints and/or litigation.
- Friends and family members should not be used as interpreters and children and young relatives are not appropriate interpreters in any context.
- **Watch this video** which highlights the dangers of working with non-professional interpreters:

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Assessing the need for an interpreter

- It is good practice to offer all persons whose first language is not English the option of a professional interpreter.
- If a person requests an interpreter, one should be provided.
- If you are not certain whether you will need to engage an interpreter, try the following:
 - Ask the person a question that does not require a 'yes' or 'no' answer.
 - Ask the person to repeat a message or explanation you have given them in their own words.
 - Ask a question that the person may not be used to answering. Most people will be able to tell you their name and where they live and even their date of birth. These are questions often asked and the person may be familiar with them.

Remember:

- A person's reading and writing skills may not reflect a person's verbal skills in English.
- Older people, people with dementia or some other medical conditions, or people who have experienced trauma may lose their English skills in stressful situations.
- If you feel that communication is suffering and messages are not getting through, engage an interpreter.

Things to consider before organising an interpreter.

If you think that a certified interpreter may be required, consider the following:

- What language or dialect is the person most comfortable and proficient in? This is usually their first language, but not always.
- Does the person prefer an interpreter of the same gender?
- If you feel that the person does not feel comfortable working with an interpreter, assure them of the benefits. These may include they are free; they are confidential and impartial; and you are obliged by a duty of care to ensure that the information you provide is accurate. If they are uncomfortable with having an interpreter based locally, or from their community, you could offer to arrange a phone interpreter residing interstate or in another city to reassure them of anonymity.

How to Book an Interpreter

Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) offers telephone interpreting services: Ph. 131 450. A TIS Access Code is required and is available at <https://tisonline.tisnational.gov.au/registeragency>.

Support with Interpreting, Translating and Communication (SWITC) has an online booking system for all interpreting and translation requests <http://bookings.switc.org.au>. Telephone (07) 3892 8559. (Fees are charged unless exempt.)

How to work with an interpreter onsite

Onsite interpreting is preferable:

- Where it is likely that the conversation will be complex and lengthy, such as NDIS-related planning and plan implementation meetings.
- When important decisions by the person must be made
- When the person indicates they would prefer this, or
- If a person has a disability that impacts on their communication e.g., a person who is hard of hearing or has a cognitive impairment.

Before the meeting:

- It is preferable to book the onsite interpreter well in advance, as up to 2 weeks' notice or more may be required.
- Ensure the interpreter booked has the relevant specialist skills if required (such as court interpreters for legal matters, etc.).
- Brief the interpreter prior to meeting with the person about your role, disability terminology, particularly any language, terms, or concepts that may be difficult to interpret or may have negative/different connotations; jargon, and acronyms. Brief the interpreter about the nature and overall aim of the session and service processes and ask if they have any questions.
- Allow extra time for the session as the interpreting process will take additional time, (at least twice as long as that where an interpreter is not required).
- Arrange the seating so that you are facing the person and can maintain eye contact. Sit the interpreter to a little to the side.

During the Meeting:

- Introduce yourself and the interpreter to the person.
- Explain your role and that of the interpreter.
- Explain the purpose of the session, and how it will proceed. Allow the person to raise any concerns they have.
- Stress that you and the interpreter are bound by a code of ethics to maintain the confidentiality of the interview.
- Speak directly to the person (not the interpreter) in the first person. For example, say "How can I help you today?" instead of "Ask him/her how I can help".
- Use plain English and avoid using jargon.
- Speak normally to the person and pause after two or three sentences to allow the interpreter to relay the message.
- Look at the person and be aware of body language. Avoid looking at the interpreter unless you are directly addressing them. If the person does not understand, it is your responsibility (not the interpreter's) to explain more simply.
- You are in control of the meeting, so maintain your role in managing the session.
- Avoid long discussions with the interpreter. If you need to speak to the interpreter, inform the person. The interpreter should interpret the nature of that conversation.

Remember the interpreter:

- is not responsible for conducting the interview, and
- is not responsible for the analysis of information, explaining, commenting, or providing advice.

Ending the meeting appropriately:

- Summarise the discussion and encourage the person to ask any questions or if they need any information clarified.
- Have the person paraphrase back to you the key messages of the meeting. If they can't, you will need to explain further.
- If the person requires another appointment, make these arrangements while the interpreter is still there.

How to return a call from a person who requires an interpreter over the phone:

- Ask the person, what their preferred language/dialect is and advise them that you will call them back with an interpreter as quickly as possible. Ask for their telephone number and whether they prefer a male or female interpreter.
- Call TIS National on 131450, or the Language Service Provider your organization uses.
- The operator will ask for your organisation's customer code, telephone number, the language/dialect you require, and whether the person is with you or needs to be called.
- If you and the person are not at the same location, let the operator know.
- If you have any special requests, such as you need an interpreter with knowledge of disability, legal or medical terminology, or gender, then please inform the operator.
- Stay online while the operator contacts the interpreter. Ask the operator to stay on the phone until all parties are connected.
- Once you connect with the interpreter, introduce yourself to the interpreter and explain the purpose of the session. "Hello, my name is X. I am ringing from... (name of organisation). I have received a call from someone who needs me to call them back with an interpreter".
- When the 'person' comes online the interpreter will introduce him or herself.
- Always speak directly to the person in the first person, rather than to the interpreter.
- Try to keep your sentences short and pause often to allow the interpreter to do their job.
- At the end of the call, thank everyone, and if you need an additional meeting with the person, find a suitable time whilst you have the interpreter on the line. (You will still need to book the interpreter through the interpreting agency).
- Clearly indicate the end of the conference call to everyone involved.

Useful Resources

- [National Disability Insurance Scheme: Translation and Interpreter Service Fact Sheet and FAQs](#)
- [The Commonwealth Ombudsman: Fact sheet on Use of Interpreters, including best practice principles](#)
- [Multicultural Language Services Guidelines – Australian Government](#)

ⁱ Multicultural Affairs Queensland. (2016). Queensland Language Service Guidelines.
<https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/multicultural/policy-governance/lsp-guidelines.pdf>