Working with Spanish-English Interpreters and Translators

To share information and to communicate effectively, the service provider and family must have a common language. Given the importance of information related to the child's health, development and education, qualified interpreters should be used in conversations with the family related to special education services. Similarly, documents and other educational materials should be accurately translated into a language that the family understands.

Definitions

▶ An interpreter provides an oral translation of one language into another, e.g., Spanish to English or American Sign Language to English.

▶ A translator changes written materials in one language into the written form of another language.

Working with Interpreters

Because there are no professional standards for interpreters in educational systems except for sign language interpreters, the skill of individuals in the role of a Spanish-English interpreter will vary according to their education, background, and training. In many meetings with English-speaking service providers and Spanish-speaking families, interpreters may be untrained volunteers, paraprofessionals, family members, or even children. Depending on the purpose of the meeting and the topic of conversation, it may not be appropriate to use a child, friend, or relative of the family. Whenever possible, it is best to use a person who is trained to translate important and complex information and to support everyone's communication efforts.

Prepare for the Meeting

- Obtain a qualified interpreter, that is, someone who is fluent in both English and Spanish and if possible, familiar with special education and terminology that will be used in the meeting.

- Because Spanish is the primary language of so many different countries, the interpreter should know the family's country of origin. Just as there are variations in the use of words and their meaning among English-speaking countries, there are also differences in spoken Spanish depending on the country. In addition, if an interpreter is familiar with the family's country and culture, he or she can provide information about culturally respectful practices.

- Discuss the purpose of the meeting with the interpreter, share any documents or materials that will need to be translated and go over terms and other topics for the meeting. Discuss the interpretation process with the interpreter. To convey a message in Spanish generally takes more words than English. Moreover, an interpreter may need a lengthy explanation to interpret a single phrase in English so that the family can understand what is said. Ask the interpreter how much to say (i.e., how many sentences) before pausing for the translation and discuss how to check on whether what you are saying is understood by the family.

- Emphasize with the interpreter the importance of maintaining confidentiality about any thing related to the family and discussed in the meeting.

- Ask the interpreter to contact the family to set up the meeting and to get an idea of the family's use of language.

- Plan sufficient time for the Spanish-English meeting because it will take more time than a meeting in a single language.

At the Meeting

- Let the family know that you will be speaking to them in English and that the interpreter will be translating what you say into Spanish and what they say into English. Encourage them to let you know if anything is confusing or needs to be discussed further.

- Ask the family where you should be and where the interpreter should be so that it is most comfortable for them. If possible, sit directly across from the family with the interpreter to the side close to them.

- Speak clearly and slowly. Pause to allow the interpreter to translate what you have said and for the parents to understand the translation.

- Look at and speak directly to the family. Let the interpreter become your voice.

- **Do not use professional jargon, slang, or metaphors that are difficult to translate.**

- **Encourage the interpreter to take notes and ask questions as needed.**

- **Although your focus should be on the family, be aware of the interpreter's reactions that indicate whether the communication process is going smoothly.**

- **Ask open-ended questions that relate to the discussion with the family to be sure that they understand what you have said.**

- **Reword information that the family has shared to confirm that you understand what they have communicated.**

- **If a family member or the interpreter appears confused about something that you have said, reword the statement and provide a simple explanation.**

After the Meeting

- **With the interpreter reflect on the discussion and evaluate the meeting.**

- **Encourage the interpreter to clarify any concerns or questions about the meeting and to let you know if you did anything that was culturally inappropriate with the family.**

- **Discuss ways to resolve these problems or concerns in future meetings.**

- **Thank the interpreter and let him or her know the next time you will need his or her services.**

ENGLISH-SPANISH TRANSLATION ISSUES

Examples: Taken from a review of translated documents fact sheets of California Deaf Blind Services Fact Sheets and publications of D-B Link.

English	Correct Translation	Incorrect Translation	Issues
• Deaf-blind • Deafblind	• Sordo-ciego • Sordociego	• Sordo y ciego • Sordos y ciegos • Sordos e invidentes • Sordos-ciegos	• First 3 terms mean "people who are deaf and people who are blind" • 4th term is grammatically incorrect, written in "double" plural.
• Disabilities	• Discapacidades	• Incapacidades • Deshabilidades	• Means "totally incapable" • Second term is an Anglicism: A Spanish-like configuration of an English word. Not acceptable.

English	Correct Translation	Incorrect Translation	Issues
• Communication Partners	• Compañeros en la Comunicación • Interlocutores	• Socios	• "Partners" means: friends, classmates, "significant other" and also "business partner" or "Socio".
• Interact	• Relacionarse		• There is no clear meaning for the word "interact", so we suggest being specific: "PLAY with the child", "TALK to the child"
• Sign Language	• Lenguaje de Señas	• Lenguaje mímico	• Means "imitation language", an error induced by corruption of the expression "like a mime" ("Lenguaje DE MIMO")
• Fingerspelling	• Deletreo manual	• Lenguaje manual	• "Manual language" is not the same as fingerspelling
• Speech	• Habla	• Discurso	• "speech" can be both the capacity of speech and "making a speech", as in a celebration.

English	Correct Translation	Translation in English	Issues
• Pictures	• Cuadros • Dibujos • Fotografías • Grabados • Ilustraciones	• Paintings • Drawings • Photographs • Engravings • Ilustrations	• Writer needs to be specific so the translator knows which word to use
• Prompt or cue	• Clave, indicación, pista		• There are three different words to choose from.
• Prompt Hierarchy	• Jerarquía de claves, indicaciones ó pistas		• Needs specific definition
• Direct verbal	• Orden verbal directa		• Needs specific definition

English	Correct Translation	Incorrect Translation	Issues
• Hand-under –hand	• Mano-bajo-mano • Mano-en-mano • Mano guiada	• Mano-sobre-mano	• Error: reads hand-over-hand
• Hand-over-hand	• Mano-sobre-mano • Mano-tras-mano		• Needs definition
• As her hands touch each object from left to right	• Toque con sus manos cada objeto de izquierda a derecha	• Toque con sus manos cada objeto de derecha a izquierda	• Error: direction has been inverted
• P.E.	• Educación Física	Tiempo para jugar	• Error: reads "playing time"

Suggestions for Translations

1. **The availability of a glossary with definitions of specialized terms in English would help translators and interpreters select Spanish words that convey an accurate meaning.**

2. **Some common words, names of documents, or acronyms may be communicated in English e.g., "IEP" or "developmentally-appropriate practices" (with a Spanish explanation of their meanings), as families should become familiar with these words.**

3. **Translated texts (from English to Spanish) must be "back-translated" (i.e., from Spanish to English) by a different translator to determine accuracy in meaning and to proof for typos and errors.**

4. **Translations should be appropriate for the target population of Spanish speakers in comprehension and literacy level. Since Spanish-speakers come from many different countries, appropriate words should be selected.**

5. **The final draft of a translated text should be edited by at least one person who is fluent in both English and Spanish and is familiar with special education terminology and the deaf-blind field, if possible.**

6. It would be helpful for the field of deaf-blindness to agree upon the most appropriate Spanish translations for commonly used terminology and concepts related to the education of children who are deaf-blind.

7. To be most appropriate and family-friendly, materials should be developed and written in Spanish for Spanish-speaking families of the target community. This way the text will be both culturally appropriate and clear in context and meaning.

8. Spanish speaking families must receive a copy of the English document and the Spanish translation so they can share information with other English-speaking service providers/agencies.

Source

Working with Interpreters represents a synthesis of information from Project SALUTE's focus groups, National Advisory Committee, staff activities, and a review of relevant literature such as the following bibliography.

Bibliography

Chen, D., Chan, S., & Brekken, L. (2000). *Conversations for three: Communicating through interpreters* [video and booklet]. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Fradd, S.H., & Wilen, D.K. (1991). Using interpreters and translators to meet the needs of handicapped language minority students and their families. *Program Information Guide Series No. 4.* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED332540) http://ericae.net/ericdb/ED332540.htm

Hammond, D.L. (1992). The translation profession. *Eric Digest* (Eric Document Reproduction Service ED345540) http://ericae.net/edo/ED345540.htm

Langdon, H.W. (1994). *The interpreter/translator process in the educational setting: A resource manual* (Revised). Sacramento, CA: Resources in Special Education (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 383155).

Media, V. (1982). Issues regarding the use of interpreters and translators in a school setting (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED239454).

Milian, M., & Correa, V. I. (2001). Latinos with visual impairments. In M. Milian and J. N. Erin (Eds.). *Diversity and visual impairment. The influence of race, gender, religion and ethnicity on the individual* (pp. 109-150). New York: AFB Press.

Ohtake, Y., Fowler, S.A., & Santos, R.M. (2001). *Working with interpreters to plan early childhood services with limited-English-proficient families.* (CLAS Technical Report #12). Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Early Childhood Research Institute on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services. http://clas.uiuc.edu/techreports.html

Ohtake, Y., Santos, R.M., & Fowler, S.A. (2000). It's a three way conversation: Families, service providers and interpreters working together. *Young Exceptional Children, 4,* 12-18.

Plata, M. (1993). Using Spanish-speaking interpreters in special education. *Remedial and Special Education,14,*19-24.(ERIC Journal Accession No. EJ470694).

Description   What We've Learned

Selected Resources   Getting Input   Photo Gallery

FAQs   Links

IDEAs that Work

SALUTE is a model demonstration project funded by the U.S. Department of Education grant # H324T990025 to California State University, Northridge from September 1, 1999 to August 30, 2004.