How can early childhood teachers and administrators communicate clearly and comfortably with families whose primary language is other than English? Interpreters can help bridge cultures to assure high-quality learning experiences for young children.

Working Effectively With Interpreters

Anarella Cellitti

The United States is becoming increasingly diverse, so early childhood educators are often among the first to work with families whose primary languages are other than English. Many parents, guardians, and family members do speak English but not fluently enough to feel comfortable communicating with teachers or administrators.

Even minor miscommunications can be costly and can lead to embarrassing situations (Schick, 2001). When educators and families do not speak the same language, their communications can be laced with cross-cultural misunderstandings (Horwath & Shardlow, 2004; Quiroz, Greenfield, & Aletch, 1999).

Early childhood programs and school systems can be more responsive to diversity by providing effective translation and interpretation services. It is essential that the role of the interpreter or translator be clearly defined to assure that both educators and families receive maximum benefit from these services. This article presents some strategies for improving communication with diverse families by using interpreters.

What Interpreters Do

The terms interpretation and translation often are used interchangeably, and more commonly refer only to translation. While translation and interpretation share the common goal of converting information from one language to another, they are actually two separate processes.

- **Translation** is the ability to convert information, primarily written, into a target language.
- **Interpretation**, which is usually oral, refers to listening to something spoken and stating the content in the target language. Individuals who facilitate communication among hearing and hearing-impaired people are interpreters (Lawless, 2008).

Whether referring to written or oral communication, both processes intertwine and are essential when educators and families communicate.

One must first be able to translate in order to interpret. But translation does not always assure that the true meaning will be presented. Only interpretation communicates clearly. While a word or phrase may be translated into the language, the meaning may be completely different.

For example, an information sheet on home care for children’s coughs states in English “never give a hot toddy to children.” In English, a hot toddy is an alcoholic drink, which is dangerous for children. The words *hot toddy* can be directly translated into Spanish. However, in Latino cultures, *hot toddy* refers to a hot chocolate beverage, which is certainly acceptable for children. Careful interpretation of the content is always needed (Hendricks, 2008).

Translation is the ability to convert information, primarily written, into a target language.

Interpretation, which is usually oral, refers to listening to something spoken and stating the content in the target language. Only interpretation communicates clearly.

Anarella Cellitti, Ed.D., is Associate Professor, Department of Teacher Education, University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She has worked extensively with the Latino population regarding issues with language barriers. Cellitti educates prospective teachers on the importance of culturally appropriate communication strategies and potential communication interferences. She teaches methods that address these situations in order to achieve an effective partnership with children and their families.
How to Find an Effective Interpreter

Licensed or certified interpreters can be expensive, but their skills are essential, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as referral to special services or implementing individualized educational or family plans. Interpreters with inadequate interpreting skills can hinder the communication process (Schick, Williams, & Kupermintz, 2006).

Other qualifications to consider when selecting an interpreter are cultural sensitivity and confidentiality. Community organizations may offer interpretation services for low or sliding-scale fees. Insistence upon strict qualifications is much easier when interpreters are paid. If hiring an outside interpreter is not possible, a trained volunteer who has agreed to follow the program’s policies can certainly be helpful.

Sometimes a well-intentioned family member or friend offers to interpret for the family. This may be appropriate in some situations, but before accepting this offer, consider these questions.

- What is the proposed interpreter’s relationship with the family?
- Is the information to be revealed critical or sensitive? (Weisskirch, 2007)
- Would the family disclose the information to that person, or would disclosure to a different family member be more appropriate?

In some cultures, seniority and importance play a key role in families. Disclosing certain matters to others can be viewed as disrespectful. Using an impartial interpreter can help to avoid upsetting family dynamics or power struggles between family members and/or friends.

Frequently, school-age children in non-English speaking homes have the most developed English language skills. As a result, teachers or families may ask these children to serve as mediators in adults’ communication.
This strategy is not recommended because it gives tremendous power to children. In some cultures, children are not expected to occupy such roles. When children carry adult responsibilities that their elders cannot fulfill, this process is called *parentification* (Mercado, 2004). As a result, children in these positions alter the family-child dynamic and influence how their families interact with English-speakers.

**Look for Accuracy of Interpretation**

Accuracy of both translation and interpretation is everyone’s primary concern. To translate accurately, the individual must have vocabulary expertise in both English and the target language. A working knowledge of grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and definitions are essential. This knowledge includes speaking as well as writing and reading.

An interpreter may be skillful in the language but may lack understanding of the specific culture or information about the family’s background. Cultural awareness is a delicate and important issue. Translators should know the family’s cultural expectations about

- politeness (verbal and body language)
- directness (style of communication)
- proximity (personal space)
- power structures in families and the community (who has information, who makes decisions)
- other considerations

Cultural awareness is essential for successful communication (Quiroz, et al., 1999). Just because someone speaks the same language does not guarantee understanding of a culture.

**Expect Knowledge About Education**

Interpreters also must be knowledgeable about educational terminology in both English and the target language. Interpreters should clearly understand that their job is not merely to translate a teacher’s words literally, but to replicate the meaning of the language in a helping way (Sandstrom, 2004).

If interpreters have the necessary translation and cultural knowledge, educators can familiarize them with educational terminology. Provide clear explanations of specific language use and legal terms to the interpreter to reduce the possibility of misrepresentation (Baron, 1997; Cseh & Short, 2006). Administrators, teachers, and the interpreter can clarify this information during an initial preparation session. This meeting also can brief everyone involved about the agenda, goals, and objectives in working with families. Be sure to provide opportunities for the interpreter to ask questions and clarify meanings before any meetings or written communications are prepared.

**Insist on Confidentiality**

Families must be assured that information gathered through the interpreter will be kept confidential (Lopez, 2000). This can be a sensitive
issue if the interpreter is a relative or friend of the family. Regardless of who provides the interpretation, the interpreter should sign a written confidentiality policy agreement. Violation of confidentiality has both professional and legal ramifications.

Working With Interpreters in Family Meetings
Collaboration among interpreters and educators is enhanced when they prepare for the meeting, work together during the session, and review the process after the meeting (see Table 1).

Prepare for the Meeting
The purpose of a planning session is to review the family meeting and to identify any communication issues such as

- objectives of the session,
- the interpreter’s role, and
- how educators will communicate.

Review the content of the meeting with the interpreter to clarify any terminology and establish a frame of reference for the content. Set an agenda that addresses the needs of both families and educators.

During the pre-session, discuss possible scenarios or events that may occur during the family meeting. Identify potentially challenging situations and agree on communication signals for handling them. Choose subtle signals that will assure fluency of the communication and will be clearly understood by both parties (Pakieser & McNamee, 1999).

During the Session
At the beginning of the meeting, the interpreter conveys to the family that the discussion is among them and the educators. The interpreter facilitates this communication. Effective interpreters redirect eye contact, body language, and verbal communication to the educators (Mercado, 2004).

Another way to achieve effective group dynamics is to establish comfortable seating arrangements. Educators and families need clear visual and verbal contact with each other. The interpreter sits in a less prominent position, where family members can see both the interpreter...
and teacher in a single view. One way to do this is to have the interpreter sit next to the teacher, but slightly to the rear, and at the same elevation or slightly lower.

Throughout the session, educators direct their attention to, and speak directly to the family. They use signals such as nodding to transfer communication to and from the interpreter (Avila, 2005). Teachers who actively listen and acutely observe nonverbal cues can gain insights about how well family members are exchanging information.

Review the Process

After the session, it is helpful for educators and the interpreter to summarize the meeting and evaluate the process. Issues to discuss may include quality of the interpreting work, effectiveness of communication, and behaviors or issues related to the participants. This reflective process helps establish trust and understanding among educators and interpreters (Leal-Idrogo, 1995).

Another purpose of the post-session is to prepare a brief report to clarify and document information from the meeting, establish conclusions, and plan follow-up sessions. This written report should be translated and given to the family. Written feedback benefits all parties and establishes a record for future reference.

* * *

Keys for successful meetings in which interpreters facilitate communication with families are

- preparation by all parties to clarify terminology, policies, procedures, and roles;
- effective interpretation by a qualified interpreter; and
- oral and written follow-up.

Interpreters act as a conduit to provide precise and effective communication among meeting participants. The goal is to give every family opportunities to effectively communicate with educators who work with their young children.

References


Table 1: Key Procedures in Working With Interpreters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before the Family Meeting</th>
<th>When Meeting With Families</th>
<th>After the Session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assure that the interpreter has the necessary language skills and cultural information.</td>
<td>Make sure family members can see both the educator and the interpreter.</td>
<td>Discuss outcomes of the session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review the meeting agenda, key concepts, and terminology.</td>
<td>Educators speak directly to the family.</td>
<td>Examine areas of success and concern for this session and future meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask the interpreter to add topics the family wants to address.</td>
<td>Assure that everyone is continually informed.</td>
<td>Compare observations to gain cultural insights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine outcomes.</td>
<td>Monitor nonverbal language to assure that everyone is clearly understood.</td>
<td>Plan for follow-up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign confidentiality agreement.</td>
<td>Follow the meeting plan.</td>
<td>Provide timely written feedback to all participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify interpreters’ roles and seating arrangements.</td>
<td>Establish communication signals for transitions between speakers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss anticipated difficulties and resolutions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Beginning with the Spring/Summer 2010 issue of *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, one article in each issue will contain the ‘Put These Ideas Into Practice’ page in both English and Spanish.

We hope that by offering these practical tips in a bilingual format, we will be better able to provide support to the South’s ever-growing community of Hispanic early childhood professionals and parents.

Looking for Bilingual Children’s Books to Add to Your Classroom Library?

Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Working Effectively With Interpreters

Anarella Cellitti

What Is The Difference?

- **Translation** is the ability to convert information, primarily written, into a target language.
- **Interpretation**, which is usually oral, refers to listening to something spoken and stating the content in the target language. Individuals who facilitate communication among hearing and hearing-impaired people are interpreters (Lawless, 2008).

Only interpretation communicates clearly.

An Effective Interpreter...

- is licensed and certified
- has vocabulary expertise in both English and the target language (speaking, reading, and writing)
- demonstrates cultural sensitivity (manners, personal space, style of communication, family and community power structures)
- signs a confidentiality agreement
- knows educational terminology
- agrees to meet before and after the session

How Teachers Support Diversity

- create a print-rich learning environment for children with materials (books, posters, games, labels, menus) in children’s primary languages as well as English
- learn and use key words in children’s primary languages with both children and their families
- feature authentic cultural artifacts and learning experiences including food preparation, art, clothing, music and dance, and everyday objects
- use qualified interpreters to facilitate communication at family meetings
- translate documents, including forms, policies, newsletters, and child health and development tips

Reference