

Working with Interpreters: A Case for Training Staff Members

by Mauricio Dangond



There are many variables at play that affect the performance of an interpreter during an assignment in the educational setting. As interpreters we must be keenly aware of words, pace of speech, body language, register, external noises, etc. Even though these are a lot to deal with, when it comes to experienced interpreters, a big part of the burden of communicating effectively lies with the speaker (e.g., case manager, SLP, psychologist, etc.). And this is important to keep in mind because interpreters are a conduit between families and staff. In essence, this means that to a great extent, the speaker's performance dictates the performance of the interpreter.

Commonly, staff members who are not accustomed to working with an interpreter (and even some who are) tend to "leave it to the interpreter." This means that in many cases the interpreter is expected to smooth over inconsistencies, awkward pauses, contradictions and as it happens, superhuman speaking velocities. Many, if not all of these can be solved by emotional management and keeping the goal in mind.

State of Mind

Meetings in the educational setting can be an intimidating task for all involved, especially in Special Education. Non-English speaking parents often feel overwhelmed when surrounded by individuals who have something to say about their children in a language that they do not understand. The interpreter, no matter how experienced, can be affected by the burden of performing flawlessly in a setting where effective communication is in part incumbent upon him or her. But we often forget about what the experience may feel like for the staff members who are reporting about the child in question.

A person's state of mind largely dictates their behavior and performance in any given instance. We tend to forget that staff members speaking during an IEP meeting may be overwhelmed, nervous, or overworked. Any of these is enough to affect performance, let alone all three. This is sufficient to make a person seem rushed (and speaking faster than they otherwise would), disconnected (affecting the flow of speech), and unmindful (forgetting protocol.) This is important to consider because as mentioned earlier, our performance as interpreters directly correlates with the way the speaker conducts him or herself.



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It is normal for individuals to have difficulties navigating emotions within a setting in which they are called upon to execute a task when others are watching or listening. These emotions can wreak havoc on the way we do things. But one very important aspect to keep in mind is that in general terms, our assessment of a situation and our emotional management can be aided or hindered by how supported we feel. It is much more comfortable and soothing to present, speak, and lead if we feel supported. This is true for the speaker and for the interpreter.

The Team

The relevance of emotional management in this context is that the interpreter, much like a teacher, Occupational Therapist, or case manager, is part of the team. Not only are we part of the team, but we work in tandem (and oftentimes simultaneously) with the speaker. In essence, we are supporting each other, we depend on each other. It is in our best interest to individually follow protocol and make each other's job as easy and effective as possible. We co-exist and collaborate to reach the same goal. What is the goal? To provide language access, aide the parent in comprehension, and make the parent feel part of the team.

Help Me Help You

Regardless of the mode of interpretation we are using, the same principles apply for any speaker in the source language: speak at a regular pace, no side conversations, talk to the parent (not the interpreter), remember that everything will be interpreted, etc. Following these tenets helps the interpreter tremendously in performing correctly. A confident, competent, and relaxed interpreter will correspondingly make the speaker feel at ease and confident that the message is being delivered accurately. In turn, this can trigger a better and calmer performance from the speaker. To put it another way, staff members and interpreters should feed off each other's skills and roles to execute more efficient and effective meetings.



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The main goal of having an interpreter present during a meeting is to provide language access to the non-English speaker. This means that ideally, the non-English speaker will hear and understand what is being said as if language were not a barrier. For this to happen, staff members should act and speak as if the parent were in fact an English speaker for whom they are explaining intricate (often very complex) subjects about their child. To achieve this, there must be synergy between interpreter and speaker.

I am a very big advocate for staff members receiving training in working with interpreters. Oftentimes interpreters and their roles are seen as a nuisance. Whereas in fact, interpreters are vital in circumstances where non-English speaking parents are present. Any deviation from an otherwise "normal" meeting will cause a disruption in flow. But as educators in a multilingual world, if we do not adapt positively to the necessary changes in our quest to educate children and help families, we are doing a huge disservice to the community we serve. Staff training for working with interpreters must be a staple in every school district that employs or uses educational interpreters.

About the Author



Mauricio Dangond started his journey in the language field as an English teacher for the Berlitz Language Center in Bogotá- Colombia, after a 6 month interhsip at the Ministry of Education. Following his move to the US in 2006 where he worked in market research, and a liaison between the South American and United States markets for several companies, he started pursuing certification as a court interpreter. In 2013 he co-founded the Dangond Academy for Language Acquisition, an International summer program for ESL students visiting the United States. In tandem with this endeavor, Mauricio was hired at the Newport-Mesa School District in Orange County, California as a full time interpreter for Special Education where he has interpreted for almost 7 years at IEP meetings and school and districtwide events. Mauricio joined NAETISL in September of 2020.



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