

Working with Interpreters

The most important part of the team



Centre for Refugee Research, UNSW

Written by

Assoc. Prof. Eileen Pittaway

Prepared and edited by

Tashi James

Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales,
Australia

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES



Introduction

In situations where facilitators do not speak the same language as participants, good interpretation is critical to a successful community consultation. Good interpretation enables the building of trust and the communication of complex meaning between facilitator and participants. This does not necessarily require a professional interpreter if none is available, but it does require that a community member who acts in the role is well briefed and guided by the facilitator. This booklet provides tips to ensure that the interpretation process is as smooth and effective as possible.

Who should interpret?



A professional interpreter is not always available and it may be necessary to use a community member as an interpreter. In this case, an appropriate person would be someone who:

- Has experience working as an interpreter.
- Is literate in the language they are interpreting.
- Understands cultural, regional and dialectic differences.
- Has the confidence of the participants in the training.
- Is comfortable discussing issues related to gender, violence and sexuality.
- Is of the same gender as the community majority attending the consultations.
- Is prepared to do preparatory work with the facilitators and to attend briefing and debriefing session before and after each day's work.
- Is not also a participant in the consultation; interpreting should be their sole role.



The interpreter's role

Interpreters are the main communication channel for the facilitator and the participants. It is critical that the interpreter:

- Translate exactly what is said.
- Speak in the first person; they are translating not speaking on behalf of the facilitator or participants.
- Do not censor what is said.
- Do not change the interpretation to suit their point of view or beliefs.
- Do not refuse to interpret a conversation because they are afraid that their translation will offend a facilitator.
- Do not stand in front of or between the facilitator and the participants.
- Do not conduct conversations with participants that exclude the facilitator or answer questions posed by participants without referring them to the facilitator.
- Write the key points of a discussion onto flip charts in their native language.
- Translate any relevant consultation materials for the group – this may require the assistance of a translator in some regions.

Briefing interpreters

The quality of the interpreter will have a big impact on the effectiveness of the training, and the learning outcomes participants gain. Interpreters may not be comfortable with some of the material which is presented or discussed, and may not be familiar with participatory and interactive training. It is therefore important that facilitators make the effort to meet with the interpreters before the training begins to discuss the available consultation material.

Potential interpretation problems should be identified early wherever possible, and may include but are not limited to:

- The meaning of key words, phrases and terminology
- Speed of speech
- Sentence length
- Confusion about what has been said
- Difficulty hearing the facilitator due to noise distraction



Furthermore, it is important that interpreters feel that they are an integral component of a dynamic teaching team. Interpreters need to feel comfortable to communicate their concerns with facilitators so that they can interpret efficiently and effectively. Similarly, facilitators need to feel comfortable to ask the interpreters to restate something if it is obvious from the reaction of the participants that there has been a misinterpretation.

Effective facilitation

It is the responsibility of the facilitator to ensure that interpretation is effective. In order to overcome some of the issues mentioned above, a good facilitator should:

- Communicate in several ways to ensure that the interpreter understands what is conveyed.
- Observe the interpreters and the group's body language to check the meaning of what is said.
- Avoid the use of slang, jargon and technical terms unless necessary.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Use lots of body language and facial expression, in consideration of what gestures are culturally appropriate.
- Check that they have explained clearly if the interpreter falters.
- Maintain control of the conversation the whole time; facilitators must not allow interpreters to conduct conversations with participant or answer questions themselves.
- Never ask the interpreter what participants mean; they should always speak directly to the participants through the interpreter.

Special consideration

If the material discussed has been of a traumatic nature, it is essential that interpreters be given the opportunity to talk about their feelings and concerns before they leave. If they are very upset, it may be necessary to provide them with specialised trauma counselling.

Further information

When planned carefully and run well, community consultations are an essential and empowering step in engaging communities and working together with community members to implement services and solutions that they themselves identify.

For further information about community consultation methods, facilitation skills and resources for running consultation sessions please see our website: www.crr.unsw.edu.au/education-and-training.