

NO ROLE PLAYS PLEASE-WE'RE BRITISH: DEVISING WORKSHOPS ON WORKING THROUGH AN INTERPRETER FOR POLICE, SOCIAL WORKERS AND PROBATION OFFICERS

Yvonne Fowler: East Birmingham College, UK

Abstract

This paper describes some of the difficulties faced in enabling public service organisations to face up to their responsibilities when working through an interpreter. It recognises the crucial communicative role played by the Service Provider and urges a process model of in-service training. Whilst recognising that Police Officers, Social Workers and Probation Officers are all working in different environments and may have conflicting agendas, the model can be adapted to suit each context provided that 5 main principles are observed. The paper concludes that becoming skilled in providing a service to non-English speaking background service users is to provide a better service to all, whether English speaking or not.

INTRODUCTION

These one day workshops have been developed because of a strong belief that the Service Provider (SP) has a crucial part to play in any interpreted communication. For the SP, there are four main variables which affect such communication, and in my view, these apply no matter what the context of the interpreted encounter. They are as follows:

- a) the SP's attitude towards the interpreter and the interpreter's role
- b) the SP's attitude towards the non-English speaker
- c) how far the SP understands the impact of the interpreter upon the communication
- d) how far the SP understands his/her own responsibilities in an interpreted communication

Any workshop devised for SPs needs to take account of these issues.

Here in Britain, resources have, until now, been concentrated on the provision of training for Community Interpreters rather than on training for those in the Public Services whose task it is to provide some kind of service, or for those concerned in the administration of Justice to non-English or limited English speakers. Only recently has such training been perceived as as a Human Rights issue. Funding has been made available here in the West Midlands of the UK by Training Managers in Social Services, Police and the Probation Service. This can, on the one hand, be a token one-off gesture which turns out to have little or no impact on organisational culture and practice. It can, on the other hand, have far-reaching implications which can lead an organisation to make sincere attempts to acknowledge its responsibilities in the areas of both interpreter training and SP training. However, there is not necessarily any correlation between the success of a workshop and organisational change. Whilst this workshop model can influence and change practice at an individual level, there is no guarantee that this will lead to change at Senior Management level. If change is needed in the way limited English speakers are treated by SPs, it is necessary to attack the problem on several fronts rather than to expect change to come about through the workshops alone, for example by setting up a forum of SPs and agencies in the Criminal Justice system, and by being involved in interpreter training. Interpreters themselves must act together and push for change. Changes may take many years to effect, and setbacks will occur as financial cuts take their toll on Public Services. But new ideas have a habit of snowballing, and at the moment, the subject of interpreting is an item very much on the agenda. The trick is to move it to a position somewhere near the top of that agenda.

However, once the go-ahead has been given for a SP workshop, a set of principles must provide a clear frame of reference for the in-service training model used. In Part 1 I will describe the principles which guide our workshop, and in Part 2 I will show how those principles are put into practice and summarise the responses of the SPs.

PART 1: FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Principle 1: Assemble the right training team

The team must consist of at least four trained, qualified and experienced interpreters who are used to working in the organisation which is funding the training. The interpreters must be confident and assertive enough to speak to a large group of professionals. There needs to be a coordinator and facilitator who will develop the model, obtain the materials for the workshop from practitioners and adapt them, devise the workshop activities, set up meetings with the relevant organisations and Training Managers, arrange fees and venues, write and send out pre-course material, facilitate the workshop, undertake evaluations and write a post-workshop report. This is time consuming work.

Principle 2: Use role play as a learning tool

SPs will only learn what it is like to work through an interpreter by doing it, and this will involve the use of roleplay and simulation exercises whether they enjoy that prospect or not. Role play is an ideal tool for experiential learning, but it has acquired a bad reputation in in-service training, and most participants will readily admit to hating it. Why is this ?

In-service training has the inherent disadvantage that most trainees do not enjoy their peers “preaching” to them about good and bad practice. However, the workshop we have devised comes with two advantages over in-house in-service training: firstly, the workshop training team (outsiders to the organisation) cannot be perceived as professional peers, and secondly, it is unlikely that this subject will have been explored previously in in-service training.

Performing in a role play generally involves the role player being observed and judged by professional peers. Thus role players often feel vulnerable and threatened: they are expected to “perform”. To overcome this, the emphasis can be shifted from performance to experience. The role play is then undertaken in a spirit of experimentation which means that, to some extent, no-one can predict the outcome. It can be made quite explicit to the participants that the perfect interview is not the goal. The focus of the role play that they will undertake is not content but communication. This will encourage them to enter into the spirit of the exercise for the sake of a new experience: working with a trained, qualified interpreter.

The fear that participants have of being watched and judged as they role play can be tackled by asking them to co-work in relays as they role play themselves as Social Workers or Probation Officers. A Social Worker, for example, can be supported by up to five or six others who can continue the interview. This works well, as it ensures that each member of the group has a turn at working through an interpreter, and it builds a climate of support and confidence amongst the group. In part 2 I will describe participants’ reactions to being asked to undertake role play.

Principle 3: Process not product

The approach used should be one of experimentation and awareness-raising so that an atmosphere of exciting unpredictability is engendered, thus increasing involvement and motivation. This approach can be made explicit in both the pre-course material and the workshop itself. The workshop is an opportunity to bring together two sets of professionals so that they can discover better ways of working together; it is not an opportunity to demonstrate a set of procedural rules about how to work through an interpreter.

As in all training, it must be enjoyable, interesting and fast-moving to maintain the engagement of the participants; however, the facilitator must be prepared to seek out opportunities to move people along the continuum by asking probing questions about attitudes and feelings. Participants must also be encouraged to reflect on the experiences they undergo in the workshop both individually and in a group.

The workshop will inevitably evoke a wide range of responses such as embarrassment, confusion and frustration, even an unwillingness to participate at all: the facilitator must be prepared for this. Participants can then step into two sets of shoes: firstly those of the language disadvantaged person, and secondly those of the interpreter. Finally they must be prepared to provide a service to a non-English speaker by simulation and role play through an interpreter and reflect on that experience with the interpreter. Without the experiential elements of the programme, the workshop becomes a purely theoretical exercise after which the beliefs and attitudes of the participants remain unchallenged and intact.

Principle 4: Identify the interpreting model

It is vital that all are aware of the interpreting model being promoted in the workshop. It is important for them to realise that there are two main models: interpreter as neutral linguistic mediator, which is the model we work to, and interpreter as advocate. Although I feel that the case for the advocacy model has not yet been made, I want to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and so rather to enable people to perceive the consequences if a particular model is followed. Descriptions of the models can be included in the pre-course material.

Principle 5: Find the appropriate starting point

If language awareness is the key to providing a public service to non-English speakers, then it is important to determine the polarities of the continuum along which one must pass in order to become a “language aware” person. Programmes can be aimed at taking participants from various starting points along the continuum to the point at the other end at which they will be left to carry on with their own personal development.

Naturally participants bring to the workshop a host of skills, experience and professionalism which they will put to good use during the session. These can be assumed and are not within the scope of this paper.

But what unhelpful or negative perceptions about interpreters and non-English speakers do Service Providers have ? Each group will present a different profile, but some of these

attitudes will be present in a greater or lesser measure according to the background of the group.

Negative perceptions

- ?? Racist attitudes
- ?? A belief that people do not have a right to receive a service in their own language
- ?? A contempt for non-English speakers
- ?? A contempt for interpreters

Unhelpful perceptions

- ?? A lack of understanding about how it is possible for people to live in Britain for many years and not speak English
- ?? Ignorance about other cultures because of the lack of contact with them
- ?? A fear of working with interpreters and of being accused of discriminatory practice or racism
- ?? A lack of understanding of the role of the interpreter
- ?? A lack of understanding of the parameters of the Service Provider's role in relation to those of the interpreter
- ?? A belief that interpreting does not require understanding of the subject matter being interpreted
- ?? A belief that interpreting is about words and their equivalents

All of these attitudes and the issues they raise must be acknowledged in some way if the workshop is to be successful, a tall order in one day.

So what is at the other end of the continuum? Participants will progress towards increased language awareness at different rates, and will necessarily be left to carry on their own personal development at the end of the workshop. The targets we set for Service Providers are as follows:

- ?? An increased awareness of the range of languages and dialects spoken in Britain
- ?? An awareness of the professional skills, knowledge and principles which interpreters bring to their work
- ?? An understanding of the importance of pre-interview planning and post-interview debriefing
- ?? An increased ability to identify skills which Service Providers and those in the Justice system can employ to enhance working relationships with interpreters

Anything achieved which goes beyond these limited objectives is a bonus.

PART 2: THE COMPONENTS OF THE WORKSHOP AND PARTICIPANTS' EVALUATIONS

Language matching exercise

The participants are given two sets of cards, one set printed with a text in 14 different languages and scripts, the other set with the names of the corresponding languages on them. The aim of the exercise is for the partners to find each other and for each pair to place their two cards on the wall. When they think they have done this successfully, they help others to do the same.

The activity has a threefold object: firstly to break the ice, secondly to raise awareness of the multiplicity of languages and scripts in everyday use in Britain today, and thirdly, to gauge, in a lighthearted and non-threatening way, their awareness of the languages around them. The fact that few participants managed to recognise the Urdu script, when many parts of the City of Birmingham are full of shops and businesses with Urdu script on their shop fronts, perhaps goes to demonstrate how physically separated are the service providers from many non-English speaking service users. Interestingly, many participants also failed to recognise European languages such as Portuguese and Italian.

Statements exercise

The participants are divided up into sub-groups of five or so. Each sub-group is given a set of provocative statements about non-English speaking service users which are designed to elicit their attitudes towards them. We could not assume that everyone shared our premise that all non-English speaking service users were entitled to receive a service in their own language, indeed, that they had a right to speak their own language, or that bilingualism is a goal that we could all be working towards. What they say may be very different from what they think, however, as there is always a temptation to say what is acceptable and what the facilitator wants to hear. In our workshops, participants “said all the right things”, but the true value of this activity is not one which lends itself to a paper evaluation.

Intralingual interpreting exercise: service providers become interpreters

For this activity participants divide themselves into groups of three. Threes are labelled A,B and C. A text is given to each person in the three. The text varies according to the organisational setting for the workshop, but should be a fairly formal document which participants would

encounter routinely in their work. They take turns to assume the following roles: A is the reader of the text and reads it to B who re-interprets in a whisper what she hears to C who listens and asks for clarification if necessary. The “interpreter” must change as many words as possible without in any way changing the message. Each “interpreter” should report back on the experience. The following sections summarise the participants’ evaluations of that experience.

Increased language awareness

All service providers reported a heightened awareness of the difficulties posed by the terminology used in their organisations. They found it very difficult, even impossible, to find other ways of defining such terms as “Social Worker” and “child abuse”. When asked what knowledge they had which enabled them to define technical terms they unhesitatingly said that it was their training and knowledge of the concepts. Therefore, if intralingual interpreting requires background knowledge of concepts, then the same must apply to interlingual interpreting. Interpreters must, they realised, study and comprehend some of the concepts in the field in which they choose to interpret.

Service Providers reported that slight variations in their re-interpretation could significantly change the meaning of the original utterance . They also became aware that in changing the words they were also changing the style of the original, and that they sometimes had to change the order of the information in order to re-interpret it, and that this change of order necessarily involved a change in the grammar. They perceived how utterances were lengthened, since extra words had to be used to explain terms. They noticed a tendency to make additions to the original text, and also noticed how easy it was to miss out elements they considered irrelevant or unimportant. Some Police Officers commented that they interpreted what they expected to hear rather than what they actually heard, thus creating a need for heightened listening skills for the sake of accuracy. They also noted that it was much easier to render the information they were given in summary form rather than sentence by sentence. Almost without exception, every group we have worked with found the exercise very difficult but absorbing and engaging.

Memory and concentration skills

All groups reported, when in their role as intralingual “interpreter”, the strain on the memory and the greater concentration required. All said it was difficult to take in, store and reproduce the information accurately without asking for repetition or employing time-gaining strategies. Note-taking was considered to be essential for the “interpreter” to aid her/him in this process. A good short term memory was needed: “interpreters” often had to ask for utterances to be delivered in shorter chunks or repeated.

The experience of being “the interpreter”

The participants noted some confusion about the text they were asked to re-interpret. This, they concluded, was because they had not had any previous briefing and did not know what the case was about, and were not in possession of any background information. They felt that they were under pressure to get it right, and felt a burden of responsibility rested on their shoulders alone, a remarkable statement considering that they knew that the task was merely an exercise in a training workshop.

It was clear that there was a remarkable similarity and consistency about the participants’ reactions to the re-interpreting exercise over the ten workshops delivered, whether they were Police Officers, Social Workers or Probation Officers. There was an evident increased understanding of the complexity of the interpreter’s role, and an increased respect for the task they had to undertake. How this respect and understanding at micro-level becomes part of an organisational culture at a macro-level, is, of course, another issue.

The facilitator was thus able to construct, from the ensuing discussion of the activity, a taxonomy of difficulties and experiences which matched in every detail those faced by the interpreter.

Shock treatment

When the group is feeling particularly relaxed, usually at the halfway point of the workshop, our Arabic interpreters give each person a form in Arabic script and begin to speak to the assembled group in Arabic. The participants are given instructions solely in Arabic on filling in the form with their personal details, such as name, address and age. The Arabic interpreters continue to speak Arabic for about ten minutes. The tension increases until there is an atmosphere of extreme and tangible discomfort. Self-confessed reactions range from feelings of inadequacy, frustration, foolishness and intimidation to extreme embarrassment. Again, it is interesting to note how people are affected by these activities even though they know them to be training devices.

Although this is a commonly used training activity, its value in this context lies in jolting participants out of a sense of complacency and reminding them what it is like to be a language disadvantaged service user.

Role plays: working through an interpreter

The participants now divide into two sub-groups and the interpreters set the scene for the simulations. All role plays must be not only relevant to the particular organisation, but must also

be real cases. Participants often like to challenge trainers by remarking that case studies or role plays are improbable or impossible to imagine. Naturally, two interpreters are needed for each group, one to interpret and the other to role play the non-English speaker, and it is preferable that different languages are used in turn for each group. Participants hear two different languages and have the opportunity of working with two sets of interpreters.

Participants must be given the following opportunities during the role plays:

- ?? to manage the introduction of the interpreter to the NESB (non-English speaking background) client and to the SP
- ?? to experience both simultaneous and consecutive interpreting and reflect on that experience
- ?? to experiment with seating arrangements and observe the impact these differences make on the interview
- ?? to observe the interpreted interview in a structured way

As mentioned before, to take the pressure off the participants, it is desirable to work in relays, one taking over from another at various points during the interview, so that each has an opportunity to experience the interpreted interview. At least four role plays using different scenarios should be attempted to provide as wide a range of situations as possible.

Evaluation of the interviews: the Service Providers' point of view

Role play

Participants' reactions to the role plays are remarkably consistent across all three contexts. Both Social Workers and Probation Officers commented that, although they had not enjoyed the prospect of role play, they had gained considerably from the exercise. Interestingly, the Police Officers stood out as being the most competent and willing role players and interviewers. It has to be pointed out that these officers were Sergeants and Inspectors at the West Midlands Police Training College, and so were themselves experienced trainers in witness and suspect interview courses. The interview training courses that Police Officers now undergo are of very high quality and are based on investigative approaches rather than old-fashioned confrontational techniques. There is a heavy emphasis on psychology and communicative skills, and all interviews must be conducted in accordance with strict rules under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act which require Officers to be accountable at every stage of an enquiry. This puts Officers at a distinct advantage in the workshops, as they are already trained in note taking, role play and interview techniques. It appears that Social Workers and Probation Officers do not receive such training.

Seating arrangements

Service Providers are asked to conduct an interview with the interpreter slightly behind the NESB person, then to conduct a similar interview with the interpreter placed slightly behind the SP, and thirdly to place the interpreter at the apex of a triangle, and to list the advantages and disadvantages of each arrangement. Some notice how the arrangement strongly affects the communicative process, some do not. Most participants realise that the seating arrangements for the interpreter cannot always be chosen, but if they do not enter into calculations at some point, the interpreted interview will be affected in some way, whether positively or adversely.

The Police Officer group were quick to see how different seating positions could affect communication. They concluded that the best place for the interpreter when interviewing a non-English speaking suspect was next to or slightly behind that suspect, whereas for a witness interview the opposite was the case, especially if the witness is distressed and talking volubly, thus facilitating the use of the simultaneous mode.

The time lag

One of the difficulties noted by many SPs in an interpreted interview is the time-lag between the interpreted utterances and the body language which accompanies the source language utterance. Spoken language, like written language, needs to be processed quickly for effective communication. The coherence and pace of an interview is lost if there are unnatural pauses between speaker turns, as in an interpreted interview. This can have a disorienting effect upon the SP and can lead her to lose track of what is being said.

Memory and concentration

As previously stated, there is a much greater demand upon the SPs' memory and concentration skills, and so it is important that they make more extensive notes than for a non-interpreted interview. It can also be hard for them to remember precisely questions that they have just asked, since they are usually composing their next utterance rather than concentrating on what they have just uttered. Obviously it is necessary, to some extent, to develop the skill of doing both at the same time in case the interpreter has to ask for material to be re-phrased or repeated, or for a term to be explained. There is time to write down notes of questions and the interpreted responses during the spaces when the interpreter is speaking to the client. All participants agreed that they became more conscious of their own language use during an interpreted interview.

Establishing a rapport

Social Workers and Probation Officers reported that it was more difficult to establish an emotional and psychological rapport with their clients when using an interpreter, and that devices commonly used by them to do this, such as humour and familiarity, could not easily be transferred into the other language. They reported a loss of spontaneity and found themselves asking for more factual information than they would with an English speaking client. They also found it essential to recapitulate much more frequently to check their own understanding of what had been said.

Social Workers and Probation Officers found it particularly difficult to cope with an account rendered in simultaneous mode. Police Officers, on the other hand, found it much easier to establish a good rapport with, say, a witness, using simultaneous interpreting and were quick to appreciate its benefits in terms of lack of interruption and saving time.

The need for joint training

Police Officers were much more concerned with making constructive suggestions about the need for joint training of Police Officers and Interpreters, the need for an amended force policy, and the incorporation of the interpreting dimension in their PACE interview checklist. They were disarmingly honest about bad practice amongst Police Officers with regard to the deployment of interpreters; for example, they condemned unreservedly the common practice of sending interpreters alone to non-English speakers' homes to take witness statements from them.

CONCLUSION

The one day workshops are always well-received and positively evaluated. However, the organisations which have so far provided funding for them have been those who see such training as a Human Rights issue, and have perhaps been the most willing to listen and change.

Many, though naturally not all, of those within the Criminal Justice system, for example, lawyers, operational Police Officers, Magistrates, Court Clerks and judges and other court personnel remain as oblivious as ever to the needs of the non-English speaker and as entrenched in their attitudes. Paradoxically, considerable progress has recently been made in drawing up National Guidelines and Codes of Practice for interpreted cases in the Criminal Justice system, but these guidelines are often not properly disseminated, so Service Providers often remain in ignorance of them.

The presence of non-English speaking citizens will always have the effect of highlighting the weaknesses of a system. That multilingual presence can be used as an excuse for hand wringing and doing nothing, or it can be used as a tool to improve Service Providers' language

awareness and communication skills to all service users, whether English speaking or not. Becoming skilled in providing a service to non-English speakers is to provide a better service to all. Learning to communicate effectively through an interpreter is to become a better communicator. In the words of a Police Officer:

“ I have learnt so much, not just about interpreting, but about communication and interviewing.....”

One can but hope that Public Services will see this training as an investment which will reap dividends in the future: improved access to services, and equal treatment for non-English speakers in the justice system.

**“NO ROLE PLAYS PLEASE-WE’RE BRITISH”: DEVISING WORKSHOPS ON
WORKING THROUGH AN INTERPRETER FOR POLICE, SOCIAL
WORKERS AND PROBATION OFFICERS**

Yvonne Fowler, East Birmingham College, England

Question: **What’s at the bottom of an organisation’s agenda ?**

Answer: **In-service training for those who provide a service to
non-English speakers.**

This presentation describes the unequal struggle to enable organisations to face up to their responsibilities in this neglected area. However well trained and experienced the interpreter, this will count for very little unless the service provider understands and can take account of the impact of the interpreter in an interpreted encounter. An unaware and insensitive service provider can cause just as much havoc as an incompetent interpreter. Add the two together and you have a potential disaster.

What attitude do participants have towards in-service training ? Do they jump up or are they pushed ? What pre-conceived notions about interpreters and non-English speakers do participants bring with them to the workshops? Will one training model do for different types of organisations ? What kind of training methods are appropriate ? Are there any positive measurable outcomes from the workshops ? And what about negative outcomes?

Our training team has delivered workshops to different organisations: the Police, Social Services, and the Probation Service. We have thus been afforded a prime opportunity to compare the reactions of three different groups of participants, and our conclusion about which group was the most receptive will perhaps be surprising. The presentation will conclude that, for the service providers, communicating through an interpreter is not an activity which is separate and different from monolingual communication but one which highlights their own strengths and weaknesses as communicators.

