



INFO SHEET - SEPTEMBER 2026

MORE THAN WORDS: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR INTERPRETERS

Since settlement organizations work with newcomers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, many agencies provide in-house spoken language support through multilingual staff during intake and one-on-one settlement services, often serving as interpreters. Others connect clients with formal interpretation services when needed. In both cases, interpreters are often viewed as language facilitators, however, effective settlement services depend on more than overcoming language barriers.

One of the needs that interpreters address is helping temporary foreign workers when filing claims with WorkSafeBC. Workers may often be hesitant to disclose information due to factors such as differing perceptions of authority or stigma surrounding what they deem sensitive topics. As a result, information shared with interpreters in instances such as when filing claims, may be linguistically accurate but not accurately portray the workers' experiences. An interpreter may observe these barriers during conversations but may not always understand how they affect communication without intercultural awareness.

This info sheet aims to help interpreters recognize when cultural and social factors influence workers' responses and navigate such situations.

WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION?

Interpretation involves facilitating communication between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Interpreters help bridge not only language gaps but also differences in values, expectations, communication styles, and perceptions of authority. Unlike translation, which focuses primarily on written text, interpretation takes place in real-time interactions where meaning is shaped by context, relationships, social norms, and cultural beliefs. Interpreters often work in settings such as healthcare, legal services, immigration, education, and social services, where misunderstandings can have significant consequences.

Intercultural communication differs from cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication compares communication practices between groups, while intercultural communication focuses on how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate with one another in specific interactions. In the context of interpretation, culture should not be understood only through broad categories such as nationality or ethnicity. Every individual is influenced by multiple "small cultures" such as family, workplace, community, religion, profession, or migration experience (Cho, 2022).



As highlighted by Zhang (2011), language competence is a key component of intercultural communication. However, the ability to use a particular language is not sufficient for successful communication. In addition to language competence, interpreters must also possess cultural fluency to ensure that they are able to minimize the potential for miscommunication and mitigate any misunderstandings. The key characteristics necessary for cultural competence are outlined later in the info sheet.

COMMON INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR INTERPRETERS

1. Language does not always convey meaning directly

Interpreters must keep in mind that words rarely exist independently from culture. The same statement may carry different meanings depending on social context and lived experiences in the individual. An accurate interpretation requires understanding not only what is being said, but also how it is intended by the speaker and how it may be understood by others.

Some examples of what interpreters may encounter:

Idioms and expressions that do not translate directly

What you can do: Ask the worker to explain what they mean or look for the meaning of the expression rather than translating it word-for-word.

Indirect communication styles

What you can do: Pay attention to the intended meaning. If the meaning is unclear, ask for clarification.

Euphemisms around sensitive subjects

What you can do: Try not to make the worker's statement stronger or weaker than what they intended.

Culturally specific concepts with no direct equivalent

What you can do: Ask the worker to clarify instead of inventing an equivalent meaning to the concept.

Different understandings of politeness or respect

What you can do: Understand that tone, eye contact, silence, and ways of agreeing or disagreeing can have different meanings across cultures. Interpret the message without judging the worker's behaviour.

2. Cultural beliefs influence communication

Individuals interpret information through cultural frameworks that shape their attitudes towards health, family responsibilities, gender roles, authority, work and success, among others. As a result, decisions are often influenced by more than immediate circumstances. They may reflect deeply held beliefs developed through family upbringing, community expectations, migration experiences, and social norms.

Zhang (2011) highlights the importance of understanding status and its impact in relationships between individuals varying in authority. For example, people from cultures where obedience is an expectation in the workplace are reluctant to question the orders they receive from people higher in authority. As a result, this dynamic may influence the way that workers perceive abuse of power and what they may be willing to share.

3. Power dynamics affect communication

Interpreted encounters often occur in institutional settings where one party holds significantly more power than the other in encounters such as within the medical, legal, or immigration contexts. These power imbalances can shape what individuals feel comfortable saying, how much information they disclose, and whether they challenge assumptions or ask questions. Therefore, it is important for interpreters to be prepared to recognize that challenges in communication may be due to unequal power relationships and be prepared to navigate them.

4. Individuals may struggle to verbalize certain experiences

Some experiences may be difficult to discuss due to various individual factors such as feelings of shame or embarrassment, trauma, cultural expectations, fear of community gossip, and religious beliefs.

EXAMPLE:

In the context of labour migration, when filing claims, workers need to provide sensitive details that they may be reluctant to discuss because of stigma within their communities. Some individuals may fear community judgment or gossip if sensitive information becomes known. Others may come from cultural backgrounds where discussing illness openly is discouraged. Understanding these concerns can help explain why a worker appears hesitant or vague when describing their injury.

Workers may also hesitate to report workplace injuries, exploitation, or unsafe working conditions due to their fear of retaliation by employers. However, this reluctance is not always driven solely by fear of retaliation. Many workers who have migrated for employment opportunities may view sacrifice and struggle as signs of success and believe that enduring hardship may be seen as a necessary part of supporting family members.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL INTERPRETATION

The diverse demographic makeup of the settlement sector makes it difficult to provide standardized training that effectively addresses intercultural communication; however, it is important to highlight the need for reflexivity in practice. Therefore, these strategies center individual reflection and engagement with the worker.

Before the Interaction

Learn about the context

- Review the purpose of the meeting.
- Familiarize yourself with relevant terminology.
- Consider potential cultural factors that may affect communication.

During the Interaction

Practice continuous cultural reflection

- Facilitate communication and not just translation.
- Avoid making assumptions.
- Respect individual experiences when shared.

Build initial understanding with the client

Ensure the worker understands the interpreter's role.
When appropriate, spend a few minutes learning about:

- The client's background
- Potential previous experiences with interpreters
- Communication preferences
- Potential concerns regarding authority figures
- Cultural factors that may influence engagement

Questions interpreters should consider

Before and during an interpreted interaction, it can be helpful to reflect on the following:

Understanding the individual

1. What factors (cultural, social, religious) may influence how this person communicates?
2. Are there topics that may be difficult or embarrassing for them to discuss directly?
3. How does the individual view authority figures such as doctors, judges, government officials, employers, or social workers?
4. What past experiences may influence their willingness to speak openly?
5. How might social expectations from the family or community affect what they are willing to disclose?

Understanding the context

1. What power dynamics exist between the parties involved?
2. Could misunderstandings arise because the participants have different assumptions about the purpose of the interaction?
3. Are there cultural expectations about respect that may affect communication?
4. Are there sensitive topics that could carry stigma or social consequences?
5. Could misunderstandings arise because participants have different assumptions about the purpose of the interaction?

After the Interaction

1. Reflect on challenges

Consider the following questions:

- What communication barriers emerged?
- How were cultural factors expressed?
- What could be approached differently in future interactions?

2. Continue learning

Intercultural competence develops through:

- Experience
- Training
- Reflection
- Engagement with diverse communities

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Inoue (2007) outlines key characteristics necessary to obtain cultural fluency:

1. Tolerance of Ambiguity

The ability to accept lack of clarity and to be able to deal with ambiguous situations constructively.

2. Behaviour Flexibility

The ability to adapt own behaviour to different situations.

3. Knowledge Discovery

The ability to acquire new knowledge in real-time communication.

4. Communicative Awareness

The ability to use communicative conventions of people from other cultural backgrounds and to modify own forms of expression correspondingly.

5. Respect for Otherness

Curiosity and openness, as well as a readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about own cultures.

6. Empathy

The ability to understand intuitively what other people think and how they feel in given situations.

To ensure effective intercultural communication, interpreters must be reflexive in their practice and be willing to learn for future interactions.

POSITIONALITY

Interpreters must also consider how their own characteristics and presence may impact what the worker is comfortable sharing. Shared language does not necessarily imply shared perspectives and understanding. Despite sharing a language, the interpreter and the worker may differ in other aspects such as their religious, ethnic, class, or political backgrounds. All of these characteristics will influence the level of comfort the worker feels and their willingness to share information.

Discussions of the difference in power relations in interpretations oftentimes center around the power differences between the worker and the third party such as an employer or healthcare provider. However, interpreters must also recognize the unique position of power they occupy within the interaction. Interpreters are the only participants with direct access to the communications of all parties, and meaningful dialogue cannot occur without their involvement. As a result, they have significant influence over the flow of communication, what information is emphasized or clarified, and how messages are ultimately understood.

Professional ethics guidelines require interpreters to remain impartial, however, it is essential for interpreters to have awareness of their influence. In order to better facilitate communication, interpreters must reflect on their own role and potential impact on the interaction.

REFERENCES

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Exploring Intercultural Communication: <https://www.amssa.org/resource/exploring-intercultural-communication/>
- Migrant Worker Edition: Intercultural Communication: Creating Safer Spaces for Migrant Workers; Issue 60: <https://www.amssa.org/resource/migrant-worker-edition-intercultural-communication-creating-safer-spaces-for-migrant-workers-issue-60/>
- Introduction to WorkSafeBC for Migrant Worker Support Staff: <https://www.amssa.org/resource/introduction-to-worksafebc-for-migrant-worker-support-staff/>