



Intellectual Output 3: Course material in module Language and intercultural communication

Article 3

Career guidance and counselling (CGC) with interpreters

This article addresses how to work with interpreters in CGC activities. The article is a translated chapter (chapter 3 “Language, Interpreter and Communication”) from the book "Step by step. Closer to the labor market" published by the Swedish Employment Service (2012). The article is translated and published with permission from the publisher to use it within the CMinaR project.

The book reports results from two projects, Directa and Diversa (2009-2012), which were started by the Employment Service and some municipalities near Stockholm, in order to be better at offering support to those who were the furthest from the labor market. The target group consisted of many migrants and one urgent issue was to develop methods to make counselling activities available to people who did not speak Swedish. The aim with the book is to spread knowledge about the successful methods that were developed within the projects.

The main emphasis in this chapter is on how officials (for example employment officers, career counselors, organizers of trainee work) can increase their skills in working with interpreters. The article offers an overview of challenges in CGC conversations (individual and group) with interpreters, provide concrete examples and strategies for how to manage the situation. Laws and regulations specific to Sweden in the field of interpretation are also

provided. We suggest that readers from other countries compare with and check their own national regulations.

Language, Interpreter and Communication

3.1. Why use interpreters?

Communication and participation form the basis for all work in Directa and Diversa. If employment officers (EO) are to be able to communicate on equal terms with their clients, it is vital, of course, that they understand each other. But that is easier said than done.

”We have been sitting in the same room, but it feels as though we have been at two totally different meetings”, as one official put it.

If a person has difficulty in understanding and in making himself understood in Swedish, using an interpreter should be self-evident. However, our experience is that neither the Employment Agency nor the local authorities use interpreters as often as is needed. Several years can pass before they discover that an individual has not understood the communications with various authorities.

On the basis of the picture given by the employment officers we have met, we have established that one of the reasons is that they want to avoid the costs involved in using the services of an interpreter. We have also met great ignorance of the negative consequences caused by a lack of communication. It does not seem as if any of those involved in Directa and Diversa have had any training in how, when and why an interpreter should be used in meetings with their clients.

Thus there is a lack of a structured system for working with interpreters and ensuring their quality in the Employment Agency and the municipalities’ services. This lack of awareness of the importance and value of using interpreters has negative consequences, in particular for uneducated foreigners who may find it difficult to learn or manage Swedish

A job-seeker who does not understand the conversation cannot make his own decisions and is made powerless – which in many cases leads to feelings of alienation and ill health.

Moreover, there are legal grounds for authorities to use interpreters. The Public Administration Act (1986:223) makes clear the responsibility for the state to use interpreters when necessary. Para. 8:

When an agency or authority deals with a person who does not speak Swedish or who has a serious hearing or speaking difficulty, the authority should use an interpreter when necessary.

The Ministry of Justice's publication The Public Administration Act clarifies how this paragraph should be interpreted:

"An authority that deals with a matter is responsible for employing an interpreter when necessary and when an interpreter is available".

The 2010 Public Administration Act's report A New Public Administration Act (SOU 2010:29) proposed changes in the Public Administration Act. The wording concerning the responsibility for authorities to use interpreters was strengthened from "should" to "must":
"When an authority has contact with a person who does not speak Swedish or who has a serious hearing or speaking difficulty, the authority must employ an interpreter and if necessary have documents translated so that the individual can protect his rights."

Using an interpreter according to the individual's needs is also supported by The Health and Medical Services Act (1982:763) Para. 2 and The Social Services Acts (2001:453) Para. 1.

3.1.1 Why don't we use interpreters?

"Job-seekers need every opportunity to practise their Swedish."

"I feel awkward when there's another person in the room."

"I feel unsure of myself because I have no training in what I do."

"There are always technical problems."

"There's no money."

"There was nothing special I had to say at the meeting."

These are a few of the comments we heard at Diversa's courses on **Using interpreters**. But in our experience none of these comments or arguments holds water.

Many participants at Directa have said that if there is an interpreter at every meeting, it is easier to make progress with employment officers, organisers of trainee work and employers. They have said that, with an interpreter, they at last understood what the meeting and the information was about. The officials who have learnt how to use an interpreter more effectively also claim that cooperation with job-seekers is simpler, quicker and better, and the work has gained new dimensions.

3.1.2 Risks without an interpreter

The biggest risk if an interpreter is not used in a conversation between people who do not speak the same language fluently is that information is not passed on or is not understood. The clients cannot explain everything that is relevant for them; instead, they answer with what they can manage to express. Nuances disappear and if the officials fill in with their own words, it will be guesses that rule. The whole basis for agreements or decisions will be more or less wrong.

If an interpreter is not used although needed, the employment officer will not know the job-seeker's needs and circumstances. The cooperation needed if an individual is to get the right support and enter the labour market misses its target. There is a risk that the wrong resources will be used. Cooperation whose aim you do not understand or agree about; and efforts that are neither relevant nor felt to be meaningful lead to a loss of motivation – for both the official and the client.

A person who cannot express himself almost always feels insecure and inferior. The opportunity to participate and influence disappears; the individual's resources are not put to use. There is a great risk that the job-seeker will feel powerless, leading to feelings of alienation, stress and ill health.

Guaranteeing the rule of law depends on two-way communication on equal terms between the official and the client. The individual has to be able to assimilate information, ask about what is unclear and question judgements and decisions that he or she is not satisfied with. The rule

of law that forms the basis of society's actions towards individuals are jeopardized if interpreters are not used when they are needed.

3.1.3 Advantages of using interpreters

The major advantage of using interpreters with people who do not speak or understand Swedish is that the parties understand each other. This means that any activity that takes place without an interpreter, although the need is there, has considerably smaller chances of reaching the target – that people should enter or re-enter the labour market. One of the participants in Directa expressed it simply and clearly:

"It's easier when you understand."

If an interpreter is used, the official and the client can communicate with each other on equal terms. The job-seeker can take part in the discussion and influence planning and decision-making. Only then can the employment officer give the right support so that the job-seeker gets closer to employment and his own upkeep. Using an interpreter then becomes a benefit in time and money for all involved.

"I have learnt more Swedish in this project than all the time I have lived in Sweden."

Using an interpreter can also be positive for the individual's language and communication skills. When everything is translated into a person's mother tongue and he/she understands what is said, he/she also finds it easier to learn the Swedish words. Many of those taking part in Directa claimed that they had learnt more Swedish during the project than in all the years they had lived in Sweden – even though interpreters were used at all times and there was no special training to develop their language skills. The individual's possibility to influence and take responsibility for his planning also has an empowerment effect. An example of this is in the following case study:

Case description

Lweendo came to Sweden ten years ago. She was illiterate but spoke three languages. To begin with, an interpreter was used at all the meetings. On many occasions she had an interpreter who was in her own network. She felt uncomfortable and inferior when she had to

talk about her private life and her difficulty in finding work with a person who knew who she was. She said nothing about this to her interviewer, who did not notice the problem.

When Lweendo had been two years in Sweden, she told her Employment officer that she no longer wanted to have an interpreter. But she did not give the real reason, she just said that she wanted to show that she could manage Swedish on her own. The EO thought it was fine that Lweendo wanted to practise her Swedish, so all the following meetings were held without an interpreter.

Without an interpreter, Lweendo did not understand more than a fraction of what was said at the meetings and the EO and the trainee organiser did not understand that. The result was that Lweendo started courses she could not manage and broke off or got a trainee job that did not lead to employment. Of course Lweendo was aware that the communication was not working, but afterwards she explained that she did not have the energy to deal with the problem. It did not make any difference any longer.

When Lweendo came to Directa, she had lost self-confidence and felt worthless. Since we had difficulty in communicating with her in Swedish, we persuaded her to try an interpreter. We asked her if she preferred a male or a female interpreter, which language she preferred and if there was anything else we needed to think about. For Lweendo it was important to have an interpreter who was a woman she did not know previously and who could interpret in the African minority language that was her mother tongue. She had not previously been given the chance to make her own requests, nor did she realise that she could do so.

Lweendo became a completely different person in her strongest language. At our meetings she talked with energy and strength, something she had not been able to do before. In Swedish she just mumbled, but now she grew up and played an active part. There was an enormous difference; her whole personality blossomed in our communication.

Thanks to having an interpreter and understanding all the conversation, Lweendo also learnt more Swedish and could develop her Swedish language skills.

3.1.4. Relatives as interpreters

It is quite common for relatives to act as interpreters in communications with the local authorities or at the Employment Agency. The main reason is that it saves time, but it also saves money. In our opinion it is a great mistake to let relatives act as interpreters since they usually completely lack training and competence for the work.

When a relative acts as an interpreter, all quality disappears and we have no way of knowing what information has reached the client – or the Employment officer. Relatives who act as interpreters also sometimes deviate from or completely ignore the principle of neutrality; they let their own – often sympathetic – agenda influence the information that is passed on. There is no legality when a relative is used as an interpreter.

Sometimes a job-seeker asks to have his relatives as language support. A person has the right to have an assistant or representative in his contacts with the authorities, but if the representative is also going to act as an interpreter, all communication has to go via that person. The official must judge, and check during the conversation, the suitability of this arrangement. If the relationship between the individual and the representative, or the representative's competence, is such that it is unsuitable to let the communication continue, the official must use an interpreter instead. In addition, the official must judge whether it is suitable for the representative to be present at the meeting

The individual's right to have a representative, like the authority's right to reject such representatives, is regulated in Para. 9 of the Public Administration Act (1986:223): Anyone who pleads his case may use a representative or assistant.

He who has a representative, however, must take part personally if the authority s requests it. If a representative or assistant behaves unskilfully or proves unsuitable in some other way, the authority may reject him as a representative or assistant in the case. An appeal against an authority's decision to reject a representative or assistant may be made, and if so in the same order as the decision was made by the authority.

Using relatives as representatives or interpreters affects the individual and the cooperation with him/her. Many people feel secure if they have a relative with them, but with a relative as a representative the individual becomes dependent on – and inferior to – him/her. The individual's feelings of power and ability decrease, which may affect his/her strength and

belief in being able to influence the situation and make changes in his/her life. Our experience at Directa is that at least the language should not be the reason for communicating via a representative. The individual's own strength and participation are far too important for that.

It may also be the case that children act as interpreters at their parents' meetings. In our opinion, there is no reasonable argument for using children as interpreters and representatives for their parents. None at all.

3.2. Tools of interpretation and their use

3.2.1. Communication

When a third party, that is, the interpreter, takes part in the conversation, communication is affected. It is difficult to ignore a person who is on the spot. We need to be aware of that. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves, the client or the interpreter that there are two people involved in the conversation with the help of a third person as a tool.

Body language also has an effect. An interpreter can communicate something quite different with his/her body language from what the interviewer or the client says or means.

This is yet another reason why you and the client should have contact with each other in the conversation. If you focus on each other, you do not run the risk that the interpreter's misleading body language confuses the conversation.

3.2.2. The interpreter's competence

There is information on the Chamber of Commerce's home page about training, authorisation and ways of looking for interpreters with various kinds of training and authorisation.

Concerning the formal competence of interpreters, there are three levels:

- Basic course, ca. six months, provided by, for example, universities, folk high schools, study organisations and interpreting agencies.
- Authorisation by oral and written tests.
- Authorisation in specialist competence, e.g. law courts and health services

Of course there are competent interpreters who have no formal training and bad interpreters with formal training.

When booking an interpreter, we recommend that you ask for an interpreter with training, that is, an interpreter who has at least taken the basic course. This course is no guarantee of quality, but the probability of quality is increased.

3.2.3. The role and function of the interpreter

Interpreters' courses – apart from providing language skills - teach what is usually called 'Good interpretation practice'.

In brief this means that an interpreter should:

- **Work in line with his/her knowledge**

In other words, an interpreter should give up or break off tasks which he/she is not competent to deal with. If you already at the booking have made clear what the job concerns, the interpreting agency and the interpreter can decide who is suitable.

- **Interpret only if there is no conflict of interest.**

A conflict of interest means that there is a relationship between the actors that jeopardises neutrality and justice. For example, an interpreter and a client may know each other privately or have connections with a third person. It may therefore be important, before the conversation begins, to ask the interpreter and the client if they know each other or have met before. Having met before in a professional situation is not necessarily a disadvantage.

- **Observe professional secrecy.**

An interpreter must not spread information about the conversation, what has been said or who has taken part in it. Telephone interpreters must not have other people within hearing during the interpretation.

- **Be neutral and impartial.**

An interpreter must translate everything that is said and only what is said, and always translate in I form. An interpreter must not express his/her own opinions or values.

It is the interpreter's responsibility to follow good interpretation practice. The interpreter should describe the principles of interpretation before starting work.

3.2.4. Variants of interpretation tools

There are interpreters with different levels of knowledge and there are various ways of using interpreters. The basis for an official to work on is the needs the official and the client have at a meeting and to book an interpreter accordingly.

A contact interpreter can be booked and used for personal conversations or group activities. A contact interpreter has all the advantages and all the disadvantages that the human factor brings – a real person present in the room, who communicates signals by means of facial expressions, nuances, body language and the like.

Sometimes it is difficult to get interpreters for small jobs if the itinerary is difficult. You can perhaps book an interpreter for a whole day and “share” the time with colleagues, or combine the meeting with having the interpreter on standby for client reception. Planning ahead improves the chances of ensuring getting a good interpreter. Perhaps you can book the same interpreter for several occasions.

Sometimes it is both practical and effective to use a distance interpreter instead. Interpreting by phone is the most usual form, but video interpretation is widespread in certain regions. Using distance interpretation can be good for short and uncomplicated tasks, when the need for an interpreter arises suddenly or when it is difficult to use a contact interpreter because of travelling difficulties.

For very sensitive meetings and conversations, distance interpretation may be preferable because then the interpreter neither sees nor is seen. A client who is worried that information may be spread may feel more secure with a telephone interpreter, when he/she is quite anonymous.

When telephone interpretation is used and at least two persons are to participate on the same phone, in our experience a conference phone is needed. Of course the loudspeaker function in an ordinary cellphone will do, but very often the sound quality is rather bad. It is always wise

to test it in advance so that you know what functions. We also have good experience of telephone interpreting in conversations where all three persons are in different places and speak on the phone to the other two.

This means that an official can call up anyone and communicate without difficulty, regardless of the person's knowledge of Swedish.

3.2.5. Choosing the right language – more difficult than you think

When booking, for example, an Arabic-speaking interpreter, we think we will get an interpreter who speaks the right language, but it is not always that simple. A language can have many different dialects, so it is important to know which variant of the language a client speaks.

The fact that a client comes from a certain country does not mean that that country's official language or majority language is the client's best language. When things go wrong, this is what can happen:

Case description

A number of deeper conversations with a client were carried out by Directa, but although there was an interpreter, we did not make much progress. It turned out that Arabic was not at all the client's mother tongue but a language he had learnt in Sweden. He was a Chaldean and had a completely different mother tongue than Arabic. In his former home country he took care of animals and had never needed to speak Arabic.

He had been in Sweden for five years, but his Swedish was not good enough to have a conversation in Swedish with the interviewer. Of course it did not work any better with an Arabic interpreter. The client had not dared to say earlier that he had got the "wrong" interpreter. Nor had he been told that he could ask for an interpreter in his real mother tongue, his strongest language.

Booking an interpreter with the wrong language is never a good idea, and the communication will suffer, of course. But using the right or wrong language can have much greater effects than that.

Many countries have an official language or a majority language but also a number of other languages among the population. One example is Afghanistan, where Pashto is the majority language while Dari is a minority language. Sometimes the majority language is closely connected with oppression for a client with a minority language as his mother tongue. If the interpreter speaks the majority language and the interviewer speaks Swedish, the individual may feel that both are speaking “languages of oppression”. The client ends up in an inferior position and may perhaps not even want to take part in the conversation. This situation can also result in feelings of anxiety and bad memories. At Diversa’s courses on the use of interpreters this was often an eye opener for officials. They had not realised that the choice of language can affect the conversation so strongly. If you have the right interpreter, you can focus on the conversation and the aim of cooperation instead of facing language complications or disturbing memories of earlier conflicts.

3.2.6. Factors that can have an influence

In a conversation where an employment officer, a client and interpreter meet, there are several power dimensions that can influence the conversation, one at a time or several at the same time. At Directa and Diversa we work from an intersectional perspective; that is, we assume that power dimensions work together rather than having a one-dimensional influence.

Case description

In the case description below the employment officer and an interpreter who speaks the country’s majority language – both men - meet Shara, a job-seeking woman. Shara speaks a minority language.

Shara comes from a country and a social background where men control women. She has been brought up to feel afraid of meeting men in various contexts.

In Shara’s home country there has been a conflict between various ethnic groups for a long time. Shara belongs to an ethnic group that has been oppressed. The ethnic group that Shara belongs to speak their own language in familiar contexts but in public contexts they are forced to speak the governing group’s language.

Shara has had no education, partly because women are not allowed to get an education and partly because the governing group have had a monopoly of the educational structures. This has created great social differences and the governing group look down on the so-called uneducated people.

Shara is 47 years old and has been a housewife all her life. She is illiterate in her mother tongue and has difficulty in learning to write and to dare to speak Swedish. She developed a depression when migrating to Sweden and during the time in her new home country.

It is easy to understand that Shara feels insecure and inferior in this conversation

Sex

It is often relevant to ask a client whether he/she would like a man or a woman interpreter. The client is perhaps not comfortable about raising certain subjects in the presence of a person of the opposite sex – neither in front of the interpreter or the employment officer. A woman who has suffered violence and assault may have difficulty in talking about her experiences to a man. We have to pay attention to the dynamics of a meeting and be aware that it may have to do with sex.

Ethnicity

The idea of belonging to a certain ethnic group comes from believing in a common origin with regard to language, tradition and religion, for example. In many countries in conflict, ethnic origin is the source of conflict, and this can be brought to a new country. An interpreter who, in his language, dress or some other way, signals an ethnic origin that is emotionally charged for the client may influence the conversation badly. This also applies to the official, of course. It may be necessary to take up and deal with the question of ethnicity and put the individual's needs in focus.

Age

There are many stereotype ideas about people's different ages.

“Can you really do this or that at that age?” It may be, for example, that the interpreter has an educative attitude towards young people, or that he expresses values about what is fitting for elderly men or women.

Religion

Different religious beliefs may create conflicts. One can be more or less of a believer and more or less tolerant of other people's beliefs – and how that affects their life situation. For example, a problem may arise if the interpreter, the job-seeker and the employment officer belong to different religious groups and do not manage the conversation in a good and professional way.

Mobility

The view on disabilities can vary a great deal between countries, societies and contexts. Clients from all over may find it difficult to talk about mental health to an interpreter. This may be due to cultural attitudes and values, but we need to be careful not to exaggerate “cultural aspects”. There are very few if any contexts that are totally neutral for people with disabilities.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation can be a sensitive matter, wherever you come from. There is a great deal of prejudice about homosexuality, and many people are very afraid to express their own sexuality. In many countries homosexuality is forbidden or even faces a death sentence. If an interpreter cannot deal with a conversation in which the client's or someone else's sexual orientation is discussed, the conversation must end.

These are some of the factors that can arise, take up space and become interwoven in a meeting between two or more people. We are affected because it is a question of who has the power in a conversation. Power dimensions exist and influence everywhere, and often several at the same time. We have to deal with this every day.

3.2.7. Translating documents

If a person does not speak or understand Swedish, it is reasonable to suppose that he/she cannot read Swedish either. A good deal of the communication between individuals and authorities is in written form. Diplomas from foreign educations are often sent off for translation, but ordinary “certificates”, letters and reports are more seldom translated. It is even more uncommon for documents in Swedish to be translated into the client's mother

tongue. It happens that important documents in Swedish are never translated or even read aloud to the clients. We often take for granted that the job-seekers understand them.

In Directa's experience, translation of documents from Swedish such as certificates from traineeships or doctor's reports can create totally new opportunities for a job-seeker. When a person understands what is said in a certificate from a trainee job, he/she can use it, for example to describe their experiences in a personal letter to an employer, or talk about it in an interview.

Not to understand is one of the most depressing feelings, and that applies equally to writing.

3.2.8. If interpreting does not function

It happens that officials notice that interpreting is not functioning but all the same they let the conversation continue. Perhaps they think it is awkward to tell the interpreter that they want to end the meeting. Perhaps it is too much trouble to find a new meeting time. But it is important to break off the conversation if the interpreting does not function.

At Directa we have experienced interpreters who have expressed their own opinions, interrupted the conversation and shown with their body language that they do not approve of what the client or the employment officer has said. In one case, the interpreter was very condescending towards both the client and the employment officer. The interpreter questioned the client's Swedish and said that he/she should take a grip and get a job – as the interpreter had done.

In similar situations it is important for the official to immediately question the interpreter's behaviour, and if it continues, break off the conversation.

In our experience, malfunctioning interpretation should be dealt with in the same way as a power cut. If there is a power cut in the middle of a meeting and you cannot see each other, most people would end the meeting and make a new booking, or move to another room where the lamps are working. The same should apply to interpreting. If the interpreting does not function, it is as if the communication has "gone dead". Either we find a way to improve the situation or we rebook the meeting.

If an official notices that an interpretation is not functioning and realises that the conversation should be ended, there are various ways out. If you can manage to tell the interpreter in a straightforward and respectful way that things are not working and that we must therefore end the meeting, which is the best solution. If it feels awkward to give the real reason, you can give a pretext, for example “We can’t get any further right now, so we’ll close the meeting earlier than planned.” The official then books a new meeting, this time with a new interpreter.

It is always important to ask the client what was not working in the interpreting, but also what kind of interpreter the client would like for the next meeting.

3.2.9. Using an interpreter/s in a group

Diversa’s program on the use of interpreters introduced the idea of using interpreters in a group activity with some 20 participants with five different languages. The course members’ spontaneous reaction was that it was impossible. But it is perfectly possible to arrange a group activity in five different languages – and it also gives obvious benefits.

The needs must determine the support that is given, not the language. If there are only two participants with Thai as their mother tongue, it is not possible to organise a group even though these two have a need for and an interest in the activity. But if several language groups are put together, the activity will be available for all of them.

Many job-seekers have very few contacts outside their own language group since most of them prefer to speak with people they understand. In a group activity with several languages, you get contact across the language borders, so you can network with them. At Directa this has led to the people in the groups sharing their experiences of education programs, work opportunities, self-employment and associations that would perhaps not have been discovered otherwise. In the breaks they also have to use and practise Swedish with the participants who do not speak their mother tongue.

3.2.10. Interpreters in trainee jobs, education programs and employment interviews

It is also important to use interpreters at meetings with, for example, organisers of trainee jobs or education programs. An employer can get better understanding of a trainee’s capacity,

potential and wishes if he/she can talk about him/herself with the help of an interpreter. The trainee will also understand more about his/her own role and what possibilities there are at the workplace. All in all, this creates conditions for good cooperation.

The organiser of a trainee program who, with the help of an interpreter, gets a picture of the client's needs can more easily put together an individual study plan. Both the client and the organiser then take part in planning the program

Case description

Lweendo came to Sweden ten years ago. She was illiterate but spoke three different languages. To begin with, an interpreter was used at all the meetings. She happened to get an interpreter on many occasions who was in her own network. When Lweendo had been in Sweden for two years, she told her supervisor that she no longer wanted an interpreter. Without an interpreter Lweendo did not understand more than a fraction of what was said at the meetings and the supervisor and the organiser of her trainee job did not understand any more either.

When Lweendo came to Directa, she had begun to lose confidence in herself and felt worthless. Since we had difficulty in communicating with her in Swedish, we persuaded her to try an interpreter. The difference was enormous. She was able to present her whole personality.

When Lweendo applied for a job in care, she had with her, via Directa, an interpreter at the job interview. With the help of the interpreter, she was able to present her whole potential. She got the job and then had regular check-up meetings with her boss. At these meetings too the interpreter was present.

Language does not need to be an obstacle – the interpreter can provide the key.

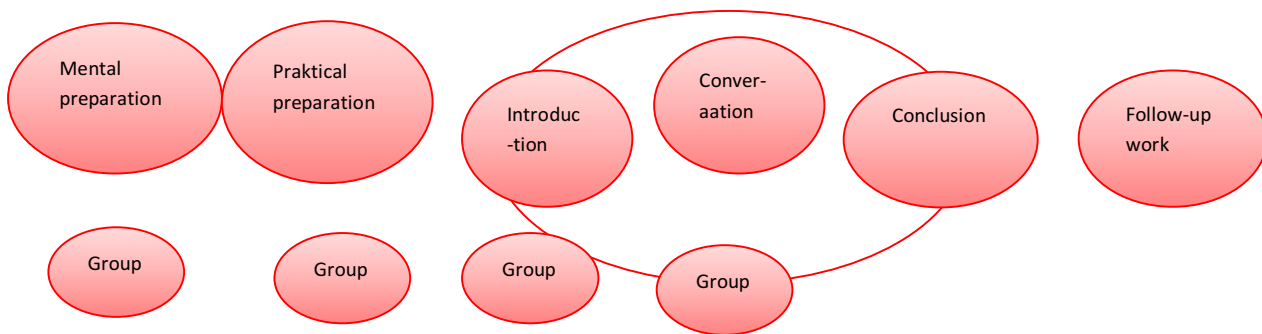
3.3. Directa's methods. Using an interpreter

If the employment officer is to be able to use an interpreter effectively and according to the rule of law, he needs to prepare himself both mentally and practically, carry out the activity with care and manage the feedback that is needed. The method is described below and the aim is to ensure the quality of the interpretation in the conversation. If interpreting were the perfect language filter, which we are sometimes led to believe, this method would not have

been necessary. However, interpreting is a demanding job that requires a person's knowledge, competence and feeling and which very seldom functions perfectly.

Directa's method for **Using an interpreter** is needed to ensure quality in a conversation between people that is never perfect.

Using an interpreter



3.3.1. Mental preparation

Think about who you are going to meet. Consider whether you know what sort of conversation or group activity there will be. Persons and situations determine the type of interpreter to book. Of course, it is the need of an interpreter for both factors that is taken into account.

Perhaps the interpreter also needs to be prepared with some kind of information before the meeting. Perhaps there are documents that need to be translated.

You often do not know how a conversation is going to turn out or what will be taken up, but the mental preparation to realise this and book an interpreter accordingly is nevertheless very important.

The mental preparation is the plan for a certain kind of action. What we do not think of here is left to chance and may become an acute problem that has to be resolved on the spot.

Communication is the single most important factor in all support and service and should never be left to chance.

3.3.2. Practical preparation

Contact the interpreting agency and book the interpreter. Describe the job clearly.

Book so that the interpreter comes a few minutes before the meeting begins. The tougher the job, perhaps an awkward or sensitive conversation, the more important it is that the interpreter is well informed.

When you book an interpreter for a group activity, it is particularly important to describe the job to the agency. You might need to give a little extra thought to the languages, the interpreters and how many interpreters are needed for each language.

Make sure you have a room that works well for the number of people who will be present. For group activities it is extra important to check the premises. Furnish the room to suit the language groups or in some other way, depending on how you want to arrange the meeting

3.3.3. Before the meeting

Tell the interpreter what the meeting is about. Be sure to tell him/her how you want to use the interpreter and if there is anything special that he/she should think about. If necessary, it might be a good idea to clarify your wishes by describing previous interpreting jobs. If the previous cooperation did not work, it may be important to explain what the new interpreter should bear in mind.

It is quite all right to have an interpreter in reserve. This interpreter sits in the room and follows the conversation but only interprets when the official or the client request it. This can be a respectful way of dealing with a client who sees the interpreter as a critic of his/her own Swedish. The conversation can then continue in Swedish but the interpreter is there and can be used by both parties as required or just to check that they have understood each other. It may be necessary to explain this arrangement to the interpreter before the meeting.

3.3.4. Introduction

It is easy to forget who are involved in the conversation. It is you and the client who have the meeting, so you begin by introducing yourself to the client and vice versa. The interpreter is then introduced. This sequence marks that it is you and the client who are having the conversation and that the interpreter is your tool.

After that, you ask the interpreter – if he/she does not take the initiative – to present the interpreter oath, in both languages, of course. This clarifies the role and function of the interpreter and helps to ensure the professional nature of the interpreting. Many people whom we met at Directa had never been given any information about the interpreter as a tool, despite having had many years of interpreting experience. Many of them had believed that the interpreter also had a position in the matter in hand, and had definitely not seen the interpreter as a tool for both parties.

Now you present your proposal of how the interpreting work should proceed in the conversation. Point out that everyone in the room has the right to interrupt the interpreting if it does not function. Remind them, too, that we speak in I form and look at each other and not at the interpreter when we speak.

The interpreter is a tool that can be used in many ways. Do ask the client how he/she wants to use the interpreter today.

“Do you want the interpreter to interpret all the time?”

“Would you like to do the meeting in Swedish and that the interpreter is there as support if needed?”

Ask too if the client has any wishes about where the interpreter should sit. These questions mark that the interpreter is a tool for both of them.

When you start a group activity with interpreters, it is very important to explain how interpretation and discussion are going to be organised. If a group discussion with several languages is to work, everyone has to know the rules and follow them.

3.3.5. Having conversation/group activity with interpreters

It is no easy matter to carry on a conversation with the help of an interpreter – but it is not so difficult either.

Speak in short sequences so that the interpreter can keep up. The interpreter may possibly jot down important points, and then you should speak so that the interpreter can do this. Think about the tempo and don't be afraid to ask if you are uncertain.

Remember that certain terms and expressions are very difficult to translate – for example abbreviations, government terminology and idioms. Try to speak simply, so that the interpreter can more easily translate correctly.

Repeat what you say so as to be sure you have understood each other. Check at regular intervals that the client and the interpreter understand each other, most simply by asking them. If the interpreter speaks a different dialect, the client will not understand every word and cannot then take part in the conversation. In addition, the interpreter may use too complicated language. Ask the client now and then to relate what has been said with an open question such as:

What have we been talking about so far, do you think?"

If there are documents that are important for the conversation, it is also important that they are translated with the help of the interpreter. You read the document aloud and the interpreter interprets what you say. The interpreter should not directly translate the contents of a document.

Be sensitive to the dynamics in the room. It is easy to ask how things are going and even if no one expresses dissatisfaction, the answers can give you signals about doubtfulness in the situation. Do you need to break off the conversation? Don't be afraid to ask and to break it off.

When you have a group activity with interpreters, the same rules apply as in individual conversations, but you need to think a bit extra about certain things. Only one person speaks at a time. This is very important as so many people will be taking part in the conversation and the interpreters need to translate each point.

Be particularly observant of the interpreters' role. On several occasions in Directa's activities the interpreters have become so involved that they have taken part in the discussions and forgotten to translate what others say. This is nice and friendly, but the interpreters need to be reminded politely and quickly what their job is.

A group activity with several languages is an intensive and exciting experience, but the brain gets tired from all the noise. Take frequent breaks!

3.3.6. Conclusion and complementary work

Ask the client if he/she thinks the interpreting has gone well. Ask also if you should book an interpreter with special knowledge for the next meeting. Should it be a woman or a man? Don't forget to note down the wishes.

Feedback is an unbeatable way of ensuring quality.

So always get back to the interpreting agency if the interpreting has not functioned. If it worked well, book the same interpreter again for the next meeting.

Usually an organisation working with labour market matters has some form of agreement about interpreting services. There is always a contact person or someone who is responsible for the agreement. Make sure, too, that you give feedback to your own organisation when interpreting does not function.

There are many bad and many good interpreters, and many interpreters are on the books of various interpreting agencies. Perhaps you and your colleagues can make a list of the interpreters who work particularly well.

3.3.7. Results – well used interpreters in conversations and in groups

The rule of law: The client understands – his documents too – and is understood. The official and the client share a picture of the meeting.

Participation: The client can present his/her own case instead of being in an inferior position. The client has a dialogue with the official instead of with the interpreter or some other representative.

“It has been good to have an interpreter that I now understand. It feels respectful.”

“It was fantastic. For the first time I have been able to talk about all of me.”

“If I am to get closer to finding a job, I must be the one who talks more. And I can only do that with an interpreter.”

“I’ve got new friends and contacts. We help each other in various ways right now. I have learnt new words, about history, the city and how important the work of associations is in Sweden. If you really want to do something in Sweden, it’s possible to change things.”