On Choosing a Language Access Provider

Introduction

Where an organization lacks ability to satisfy its language assistance needs entirely through internal staff resources, the identification and selection of volunteer or contract third party language providers can be a vital part of any language access program serving limited English proficient individuals (LEP). This part of the website provides federal agencies and recipients with helpful information on choosing a language services agency.[1] Knowing how to choose a competent provider and how to work effectively with that provider can play a role in successfully integrating third party of language services into your delivery of services and benefits to the public. Clear communication, defined expectations, and working in partnership will lead to more effective, high-quality, and cost-effect language assistance.

What are *translation* and *interpretation* services?

The following are commonly accepted definitions of "translation" and "interpretation."
- <u>Translation</u> is the process of *transferring ideas expressed in writing from one language to another language.*
- <u>Interpretation</u> is the process by which *the spoken word is used when transferring meaning between languages.*

Successful translation and interpretation services achieve meaning and ease of understanding for the target audience, avoiding the awkwardness of literal conversion from English and recognizing literacy concerns. Literal conversion from English to other languages can be confusing because many words and phrases do not have a non-English equivalent. Indeed, one of the governing principles of competent language services is "meaning for meaning" rather than "word for word."

Cultural Nuance

The goal of achieving meaning and ease of understanding is furthered by conveying "cultural nuance." Cultural nuance is supported when translators and interpreters are at home in both the American culture and the culture of the target language community. Three terms you may come across in discussions about culture and language are "bicultural," "cultural concordance," and "native speaker." "Bicultural" is used to convey the feeling of being at home in two cultures, but does not necessarily confer "cultural concordance." The latter is used to describe circumstances when the translator

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[1] In preparing this information, the Federal Interagency Workgroup acknowledges Ms. Cindy Roat, a Seattle based language access expert and consultant, who, under a grant from The California Endowment, prepared a paper entitled *How to Choose and Use a Language Agency: A Guide for Health and Social Service Providers Who Wish to Contract with Language Agencies.* The paper, directed toward the health care sector and focused on interpreter services, is available on-line at www.calendow.org or by calling 1-800-449-4149. This section incorporates and generalizes much of the structure and text of her work.

or interpreter is from the same culture as the LEP individual. "Native speaker" describes an individual whose first language and culture is other than English and American.

How does a language agency fit into your language access program?

A language provider is an organization that provides interpretation and/or translation services to another organization, usually in return for a fee. How a language agency can best serve your organization depends on the level of demand, language mix of your customers, the competence of readily available internal language resources, and the capacity of providers that are available to you.

1. Auxiliary support for overextended staff and/or contract interpreters/translators.

Organizations with in-house staff interpreters/translators and trained bilingual staff who serve as interpreters/translators may retain an agency as an auxiliary resource when the regular resources are not available. Unmet needs can then be filled on an ad hoc basis without incurring the cost of hiring more staff.

2. Primary source for interpreters/translators of languages infrequently encountered.

Some organizations use providers primarily to provide interpreters/translators only for those languages infrequently encountered. Some providers, because of the wide range of companies served and languages encountered, have market incentives and built-in economic efficiencies for maintaining interpreters or translators across a broad spectrum of languages.

3. Primary source of all language assistance needs.

For some organizations, it is more efficient and effective to outsource all language assistance needs. The language agency services can then be integrated into customer service without adding internal service capacity.

What can you expect from a language agency?

Language providers are just like any of your other contract-based business relationships.

There should be a clear **contract** in place that specifies responsibilities, assigns liability, sets pay rates and lays out the ways in which difficulties or disputes are resolved. Some providers may be able to provide additional services, such as customized billing, data collection, language identification cards, training, etc.

1. **Quality of Product**: The most important expectation to have of a language provider is quality interpreting and translating. A provider should be willing to guarantee the quality of the language services being sold. As noted earlier, this does not mean simple accuracy of verbatim interpretation and translation from English to the target language. Rather the interpretation and translation effort

should be fully cognizant of the culture of the target language so as to make certain that the true *meaning* is conveyed.

2. **Customer Service:** A language provider should be able to provide high quality customer service. Some of the characteristics of high quality service are:
   a. <u>Ability to meet demand for interpretation.</u> The provider should be able to fill most of the appointments you assign, except in languages that the provider told you at the time of contract could not readily be provided.
   b. <u>Ability to meet demand for translation.</u> Translations must be done for meaning and ease of reading, avoiding the awkwardness, and often inaccuracy, of literal translations from English. The provider should be fully familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of different methods of translation, and be able to advise you on the most appropriate methods for the immediate circumstances, including the advisability of dual-language print materials. At times, field-testing may be necessary to assure that translation goals are met. The provider should be able to meet time deadlines for production of translated materials.
   c. <u>Low cancellation rates; on time service delivery.</u> If a provider commits to sending an interpreter, then the interpreter should be there, and on time.
   d. <u>Acceptable emergency response time.</u> Provision should be made in the contract for emergency situations that require language assistance immediately.
   e. <u>Implementation.</u> A provider should be willing to train your employees on how to access the provider interpretation services, and how to best use and interact with interpreters.
   f. <u>Rational scheduling of interpreters.</u> A provider must allow sufficient time for interpreters to fulfill obligations.
   g. <u>Rapid rates of connection.</u> With telephonic interpreting, the provider should be able to provide an average connect rate of under one minute, measured from when the phone starts ringing at the provider to when an interpreter is on the line.
   h. <u>Effective complaint resolution.</u> The provider should provide a key company contact to resolve any complaints or concerns.

How do you choose the best language provider for meeting your needs?

Although needs may differ, there are common concerns that will help in choosing a language provider. These can be grouped under three headings: (1) Quality of Interpreters and Translators; (2) Delivery of Services; and (3) Administration. Here are some questions to ask.
1. **Quality of Interpreters and Translators**
   a. <u>How does the provider **recruit** interpreters and translators?</u> The most successful providers appear to recruit interpreters and translators on an ongoing basis from a wide range of sources. They may also maintain close on-going relationships with immigrant and refugee communities, as well as with professional organizations and training programs.

b. <u>Does the provider **screen** translator and interpreter candidates?</u> All ages establish a minimum requirement for translators and interpreters, but that floor may vary from provider to provider. All should be screened for their language skills in both active languages. A measure of professional competence may be found by looking at indicators such as years of experience, formal education in translation and interpretation, and accreditation from professionally recognized organizations.

c. <u>Does the provider require interpreters and translators to receive **professional training**</u>? It is critical that interpreters and translators be trained, if not formally, then in-house. Basic initial training can run from four hours to over 200, with 40 hours being a common length. For interpreters, training ideally should include the role of the interpreter, ethics, basic conversation skills, and handling the flow of a session.

d. <u>Does the provider require any **continuing education**</u>? Continuing education should be considered a reasonable expectation.

e. <u>Are the provider interpreters or translators **certified**, and, if so, by whom?</u> It is useful to know how many certified interpreters and translators the provider has in each language and the source of the certification.

f. <u>What **Code of Ethics** are the interpreters/translators asked to follow?</u> Ask for information on the codes of ethics that are used by the provider.

g. <u>What **protocols** are interpreters expected to use?</u> Many providers have developed internal protocols used by employees or contractors. You should make sure that the protocols are consistent with your internal needs. For example, a protocol might instruct the interpreter as to what to do if there is a communication breakdown.

h. <u>How does the provider provide long-term **quality assurance** for interpretation or translation?</u> The cost of language services must be backed up by assurance that the services provided are accurate and reliable. Quality assurance is critical in terms of protecting access for individuals who are limited in their English proficiency.

i. <u>What mechanisms does the provider have to **instruct interpreters** about specific policies and procedures of your organization?</u> A training mechanism should be in place to assure that interpreters fit into your organization.

j. <u>Does the provider **specialize** in any particular field or industry?</u> Some providers serve all venues: legal, medical, social services, financial, customer service, educational, etc. Others, however, specialize in only one or perhaps two areas. Regardless, you must make sure that the provider expertise aligns itself with your needs.

2. **Provision of Language Services**
   a. **Available languages**. A critical factor to consider in choosing a provider is the depth, breadth, and quality of its interpreter and translator pool. Some providers specialize in specific languages only (i.e.,

Spanish) or language groups (i.e., Eastern European). Given your specific language needs, you may find that instead of contracting with one language provider, you may wish to contract with more than one. In that way, you can take advantage of each one's strengths.

b. **Back-up alliances**. Some providers have back-up agreements with other providers to cover requests that might otherwise go unanswered. While this practice will certainly expand the provider capacity, you will want to make sure that the allied providers maintain the same standards that you would expect from the contracted provider.

c. **Responsiveness** (for in-person interpreters). The provider should track and share information on what percentages of all requests the provider is able to fill.

d. **No-Show Rates** (for in-person interpreters). The provider should track and share information on what percentages of all requests result in no-shows.

e. **Connect times** (for telephonic interpreters). Connect times of 45 seconds or less are competitive. Times should be calculated from when the call starts to ring at the provider until an interpreter is on the line.

f. **Standard equipment** requirements (for telephonic interpreters). Many telephonic interpreter services will be able to recommend specific speaker phone technologies. Because technologies may add to costs while improving quality, you must learn about necessary technological upgrades that may need to be made.

g. **Disaster recovery system** (for telephonic interpreters). If there were some sort of national disaster, access to telephone interpreters would become more important. You should ask the provider if contingency plans are present for language access in such times of crisis.

h. **Switching Equipment** (for telephonic interpreters). For those with experience with call centers and telecommunications, information on the provider's switching system can tell you a great deal about how prepared it will be to handle a large volume of calls, track connectivity statistics, and provide accurate billing and reporting.

i. **Testing translated material**. Some providers test the accuracy of translated materials. For example, a provider may offer to conduct focus group (a group from the targeted audience) testing as part of the service.

j. **Additional services**. Some providers offer ancillary support services that may be of use to you. The more services offered, the more of a partner they can become.

3. **Administration**

a. **Fees**. In-person interpreter fees are usually charged by the hour, with a one-hour minimum. Telephone interpreter fees are usually charged by the minute, although fees may vary by the time of day or particular language. Translation services are often charged by the word or page. Regardless, the cost usually varies according to how difficult it is to

recruit interpreters and translators in any given language. There also may be a variety of charges/discounts associated with the service, such as a one-time set-up fee, a monthly minimum, volume discounts, cancellation fees, etc. Make sure you are aware of pricing information before you sign-up.

b. **Cancellation policies**. What is the provider's cancellation policy? If you cancel a request for an interpreter, will you be charged? Most providers will not charge if the cancellation is more than24 hours before the appointment. Some providers will charge, as they feel it only fair to pay the interpreter whose time has been reserved and who may not be able to get another appointment to replace the cancelled one. Same-day cancellations are almost always charged.

c. **Company history**. Trust is integral to a good working relationship. Learning as much as you can about the people who run the provider and their experience is important. Request, and follow-up on, current and past referrals.

d. **Industry involvement**. A key factor in your consideration of an provider may be how much commitment the provider has given to the ongoing development of the fields of interpretation and translation. You may want to know whether the provider is a member of a national, regional, or local organization dedicated to the advancement of the interpretation and translation fields.

e. **Key documents**. At a minimum, you should ask to see a standard contract and a sample billing statement <u>prior to signing</u>. If you need specific information that is not in the standardized bill, then you should bring that up in contract negotiations. You must have assurances that the provider has the capacity to track the data you need.

How do I use an a provider?

The most important part in working with a provider is clear communication. The provider, when used properly, becomes part of your "language access team." However, how you are organized internally will have a considerable effect on how smoothly the collaboration goes.

1. **Internal systems in place**. It should be clear to your employees when the need for an interpreter should be noted, who is responsible for ordering the interpreter and how that is to be done. In addition, staff should know who has the responsibility to cancel the interpreter if necessary. When possible, documentation should be available in hard copy. Your employees should also recognize the need to have vital documents, such as a patient consent form in the health care setting, translated into appropriate languages.

2. **Information to the interpreter**. In addition to date, time and place, the interpreter should be given the nature of the interpretation, the names of the people involved, and any other information necessary to support a successful language access intervention.

3. **Direct contact with translators and interpreters**. You should ascertain whether direct contact with translators and interpreters is allowed. Direct contact with translators and interpreters can help resolve issues immediately, without the need for the provider to act as a go-between.

How do I monitor a provider performance?

There are a number of ways to monitor a provider's performance. On the interpretation side, you can track requests filled, requests returned, no-show and late arrival rates, billing error rates, complaints, responsiveness, resolution of problems, and reoccurrence of problems. You may want to actively solicit feedback from your customers and your employees about the provider, either through routine feedback or periodic surveys.

On the translation side, look out for these major concerns:
   o   Literal translations ranging from awkward, at best, to misleading or completely incomprehensible.
   o   Translations that miss the mark due to the translator's lack of relevant cultural knowledge, including lack of familiarity with local language patterns and word use.
   o   Translations done at a reading level that is too difficult for the intended audience.
   o   Translations done in a style that is not suitable for the purpose of the document.
   o   Errors that reflect lack of careful proofreading of the final product.

We hope that the information provided helps you and welcome your feedback. If you have suggestions, please contact mkatz@cms.hhs.gov.

Sample Questionnaire

You may wish to consider and/or adapt the following questionnaire as a means of gathering and comparing information from language service providers.

Language Service Provider Information

Name of Provider: _____

Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

FAX Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Website Address: _____

Service Provider Contact Person:

a. Name: _____

b. Email Address: _____

c. Telephone Number: _____

Does the provider belong to any professional language organization?

___ Yes ___ No

·· If yes, list the professional language organization.

Is the provider on the General Services Administration's General Services Supply list or state or local schedules? ___ Yes ___ No

(If you want to find out more about GSA's Supply Schedule, please visit www.lep.gov; look at the Federal Agencies or Recipient site under Resources "GSA Language Services Schedule.")

Description of Services

·· Geographic Area(s) Served:

·· Language Services Offered (check all that apply):

___ Face-to-face Interpreting Services

___ Telephonic Interpreting Services

___ Translation Services (Written materials)

___ Translation Services (Website expertise)

___ Other (Please Specify) _____

·· Area(s) of Expertise:

___ Medical/Health	___ Law/Courts/Prisons	___ Conference
___ Social Services	___ Insurance	___ Defense Industry
___ Education	___ Commercial	___ Other (Please list)

·· Languages Available:

Please list the languages available. List only languages that have at least one active interpreter or translator currently and regularly available. Please indicate how many interpreters/translators available for each language are native speakers and, if so, from where (e.g., Spanish - Mexico, Spain, Ecuador, etc.)

·· Methods of Interpretation and Translation

Interpretation Services:

___ Consecutive (Interpreter waits for speaker to pause and interprets each section immediately afterward.)

___ Simultaneous (Interpreter interprets simultaneously as the speaker talks.)

___ Summarization (Interpreter provides a summary of the speaker's remarks.)

___ Sight translation (Interpreter reads aloud the English document in another language or reads the non-English document in English.)

___ Other (Please Describe)

Translation Services:

___ Back (two-way) Translation (One bilingual translator translates from English to the target language, then a second bilingual person translates from the target language back to English.)

___ One-way Translation (A single bilingual individual translates from English to the target language.)

___ Committee Translation (Two or more bilingual translators independently translate from English to the target language, then meet to produce a final version by resolving differences.)

___ Original Language (Instead of translating from English to the target language, a document is created in the target language from scratch.)

___ Other (Please Describe)

Quality Assurance Practices

·· **Initial Screening**: Please describe how <u>potential</u> interpreters/translators are screened.

Please place an "X" next to the skills evaluated in initial screening.

___ Basic Language Skills ___ Interpretation Skills

___ Industry-specific Terminology ___ Cultural Awareness

___ Ethics ___ Sight Translation

___ Written Translation Skills ___ Other (Explain)

·· **Training**

Are interpreters/translators required to have basic training after hiring? ___ Yes ___ No

If yes, please describe who offers the training (e.g., in-house or external, number of hours, topics covered, etc.) and what the training program consists of. If the trainer is external, please list the name and full address of the training organization.

Is continuing education (CE) required? ___Yes ___No

If yes, how many hours per year? ___ Hours

·· **Certification** ("Certification" refers to a scientifically validated and reliable process to guarantee skills and abilities.)

What percentage of your translators and interpreters are certified by:

___ Internal Process (___ Translators ___ Interpreters)

___ State Process (___ Translators ___ Interpreters)

Name(s) of State(s): _____

___ Federal Court (___ Translators ___ Interpreters)

___ Private External Organization (i.e., American Translators Association)

o Please list private external organizations separately:

·· Quality control/monitoring process

Please describe all internal quality control/monitoring processes.

Interpretation: *(For example, is a practicum required? [A practicum is defined as a time when a novice interpreter observes and is observed on the job by an experienced interpreter]; Are calls monitored?; etc.)*

Translation: *(For example, Are cognitive tests completed?; Is there an independent review process by native speakers?; etc.)*

How do you monitor the quality of interpreting and translation services over time?

Interpretation:

Translation:

What system is in place to resolve complaints?

Administration

·· Administrative Policies

Hours of operation (e.g., 24/7, 9:00-5:00 M-F, etc.) _____

What is the confirmation policy for interpreter services? (Within what time of receiving a request will you confirm that an interpreter is or will be available?)

What is the cancellation policy for interpreter services? (Within how many hours of the appointment may the client cancel without being charged?)

Is there a privacy and confidentiality policy? ___ Yes ___ No

If yes, please describe.

What, if any, are the provider's policies with regard to direct contact between a translator/interpreter and the client?

For telephonic interpreter services only:

What is the average connect time? (Include your definition of "connect time.")

Are telephone services redundant? (For example, if an emergency rendered primary telephone services inoperative, is the provider prepared with a secondary service to guarantee access?) ___ Yes ___ No

·· Pricing

Please describe pricing practices and fee schedule.

Some questions that could be answered are:

Does the provider make estimates for work to be performed?

Does the provider offer volume discounts?

Does the provider offer services on a single use basis?

Will the provider allow limited test calls prior to contracting for telephonic interpreting?

What information for tracking purposes can be provided on billing statements? (For example, separate tallies by languages, average time per interpretation event, etc.)

·· **Billing**

Please describe billing practices.

Answers to the following questions would help clarify billing information.

How often does the provider bill?

What are the terms?

Are there late fees?

What information for tracking purposes can be provided on the bill?

Experience

·· References. (Current and Past)

Does the provider furnish, or has it furnished, translation or interpretation services to any federal, state or local agency? ___ Yes ___No

·· If yes, list the organization and the type of services provided.

·· **Additional comments from service provider:**