



Guidelines to determine whether an Indigenous language interpreter is required

The following test should only take a few minutes to administer. It involves asking a few questions to see how well someone understands English and how well that person responds in English. It also involves laying word traps to uncover potential areas of miscommunication.

Instructions for administering the test:

- take notes of the responses
- speak clearly in plain language.
- give adequate time for a response.

If the response or lack of response indicates that the question may not have been understood, investigate this further—ask,

“Do you understand what I asked you just now?”

If the person answers “no”, repeat the question, followed immediately by

“I need to find out if you understand my question. Can you repeat what I just asked?”

If the person answers “yes”, immediately follow this with the same check—

“I need to find out if you understand my question. Can you repeat what I just asked?”

In either case, if the interviewee is unable to re-state the sense of your questions, then an interpreter’s assistance is required.

STAGE 1: Say to the person—

“Before we talk about _____, I need to be sure that we can communicate properly in English.”

“I’m going to ask you some questions to see how you answer them. This will help me work out if we need an interpreter. Let me ask you this question—do you have any difficulties with speaking or understanding English?”

If the person does not respond or answers “yes”, but can give no clear details, then there is no need to proceed, an interpreter is warranted.

STAGE 2: Say to the person—

“I’m going to ask you a few questions about yourself so that I can check that you are able to give me the information I need in English. Please listen to my questions and answer them as well as you can.”

“Can you tell me where you were born and your date of birth?”

“What education have you had?”

“Do you know how to read and write English?” (If the answer is “yes” then ask the person to read a newspaper headline and to write: I know how to read and write in English).

“Tell me a little bit about your country -- things like: where it is, what it looks like and what bush tucker you can find there?”

If the person’s responses are inappropriate to the question **OR** if the answers are only one or two words long **OR** the interviewee cannot come up with a few clear sentences for the last question, then there is no need to proceed—an interpreter is warranted.

STAGE 3: Say to the person—

“Now I’m going to ask you just a few more questions. This time I might make some questions a little bit tricky or ask them in another way so I can see if you stay on track.”

“When were you born?—was that this century or last century?”

“When you were growing up in Sydney, was the food good?”

“John Howard comes from your community too! That’s right isn’t it?”

“How long did you go to school in Canberra; was it more than one year?”

“Okay, this is the last question: are you satisfied that we can go ahead in English or do you think we need an interpreter?”

If the responses do not match the questions—for example, if the person responds to either/or questions with ‘yes’ or ‘no’, or fails to recognise and rectify the false assertions about Sydney and Canberra—then an interpreter is required.

How to work with Indigenous interpreters

Make sure you get the right interpreter for the job—use a qualified interpreter wherever possible.

Provide as much information as you can about your client. Use the KIS booking form—we’re happy to fax you a copy—to ensure you obtain as much information as possible. The minimum information required is:

- Name & skin name of client
- Approximate age
- Community of origin
- Topic of the interview
- Language

This information will help us to find an interpreter who will then decide (for cultural reasons) whether he or she is able to undertake the assignment.

Take the time to talk to the interpreter about the purpose of the interview before the assignment. Tell the interpreter whether you will be using ‘jargon’, specialist or technical terms, and explain in plain English what these terms mean.

At the start of the interview, explain the role of the interpreter to your client. Many Aboriginal people have never been provided with an interpreter and need to understand that the interpreter is there to interpret only what you are saying, not to take sides, give advice, make judgements or tell anyone outside the meeting what was said. The interpreter is there simply to interpret what you say to your client, and what your client says to you.

Other considerations for the interview process include:

1) Seating arrangements

The best arrangement is triangular. Interpreters are trained to seat people to enhance the interpreting interview. Support the interpreter in their attempts to arrange participants' seating, if this is possible.

2) Eye contact

It is important to maintain eye contact with the client NOT with the interpreter. However, remember that eye contact may make some Aboriginal people feel awkward and they may look the other way. Some Aboriginal people may consider direct eye contact a sign of hostility or bad manners.

3) Facial expression

Speak directly to the client/patient so he/she can see your facial expression, and you can see his/hers. It is important that your client can read your interest, good intent etc., even if language hinders direct communication. Do not speak directly to the interpreter.

4) Use of short statements

Use short statements so it's easy for the interpreter to remember your words and interpret accurately. Pause frequently to allow time for interpreting.

5) Speak directly to your client/patient

Always address the client/patient as 'you', and use the first person ('I', 'me') to refer to yourself. The Interpreter will interpret for you and the client/patient in the first person. The interpreter's task is to interpret exactly what you or the client/patient says.

6) Use of technical/specialist terms

Try to express yourself in plain English, in case the client/patient or Interpreter is not familiar with technical terms or jargon. If you need to use technical terms to convey information, make sure that both the interpreter and the client/patient understand. It is better to 'unpack' technical terms for the interpreter at a briefing session prior to the assignment.

7) Personal opinions

NEVER ask the Interpreter for his/her personal opinion of the client/patient or their actions, and discourage him/her from offering them. The interpreter must be impartial.

8) Cultural differences

Make allowances for cultural differences, such as:

- direct eye contact can be intimidating; it may be considered rude or aggressive
- an Indigenous female client/patient will usually prefer a female interpreter
- relationships between Aboriginal people may determine certain behaviours (eg some relations cannot look at or talk to each other). It is important that you tell the prospective interpreter or agency who they will be interpreting for so that inappropriate or difficult situations do not develop. This is also the purpose of asking for the client's skin name.

9) Use of unqualified people, relatives or children

Do not use unqualified people, relatives or children as Interpreters. They do not have expertise in the area and easily make mistakes. Untrained people do not know how to seek clarification about unfamiliar language or obscure terminology and they are not obliged to abide by professional ethics.

Interpreters' Code of Ethics

Many of our interpreters are accredited through the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) at the paraprofessional level. This provides users of our service with a guarantee that interpreting is accurate and our interpreters practise their interpreting skills according to a professional code of ethics—

1. Professional conduct—Interpreters and translators endeavour to be polite and courteous, unobtrusive, firm and dignified; explain their role to clients, encouraging them to speak to each other directly; allow nothing to prejudice or influence their work, and disclose any possible conflict of interest; decline gifts and tips explaining to clients that accepting them could compromise their professional integrity; be punctual and prepare for assignments
2. Confidentiality—Interpreters and translators do not disclose information acquired during the course of their assignments.
3. Competence—Interpreters and translators undertake work which they are competent to perform in languages in which they are accredited or recognised.
4. Impartiality—Interpreters and translators observe impartiality in all professional contracts.
5. Accuracy—Interpreters and translators take all reasonable care to be accurate relaying accurately and completely all that is said by all parties in a meeting—including derogatory or vulgar remarks and non-verbal clues; not altering, adding to or omitting anything; acknowledging and promptly rectifying any mistakes and ensuring speech is clearly heard and understood by all present.
6. Employment—Interpreters and translators are responsible for the quality of their work, whether employed as freelance practitioners or by interpreting and translation agencies or other employers.
7. Professional development—Interpreters and translators continue to develop their professional knowledge and skills.
8. Professional solidarity—Interpreters show respect and support to their fellow professionals.