

Introduction to Remote Interpreting

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What is remote interpreting?

Remote interpreting takes place when the interpreter is *not in the same location as all the parties*. The interpreter could be in the same location as some of the parties.

It can be

- prescheduled or
- on demand.

Is everyone an interpreter?

Though knowing two languages is a prerequisite for interpreting and translating, it is not a good predictor of interpreting and translation skills.

The federal government studied the connection between language proficiency in both working languages and the ability to translate and found no relationship between these skills¹.

“Bilingual” is a person who can comprehend and speak two languages at varying levels of proficiency, typically operating monolingually at any given time. Bilingual persons are not necessarily trained in cognitive abilities and skills for Interpreting². (DAS RFP 2021)

Differences between on site and remote

On site interpreting	Remote interpreting
The interpreter gets the message from the source.	The interpreter uses technology to receive the message. (internet or phone).
The interpreter sees the person’s reaction to our rendition live. That facilitates checking for understanding.	The interpreter does not see the whole picture.
Body language, which is part of the message, is clear to the interpreter.	The sound quality is not as good as when in person.

¹ [Testing the right skill: Evidence to support testing translation ability | Brooks | Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series – Themes in Translation Studies \(uantwerpen.be\)](#)

² DASPS-2860-17 INTERPRETING SERVICES RFP May 2021

<p>The interpreter is more integrated into the interaction.</p> <p>The interpreter can stand, move, without limitations. This allows interpreters to use their physical location in the room (positioning) to enhance communication.</p> <p>Participants can communicate with each other directly if they so desire.</p> <p>Everyone in the room needs protection from infectious diseases.</p> <p>Signaling for clarifications and repetitions can be done with body language.</p> <p>The interpreter has access to the written materials being discussed.</p> <p>Often preferred by patients.</p>	<p>Much more tiring. Our endurance is half of what it would be in person.</p> <p>The interpreter sits rigidly with our face to the screen for most of the encounter.</p> <p>Interrupting can be more difficult.</p> <p>There is a delay between when the speaker communicates and when the interpreter hears the message, which can create challenges in dialog.</p> <p>Using headphones for extended times can affect the interpreter's hearing. This has been documented as a work-related health issue in call centers.</p>
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These are just some of the differences between the two ways of delivering our services. As interpreters consider them, they can make plans to overcome the weaknesses of the system used.

Are remote meetings here to stay?

Through my participation in meetings with people from the Hillsboro Chamber of Commerce and other networking groups, I have seen that remote meetings are not as effective as in person meetings. Attendees to the remote meetings that have replaced on-site gatherings can hardly wait to see each other in person! This is now commonly reported in the media. See the following quotes:

Members mention that they miss the side and spontaneous conversations that often advance the work, shop talk over a cup of coffee, unwinding together informally after meetings in the lobby or at dinner, connecting with old colleagues and new.

In addition, nonverbal signals can't be seen as easily in a virtual environment -- the look in someone's eyes or a body language signal. And dialog, impacted by virtual meeting technologies, has given way to more formal or stilted exchanges.

ASTM magazine³

We learn at a very early age that conversation is a game that two (or more) people play that involves breathing, winking, nodding, eye contact, head tilts, hand gestures, and a whole series of subtle non-verbal signals that help both parties communicate with one another.

Conversation is much less functional without these nonverbal signals. In conference calls, we're not getting the signals we're used to getting to help us know when the other person is ready to hand the conversational baton on to us, and vice-versa.

Harvard Business Review⁴

Remote meetings are a solution for when in-person encounters are not practical. For accuracy, interpreters need better sound quality and visual input than anyone else in the encounter.

What modes of interpreting can be used in remote settings?

Consecutive interpreting, where the interpreter relays the message after the speaker has completed their rendition, is possible in both telephonic and teleconference settings⁵.

Sight translation requires that the interpreter see the documents in question. Some teleconference platforms allow the speaker to share the screen, and in that case the interpreter can provide sight translation.

Simultaneous interpreting⁶, where interpreters interpret without waiting for the speaker to stop, requires that there be a separate audio channel for

³May/June 2021 ASTM Standardization News magazine, page 37

⁴ <https://hbr.org/2015/05/understand-the-4-components-of-influence>

⁵ "Consecutive Interpretation" is the rendering of statements made in the Source Language into statements in the Target Language, intermittently, with a pause between each completed statement of approximately 40-50 words. Consecutive Interpreters wait until the speaker of the Source Language has finished before rendering speech into the Target Language. Consecutive Interpreting takes 50% more time than Simultaneous Interpreting and may take a Bilingual interpreter 100% more time to provide Consecutive Interpreting Services due to less developed recall memory. Consecutive Interpreters frequently take notes to assist in Consecutive Interpretation.

Source: DASPS-2860-17 INTERPRETING SERVICES RFP May 2021

⁶ "Simultaneous Interpretation" is the rendering of one spoken language (Source Language) into another (Target Language), continuously at the same time someone is speaking but lagging slightly behind the speaker. Simultaneous Interpreting is spoken in whispered tones

rendering the interpreted message. Ideally, this is done with an interpreter channel on the platform. However, sometimes interpreters have to use a separate system, such as a telephone, to provide this service.

Tips for managing the flow

Many of these tips are also applicable to interpreting in person.

- E.g.: The interpreter can only interpret for one person at a time. Who would like to repeat the last thing that was said?

The correct intervention protocol is to refer to the interpreter as “The interpreter says...” because if not it gets confusing.

- The interpreter requests a repetition/clarification.
- The interpreter requests a repetition in a way that is easier for her to interpret accurately.
- The interpreter is having trouble with the sound quality and may need some extra repetitions.

How to intervene:

- When parties understand each other without the interpreter’s assistance, be on standby until the interpreter detects miscommunication.
- When the communication goes astray, the interpreter has to step in and make people take a step back.
- When the interpreter is cut off, she has not completed the rendition of what the other person had to say, so she should complete her rendition.

Best uses for remote interpreting

- Unscheduled interactions with people who do not share a common language.
- Phone calls.
- Interactions in which the two people who do not speak the same language are not in the same place.
- At the front desk, when a staff member who can speak the person’s language is unavailable, unscheduled.

or by using special audio equipment. Simultaneous Interpreting speed usually ranges from 80-120 words per minute.

Source: DASPS-2860-17 INTERPRETING SERVICES RFP May 2021

- When someone makes a phone call for inquiry or an appointment, and there is not a staff member who can speak the person's language, unscheduled.
- Follow-up phone calls.
- Reminder phone calls, so the medical provider can follow up on any issues the patient might bring up. The interpreter is not able to answer questions. If unable to work in a three-way conversation, providing a recorded message just like the English-speaking patients receive should be appropriate. This message should be sent by the medical provider. When you are asked to do a reminder phone call and the LEP starts talking about issues regarding transportation, insurance companies, etc., make sure to politely inform them your role and willingness to interpret on the day of the appointment.
- In an emergency, when an in-person interpreter can't be found or would be logistically impractical to facilitate.

Remote interpreting is not recommended in these situations

- With complex diagnoses.
- When a diagnosis or subject matter is sensitive or emotionally charged. Unfortunately, this is something interpreters don't know ahead of time.
- Outpatient procedures. e.g., mammogram.
- When the patient has difficulty with technology.
- When it might require another person in the room to manage the technology.

How to prepare for remote settings

1. Be a good in person interpreter
2. Learn how to interpret with no visual cues
3. Learn how to access technology. Practice using the technology before using it professionally. Include challenging situations in your practice. Get used to the controls ahead of time so they are not a distraction when you are interpreting.
4. Practice diction with poems. The Limericks by Edward Lear⁷ could be helpful.

Why an in-person interpreter?

- Moral support from someone in your language.

⁷ <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/limericks-by-edward-lear>

- An in-person encounter may provide better context to the interpreter in terms of body language and cues that will facilitate better understanding. The remote interpreter is not privy to these elements.
- Most of our communication is not verbal. Some studies indicate that over 70% of our communication is not through words.
- High rate of bad connections or technical difficulties with remote interpreting.

Who should interpret?

Certified interpreters or qualified can provide documentation indicating the certifying or assessment body, any subject area expertise, the proficiency level, and specific language combination(s) assessed.

Certified and qualified interpreters maintain their status through CE credits and are bound by a code of professional conduct. When interpreting certification exams are not available for a particular language pair, verification of a high level of listening comprehension and speaking proficiency in both working languages may be used as an acceptable screening tool to predict interpreting performance. Note: this verification should ideally be through a third party, not by the language company itself.

If possible, interpreters should have training for remote interpreting and clients should be trained on how to work with remote interpreters.

Very clear diction is a high priority because the sound quality issues of remote interpreting are unforgiving. This applies to interpreters, patients, and providers. For example, the prefixes *hyper-* and *hipo-* could be confused.

Good customer service. Both the provider and the LEP need to feel welcome, listened to, and well served.

Who should not interpret?

- Someone with language proficiency less than Advanced Mid on the ACTFL scale since that is the minimum level for communicating without the LEP having to adjust to the speaker.
- Someone with poor memory retention: This is why the interpreters should either pass an interpreting exam or a listening comprehension test, which will reveal this issue.
- Someone who has not taken any training in notetaking.
- Someone without a solid knowledge of interpreting ethics.
- Someone with unclear diction.
- Friends and family members.
- Bilingual staff who are not trained and tested as interpreters.

- Challenges

- For the remote interpreter

- Sound quality. When a speaker communicates through a mask, for example, the sound can be muffled.
- People overlapping when multiple parties are talking at the same time affects the flow of the encounter as the interpreter will need to interrupt and clarify more often.
- The person with less social power in the interaction interrupts because they have something at stake, the interpreter can't hear clearly, and the flow is affected. This can compromise the dynamics.
- People with difficult stories do not want to repeat them. Therefore, interpreters need excellent note-taking skills to be able to interpret long segments.
- Vicarious trauma by having to interpret difficult scenarios such as "I was raped."
- Bandwidth, phone signal.
- Sedentary lifestyle: a remote interpreter may be sitting down for long periods of time, especially when the queue is high. Physical discomfort affects a person's ability to focus.
- The pay for remote interpreting is lower than the pay for in-person interpreting.
- It is harder to follow best practices for requests of interpreters of a particular gender, requests for specific interpreters, etc.

It is helpful to practice interpreting in these challenging conditions to be ready if they happen.

For the in-person interpreter

- Exposure to communicable diseases
- Mobility issues: not all interpreting settings are handicap accessible.
- Environmental allergies
- Transportation
- Lack of reimbursement for travel and mileage.

Tools for remote interpreter not available when in person

- Google maps: <https://www.google.com/maps>
- Online dictionaries. However, you can't look things up very fast. Interpreters need to be extremely familiar with their search tools and have bookmarks ready.
- Online specialized resources such as the Merck Manual for Home Health: <https://www.merckmanuals.com/home>

Camera presence

- Monitor your appearance on the screen. What can people see behind you? Is it distracting?
- Dress well, including the parts not visible when sitting down. Will you be embarrassed if you stand up? A remote appointment has the same significance as an in-person appointment. Dress the same way.
- The environment should be free of distractions. Do other people have access to your room? Will there be background noise?
- Make sure the logistics are set up: The computer, chair, etc. should be at an ergonomic height, make sure your mic/headset speakers are working. Make sure you're not muted.

Equipment

Equipment: headsets

A headset with a boom mike is recommended. Headsets for teleconferencing with a USB connection to the computer give the best results. Noise cancelling and protection from sudden loud noises (toxic noise) are also important features.

Tip: Test your headset by calling someone else while using it.

- Can that person hear you clearly?
- When they speak in a muffled way, can you still understand them?
- Does it have a cough button (this could be a mute slide close to your head)

Equipment: internet connection.

The interpreter should be directly connected to the internet through an Ethernet cable. Wi-Fi connections are unreliable, and the interpreter may suffer interruptions in the connection.

Fiber optic connection to your home. Some internet providers have a shared system, where there is a high bandwidth connection shared by several homes. Interpreters can't afford to have their connection drop because of high traffic on the shared system.

The fastest bandwidth available. Ideally, the interpreter should have a connection of at least 60 Mbps (megabits/second). If a higher speed is available, it is recommended.

Equipment: visual background

Platforms such as Zoom have backgrounds available. However, an electronic background can create distracting effects when interpreters move.

Having a physical screen as a background is ideal. Some language companies that subcontract interpreters for remote services require that interpreters use a solid color background, which can be a screen.

Regardless, be aware of what can be seen behind you, and provide a neat, non-distracting background.

Test your internet speed

Speed test by Ookla - The Global Broadband Speed Test

- Push go.
- How fast are your ping, your download, and your upload?
- Ping: time for the signal to get there and back.
- Download: information coming to your computer.
- Upload: information from you to the web.
- What are you downloading and uploading right now?

Other considerations

Standing and stretching once an hour is a standard health recommendation. Simultaneous conference interpreters switch every 20 minutes to maintain quality in booth settings.

When working for remote interpreting companies, they often allow 15-minute breaks every 2.5 hours as well as a mandatory lunch break.

Compensation: There should be no difference in compensation between remote and onsite interpreting. If there should be a difference, it should be with reimbursing for telecommunication expenses vs. mileage.

Reference material

<http://www.ata-divisions.org/ID/interpreting-on-site-or-remote-a-user-perspective/>

<https://najit.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/TI-Descriptions.pdf>

<https://www.fit-ift.org/publications/papers/>

https://www.imiaweb.org/uploads/presentations/2010_15.pdf

<https://www.lep.gov/language-access-planning>

See the Translation and Interpreting Procurement Services, (TIPS) sheets:

Tips on hiring the right telephonic interpretation vendor

[https://prod.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS Telephone Vendor Selection.pdf](https://prod.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS_Telephone_Vendor_Selection.pdf)

Issued by the US Department of Justice Federal Coordination and Compliance Section.

Tips for working with telephone interpreters

[https://www.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS Telephone Interpreters 0.pdf](https://www.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS_Telephone_Interpreters_0.pdf)

Issued by the US Department of Justice Federal Coordination and Compliance Section. This sheet can be useful for other settings

What does it mean to be a Certified linguist?

[https://www.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS Trust Me Im Certified.pdf](https://www.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS_Trust_Me_Im_Certified.pdf)

Issued by the US Department of Justice Federal Coordination and Compliance Section.

Building an effective staff language service program

[https://www.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS Effective Language Program.pdf](https://www.lep.gov/sites/lep/files/media/document/2020-03/TIPS_Effective_Language_Program.pdf)

Issued by the US Department of Justice Federal Coordination and Compliance Section.