Team Interpreting: Best Practices
by Debra Russell

Has team interpreting changed over the past ten years? A few years ago, I prepared an article designed to help interpreters ask questions that would structure their conversations in order to prepare themselves for teamwork. The material stemmed from workshops that I had taught, along with ideas and experiences from Karen Malcolm and Risa Shaw. When asked to write about team interpreting for this newsletter, it seemed that the previous material might serve as a springboard, and I have combined it with new data derived from looking at the kinds of written conversations that interpreters hold while working together.

Team interpreting refers to interpreting situations where two or more interpreters are working together with the goal of creating ONE interpretation, capitalizing on each other's strengths, and supporting each other for consistency and success. At the time of the original article, teams were often composed of interpreters who were both hearing. However increasingly, we see Deaf and non- deaf interpreters working in teams. One example of this occurred during the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf (ICED) held in July 2011 in Vancouver BC. At that congress, some forty-four interpreters came together to work as teams providing ASL-English interpretation and International Sign. The International Sign interpreter teams had Deaf and non-deaf interpreters, and depending on the language preferences of the Deaf interpreter, their team interpreter may have been feeding in ASL, BSL, Auslan, and so on. With any team it is important to have the conversation about how to work together, and when creating teams composed of Deaf and non-deaf interpreters, it is even more important to talk about the work, as our interpreting experience, along with our linguistic and cultural knowledge, may be very different.

A foundational premise in team interpreting is that all team members are responsible for the success or failure of the work. This is an important aspect when building team practices, in that it forms the foundation for sharing preparation work, actively supporting each in producing a cohesive interpretation, and managing any problems that may arise during the work. However when teams are new to working with each other, these practices may need to be honed. The following information may enhance the experience of teaming.

Pre-Assignment Preparation:

When asking interpreters about their most successful team interpreting experiences, it would appear that the success came from a shared guideline that "anything is talkable". However the challenge today may be that hearing interpreters are more comfortable having these conversations in English, and when working with Deaf interpreters, they must find new ways to talk about the work in ASL. The idea that “anything is talkable” may be a new notion for those who view teaming preparation sessions to involve only a discussion of how long each person will interpret and compensation considerations. However the concept fits nicely with our AVLIC Code of Ethics Guidelines for Professional Conduct and the AVLIC Dispute Resolution Process.

Some of the following topics may be reviewed prior to an assignment, others may be discussed at an agreed upon time after the assignment. When working with colleagues that you have little experience with, it may take more time to hold these discussions, but inevitably, the time will be worth it. There are plenty of options for holding the face-to-face conversations via videophone or skype, well before the assignment. When preparing with colleagues that you frequently work with, the time factor will be less, but it is still important to check in with each other on many of these issues. The following areas might guide your conversations:

1. Can you describe your interpreting process and style, including your:
    - interpreting model (how do you see interpreting – for example do you see interpreting as a meaning-based task, or as a task where lexical transcoding reveals the source message? If working with a Deaf interpreter, do they prefer to receive the source language in ASL or in more English-like structure?)
    - model of teaming (what strategies do you use to sustain active involvement in the interpreting when in the support role vs. the active role? What is your vision of ideal team support?)
    - processing time (do you like to wait for a complete thought? Do you typically start too soon and want your team interpreter to cue you to hold back?)
    - interpreting strengths and what you may need help with
    - audience assessment (language preferences, pre-knowledge of
    - consumers) ◦ how and when to offer feeds that are effective for you (words, chunks,
    - phrases, sentences) and whether to feed in ASL or English
    - dominant ear or eye issues that affect positioning ◦ what decision-making process you use when determining whether or not
    - to use a feed
    - preferences for physical touch and distance

2. What signals will you use for the assignment? Who will slow down or stop the speaker/signer, and how, if necessary? How will we signal the deaf consumer to let them know we have switched voice interpreters? Who will check with consumers about whether the signals are suitable for them? What signals will each interpreter use to request a feed?

3. When will turn-taking occur? How will we switch? How will we signal each other if we want the team member to take over prior to the agreed-upon time frame? If working within larger teams (e.g.: multiple services - LSQ/ASL/International Sign), can the switches be coordinated to reduce the visual distraction? What signal will work well in the setting? Who will be responsible for timekeeping?

4. Who will begin interpreting and who will begin monitoring the work, and why?

5. Feedback: Do you want encouragement during the assignment? Do you want feedback during the interpretation? Is there something that you are working that you would like me to note during the interpretation? Will it distract you if I take notes? When monitoring the interpretation for completeness and accuracy, what features do you tend for look for, and why? (I will come back to this area in order to share some new data about the kinds of notes used between interpreters)

6. What preparation work needs to occur with consumers? Will the preparation tasks be shared or taken on by one interpreter? Who will ask for the preparation?

    One trend I am seeing in my work is that interpreter coordinators are using Dropbox as a tool where presenters can deposit presentations, articles and papers, in order to make the material accessible to the interpreters. These tools are very useful in that the materials are always available to the team if they have internet access, the materials do not have to be downloaded to one's computer or printed, and if WIFI is available while interpreting, interpreters can be viewing the presentation via their IPad. The preparation materials can be so helpful in helping us work through accents, complicated content, and lead us to other sources that can aid us in understanding the material.

One of the other challenges that I see on teams is that some interpreters take the preparation seriously, and review the material in advance and others choose not to do so. These decisions impact the team dynamics and the overall quality of the work. While coordinating the large team at ICED, we had very positive feedback from consumers who said it was obvious when the interpreters had chosen to prepare and that shaped how they viewed the team. The same consumers indicated that they could also tell when interpreters were not well prepared and that also influenced their perceptions about the professionalism of those individual interpreters.

Finally, a tip from a cherished colleague: View the YouTube clips, not just the PowerPoint presentation!

7. What strategies will be used to deal with conflict? When will we debrief after the assignment?

8. Other issues: clothing/travel/parking/safe walks/meal breaks, etc.

Pre-conference between interpreters and consumers

While we prepare as teams, we also want to think about how we prepare with the consumers we will work with in a given assignment.

1. Does the person(s) you are meeting with know how to use interpreting services? If not, who will explain how to work effectively with the interpreters?

2. How will introductions be made? Is there a need to explain the use of simultaneous/consecutive interpreting within the assignment? If we plan to use notes with each other, how should this be explained to consumers? How will the notes be disposed of post-assignment?

3. What is the purpose/goal of the interpreted interaction? For conference work, what are the central messages the consumers hope to leave with the audience? If using audiovisuals, how will lighting be handled? Specific questions that arise from the preparation the team has done with the presenter's materials?

4. How should the interpreters signal you when we need to interrupt you, need time to complete the interpretation, or need to switch interpreters?

During the Interpretation

During the interpretation, it can be useful to communicate about the following issues:

1. Is there a need to adjust the volume of the spoken interpretation, or the signing size/style of the signed interpretation?

2. Do the time frames or processes need to be adjusted as the assignment proceeds? For example, do we need to split the process so one interpreter performs the ASL to ENG and the other interpreter performs the ENG to ASL, in order to enhance the work?

3. If the information that was fed was not used immediately, it may mean:
    - the feed was not heard (does the interpreter need a visual or tactile cue to signal that a feed is coming?)

- the volume was too low, or the signing not seen
- the information may be incorporated later

But, ultimately, the decision as to if, how, and when the feed will be used is the active interpreter's.

Notes as a Communication Tool

Over the years, I have often written notes to my teammates, when it was appropriate. Recently I asked several teams if I could review any written notes they used on an assignment. Six interpreters participated, offering their raw notes. Several themes emerged when looking at the notes that may be helpful to other teams looking for ways to enhance their interpreting work.

For example, all teams used the notes as a way of communicating positive feedback to each other about the interpretation. When interviewed after, it was clear that these notes had a further benefit as it strengthened the professional relationship between the interpreters. For example:

> *"Great affect and loved the word choices that spoke to the historical references to Shakespeare"*
>
> *"Processing time – about 8 seconds – allows you to produce ASL grammar suitable for this consumer."*
>
> *"Great incorporation of signs from audience questions"*
>
> *"Internalized passivity – great that's a GREAT way of describing it. You are so accurate and effective today – clearly awake now!"*

Such examples show the team investing in their professional relationship, noting positive elements within the work and bringing the features to the attention of their teammate. Further, the teams used notes to draw attention to language and interpretation patterns that may be a challenge for the other interpreter, for example:

> *"I notice that you have started each sentence with "so" and are using "and" to connect all of the thoughts - I wonder if you can pause more between thoughts?"*
>
> *"Tell you later – suggest adding "frustrate" or other sign to deepen meaning and adjust packing for emphasis – I'll follow up with you on break about this."*
>
> *"SL – research shows TL: research "proves" – never proves really; impact for audience that knows about research; what will they think about the Deaf consumer – let's talk this through..."*
>
> *" Quay – pronounced KEY not qw"*

The notes also showed examples of where the interpreters communicated about decisions that needed to be made, for example:

> *"I expect I'll miss many of the names of who is speaker when the Deaf person shadows the audience and I don't think its effective to interrupt and clarify. Your thoughts?"*
>
> *"I am tiring – can we move to 15 minutes instead of 20?"*

Finally, the notes contained practical information, like names of participants around a table, and notes of names signs if the interpreter's were less familiar with the Deaf participants, timing of starts/ends of turns, and references to preparation to be read in advance of the next day.

The notes were professional in tone, had the occasional diagram or sketch on them, and would have been viewed as "interpreter working notes" if consumers had asked to see them prior to being disposed of post-assignment.

Post-Assignment Topics

The post-assignment conversation can be an opportunity to further enhance the team experience and to build professional relationships with your colleagues. You may wish to discuss the following, which may include reviewing the notes exchanged between the team, and/or talking about these three areas:

1. Review what specific features contributed to a successful interpretation. Were there features that hindered an effective interpretation?

2. What worked well; what was comfortable for you; what would you change next time, and why? What did your teammate do that you particularly appreciated?

3. Is there anything that needs to be resolved between team members? The idea here is that if you feel the need to go and tell someone else about your teammate, you need to talk to your teammate first. If that isn't successful you might seek advice from a respected colleague and/or mentor. Is this a concern to be pursued, or is this something you can let go of in order to maintain relationships with your colleagues?

One of the keys to effective teamwork is communication, and these tips can help you structure your conversations toward the goal of providing successful interpretation within a team context, and building a professional community of interpreters engaged in thinking and talking together.