TEAM INTERPRETING: A JOINT VENTURE[1]
Risa Shaw, SC:L, CSC, CI
Private Practice Interpreter

In any interpreting situation, our goal is accurate, effective interpretation. To accomplish this goal, a number of factors must be taken into consideration. The focus of this article is one of those factors: that more than one interpreter may be necessary to insure accurate, effective interpretation. This article will examine what it means to work together effectively and describe the teaching methods I use when working with interpreters to develop and hone team interpreting skills.

Team interpreting is a shared decision-making process in which the interpreters operate as a single unit as they work together on one interpretation. This may be necessary for a number of reasons, including: the density of the material[2]; the number of participants, their roles and the purpose for their interaction; the context; the type of situation; the power dynamics; the pace; the time of day; and/or the duration of the interpretation. Duration, or length of time, traditionally has been the determining factor, though considering a host of other factors provides a more realistic and appropriate list of criteria.

The exact manner in which the interpreters function will depend on the situation. Typically we work together in pairs[3], with one interpreter producing the actual interpretation and the second interpreter monitoring the interpretation, being available to provide information or correction, and to deal with logistics in order to maintain a high level of accuracy. The two interpreters essentially swap duties and responsibilities when they spell each other.

A certain level of mutual trust and respect is needed to maintain the integrity of a team. The pair must operate from a common understanding of what the task requires and what their responsibilities are. They need to discuss their individual working styles, expectations of their teammate, knowledge of and expectations of the situation, preparation undertaken, and problem solving strategies. They also need to agree on techniques to monitor, provide information to and request information from each other, how to switch duties, and what type of signals or cues they want to use with each other. These are just some of the topics of discussion that become second nature as we talk to each other in preparation for working with one another. While interpreting, the team continues their communication with one another, typically in a discreet and often abbreviated fashion, in order to collaboratively produce an effective interpretation. After the interpreting session is over, the interpreters will benefit from reflecting on what was effective for them as a team and what they may want to do differently the next time.

When considering the composition of a team, we take into account the usual factors for each individual interpreter (familiarity with the type of situation, the context and the persons involved, linguistic and cultural fluency, interpreting skill levels, etc.). In addition, we need to consider the compatibility of the potential team and the ways in which they may (or may not) complement each other in all of the above areas and more. We want to ensure that what each interpreter has to contribute will meet the needs of the specific job. It is important to keep in mind that the ability to negotiate and achieve a successful working relationship is _not_ proportional to interpreting skill.

Teaching Methods

For the past 13 years I have had the pleasure of working with interpreters of all levels of experience and skill in workshops and classes focused on developing team interpreting skills. Most of the training time is devoted to hands-on work for the participants.

With a context, topic and speaker background, participants work in pairs (after creating a profile of the person(s) for whom they are interpreting). They discuss how they will work together, do the actual interpreting and monitoring (the interpreter in the "second" role receives additional information in order to monitor and help her/his teammate and so that her/his teammate will be able to rely on her/him), and then discuss how the work went, focusing on the mechanics of working together. The focus of the course is on the teaming work, not on the interpretations.

I emphasize the need for participants to make conscious decisions throughout the entire interpreting process (beginning the moment they are asked to accept a job), the need to know their own decision-making process (self-awareness is a key component) and to be able to relay such information to their partner. These seemingly simple skills are paramount in successful team interpreting.

When questions such as, "What do I say when someone asks me why we need two interpreters for this?" or "What if my teammate is resistant to the idea of monitoring?" we set a context and role play the scenario.

I use large newsprint to list the topics that come up during discussion. For the first several training sessions I did on this topic, I typed up all of those notes and sent them to the participants. I realized that the same topics were brought up in each workshop, without fail, regardless of the group of participants or their number of years of experience. The topics include areas such as how to build and keep a team intact, factors that influence a team's effectiveness, pre-conference topics, post-conference topics, what happens during the interpretation, ways to provide information, types of information to provide, signals and cues, responsibilities of the "second" interpreter role, responsibilities of the "first" interpreter role, and negotiating strategies within the team.

As interpreters, we take pride in our work ethic and in providing a service, albeit one that is not always understood or respected. When we respect and clearly convey the daunting nature and complexity of the task of interpreting, those who hire us and with whom we work accept the conditions that are required to provide them with quality service. It is to an interpreter's credit when she/he understands the compelling circumstances requiring more than a single interpreter to provide accurate and honest interpreting. Watching successful teams of interpreters work with certainty and grace, and seeing consumers express when and how a team made a real, tangible difference in the usefulness of the interpretation, is the true measure that we are achieving our goal of accurate, effective interpretation.

Risa Shaw has based her interpreting and teaching practice in the Washington D.C. area for the past 17 years. Ms. Shaw currently specializes in interpreting in legal settings, along with her teaching. She has been teaching courses and leading workshops around the country and in Canada since 1987, and is well known for teaching on the topics of Team Interpreting, Analysis of Interpretations (feedback), The Interpreting Process,

and Interpreting in Legal Settings (including an overview course and a series of advanced seminars). She has undergraduate degrees in Interpreting from Gallaudet University (AA), in Linguistics from George Mason University (BIS) and her graduate degree in Education: Teaching Interpreting from Western Maryland College (M.S.). She is a member of the first graduating class of the TIP Program. Ms. Shaw has been an active member of CIT since 1984 and RID since 1982, and serves on the Maryland Administrative Office of the Court Advisory Committee on Interpreters. She was awarded the new legal certification (SC:L) by the RID in 1997 and also holds the CSC and CI certifications. Ms. Shaw has presented at CIT and RID conventions on the national, regional and local levels. Her work has been published in CIT Proceedings and newsletters, the RID Journal of Interpretation and the RID VIEWS, as well as in international publications.

Footnotes

1 The principles in this paper apply equally to teams of interpreters made up of any configuration (hearing and/or Deaf interpreters, and interpreters of any languages). However, this paper does not attempt to include all of the issues that arise for the various configurations.

2 For further explication of this concept see: Palma, Janis, (1995). Textual density and the judiciary interpreter's performance. American Translators Association, Translation and the Law, Vol. VIII.

3 A team of interpreters may be of any number, and is not limited to two people. I refer to a team as a pair or two people in this paper only for the sake of linguistic ease.

NOTICE TO THE CIT MEMBERSHIP

Special Mailing

You will receive a special mailing postmarked by July 15, 2000

Proposed Bylaw Revisions
and
Candidates for Board Positions

In your mailboxes soon!