



# How to decide whether to use an interpreting service

## Barriers to effective communication in English

There are many things that can reduce a person's ability to communicate effectively in English, particularly when English is their second language. These include:

- stress
- unfamiliarity with the situation or uncertainty about what is expected
- an imbalance in power/knowledge between the parties
- background noise
- a conversation involving more than two people, especially if there is overlapping speech
- an inability to see the speaker's face
- people speaking too quickly
- the use of technical terms, figurative language, abstract nouns and complicated sentences
- effects of ageing (e.g. reverting to first language) or medical conditions (e.g. dementia)

**Remember that the interpreter is not there just for the client. The interpreter is there for both of you, to help you communicate with each other.**

## Things to consider before you decide whether to work with an interpreter

Deciding how well a person speaks English (assessing English proficiency) is a complex task. Untrained people tend to significantly underestimate the amount of miscommunication that occurs when communicating with someone with limited English proficiency.

If a person speaks English as a second language and has had limited education in English, it is likely that you should work with a credentialed interpreter. This is especially true when you are dealing with specialised terminology and unfamiliar situations such as the medical and legal matters.

In some cases it is obvious that an interpreter is needed for effective communication. However, in many cases you will need to think carefully to identify people who can communicate in English about everyday familiar situations, but need the assistance of a credentialed interpreter to communicate in unfamiliar situations with technical language.

## When to engage an interpreter

Engaging a credentialed interpreter is recommended if:

- requested by the client
- the client cannot comprehend or respond to basic questions in English
- understanding and responding between you and the client is difficult or limited
- the client relies on family members, friends or carers to communicate
- the client prefers to speak in his/her own language, or
- English is the client's second language, and the situation is stressful or complex.

## Is communication between you and the client adequate?

Ask yourself, how close am I to the “ideal communication benchmark” – does the client **fully understand** me, and can they **fully express himself or herself** in this situation?

Another question to ask yourself – if you became ill in a non-English speaking country and had to rely on the client to interpret for you into English, would you be happy to proceed? If you would be hesitant relying on them to adequately communicate to you what was going on, you should not ask them to go through the same process without the assistance of a credentialed interpreter.

If you decide that the client does not need the assistance of an interpreter, you must be satisfied that they can handle the full range of language (including speed, technical terms and any information they may encounter that informs decision-making, such as complicated medication regimes or legal jargon. Otherwise, you are putting the client at a disadvantage compared to someone for whom English is a first language.

## The dangers of biographical data

Some people who speak a language other than English will have had repeated experience providing biographical data to service providers in English (*where do you live, what’s your date of birth, are you employed, etc*).

Do not rely on the client’s ability to provide biographical data as the basis for deciding whether to work with an interpreter. Just because a client can adequately answer simple questions about their life, this does not mean they have sufficient English proficiency to provide and respond to complex information such as relaying symptoms or understanding legal processes or medical treatments.

If you ask a client, “do you speak English?” they may quite truthfully answer “yes”, because they do speak some English.

Instead, ask, “*what language do you speak most at home?*”

In order to get an accurate picture of a person’s English proficiency, move the conversation into topics and styles that require more detailed comprehension and response. Use open-ended questions to better gauge comprehension and communication skills when using English.

## The dangers of over-modifying your speech

Often when we get the impression that a person does not fully understand us, we intuitively compensate by reframing unanswered open questions to “either/or” questions or “yes/no” questions. For example, “*Can you tell me how you feel?*” becomes “*Have you got a headache?*”

When you do this, the client becomes heavily reliant on your prompts, suggestions, tone of voice and other cues to enable the conversation to proceed. In other words, the client’s ability to communicate is limited to the questions you ask.

Even though the client appears to more easily answer questions with a yes/no response, you have not provided them with the option of fully explaining their own symptoms or opinions. Yes/no questions should not be relied on to decide whether to engage an interpreter.

## How to talk with your client about the need for an interpreter

It is important to raise the topic of working with an interpreter in a sensitive manner. There may be a number of reasons a client might not want to work with an interpreter:

- They might not know what an interpreter does
- They might have had a negative experience with an interpreter in the past
- They might not want other people knowing about their business
- They might think they have to pay for an interpreter
- They may feel shame or anger because you are indicating their English isn't 'good enough'.

## A suggested way to discuss the need for an interpreter

In most cases, your ability to discuss the need for an interpreter will depend on the client's ability to understand and communicate in English. One way you could raise this issue is by saying:

*"Before we start talking, I want to ask you about what language we should use today. Maybe we can talk in English, or maybe it's better if we talk in your language. I don't speak your language, so if we think it's better to talk in your language I will ask an interpreter to help me."*

Wherever possible, you should explain the interpreter's role before you directly ask the client what they think about having an interpreter present, so that they can make an informed decision:

*"An interpreter is someone who speaks your language and speaks English and has had training to help them understand the technical/medical/legal words that you will hear today. The interpreter will put everything I say into your language, and everything you say into English. The interpreter must follow rules. They can't take sides. They must keep the message the same - they can't add anything or leave anything out. The interpreter must keep everything we talk about secret."*

## Determining the preferred language

A client's language cannot be determined reliably from their country of birth. For example, a person from China may speak Mandarin, Cantonese or another Chinese dialect. In some cases more than one language may be spoken.

The following steps may help to determine a client's preferred language:

- If a client speaks sufficient English, it may be possible to ask for their preferred language, especially if they have used interpreters previously.
- Use visual aids that list languages. The client may be able to point to the language they speak. See the [Language list by country and place](#)
- If this fails, contact an interpreting service, as they may be able to assist you to identify the language through a telephone interpreter.