



Working with British Sign Language Interpreters

Both deaf and hearing people use interpreters to help communication between them. Here is a list of useful points to remember when working with a BSL interpreter:

The interpreter's role and preparation

The main role of an interpreter is to pass messages from people using BSL into English and vice versa. Interpreters use their skill and knowledge of two different languages and cultures to receive a message given in one language and pass it on in the other language.

An Interpreter has to convey every piece of information that is given in one language into another without omitting or adding anything to it. An Interpreter must interpret everything that occurs, including comments and questions from others present.

In BSL interpreting, it is the meaning of the message that is interpreted, not each individual word. It's impossible for the interpreter to deal with information they do not fully understand. Therefore it is absolutely essential to send them scripts of speeches, minutes, agendas, presentations or any other relevant background information and definitions of jargon and technical terms well in advance. It is recommended that a period of 4 to 6 weeks in advance of the assignment is ideal, with 2 weeks being the absolute minimum.

The interpreting process

Sign language interpreters may look very active with their hands, but in actual fact most of the hard work is going on in their heads. As with any other interpreted language, every English word doesn't necessarily have a corresponding sign in BSL and each language has its own grammatical structure. The interpreting process involves expressing the same meaning using a different vocabulary and grammatical structure.

This means

- Only ONE message can be interpreted at a time. Therefore, in a meeting it is important that only one person speaks or signs at a time.
- Interpreting requires intense concentration and can be very tiring. At top speed interpreters may be processing up to 20,000 words per hour.
- For meetings and events longer than 2 hours at least two interpreters are necessary
- The mental processing takes time and there will be a delay as the message passes from one language to another.

Where the interpreter should stand or sit

Always think about lighting and background:

The interpreter must be very easy to see, so they should always be placed in good light -- never in front of a window, or with light coming from behind as this shadows their face.

The background behind the interpreter should be visually calm. Vivid patterns or a harsh white background can be distracting or strenuous to the eye.

Think about the situation too:

- Job interview
Interviewer and applicant face one another with the interpreter next to the hearing person, or seated to one side
- Round table meeting
The interpreter should be positioned directly opposite any deaf participants
- Conference
If the presenter is deaf, the interpreter should be positioned opposite them, often in the front row of the audience in order to see the signing clearly.
If the presenter is hearing, the interpreter should be positioned close to them and near any visual aids, so the deaf people in the audience can view quickly and easily.

Other points to be aware of

Interpreters cannot retain much of what they have interpreted, as their full attention is focused on processing the content from one language to another. Therefore, don't expect an interpreter to 'fill in' any deaf people who were not present for the full session.

Don't ask the interpreter any questions, or make comments to them – it will make their task more difficult and they are not supposed to get involved in this way.

When giving presentations, speak clearly at a normal pace. Speak naturally, in full sentences.

Interpreters follow a strict code of ethics which ensures that confidentiality is always maintained.

For any further information on interpreters or what materials or equipment you may need to provide contact the Interpreting and Communication Department at

Merseyside Society for Deaf People on 0151 228 0888