

**Teaching through an Interpreter**  
**15 tips for optimal results**  
by Robert B. Reekie

Interpreters are very special people. They clarify and provide understanding. Over the past 30 years I've had the privilege of working in tandem with interpreters on every continent, involving more than 20 languages, including Russian, Chinese, Lingala, Kiswahili, Hindi, Thai, Spanish and French. Based on these rewarding tandem experiences, here are suggestions that I've found useful as a cross-cultural trainer.

1. Take time to sit down with the interpreter. Ask this person about his/her work as an interpreter. What sort of material has he worked with? Has he interpreted editorial material?
2. The more the interpreter knows, the more effective the interpretation. As you share together in conversation, the interpreter will develop a feel for how you, the trainer, talk and how your words flow. Also, the interpreter will gain insight on cadences.
3. How does the interpreter prefer to handle translation? Some prefer simultaneous translation, while others are more efficient when sentences or a paragraph are spoken by the trainer and then translated. Generally, simultaneous translation is less effective for training workshops.
4. Review all technical terms and words important to the task of publishing, editing or writing. Also, talk about nuances, key sentences and ideas to be covered. Discuss any explicit and implied meanings.
5. If using an overhead projector and handouts, be sure to ask the interpreter or someone fluent in the language to translate and prepare these *before* the workshop. To assist the trainer, it helps to have the language of the trainer side-by-side with the language of the workshop.
6. When using a chalk or white board, do some examples with the interpreter of what you intend to use. This lets the interpreter see how you handle the materials and where you will be positioned.
7. Interpretation usually means the trainer will have about half the allotted time to share. So, if the time slot is 60 minutes, the spoken time for the translator will be closer to 30 minutes or less. Keep this in mind when preparing.
8. When working with a translator, be sure to watch the faces and eyes of the listeners. This will help you determine whether or not the subject, idea, or

9. illustration is being grasped. Be ready to repeat or re-phrase something said.
10. When working with interpreters, trainers are more effective when care is taken with word choices and how sentences are formed and expressed.
11. Do not rush through what you want to say or share. You want your listeners to learn with understanding and insight, and you can help learners discover a truth by using an illustration or anecdote. Decide ahead of the talk what is essential and important.
12. Some interpreters prefer to work from a manuscript. Be cautious about a word-for-word translation. Good interpreters grasp ideas and concepts to give clarity to what is being said. Translation is more effective and enjoyable when trainer and interpreter are a synchronized team, as together they explain, explore, show, and guide.
13. Interpreters must also be effective in handling translation from participants who raise a question, give comments, and ask for clarification.
14. Interpretation is extremely demanding, so the trainer needs to beware of overburdening the interpreter. If possible, the interpreter should have an alternate or backup person.
15. Not all interpreters are equal. Some are superb, while others range from good to average to misleading. The trainer will be able to gauge the interpreter's rapport with listeners by feedback from the floor. If an interpreter is not communicating effectively, the trainer will need to talk with him/her and also with the workshop or seminar director.

Never take your interpreter for granted. Always remember that without your mouthpiece – the interpreter – your words and ideas will remain beyond understanding, and you will be out of touch with your listeners.