



Language Interpretation for Diverse Families: Considerations for Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

The special education field is challenged by a lack of attention to and recruitment of well-trained language interpreters in schools. As such, special education teachers need to take a leadership role in working with interpreters to ensure diverse families are collaborative members of individualized education program (IEP) teams. Using the framework of collaborative family school partnerships, this article describes practical strategies for special educators when working with interpreters during IEP meetings with families. Taking a proactive role when working with interpreters can help improve the quality of service delivery for diverse students with disabilities and their families.

Keywords

bilingual issues, collaboration, cultural, diversity(ies), linguistic, involvement, parent(s)

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), 19.6% of U.S. residents speak a language other than English at home. These national trends are reflected in U.S. schools, where more than 5 million school-age children (roughly 11% of all K–12 students) are English language learners (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006). Of these, 12% also qualify for special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Thus, special education teachers not only may work with students who have been

diagnosed as having a disability but also may be teaching these same students who are English language learners.

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This factor must be considered when teachers are preparing for and holding individualized education program (IEP) meetings with the families of these children.

Conducting IEP meetings for students who have disabilities and are English language learners requires greater consideration compared to typical school-based meetings (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Lo, 2008a). English language learners with disabilities are likely to have parents and other family members who do not speak English and, like all parents, whose participation is critical to their children's success (Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). These language differences require an additional layer of planning for teachers to aid their communication and collaboration with parents and families (Lo, 2012). To assist in collaborative decision-making processes, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and the resulting regulations (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) mandated that schools provide opportunities for parent participation in part by ensuring that language interpreters (e.g., English–Chinese, English–Spanish) are provided for parents who do not speak English. The interpreter's role is to facilitate communication, collaboration, and partnerships during program planning.

Yet, as with all forms of communication, errors during interpretation can occur. Indeed, researchers have found difficulties with interpretation quality during IEP meetings (e.g., Klingner & Harry, 2006; Lo, 2008b) stemming not only from difficulties with accuracy but also from a misunderstanding of interpreter roles as well as a lack of cultural understanding and awareness (Chen, Chan, Brekken, & Valverde, 2000; Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003b). Although little research has been conducted in the field of special education regarding interpretation errors, medical research provides a fruitful context for discussion. In medical research regarding the use of language interpreters, results have indicated that quality interpretation is related to more positive medical service outcomes and higher care satisfaction by patients (Garcia, Roy, Okada, Perkins, & Wiebe, 2004; Karliner, Jacobs, Chen, & Mutha, 2007). Conversely, the use of untrained interpreters can lead to negative impacts for patients who do not speak English (Flores, 2005).

Recent studies investigating parents' experiences during the IEP process have indicated that cultural and linguistic barriers continue to exist and can preclude parents' meaningful participation in decision making about their children (Harry, 2008; Reiman et al., 2010; Salas, 2004). Language differences, unprofessional behavior on the part of school personnel (e.g., not attending meetings, arriving late and/or leaving early, checking the clock repeatedly during meetings), and poor translation and interpretation services have been cited by parents as specific challenges. As a result, parents also report feeling marginalized, as though their input is not valued or actively sought by school professionals (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Lo,

2008a, 2009; Salas, 2004). Moreover, when interpretation errors occur during IEP meetings, parents can be denied the opportunity to participate in an informed and meaningful way, which is in direct contrast to the spirit and letter of special education law (Cheatham, 2011).

Parent participation in decisions regarding the education of their student with special needs is underscored in IDEIA. Parents and students with disabilities are partners with educators in decision making about students' educational programming and should experience full opportunities for participation and support during educational meetings. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2010b) developed ethical principles for the special education profession, which include recommendations that special education teachers develop relationships with families as well as advocate for resources that will improve learning outcomes for students with disabilities. These themes are reiterated in the CEC *Standards for Professional Practice* (CEC, 2010a). Furthermore, CEC recommends that teachers implement collaborative conferences with families, communicate effectively with families, and evaluate collaborative activities. Forging supportive, mutually respectful relationships between families and school professionals represents the cornerstone of collaborative partnerships (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004).

The vision of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 2011a) is to make effective communication a human right. To accomplish this mission, ASHA provided specific guidelines and practical suggestions that can assist practitioners in implementing effective communication for families of students with learning disabilities and communication disorders. To minimize miscommunication and maximize opportunities for parent participation, ASHA recommended several guidelines for selecting an interpreter and working with him or her prior to, during, and after an interpretation session. Some of ASHA's (2011b) recommendations for providers include establishing rapport with the interpreter, describing roles of people attending the meeting, building in extra time for meetings, and meeting after the session to debrief and engage in future planning.

The special education field is challenged by a lack of attention to and recruitment of well-trained language interpreters in schools. Educators may ask ad hoc interpreters (e.g., bilingual teachers, secretaries, lunchroom personnel) who have little or no training to serve as language interpreters (Mueller, Singer, & Grace, 2004). Moreover, some educators may even ask children to interpret during school-based meetings despite professional recommendations against the practice (e.g., ASHA, 2011b; Lynch, 2011). Given their responsibility to advocate for students and families (CEC, 2010a, 2010b), special educators should take a leadership role within their programs to seek out qualified language interpreters, for example, through other local education programs or community service organizations.

Table 1. Strategies for Teachers When Working With Interpreters During IEP Meetings.

Before the meeting	During the meeting		After the meeting
	Reassuring strategies	Clarifying strategies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet and talk with interpreter before the meeting • Lay a foundation for the meeting • Ask questions about interpreter’s style • Clarify interpreter’s role • Ascertain interpreter’s previous experience/ comfort level with IEP meetings • Provide training in use of specialized educational terms/procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind all participants of the importance of confidentiality • Ensure all meeting participants speak directly to the parents and other family members • Reassure parents of their important role in the meeting • Respect any level of parent participation, understanding cultural norms • Highlight strengths of the student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask open-ended, clarifying questions • Check for understanding not only with the family but also with the interpreter • Avoid jargon and oversimplification of discussed information • Summarize key points at meeting’s end • Be aware of nonverbal body language of interpreter and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss any interpretation-related difficulties that occurred during meeting • Ask families to discuss their level of satisfaction with interpreted meeting • Seek professional development regarding language interpretation for all team members as necessary

IEP = individualized education plan.

Teacher Strategies for Working With Interpreters

Parents’ participation in decisions regarding the education of their student with special needs has become increasingly significant with each successive revision/reauthorization of IDEA. Although individual teachers may not have the resources or ability to make systems changes to ensure proper interpreter training for every family, a primary responsibility in collaborating with all families is to understand the family’s needs and facilitate family participation in decision making about the education of their child with the disability (Friend & Cook, 2010). With the goal of building true family–professional partnerships (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011), teachers can frame their approach to empowering families by viewing them as a support for mutual academic and behavioral goals and by employing specific strategies to facilitate communication with parents through the use of targeted collaborative efforts with interpreters. Discussions in the field have centered on strategies to ensure higher quality language interpretation for families whose native language is not English (California Healthcare Interpreters Association, 2002; Isaac, 2005; Lynch, 2011). A focus on strategies occurring at three times relative to the interpreted IEP meeting (i.e., before, during, and after) hold promise for more effective interpreted IEP-team collaboration (see Table 1).

Before the Meeting

Before any session in which an interpreter may be needed, teachers can request to meet with the interpreter (ASHA, 2011b; Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Hsieh, 2008; Ohtake, Santos, & Fowler, 2000). Taking time to get acquainted can help all parties relax, build trust and rapport, and lay a foundation and purpose for the meeting. As interpreters may have differing interpretation styles, teachers can ask the interpreter to describe their preferred processes to help the meetings smoothly progress (ASHA, 2011b; Hilfinger Messias, McDowell, & Estrada, 2009; Hsieh, 2008). For example, a question such as “How often do you require pauses?” can help everyone in the meeting communicate more efficiently and effectively. Although ASHA (2011b) recommends frequent pauses, some experienced interpreters may find it effective to assimilate larger amounts of information before proceeding with the interpretation. To ascertain additional information on the interpreter’s style, another question teachers may pose is “Do you relay the information verbatim or do you prefer to paraphrase?” Engaging in such a discussion prior to the meeting enables the teacher and IEP team members to determine the extent to which the interpreter may be adding, deleting, or altering the content of the interpretation (Hart, Cheatham, & Jimenez-Silva, 2012).

In addition, teachers should spend time ascertaining the extent to which the interpreter has previously interpreted during special education meetings (ASHA, 2011b; Ohtake et al., 2000). Interpreters must have training and/or experience in the use of specialized educational terms and IDEIA procedures common to IEP and other school-based meetings (Hart et al., in press; Lo, 2008a). Teachers and other IEP team members need to inquire about the interpreter's level of comfort with and understanding of any terms and procedures that might be discussed to ensure parents' and educators' understanding of the student's needs and educational services. Interpreters can also be of assistance in ensuring that IEP meetings are culturally sensitive. Families may have differing views on teacher roles, parenting styles, and communication. For example, many families will defer to teachers as experts, whereas others may assume a more managerial style in interacting with educators (Lareau, 2000). To accommodate family members who may be more deferential in their approach to education professionals, teachers can ask the interpreter to let them know if any communication with the family is conducted in a culturally inappropriate manner (Friend & Cook, 2010; Ohtake et al., 2000).

During the Meeting

Reassuring strategies. Special education teachers and other IEP team members can employ strategies for reassurance and clarification during interpreted meetings. First, educators can help parents and family members feel reassured, reducing doubts or fears during these meetings about their children's education. Once all members are present, the person in charge of the meeting should remind all members present of the importance of confidentiality, pointing out that all information shared will be used for educational planning purposes only (ASHA, 2011b). Moreover, teachers should also ensure that everyone speaks directly to the parents and other family members (ASHA, 2011b; Friend & Cook, 2010). Although it may be tempting to look directly at the interpreter, it is more effective to focus communication toward the parents, including the use of verbal and nonverbal communication. For example, nonverbal encouragers, such as maintaining appropriate eye contact, nodding one's head in agreement, and having a pleasant facial expression, can reassure the family of the school personnel's support and positive regard for them. Moreover, teachers can gauge the interpreter's reactions to determine if the IEP meeting is continuing smoothly (Friend & Cook, 2010).

It is also important to reinforce the notion that parents and family members are valuable partners in the educational planning process. Families from some cultural backgrounds may view teachers as the experts, relying heavily on teachers as sources of information about best practices (Hanson & Lynch, 2003). When parents readily defer to professionals' expertise, it can be difficult to gain

information from and engage in meaningful collaboration with them. The teacher can ask the interpreter to help by providing knowledge of the family's culture as well as not only by interpreting the words provided by the teacher but also by communicating the tone of the information presented (Friend & Cook, 2010; Lo, 2010; Lopez, 2000; Ohtake et al., 2000). Teachers can encourage the interpreter to share the preferred communication style of the family. During the meeting the teacher can express reassuring comments to the family, such as, "I was hoping that with your input, we could develop a strategy that would help your child." Using accepting statements that include the words *we*, *us*, and *our* communicates a collaborative effort during the IEP process in which families have an integral role (Knackendoffel, Robinson, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1992). The interpreter's role in communicating both the reassuring message as well as the empathic tone is crucial.

Clarifying strategies. Educators can also foster effective communication and collaboration via language interpreters through the use of clarifying strategies. As with any profession, there are technical terms and procedures in special education that are known to professionals within the field but might not be known to individuals not directly working in special education. Therefore, it is easier to proactively prevent misunderstanding by avoiding the use of jargon and acronyms when possible (Ohtake et al., 2000; Trumbull, Greenfield, Rothstein-Fisch, & Quiroz, 2007). If jargon and acronyms cannot be avoided, teachers should also use words that define and describe the educational terms. Doing so not only helps clarify crucial terms for parents but also helps the interpreter use the same meaning as the teacher and family. As discussions continue to evolve, teachers should check for understanding by asking open-ended and clarifying questions (Lo, 2012). For example, teachers can ask questions such as, "You stated that you are concerned about your child's behavior. Can you tell me more about where and when the behavior occurs?" Though checking for understanding is a skill that might come naturally in conversations, it may be overlooked in an interpreting situation because it may feel unnatural for teachers and parents to communicate using this method. Checking for understanding can occur not only with the parents but also with the interpreter to help ensure understanding and opportunities for dialogue are occurring for all IEP meeting participants (Friend & Cook, 2010).

When describing terms, processes, or results during IEP meetings, teachers should avoid oversimplifying information (ASHA, 2011b). While an interpreter is assisting in a meeting, teachers may feel compelled to simplify information for the ease of the interpreter as well as for the understanding of the parents. However, doing so could result in inaccurate information being communicated, thereby contributing to misunderstandings among meeting participants (Javier, 2007). To address possible miscommunication instances that

may have gone unnoticed during a meeting, special education teachers should end the meetings by summarizing the major points and outcomes. Summarizing key points will reiterate information that was previously stated and allow all IEP team members another opportunity to reflect and engage in final discussion. If an interpretation error occurred during the meeting, summarizing information is another chance for the information to be presented in a different way and a possible chance for clarification. Teachers and IEP team members are not the only parties who can summarize the meeting information. Family members can also be afforded the opportunity to summarize the key points of the meeting. This would be another way for teachers to check and make sure that they understand the families' perspectives and understanding; this serves as another opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or interpretation errors.

As already noted, the team or teacher should monitor any communication problems by checking with the interpreter throughout the meeting, but this is especially important to do as the meeting nears conclusion. To encourage true partnerships with families as well as a two-way exchange of information, open-ended questions to parents and families and other IEP team members about the extent to which discussions were understood can be asked to clarify any remaining issues and check for final understanding (Lo, 2010, 2012). At this time, special education teachers should be aware of any nonverbal body language of all parties that might indicate disagreement, surprise, or disapproval, such as crossed arms, raised eyebrows, bowed heads, or other changes in demeanor that were not previously exhibited (Ohtake et al., 2000).

After the Meeting

Once the meeting has concluded, teachers can check with the interpreter to see if he or she encountered any communication problems or challenges during the session (ASHA, 2011b; Friend & Cook, 2010). Teachers can ask the interpreter probing questions, such as the following:

- How did the interpretation process work from your perspective?
- Did you encounter any problems while relaying information to the parents?
- What can we do during the next meeting to more effectively communicate?
- Which strategies worked well at this meeting that we should continue to employ in future meetings?

Similarly, with the interpreter present, the teacher can ask family members about their satisfaction with the interpreted IEP meeting.

If difficulties are expressed, the teacher can brainstorm with the interpreter to determine ways to address

these difficulties (Ohtake et al., 2000). When challenging or serious interpretation difficulties occur, the teacher may need to approach the school administrator and advocate for professional development for IEP team members, the language interpreter, or both. Furthermore, when language interpretation services are found to be lacking in quality, teachers can encourage their program administrators to consider employing language interpreters with higher levels of interpreter training. As school leaders are often challenged by a lack of special education leadership preparation (Monteith, 2000), special education teachers can offer a unique perspective of the impact both high- and low-quality language interpretation can have on the outcome of IEP meetings. Because inaccurate language interpretation can affect families' ability to participate in IEP meetings (Cheatham, 2011), administrators must be made aware of how language interpretation relates to IDEIA regulations that require opportunities for meaningful parent participation in special education planning (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Parents and other family members may experience challenges when processing the large volume of information discussed during IEP meetings. Therefore, to make sure that these parents are full IEP team members, Lo (2012) recommended the following three strategies:

1. In collaboration with the interpreter, teachers can provide a translated written summary of the main components of the IEP for parents, with encouragement to contact the school with any questions or concerns.
2. With the assistance of the interpreter, teachers should inform the parents of when they can expect to receive their translated copy of the IEP and the due process procedures they can invoke should they disagree with its contents.
3. Teachers can coordinate with interpreters to ensure the IEP document itself is translated accurately and within a reasonable time frame.

Using these strategies together can promote a fuller understanding for families and provide parents additional opportunities for participation as integral members of the IEP team.

Although consulting with the team members after the IEP meeting can provide valuable insight into the function of the process, teachers need to also self-reflect on how effectively they were able to work with the interpreter. Table 2 provides a set of sample self-reporting questions teachers can use after an IEP meeting with an interpreter. By considering these questions, teachers can pinpoint areas for improvement. They should also revisit the questions before the next meeting as a reminder of effective strategies to use with the interpreter.

Table 2. Teacher Self-Assessment Questions for Interpreted IEP Meetings.

Before the meeting	During the meeting	After the meeting
Did I meet with the interpreter before the meeting?	Was the concept of confidentiality reinforced during the meeting?	Did I ask the family members about their satisfaction regarding the meeting?
Did the parties seem to feel comfortable?	Was I attentive to nonverbal cues and the interpreter's reactions?	Did I encourage the family to contact the school with questions?
Did I ask the interpreter about his or her experience in interpreting for IEP meetings?	Did I speak directly to the family?	Did I provide a translated written summary of the meeting?
Did I ask the interpreter to communicate to me if cultural misunderstandings occurred?	Was there an appropriate pace to the meeting? Did I provide enough pauses for the interpreter?	Did I inform the parents about when they would receive a translated copy of the IEP?
	Did I clarify/provide an explanation of any educational terms used in the meeting?	Did I send the IEP document for translation?
	Was any information oversimplified?	Did I ask the interpreter if any problems occurred during the meeting? Were solutions to identified problems brainstormed?
	Did I use team building statements that utilized the words <i>we, us, our</i> ?	
	Were key points summarized?	
	Did I check for understanding/ask clarifying questions?	

IEP = individualized education plan.

Other Considerations

Even though teachers may have been proactive and implemented effective strategies when working with interpreters, several circumstances can arise at IEP meetings that require attention or action from the teacher to ensure effective use of the interpreter (Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003a; Lo, 2012). At times, families may be uncomfortable with a school-provided interpreter, for several reasons:

1. It is possible they know the interpreter from the community and find him or her untrustworthy.
2. Interpreters may be family friends with whom families do not want to share personal information. When this occurs, the families should be afforded the opportunity to request a different interpreter. This can be addressed before the meeting by including the interpreter's name on prior written notice of the IEP meeting. If the name is not included on this list or changes for some reason, teachers should immediately notify the families so they can make informed decisions on this information.
3. Parents may also simply prefer to have a child or another family member interpret the meeting for them during IEP meetings (Ohtake et al., 2000). Although it is important to consider family requests, teachers also need to ensure that

discussions are interpreted accurately (Lo, 2012; Ohtake et al., 2000). Teachers can honor the parent's request and also make the recommendation that the school district-provided interpreter remain present at the meeting as support for the parent-selected interpreter. The school district-provided interpreter can interpret educational terms or concepts discussed in the meeting and serve as a resource for the interpreter selected by the parents.

It is nearly impossible to address all of the cultural differences that must be considered when working with families from diverse backgrounds. Professionals may incorrectly assume that when an interpreter speaks the same language as the family, he or she also has a deeper awareness of their cultural beliefs and traditions; however, this is not always the case (Javier, 2007). If this is the case, teachers must assume the additional responsibility of finding out more about the family's culture, beliefs, and traditions (Lo, 2012) and then share what they have learned with the interpreter. At this point, teachers need to consider how the family may view the role of the interpreter, the role of education, and the family's role in collaborating with school officials (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012). As different families may have different responses to each, teachers need to be respectful of parents' wishes while leading the team to develop an appropriate educational plan.

Conclusion

Evidence has indicated that high-quality language interpretation is not consistently available in schools (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Lopez & Rooney, 1997). Without such interpretation, the legal requirements of the IDEIA regulations, such as parents' right to informed consent and participation in decision making regarding their children, can be violated (Cheatham, 2011). However, teachers can take a leadership role to advocate for quality language interpreters. Moreover, when communicating with families via language interpreters, special education teachers can make efforts before, during, and after IEP meetings to further provide quality services to students with disabilities and their families. In so doing, teachers continue their efforts to ensure that the voices of diverse families are not only accurately heard but also valued in the educational planning and decision-making process for their child with disabilities.

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