

May I Have a Word?

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Tips for SLPs Evaluating in Languages They Do Not Speak: Optimal Use of Interpreters

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- SLPs who have limited proficiency in the native language of the person being assessed should not attempt to complete the evaluation without a fully proficient interpreter. If a child or adult perceives the limitations of the SLP in the minority language, s/he is likely to adapt their language use down to the level of that SLP. Consequently, the SLP may not get an accurate measure of their true language ability and might erroneously make a judgment of reduced ability.
- Schedule a meeting with the interpreter to establish rapport and trust, to effectively train, to allow the interpreter to ask questions, and to clarify any misunderstandings or difficulties. The training should cover: 1) role of the interpreter, 2) function of the SLP, 3) general background on the individual being assessed, 4) testing procedures, including discussion of tests to be used and their purpose (what attempting to measure), 5) testing and educational terminology, and 6) the importance of confidentiality.
- Emphasize in the training that interpreters are there to interpret neutrally and objectively, not using elaborations and explanations of the testing material. Give them an understanding that aiding the examinee could impact results which would in turn impact their ability to obtain necessary intervention services.
- Don't assume that because a person is fluent in a given language that they will have the necessary skills to interpret for you, especially when specialized vocabulary is involved. The interpreter should always be briefed ahead of time and given all of the testing protocols to be used to review prior to the testing session. That preparation time is crucial to the success of your testing session, so make sure you motivate them with appropriate compensation for preparation time.
- As mentioned before, well meaning interpreters might have a tendency to want to "help out" the individual being assessed by adding to their responses or interjecting their own meaning to what was said. One crucial aspect of interpreting for a speech/language evaluation is that interpretations be verbatim. Appropriate adjustments for word order, for example, may be made based on differing grammars. An example of this would be, if a child said in Spanish, "el gato feo," the verbatim translation would be "the cat ugly," but since adjective placement occurs after the noun in Spanish, the true translation should be "the ugly cat." These adjustments may be made without compromising the results.
- Family members are great assets to bilingual speech/language intervention, however, they should not be used as interpreters for evaluation purposes if possible. It is often difficult for them to separate themselves from the situation to interpret neutrally and objectively. Family members also become accustomed to the communication style of the person being assessed, often being able to understand and "normalize" even disordered speech and language, and they may also have a tendency to speak for them.
- When using an interpreter with a specific individual on more than one occasion, it is best to use the same person if possible. This helps establish rapport and reliability between the interpreter and the person being assessed.
- The use of an interpreter should always be documented on written reports. It should also be documented that the interpreter received thorough training prior to the evaluation to maximize validity of the results.
- Standardized measures that are not appropriately normed and validated for speakers of other languages impose one culture's standards of development and performance upon another culture's standards. This means that tests normed on monolinguals are potentially biased against bilinguals, therefore, results should be reported with caution, especially when translating tests. Standardized measures should be used as a supplement to other alternative measures to gain information about the individual's true language ability.
- When looking for interpreters, consider the following sources for potential candidates who speak the native language of the individual being assessed: bilingual teachers, student teachers or paraprofessionals, college students, nearby churches or organizations that identify with that minority language.