switchboard



Fundamentals of Working with Interpreters

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Today's Speaker



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Learning Objectives

By the end of this introductory session, you will be able to...

Define

key terms and roles within language interpretation and working across cultures

01

Describe

key strategies for working with interpreters when serving refugees and newcomers

02

Apply

trauma-informed care principles and cultural responsiveness during sensitive interpreted conversations

03

Define

key terms and roles within language interpretation and working across cultures

01 02 03

Defining Key Terms

Language access means ensuring clients, patients, and communities can use and benefit from a wide range of services regardless of their ability to speak or read in English (or the local dominant language).



Defining Key Terms

Interpreter

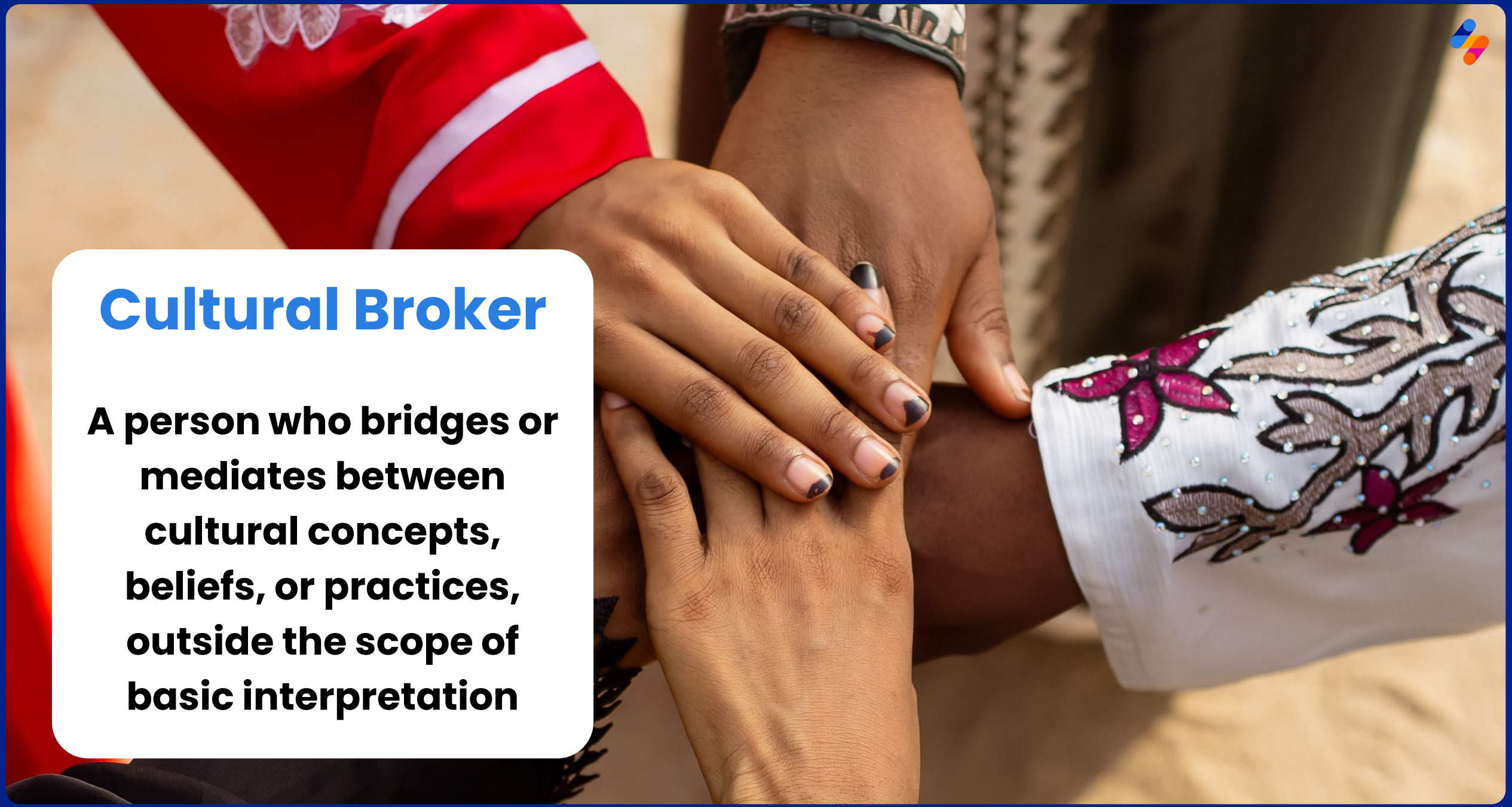
A person who converts a spoken (or signed) message in one language into a corresponding spoken (or signed) message in a target language

Translator

A person who converts a source text in one language into a corresponding message in a target language

Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

A level of English proficiency that is insufficient to ensure equal access to public services or benefits without language assistance



Cultural Broker

A person who bridges or mediates between cultural concepts, beliefs, or practices, outside the scope of basic interpretation

"Health and social service providers must take adequate steps to ensure that [persons with limited English proficiency] receive the language assistance necessary to afford them meaningful access to their services, free of charge."

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Policy Guidance on the Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination As It Affects Persons With Limited English Proficiency

Citation: 65 FR 52762

Role of the Interpreter

Transmit the message accurately and completely:

- **Understand** in the source language
- **Convert** into the target language
- **Support** the pacing and flow of the conversation for effective interpretation



Modes of Interpretation



Consecutive

The speaker pauses and then the interpreter speaks



Simultaneous

Participants continue speaking while interpreted messages are reproduced in real time



Sight

An interpreter reads a document and simultaneously speaks about it in another language

Interpretation or Language Access Type	Pros	Cons
Telephonic language lines or video interpretation services	• Available any time • Selection of less common languages or dialects • Potentially preferred for client anonymity or confidentiality	• Loss of in-person interaction • Cost • Technical issues and wait times
Community interpreters (Volunteer or paid)	• Way for the community to contribute • Meaningful employment for former clients • Can be cost-effective	• Potential privacy or boundary concerns for clients • Quality assurance and training standards
Multilingual Staff	• Efficient and reduces meeting time • Supportive to clients	• Can be overwhelming for staff and lead to boundary issues or burnout • Not always available

Avoiding Ad Hoc Interpreters

An untrained individual asked to interpret (e.g., family member, spouse, or friend)

Though sometimes convenient**, avoid using ad hoc interpretation** because it may:

- Violate clients' right to language access
- Break client confidentiality, create conflicts of interest, or prevent open, accurate communication
- Create unsafe situations for clients

Minors under 18 should ***never*** serve as ad hoc interpreters.

Remind clients of their right to **free, independent, quality** interpretation.



Case Scenario: Olena

Olena is from Ukraine. She has been widowed for many years and now lives in the U.S. with her adult son Petro and his family. You are setting up your first in-person meeting with Olena and are assessing if she will need language interpretation. Though she knows a little English from her school days and some conversational Ukrainian, she strongly prefers communicating in Russian. Olena says Petro can interpret for her because she is a very private person and doesn't want to involve anyone else.





Effective interpretation elevates refugee voices and greatly improves services.

Describe

key strategies for using language interpretation when serving refugees and newcomers

01 02 03

Key Strategies

01

Host a pre-session

Meet with your interpreter beforehand ***if possible***

02

Set up interpreted conversations for success

Introduce everyone and explain roles. Arrange the seating when in person, or address remote interpretation challenges.

03

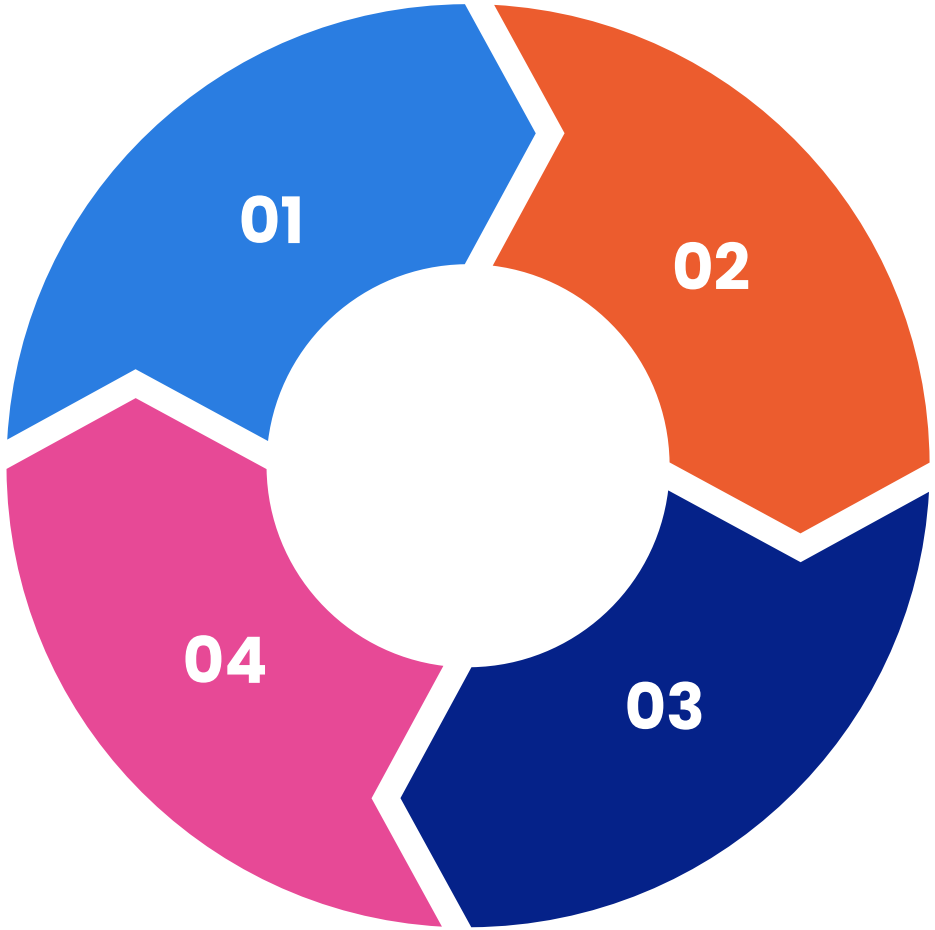
Support high-quality interpretation

Impartial, direct, accurate, and complete

04

Debrief with interpreter

Check in, provide feedback and support, and improve future interactions



Hosting a Pre-session

01



- Have a short, private conversation with interpreter before the session
- Introduce yourself, provide key information about the session, and confirm interpreter's understanding of their role
- Share context, useful terms, and documents or job aids
- Allow time for questions and concerns

Setting up Interpreted Conversations for Success

02

- Explain the **role** of the interpreter
- Reinforce **confidentiality**
- Provide a **framework** for successful interpretation (e.g., explain pauses)
- **Create space** for additional critical information or clarification



Arranging the Seating

02

Interpreter between client and provider



The Triadic Interview. Graphic adapted from Think Cultural Health, Department of Health and Human Services.

Arranging the Seating

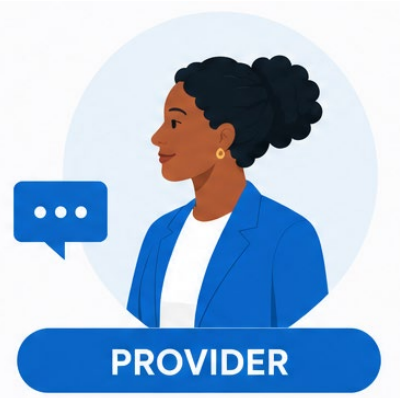
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Interpreter near client

- ✓ Encourages connection between provider and client
- ✓ Helpful for clients who are hard of hearing
- × May create perception that the interpreter is the client's advocate
- × May be distressing for clients to have interpreter behind them, especially if there is a history of trauma







Arranging the Seating

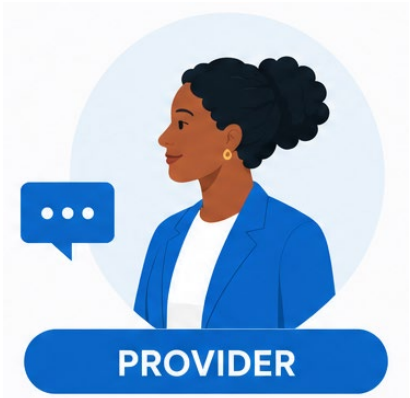
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Interpreter near provider

- ✓ Encourages eye contact between provider and client
- ✓ Ideal for sign language interpretation
- ✓ Allows interpreter to fully see client's body language
- × May feel intimidating to the client







Mitigating Common Challenges in Remote Interpretation



Technical Issues

- Have a backup plan in case tech fails

Interpreter Fatigue

- Remote interpretation is taxing; take regular breaks

Confusion or Miscommunication

- Strive for clear, intentional communication
- Leave space for clarification
- Explain communication procedures
- Check for understanding

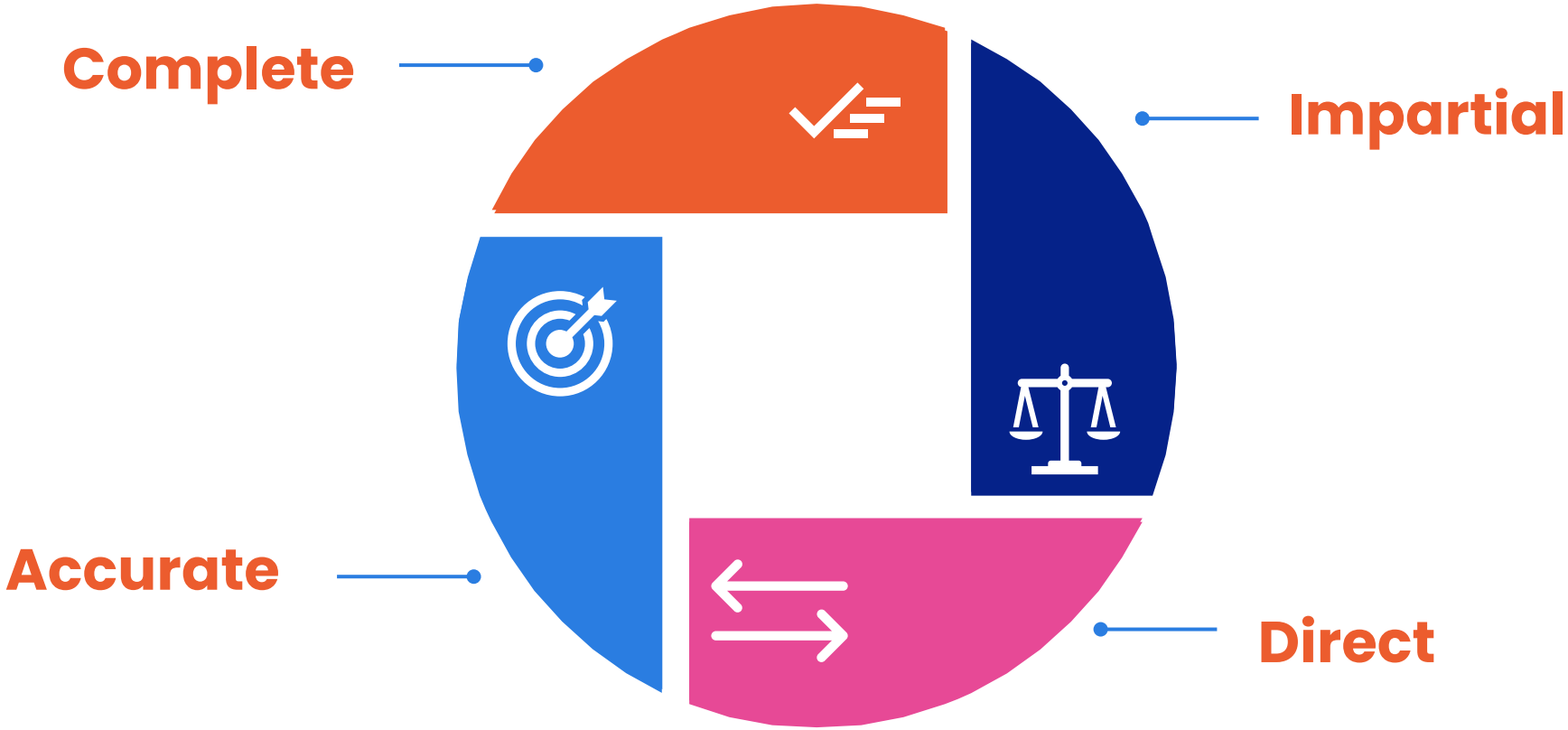
Case Scenario: Yusuf

Yusuf is an eight-year-old client recently arrived from Afghanistan, who you are now enrolling in your youth support and education program. You don't know Yusuf very well yet, but you know that his family had a difficult resettlement journey. He seems polite but also very shy, and he speaks no English. When you learn his preferred language is Dari, you hire Hamid, a Dari-speaking community interpreter your agency works with, to join your regular meetings with Yusuf.



Supporting High-Quality Interpretation

03



Impartial Interpretation

- Interpreter **should not insert their own feelings, opinions, or advice**
- Interpreter **should not mediate conflict** between client and provider
- **Screen for potential conflicts of interest** between interpreter and client; use remote interpretation services if needed





Direct Communication

- Always speak **directly to the client**
- Speak **slowly and clearly**
- Interpreter should use **first person** (“I”—not “he” or “she”)

Accurate Interpretation

- **Message-for-message**, not word-for-word
- **Choose your words carefully**: include all necessary details while leaving out extraneous information
- **Avoid jargon**, abbreviations, technical terms, slang, and idioms
- **Take time to clarify**, and don't jump to conclusions about miscommunications





Complete Interpretation

- **Interpreter conveys everything said** without omitting or changing
- **Interpreter mirrors tone**, does not soften tone or calm tensions
- **All people present are interpreted**, including side conversations

Debrief, Support, and Give Feedback

04



- Consider **debriefing** with your interpreter, ideally **right after the session ends** and the client has left, especially if there were:
  - Sensitive topics or trauma exposure
  - Significant communication breakdowns
- Share **resources on** **self-care and any support services** available to the interpreter
- Demonstrate professional respect by providing **constructive and specific feedback privately**
- Ask the interpreter **what you can improve** in the future

Case Scenario: Yusuf

You have done everything you can to set up your first meeting with Yusuf for success. During your meeting, Yusuf seems more comfortable directly engaging with Hamid because of their shared background. As you try to check if Yusuf understands everything you have shared, he is nodding frequently. Hamid says a lot to Yusuf and then tells you, “Yusuf understood everything perfectly. I think he’ll be fine in America. He’s so smart and cute; he reminds me so much of my son when he was young.”

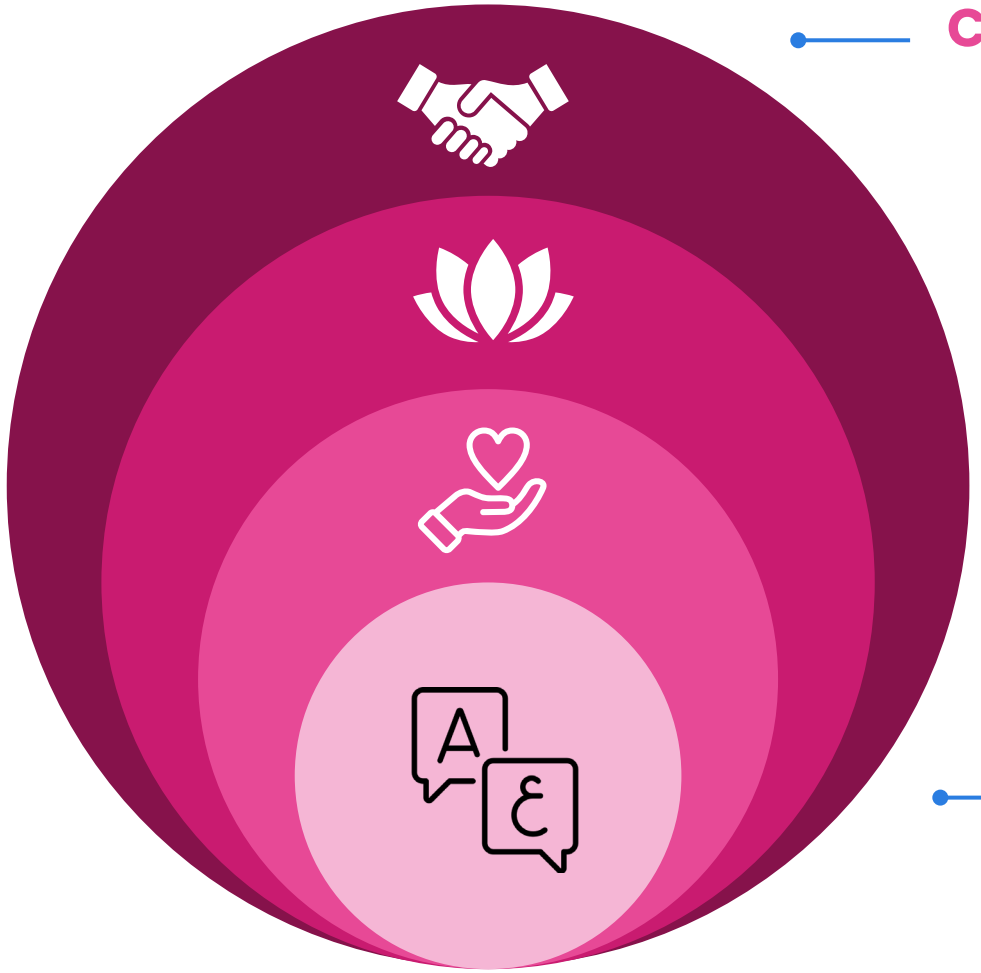


Apply

trauma-informed care principles and cultural responsiveness during sensitive interpreted conversations

01 02 03

Approaching Interpretation Holistically



Clear Respectful Communication

Culturally Responsive Approaches

Trauma-Informed Care

Effective Interpretation

Trauma: Event, Experience, Effect (3 E's)



Traumatic Event(s)

- Actual or threat of bodily harm
- May be deeply disturbing, frightening, or life-threatening



Experience of Event(s)

- What may be traumatic to one person may not be to another



Effects of the Event(s)

- Emotional, physical, and behavioral reactions that occur after exposure to traumatic events
- Also known as **traumatic stress**

Trauma-Informed Approach

- Considers trauma's **physical, emotional,** and **spiritual** impact
- Identifies trauma signs in **behavior, relationships,** and **dynamics** and minimizes trauma **triggers**
- Builds **positive, restorative** relationships and embraces clients **holistically**
- Embodies **6 core principles:**
  - Safety
  - Trustworthiness & Transparency
  - Peer Support
  - Collaboration & Mutuality
  - Empowerment, Voice, & Choice
  - Cultural & Contextual Issues





Trauma may be present even if it is not the topic of discussion. Routine topics may raise trauma responses.

Trauma-Informed Tips for Interpreted Conversations

- Reinforce that both you and the interpreter are bound by **confidentiality**
- Consider how **trauma may affect the client's speech and communication style**
- **Remember to communicate directly** with your client(s) and use **active listening skills**
- **Center clients' power and choice**
- **Support interpreters** if they are at risk of **re-traumatization or secondary trauma responses**



The client is the expert on their personal cultural experience—not the interpreter.



Selecting Interpretation with Sensitivity

- Identify the **appropriate language** and any **specific dialect** needs of the client
- Consider **religious or cultural factors** when choosing an interpreter or interpretation service
- Choose an **interpreter suited to your client's context**, within the limits of your resources
    - *Reflect through both culturally responsive **and** trauma-informed lenses*



Culturally Responsive Interpreters

- Skilled interpreters should recognize how words and messages are wrapped in **specific cultural meanings** and if there are **unshared cultural assumptions** shaping the conversation
- Interpreters can **point out cultural misunderstandings** but should support client and provider in navigating them together rather than trying to “fix” the situation themselves
- Support interpretation by avoiding cultural idioms and slang, speaking in literal terms, and defining context-specific terms



Building Bridges

Don’t rely solely on the interpreter to create cross-cultural understanding!

- Get to know the client **personally** and don’t make assumptions
- Create a **welcoming environment**, considering physical, spiritual, and interpersonal customs and differences
- Pronounce **client names** correctly
- **Learn a few words** in your client’s preferred language for greetings and building rapport
- Educate yourself on **specific cultural sensitivities** related to the subject matter



The Mbemba Family

The Mbemba family is from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The family includes the father Paul, the mother Therese, and their daughter Angelique, who is 13. They speak Lingala and have limited English.

Today you arrive for a home visit with a professional telephonic Lingala interpreter. Angelique seems quieter than usual. When you ask how school is going, she gives one-word answers through the interpreter and looks down. You ask Paul and Therese if you could talk with Angelique alone for a few minutes. Paul says he doesn't think that's necessary. He explains that the family came here to move forward, and that Angelique is a child who doesn't have anything to talk about with you. When you ask Therese if she would like to add anything, she says, "Paul is the head of the household, and we follow what he says." Angelique looks at her father and says nothing. A moment later, she excuses herself and quietly leaves the room.





Questions?

Type your question in the Q&A

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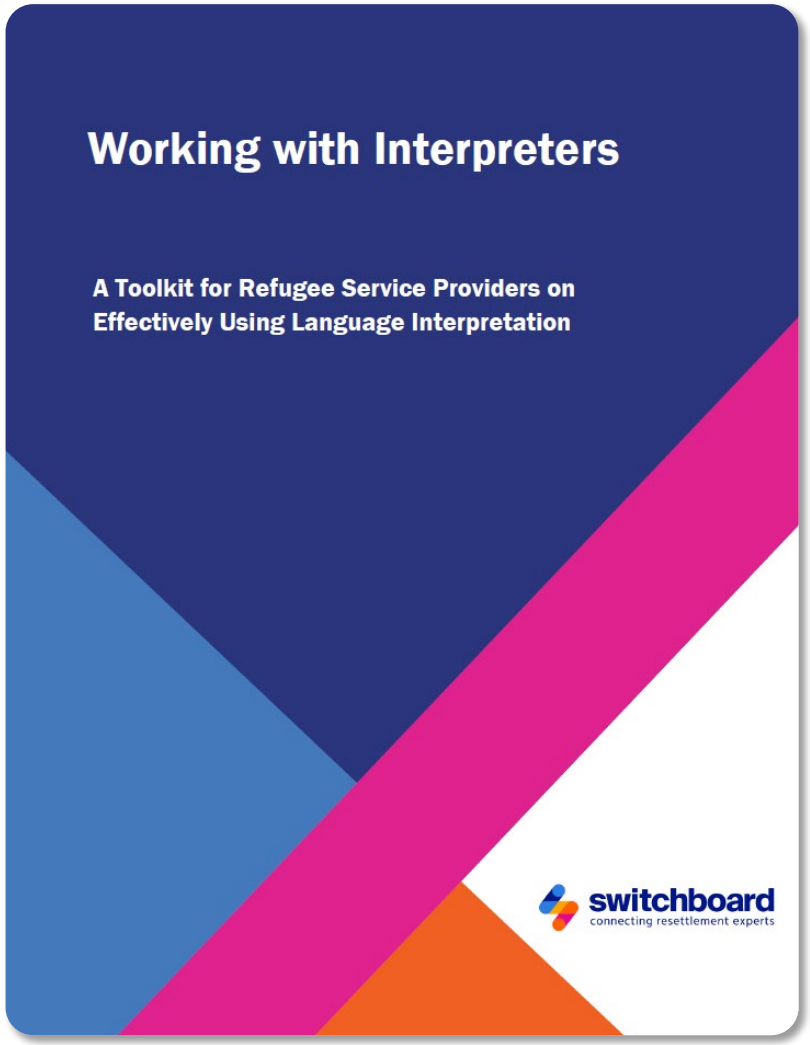
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Recommended Resources

- **Toolkit:** Working with Interpreters
- **eLearning courses:**
  - Introduction to Working with Interpreters
  - Overcoming Challenges in Interpretation
  - Basic Protocols and Practical Skills for Interpreting in Newcomer Services (for interpreters)
- **Archived webinar:** Training and Supporting Community Members Serving as Interpreters
- **Settle In:** Client-facing culturally relevant resources in multiple languages
  - How to Get Interpretation and Translation at Your Medical Appointments
  - Interpretation Requirements for Affirmative Asylum Applicants
- **Society of Refugee Healthcare Providers blog post:** Working Across Cultures in Mental Health Services
- **CARRE toolkit:** Cultural Validation and Translation



Help Us Help You!

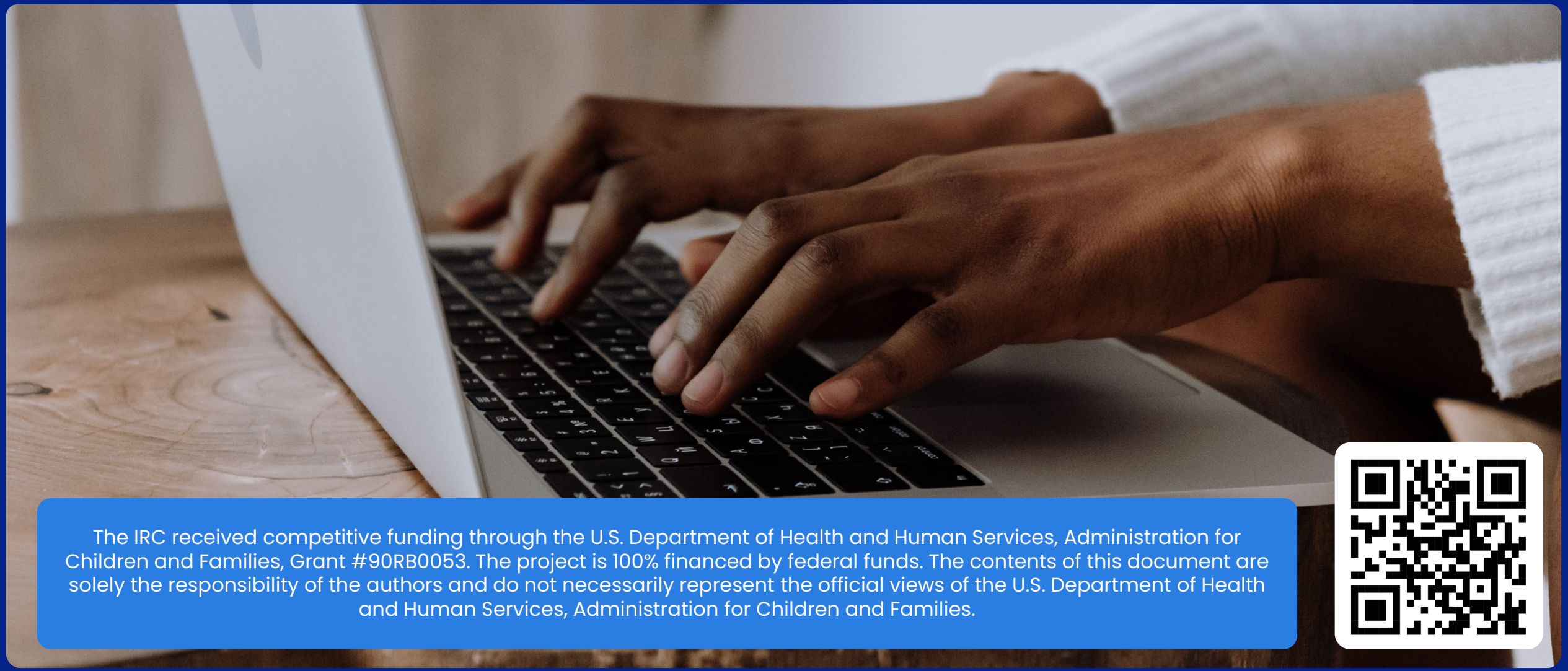
Scan the QR code or click the link in the chat to access our feedback survey!

- Four questions
- 60 seconds
- Help us improve future training and technical assistance



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