

# FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

By Thomas G. Mansella, ATA Certified Translator  
ESOL/HILT, Intake and Language Resources Center  
Arlington County Public Schools

**1. *What is translation?***

Translation is the rendering of *written* communication across the barriers created by different languages and cultures.

**2. *What is interpretation?***

Interpretation is the rendering of *oral* communication across the barriers created by different languages and cultures.

**3. *What are the different forms or levels of translation?***

A casual translator (i.e., staff, parents, volunteers) may translate routine communications between teachers and parents such as flyers, letters, report cards, or simple newsletters. Educational, legal, medical, and other technical fields require a translator who is professionally trained in the subject area.

**4. *What are the different forms of interpretation?***

- 1) Simultaneous interpretation (As each person speaks, the interpretation is rendered without a significant delay using electronic devices.)
- 2) Consecutive interpretation (Each person has to pause to allow for the interpretation with or without the use of electronic devices.)
- 3) Escort interpretation is a combination of simultaneous and consecutive interpretation for those who do not require a verbatim interpretation, just the gist of what has been said.

**5. *What are the differences between languages?***

Obviously, each language has its own words and sounds, but there are other considerations. First, each language has its own peculiar grammatical, lexical, and stylistic structure; secondly, each language has its own regional and cultural distinctions; and, lastly, each language has its own proper register<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “register” describes the various styles of language available for writing or speaking, from the informal register of slang and swearing to the formal academic register used when writing at the university level or professionally.

**6. What are the goals of translation?**

- 1) Accuracy – A translation has to render the original meaning and the register of a text in one language to another as closely as the interaction between different languages allows.
- 2) Quality – A translation has to read and sound as if the text was originally written in the target language.

**7. Are bilingual persons naturally qualified as translators or interpreters?**

No. Good translators and/or interpreters need to be bilingual *and* bicultural *and* academically proficient in both source (the original document's language) and target (the translated document's language) language. They should have training in the different grammatical, lexical, and stylistic structures of *both* languages.

**8. What skills are needed to translate and/or interpret?**

A translator and/or interpreter must have language proficiency in both source and target language, academic proficiency in the subject matter, ease of written and/or oral expression, awareness of cultural and/or regional language nuances, resourcefulness, and personal integrity.

**9. Why do translators and/or interpreters need to be skilled in both source and target language?**

A translator and/or interpreter must be able to understand the meaning and register of a written or oral communication in order to accurately transfer the meaning from one language to another.

**10. Why do translators and/or interpreters need to be academically proficient?**

A translator needs to understand the subject matter to be able to do his or her job. A top contract law translator may not be qualified to translate social studies curricula. An experienced judiciary interpreter may lack the preparation needed to function during a special education meeting. Acquiring the necessary vocabulary and stylistic skills requires training and time. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost all interpreters and translators have a bachelor's degree.

**11. Why do translators and/or interpreters need to have ease of oral or written communication?**

Having understood the meaning of an utterance, an interpreter needs to be able to speak clearly and intelligibly, without the need for major repetitions, clarifications, or corrections. In general, even though a translator has more time and opportunities to polish a translation, the translator has to be able to represent the style and register of one language into another. Good translation requires a high degree of reading and writing skills in the target language.

**12. Why do translators and/or interpreters need to be aware of cultural and/or regional language nuances?**

All languages are local. Translators and interpreters need to be aware of and acknowledge national, cultural, and regional usages. A term may be acceptable in one

region but not in others. British, Australian, Caribbean, and American English have their own distinctiveness, just as Caribbean, European, South American or Chicano Spanish have their own.

**13. *Why do translators and/or interpreters need to be resourceful and have personal integrity?***

One dictionary is not enough. Sometimes even having several different technical dictionaries will not suffice. A professional translator or interpreter knows how and where to find translations or patterns of usage that may lead to an accurate translation. Personal integrity is needed to know personal and professional limitations and the candor to acknowledge them. Personal integrity is also needed to resist the temptation to “improve” the original and to avoid sloppiness.

**14. *What professional certifications are needed for translation or interpretation?***

In the United States, the American Translators Association (ATA) certifies translators. To become certified, translators are required to pass two exams in the fields of science/technology/medicine and law/business/finance. There are no specific exams in the fields of education/social sciences. It is recommended that school divisions use certified translators. Accreditation only refers to one pair of languages (i.e., English → Spanish certifies the proficiency only in translating from English into Spanish. Certification for Spanish → English requires passing a different exam. NAJIT, the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, certifies interpreters and translators in the field of judiciary interpretation or translation. The Department of State has its own certification process. Other countries offer similar certifications; some are more demanding than others.

**15. *Why is it necessary to evaluate translators and/or interpreters?***

The goal of an evaluation should be to offer objective evidence to both the translator and school division that the translator and/or interpreter has the professional and cultural competence in a specific language combination needed to comply with legal and educational requirements.

**16. *How can I evaluate prospective translators and/or interpreters?***

A division should at least develop several job descriptions (i.e., translation or interpretation of basic school communications, such as announcements of parent meetings or Individualized Education Plan (IEP), school level or county wide translation/interpretation), define minimum educational requirements (college, advanced degree) and related work experience, develop (adopt) a grading system and tests in language pairs, examination procedures, and, if needed, training for testing. Some of these services may be available by contracting with a translation agency or networking with school divisions that have had more experience with translators and interpreters.

**17. How do I contract a translator and/or interpreter?**

In the U.S., the vast majority of interpreters and translators are independent professionals. Some have a working relationship with a translation agency and others work independently for their own customers. The American Translators Association publishes a list of translators, interpreters, and translation agencies.

<http://www.atanet.org/>

**18. What services are provided by a professional translator/interpreter?**

A professional translator/interpreter provides services for individuals and corporations, both domestic and international. When a customer requests a bid from an independent translator/interpreter, he or she will evaluate the job and, based on his or her experience, will prepare an estimate. Once the estimate is accepted, the translator/interpreter will complete the job or assignment.

**19. What are the strengths and weaknesses of relying on an independent professional?**

Some strengths include translation consistency in a given language pair and lower prices, but one drawback is that large translation projects may take a longer time. To maximize the advantages of using an independent professional, it is necessary to build in a realistic time for translation, be aware of the production rate, and to specifically request proofing by a professional linguist.

**20. How can I maximize the advantages of using a professional translator/interpreter or translation agency/company?**

To maximize the advantages, it will be necessary to prepare a glossary of terms in each language pair, so no matter who works on the translation, it will be consistent. Never request a translation of a work in progress. If necessary, divide the project in sections and only send out the completed sections for translation. When working with a professional translator, it is important to request both the electronic file of the project and the translation memory of the program. This will make it easier and less costly to make updates in the future.

**21. Which services are provided by a translation agency/company?**

A translation agency provides services for individuals and corporations, both domestic and international. Many agencies do not have in-house translators. When a customer requests a bid from an agency, either the owner or the translation coordinator will evaluate the job and, based on his or her experience, will produce an estimate. Once the estimate is accepted, the agency generally bids the project over the Internet. Depending on the size of the project or if a very tight deadline is required, the translation coordinator may decide to parcel out the translation project among different translators. Modern technology allows the translation to be collated and proofed at the agency. However, even though an agency may advertise translations in all languages, it will be almost impossible that the owner or translation coordinator(s) of the agency be proficient in all languages. The agency will have to depend on the quality assurances of a sub-contractor.

**22. What are the strengths and weaknesses of relying on a translation agency/company?**

Some strengths include good coordination of a translation project in different languages and good turn around time. Some weaknesses may include probable lack of translation consistency unless a glossary is provided and higher prices. In addition, the school or division may develop a strong relationship with an agency but not with a particular translator.

**23. Is there a Code of Ethics for translators and interpreters?**

The American Translators Association has a Code of Ethics. For new certification and re-certification, translators and interpreters will need to attend a Professional Ethics Workshop. Other medical, judicial, and sign language associations have Codes of Ethics for interpreters. Courts may have a Code of Ethics for judicial interpreters.

**24. How can I ensure the best quality in translation or interpretation?**

Translating a document is a process that may involve more than one person: translator, proofreader, editor, and reviewer. It may be an iterative process that may involve the author of the document and the testing of the translation with the target audience, or it could use back-translation techniques. The basic question is, “*How much quality can you afford?*” Many translation agency/companies and/or independent professionals will charge different rates according to the client’s expectations.

**25. How can I avoid pitfalls in a translation/interpretation project?**

Do your homework:

- Indicate the regional/cultural language choice – (e.g., European, Canadian or Caribbean (Creole) French? Mexican, South American, or Cuban Spanish?)
- Stipulate the technical background required of the translator/interpreter and request specific references (e.g., expertise in special education, administrative law, education, health, etc.)
- Specify the use of the translation (e.g., ready for publication, printing and/or distribution without any further revision or to be further edited at the school/division level?)
- Prepare a glossary of unique terms or contract the preparation of a glossary.
- State in any contract or agreement your expectations about quality, turn-around, and Errors and Omissions insurance.
- Select a domestic professional translator or translation agency/company. Foreign contractors operate under the contract laws of their countries, which may be difficult and/or expensive to enforce in the US.
- Choose professional translators or translation agencies listed with their local Chamber of Commerce or the Better Business Bureau (BBB).
- Require that translators and interpreters have accreditation, certification, or other professional recognition. Membership in a professional organization should be expected of translation agencies. Professional translators, interpreters, and agencies should abide by a Code of Professional Conduct or Ethics.
- Inquire about technology resources and computer security practices.
- Request references, specifically in the particular area of expertise (e.g. education, social services, health, etc.)

- And, finally, be prepared to pay a reasonable fee. Good independent professionals and agencies invest in technology, continuing education, and linguistic and financial resources. You want them to be there for you when you need them.

## Resources

### ***General:***

- Bureau of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos175.htm>

### ***Organizations:***

- American Translators Association: <http://www.atanet.org/>
- The Cross Cultural Health Care Program (CCHCP): <http://www.xculture.org/>
- The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT): <http://www.najit.org/>
- National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (NCIHC): <http://www.ncihc.org/>
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf: <http://www.deaflinx.com/>

### ***Certification:***

- ATA: [http://www.atanet.org/certification\\_change.htm](http://www.atanet.org/certification_change.htm)
- NAJIT: <http://www.najit.org/examfaqs.html>

### ***Training:***

- Institute for Applied Linguistics (Kent University): <http://appling.kent.edu/>
- Certificate in Translation (online – New York University) <http://www.scps.nyu.edu/departments/certificate.jsp?certId=157>
- Monterey Institute of International Studies: <http://www.miis.edu/>
- University of Minnesota Program in Translation and Interpreting: <http://www.cce.umn.edu/creditcourses/pti/>
- University of South Carolina: <http://www.state.sc.us/dss/>

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