



CBBC Guidance on Using Interpreters

While a growing number of younger Chinese managers and government officials speak some English, it is quite likely that you will still need an interpreter for formal meetings and negotiations in China. Accurate interpreting requires special training or at least frequent practice. Although someone's English may seem fluent, he or she may be unwilling or unable to take on the role of official interpreter during a meeting. To avoid embarrassment or loss of face, it is best not to make assumptions.

At worst, if your business partners have not understood what you have said, your message may be completely lost. Yet to avoid loss of face, they may indicate that they have understood everything! It is crucial not to underestimate the interpreter's role as he or she is the key to successful communication.

Here are 10 suggestions and recommendations for working with an English/Chinese interpreter:

Use your own interpreter. The Chinese will sometimes provide an interpreter for their side. When possible, both sides should have their own interpreter, particularly for long discussions. One interpreter working for both sides from Chinese to English and vice-versa may tire easily and start missing the meaning or detail of what is being said. Afterwards you can also ask your own interpreter for feedback on the nuances behind the discussion.

Use a locally-based interpreter. While most business people will speak standard Mandarin (Putonghua), there are variations within the Chinese language with a range of regional dialects and accents, which may be difficult for an outsider to understand.

Brief your interpreter. The secret of good interpretation is, ideally, to have someone whom you know well and to brief them beforehand. Even if it is not possible to get to know your interpreter well in advance, try to involve him or her at every stage of your pre-meeting arrangements. The quality of interpretation will improve greatly if you provide adequate briefing on the subject matter. Ensure your interpreter understands what you are aiming to achieve.

Speak in manageable sentences. Speak at an even pace. Do not speak for a long time before pausing. Your interpreter will find it hard to remember everything you have said, and will not interpret all your points. Conversely, do not speak in short phrases and unfinished sentences as your interpreter will find it impossible to translate the overall meaning.

Use clear language. Avoid jargon unless you know your interpreter is familiar with the terminology. Some interpreters may be more familiar with American English and have a little difficulty at first with British accents. Make sure your message is getting through clearly and in a tone that will not cause resentment. Be prepared for the response from the Chinese side to be ambiguous – this may be for cultural reasons (e.g. to be polite or to avoid saying 'no'). Ask open questions (not requiring a yes or a no) in order to explore the views of the Chinese side more effectively.



Listen to your interpreter. Listen to how your interpreter interprets what you have just said. If you have given a lengthy explanation but the interpreter translates into only a few Chinese words, it may be that he or she has not fully understood. Or it may be that he or she is wary of passing on a message which appears too blunt or too direct. Check that the interpreter has adequately conveyed your point to the Chinese side.

Counting in Chinese. Large numbers are particularly tricky and often interpreted wrongly, sometimes leading to a mistake between millions and billions. For example, 10 million translates into Chinese as “1,000 ten thousands”; 100 million has its own character, ‘yi’; and 1,000 million or one billion translates as “10 yi”. CBBC recommends that you write the figures down, or at least confer with the interpreter, to avoid any confusion.

Avoid jokes and witticisms. Although the Chinese and British senses of humour are similar in many ways, jokes and witty asides do not interpret easily from English to Chinese. Even if your interpreter has understood, the joke may well fall flat in translation and your interlocutors may just laugh politely without understanding the punch line.

Consecutive or simultaneous? General or Technical? Consecutive interpreting means you speak and then your interpreter interprets. It is a common form of interpreting used for meetings, discussions and negotiations. Simultaneous interpreting is when you speak while the interpreter interprets simultaneously, but special equipment is required and it is expensive to hire interpreters. Simultaneous interpreting is usually used for large seminars and conferences. There are two interpreters who interpret in 20-minute sessions to avoid stress and tiredness, although three may be used for a full day. Simultaneous interpreting requires professional training. If you are planning an event for which simultaneous interpreters are needed, CBBC may be able to recommend specialist companies in China who can provide the interpreters and equipment.

Level 1 (General) interpreters may be employed for most business meetings but if technical or specialist language is used then you should consider a more experienced Level 2 interpreter. CBBC will make every attempt to find an interpreter with the specialist knowledge for your meetings. A Level 2 interpreter should also be used if you are meeting high level Chinese officials or VIPs, or if you are presenting at a seminar where many people may speak or take part in discussions.

Speeches and presentations. Remember that the need to interpret everything will cut your speaking time approximately in half (unless using simultaneous interpreting). Do ensure that the interpreter can cope with the technical or specialised terminologies of the presentation. More importantly, the interpreter should always be given the text well in advance. If you change your speech later, make sure that your interpreter is forewarned, otherwise he or she may just stick to your original text rather than follow what you actually said. Last minute ad-libs from the text may well not get interpreted.