



Tip of the Month October 2025

Working with Interpreters¹

Original Tip of the Month by

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“If you talk to a [person] in a language [they] understand, that goes to [their] head. If you talk to [them] in [their] own language, that goes to [their] heart.” – Nelson Mandela

Many of our clients speak multiple languages, and English may not be a client’s first language. In these cases, we need help from an interpreter to communicate important legal processes and concepts to clients in their first language. Here are some tips on working with interpreters to help you as you communicate with your multilingual clients.

1. **Introductions:** Introduce yourself to the volunteer interpreter. Introduce the client to the volunteer interpreter.
2. **Seating:** Position the interpreter appropriately. Ask the client and the interpreter about seating arrangements. It is usual for the interpreter to be seated next to the attorney so that the client can observe both the interpreter and the attorney simultaneously.
3. **Set Expectations:** In order to ensure that you, the client, and the interpreter have a shared understanding of the extent of the interpreter’s professional services, we suggest that you communicate the following points at the beginning of a session involving an interpreter. Please make sure to include all three parties in the conversation (client, attorney, and interpreter).

Footnote 1: While many of the tips included in this article may apply to sign language interpretation, the focus is on oral language interpretation.

- a. "This is a conversation between you [the client] and me [the lawyer]. But we need help to communicate, so we are going to communicate through an interpreter."
- b. "The interpreter will interpret everything you say into English and everything I say into [client's preferred language]."
- c. "The interpreter cannot participate in the conversation, share their opinion, or give advice. The interpreter's only job is to interpret what each of us says."
- d. "The interpreter has to follow the same rules of confidentiality as I do, which means they have to keep whatever we say in this meeting a secret and cannot tell anyone else what we say."
- e. "If you do not understand something, ask me [the lawyer], not the interpreter. Please talk to me [the lawyer], not to the interpreter. I will do the same."
- f. "If I need to clarify something with the interpreter, I will ask the interpreter to tell you what I said to them. If you have a long question or a long answer, please pause frequently so that the interpreter can interpret everything accurately. I will do the same."
- g. "Please speak loud enough and pronounce your words clearly so the interpreter can hear you easily. I will do the same."
- h. "It may take longer to say everything through an interpreter. Please say everything you need to say. I will do the same."
- i. "If you have any difficulty hearing the interpreter or understanding me during the conversation, please tell me. I will do the same."
- j. "Are you able to hear and understand the interpreter? Are you ready to proceed? Can you hear and understand everyone adequately? Would you like a pen and paper or an electronic device such as a tablet or laptop to assist you?"

4. **The Interpreter's Role:**

- a. The interpreter is neutral and not that of a “cultural broker.” Ethical guidelines prohibit interpreters from offering opinions on legal matters. Interpreters are required to convey everything a client would have understood if they were fluent in English. Therefore, please avoid making comments that you would not want interpreted.
 - b. VLN advises against using a client’s family member or friend as an interpreter. VLN volunteers have access to a professional, telephone-based interpreting service— paid for by VLN— that should be used instead of relying on a client’s personal connections for interpretation.
 - c. When the interpreter is related to the client, which, again, is not ideal, please keep a few things in mind:
 - i. Treat the family member as you would any professional interpreter; remind them they are bound by the ethics and confidentiality rules.
 - ii. Consider any conflicts of interest that may arise in using a family member as an interpreter. If you have questions, do not proceed with the meeting until your questions have been answered.
 - iii. Take extra care in communicating and clarifying. Although the family member speaks both languages, they may not fully grasp the complexities of the legal matter at hand.
 - iv. If you do not feel comfortable, do not proceed with the meeting.
5. **Interpreter Styles:** Some interpreters may use a simultaneous “over-speak” style, speaking at nearly the same time as you. Others interpret consecutively, waiting until you pause to convey what was said in full. Some may use a hybrid approach. The appropriate style can vary depending on the situation.

6. The Lawyer's Role:

- a. Speak clearly and at your normal pace and volume. If adjustments are needed, the interpreter will let you know. Allow extra time for the client to respond, since there may be a delay while the interpreter translates your words into another language. This is especially important in group discussions. When interpretation is consecutive—meaning the interpreter begins only after you finish speaking—use shorter phrases or 'chunks' so the interpreter can accurately recall and convey your message.
- b. Speak directly to the client as you would without an interpreter present. For example, say, "What is your legal issue?" rather than, "What is his legal issue?" It's natural to want to speak to the interpreter instead but try to act as if the interpreter is not there. Address the client in the first person and allow time for the interpretation. [*Note: the interpreter should also use the first person.*]
- c. Be as clear and specific as possible. Avoid using lingo and allow space for clarifying questions. It can be helpful to explain legal concepts and the "why" behind them.
- d. Make sure that the client and the interpreter will understand each other. Some languages have different dialects, and understanding can be difficult.
- e. If possible, provide the interpreter in advance with the documents you will use in the meeting. This will allow the interpreter to become familiar with the information and ask questions if they do not understand something.
- f. Do not leave the client and interpreter alone. Clients often feel an affinity with the interpreter, which can interfere with the attorney-client relationship, jeopardize attorney-client privilege, or lead to the interpreter's unauthorized practice of law.
- g. Do not allow side conversation. The interpreter is required to interpret everything that is said. Please stop the client and/or interpreter if side conversations occur. As the attorney, please do not have side conversations with the interpreter. If you need to clarify a point, ask the interpreter to explain what you are doing to the client. The client must feel secure that the interpreter is a neutral person.

- h. Be aware of different perspectives and how things are perceived in working cross-culturally.
 - i. Using culturally-neutral humor can help build rapport. However, keep in mind that the client may have a different cultural understanding of humor and sarcasm, so it is often best to avoid sarcasm and certain types of jokes.
 - j. End the meeting and reschedule with a different interpreter if you think what you want communicated is not being communicated.
 - k. After the meeting and the client has left, take time to debrief with the interpreter. Talk about things that went well and what could have been done better. Thank the interpreter for their time and attention. Remind the interpreter that all the information is strictly confidential and cannot be revealed to anyone else.
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Additional Tips for Working with Clients from Afghanistan

The Afghan Legal Clinic Project is a partnership of Volunteer Lawyers Network and The Advocates for Human Rights. These nonprofits established the clinic to provide individualized immigration legal services to Afghan evacuees in Minnesota who needed help with cases ranging from asylum and immigration visas to employment authorization. Staff and volunteer attorneys have helped hundreds of evacuees who otherwise would not have had the resources to apply for immigration status that allows them to stay in the U.S. temporarily or permanently. The clinic project has received a Commissioner's Circle of Excellence Award.

1. **Show cultural respect:** Greetings matter— a simple “Salaam Alaikum” can set a welcoming tone. Small gestures of courtesy, such as offering tea or water, carry a lot of weight in Afghan culture. Acknowledge the importance of family by showing respect to elders and addressing them politely. These gestures may seem minor, but they help clients feel dignified, valued, and more willing to trust you and the interpreter.
2. **Respect family and gender dynamics:** In many Afghan families, the eldest male plays a leading role in decisions. Acknowledge this reality but also make room for each person to be heard, especially women. When meeting female clients, try to provide female

interpreters whenever possible, as this often helps them feel more at ease and willing to speak openly.

3. **Keep your language simple:** Avoid technical terms, legal jargon, or word-for-word interpretation. Explain what the terms mean in simple language. With Afghan clients, interpreters often need to convey ideas in a storytelling style, since literal interpretation rarely carries the full meaning and can confuse the client. Moreover, in Afghan culture, people are used to receiving information in narrative form rather than abstract or technical terms.
 4. **Break down complex ideas:** Afghanistan's legal system is very different from the legal system in the US, and many clients have limited to no experience with formal legal processes. Explain complex ideas one step at a time and check for understanding before moving forward so the interpreter can ensure clarity.
 5. **Observe non-verbal cues:** In Afghan culture, men often shake hands with men, but with women, wait for them to initiate. Avoid long or direct eye contact if it seems uncomfortable, as this can signal respect rather than avoidance. Use your right hand for gestures or offering items, since the left hand is considered unclean.
 6. **Be patient with silence:** In Afghan culture, silence can signal respect or hesitation, not necessarily agreement. Allow space for the client to process before continuing.
 7. **Use correct terminology:** Refer to people from Afghanistan as "Afghan". The word "Afghani" refers to the national currency of Afghanistan and not the people.
 8. **Understand how trauma is expressed:** Many Afghans have grown up in war and lived through repeated hardship. When they speak about tragedy, they may do so in a calm or casual manner, sometimes without visible emotion. This does not mean the experience was minor-- it often reflects exhaustion, resilience, and the weight of having endured so much. Listen carefully, acknowledge their words, and show empathy even if emotions are not openly expressed.
 9. **Honor and shame dynamics:** Afghan society place high value on family honor. Clients may avoid discussing issues they think bring shame to their family. Show empathy and avoid judgmental language and encourage interpreters to render the client's words faithfully so that sensitive matters can still be addressed.
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Resources:

1. Minnesota Judicial Branch – Language Resources: mncourts.gov/help-topic-sections/language-resources
2. Volunteer Lawyers Network – vlnmn.org