

Misconceptions about Bilinguals and Bicultural Individuals

Incorrect statements:

1. Interpreting and translating are the same.
2. If you are bilingual, you are fluent.
3. If you are bilingual, you are bicultural.
4. Bilinguals intuitively know how to interpret.
5. Anyone who is bilingual can effectively interpret.
6. Interpreting is a simple task.

Correct statements:

1. Interpreting is not translating. (Interpreting is oral and translation is written).
2. Not all bilingual individuals have the same degree of fluency required to interpret.
3. Being bilingual does not automatically qualify an individual as bicultural.
4. Bilingual linguistic proficiency is a prerequisite for bilinguals to become interpreters. Accurate and complete interpreting occurs when proficient bilinguals learn specific skills through training, not by intuition.
5. Not all bilingual individuals have the ability to become interpreters or translators.
6. Interpreting is a complex task that requires extensive training that includes practice to develop active listening skills, memory, ability to extract meaning from messages, and ability to restate information in the target language.

Key learning points from Memory Assessment Activity:

Memory capacity and retention are essential for interpreting accurately and completely. Some bilingual individuals can further their memory skills and other do not. Memory skills are rarely considered when asking a bilingual individual to interpret. Next time you work with an interpreter consider the following facts:

- Unfamiliar and new words are difficult to understand and clearly remember.
- Stress, noise, distractions, accents and fatigue make information more difficult to understand and remember.
- English and every other language have hundreds of words and concepts that do not have language equivalents.
- Interpreters have to listen, understand, remember, search for language equivalents, and convert information in two languages within a few seconds.

Refer to the next handout entitled:

Cross-cultural Communication Working Effectively with Interpreters for specific recommendations about working with interpreters.