Handbook

Interpreting at Online Events

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Introduction

For a year now, the international youth work community has been faced with the challenge of having to operate despite travel restrictions and the need for social distancing. During this time, a multitude of approaches have been trialled and tested with the aim of continuing to hold meetings, conferences, international youth exchanges and workcamps in the virtual space.

This Handbook contains the insights we have gained when organising interpretation at online events. We hope these will be of assistance to organisations planning their own multilingual meetings. Our thanks go to our colleagues at ConAct – Coordination Center for German-Israeli Youth Exchange, the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO), the Foundation for German-Russian Youth Exchange and Tandem - Czech-German Youth Exchange Coordination Centre, who contributed their experience to this Handbook. We would also like to thank our interpreters, who have advised us on this subject repeatedly in recent months.

The Handbook does not claim to be exhaustive. We welcome your feedback, your personal experience and suggestions on the subject of interpreting at online events so we can keep this publication up to date. If you would like to get in touch, please do so at sprache@ijab.de.

1. Simultaneous interpreting

1.1. General aspects

- Simultaneous interpreting is provided practically in real time, so no time is lost. Participants can respond directly to what was said without having to wait for the interpretation. This is relevant given that online, participants' attention span is shorter.
- Online events are often shorter than in-person events. If time is of the essence, simultaneous interpretation will save time.
- If the agenda involves several presentations before the entire group of participants, preference should be given to simultaneous interpretation.
- Simultaneous interpreters always work in teams of at least two. If the plan is to offer interpretation to several groups at the same time, remember to plan for a larger interpretation team.

1.2 Technical aspects

As a rule, simultaneous interpreting - which involves oral translation practically in real time - can be organised for any online event.

The ideal solution will depend on a number of factors:

- How formal is the event (working meeting, conference, youth exchange)?
- How many languages are involved?
- How interactive is the event (will there be presentations, discussions, group work)?
- How long is the event?
- What tools will be used?

As a rule, practically anything goes. However, the more complex the setting, the more costly the service will be.

1.3 Distributed and hub-based interpreting

Simultaneous interpreting at online events can be provided in two ways: distributed (online) or from a hub.

Distributed interpreting (also known as online or cloud-based interpreting)

- The interpreters each work from their home offices. They connect to the meeting via laptop/desktop and headsets.
- This means they are dependent on their domestic internet connection. There may also be distracting background noises (e.g., construction sites, traffic noise).
- The interpreters may not be working from the same office/location, so they cannot see each other to manage a smooth handover.
- The interpreters cannot rely on professional technical support.
- Liability may be an issue, since the interpreters cannot control what happens outside their front doors (e.g., internet connection is interrupted, etc.).
- Depending on the video conferencing platform chosen, the interpreting functions will vary.
- This solution is the least costly.
- It is suitable for shorter working meetings, fairly informal events, preparation meetings and youth exchanges.

Hub-based interpreting

- The interpreting team work from the same location (known as a hub), with professional technical support, in their usual working environment

(booths). Note that while the pandemic lasts, interpreters will have to work one to a booth to ensure social distancing.

- Hubs may be in a fixed location, e.g., on the premises of a technical equipment provider.
- Hubs may also be set up temporarily in a location chosen by the event organiser.
- Ideally, interpreters will all work from the same hub and be able to maintain visual contact.
- It is possible for interpreters to connect from several hubs in various countries to the same event. However, this is rarely done so it remains a largely unexplored field. Generally speaking, the more locations the interpreters connect from, the more complex it will be for them to communicate. Also, hubs in different countries may be technically incompatible; a hub provider in one country will likely not want to be held liable for the proper functioning of a hub abroad.
- Hub interpreting is the costlier option. However, it offers interpreters ideal working conditions. It is also the setting of choice for event organisers because the technical equipment provider handles all technical aspects, leaving the organiser to concentrate on the actual event.
- Interpreting into and between several languages is not a problem from a hub. The equipment provider integrates the interpretation channels in the selected video conferencing tool, allowing organisers to work with their preferred platform.
- Hub-based interpreting is suitable for longer, more complex and more formal online events (e.g., involving the presence of high-ranking guests). Hubs are run by professional technical staff, ensuring stable video and audio transmission.

Meanwhile, interpreters have gained a wealth of experience with online interpreting (also known as Remote Simultaneous Interpreting, or RSI). It is recommended to reach out to a (consultant) interpreter in advance of an event and ask for advice on what options are best for your online event.

1.4 Video conferencing tools and platforms

Zoom interpreting feature

In recent months Zoom has emerged as a user-friendly, stable video conferencing tool. It is widely used in our field, too. Zoom offers a simultaneous interpretation function allowing interpretation between the main event language and currently up to eight further languages.

- **Zoom plans**
  The interpreting function is available to users with a Business, Education or Enterprise account. However, it can also be purchased as a webinar add-on plan by users with a Pro account. Zoom offers monthly as well as annual plans. The choice of plan will depend on how often the user anticipates having to use Zoom (plus the interpreting feature) - just one event or a whole series. It is advised to take out a plan sufficiently ahead of an event so that the user can familiarise themselves with the tool and its various settings, learn how to manage meetings, and test the system thoroughly.

- Refer to Zoom's Support pages to learn how to use the **interpretation feature**: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360034919791-Using-Language-Interpretation-in-your-meeting-or-webinar

- **Languages**
  The Zoom interpretation feature allows for interpretation between one main (floor) language and up to five additional languages at the same time. Note that Zoom does not allow for relay between the languages.[1] Zoom currently offers the following default languages: English, Chinese, Japanese, German, French, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish and Korean. Users can add further languages by clicking on the plus sign (+). Note that although there is no limit on the number of languages that can be added, only five languages can be used in a meeting or webinar at the same time.

  If a virtual event is planned to be held in just two languages, Zoom is a good option. If more than two languages are to be spoken, Zoom's interpreting feature can only be used if interpreting is to be offered solely from the main (floor) language into these other languages (e.g., a presentation or speech in English is interpreted into, e.g., German, French, Japanese and Greek). If the plan is to allow for interaction between the participants (e.g., a Q&A session or a discussion) who speak more than two different languages, a relay setup will be necessary. This involves additional technical equipment (an added expense) that can be integrated by an equipment provider into the Zoom meeting.

[1] Relay interpreting is required whenever an international event requires a larger number of languages. If enabled, interpreters can select the channel they wish to hear and interpret from. Either they can select the floor language so they can interpret directly from the speaker's original sound, or - if the floor language is not a working language for them - they select a relay (or "pivot") language, meaning the interpretation provided by a colleague, and interpret from that into their target language. Example: The conference languages are German, English and Russian. A Russian speaker takes the floor, but the interpreters in the English booth do not work from Russian, only from German. They must hence switch to the relay channel of their colleague who is working from Russian to German. They use their colleague's interpretation into German to provide interpretation into English.

- **Personal Meeting ID**
  Language interpretation cannot be used with Personal Meeting ID (PMI). To enable interpretation, choose the option “generate automatically” when setting up the meeting or webinar.

- **How to start interpretation**
  When the meeting begins, the host launches the interpretation feature, whereupon the interpreters are invited to join their respective audio channels. In preparation for this, the host needs to enter the names of the interpreters as shown in the meeting participant list. Note that in Zoom, the interpreters cannot hear their colleagues’ interpretation, even if they happen to be using the same channel/language combination. If two or more interpreters are covering the meeting and they are not in the same room or location (and do not have visual contact), they need to set up a back channel (e.g., Messenger or similar) so they can hear each other and coordinate the handover.

- **Participants**
  Participants can select an audio channel of their choice so they can hear what is being said in their own language via the interpreters. They can opt to hear either the interpretation and, more quietly, the original (the 80/20% option) or just the interpretation (100/0%). To use the interpreting feature, participants need to connect to the meeting via the Zoom desktop client that is installed on their laptop/desktop, or alternatively use the Zoom app on their mobile device. Interpretation is currently not available to participants who connect to the meeting via browser. Participants should be reminded in advance of the meeting to download the most recent Zoom update so they can be sure to be able to access all of Zoom’s functions.

- **Recordings**
  Should a recording of the meeting be planned, note that cloud recordings of interpretation sessions will only record the original audio of the meeting, but not the interpretation(s). Local recordings of interpretation sessions will record any audio the person who is recording can hear, but not multiple audio channels. Should a recording of the interpretation be planned, consent must be sought from the interpreters in advance. Note that this may increase the cost of the service, since the interpreters may ask for a fee to cover the cessation of copyright to their product.

- **Breakout rooms**
  Zoom does not allow for interpretation in breakout rooms. Should interpretation be needed for group work in breakout rooms, consecutive interpretation is the method of choice.

Interpreting with WebEx

Staff working for public-sector employees may not be permitted to use Zoom on their work devices. Many public-sector organisations use WebEx as their video conferencing tool, however WebEx (currently) does not offer an interpreting feature. If interpretation is to be provided for a meeting on WebEx, a separate WebEx session (conference) needs to be set up for each language or language combination.

If bidirectional interpretation is required (from and into one language to another), the interpreters will have to connect to both sessions (conferences) and listen to what is happening in both rooms so they can interpret from both floor languages. This requires them to wear two headsets or sets of earbuds. It also requires them to remember to interpret the right language into the right conference, and they have to mute themselves in one of the conferences whenever they are speaking into the other. This setup involves greater complexity, which the interpreters have to handle competently on top of their actual interpreting duties.

The participants, on their part, need to connect to the main conference (to watch the video feed) as well as to the second, foreign-language conference (for the audio), taking extra care to keep their microphones on mute so as to avoid any echo or acoustic feedback.

DINA.international / BigBlueButton interpreting function

DINA.international, the new digital platform for international youth work, integrates the video conferencing tool BigBlueButton (BBB), which offers an interpretation feature.

Once the interpreting feature is activated, participants with host rights can take on the role of interpreter. They select the language they wish to hear as well as the target language into which they want to interpret. BBB is relay-compatible ("relay" meaning that, in multilingual conferences, interpreters access one of their colleagues' channels if the floor language spoken is not one of their working languages). The interpreters have an additional microphone button they use to speak into their interpretation channel. Participants choose their preferred language via a button, too.

In DINA/BBB, the interpreting function is also available in the breakout rooms.

The platform also offers a (hidden, separate) video space that is muted in both directions, enabling the interpreters to maintain visual contact.

Multilingual video conferencing platforms

There are a number of multilingual video platforms on the market with an interpretation feature for more than two languages, e.g., VoiceBoxer or KUDO.

The advantage of these platforms for the interpreters (unlike with, say, Zoom's interpretation feature) is that they offer a dedicated "soft console", which visually mimics the hardware that interpreters normally use in an interpreting booth. Plus they allow interpreters to hear each other. These types of platforms are more expensive than interpretation via Zoom, yet less expensive than a hub-based setup. That said, organisers will have to spend time learning about how these platforms work and take the time to conduct a test.

2. Consecutive interpreting

2.1 General aspects

Advantages of consecutive interpreting (especially for online youth exchanges):

- It clearly demonstrates the equal importance of the languages.
- The significance of (intercultural) communication and language is made plain, which can initiate interesting discussions.
- Organisers can continue to use their usual semi-professional interpreters who they have worked with on in-person youth exchanges.[2]

Requirements

- Consecutive interpreting requires all participants to exercise patience. They need to allow for longer oral contributions as well as longer interpretation(s), which can be even more taxing online than it already is when at an in-person event.
- That is why care should be taken to keep oral contributions short, so participants who do not speak the original language do not have to wait for too long.
- Ahead of a meeting, it may be helpful to agree how to signal that a statement or segment of a speech has ended (e.g., by saying “thank you” or nodding at the interpreter). The latency (delay) inherent in video conferences can make it a challenge to recognise when a speaker pauses or has finished. Also, latency can mean there is a longer delay between the end of a segment or speech and the start of the interpretation. Speakers may hence be tempted to continue talking because they believe the interpreter may wish for them to continue completing another segment.

[2] Some youth exchanges rely on semi-professional or lay interpreters when required. Normally, these lack professional training and are often used for reasons of economy because their fees are lower. Semi-professional interpreters have solid language skills and are good at understanding the typical settings in which youth exchanges take place, often because they themselves have taken part in a youth exchange or seminar in the past. For a good insight into the role of semi-professional interpreters, please refer to this publication by the German-Polish Youth Office: Was hat sie gesagt? Übersetz doch mal schnell! (in German).

2.2 Technical aspects

- Consecutive interpretation can be provided via any video conferencing tool, since no specific technical arrangements are required (for details, see section 4, Practical considerations).
- As with simultaneous interpretation, interpreters working consecutively from different locations will ideally have to set up an additional back channel so they can communicate.

For consecutive interpretation, too, a test run should be arranged and clear procedural rules established so that communication runs smoothly.

3. Costs

- Online interpreting: It is often assumed that the cost of providing interpretation during online events is lower than for in-person events, considering that no travel time and travel expenses are incurred. However, interpreting online requires a special set of skills and is more tiring than working from a regular booth or in a hub. Interpreters' fees hence may well be higher, or the number of interpreters working in a team may have to be increased. It is conceivable that this may be compensated for by the fact that working hours are usually shorter for online events.
- Hub-based interpreting: The cost of booking an interpreting hub can vary enormously, with the cost (in Germany) ranging between EUR 1,000 and 3,500 per day for two languages. If a temporary hub is set up on the client's premises, transportation costs will be added to the bill. Also, the cost will depend on the duration and complexity of the online event.
- For as long as the pandemic lasts and there is a risk of infection, the interpreters will have to work one to a booth (rather than two). This means higher equipment costs.

4. Practical considerations

- **Headsets with microphones**
  If interpretation is to be provided at an online event, it is strongly recommended that all participants use a headset with microphone. This

is particularly the case when the interpreters are working distributed/online from their home offices, since they will not have professional technical support that could help optimise audio quality. The interpreters require excellent audio quality so they can interpret simultaneously (listening and speaking at the same time). Consecutive interpreting, too, crucially requires good audio quality.

- **Quiet environment**
  Participants should be reminded to take part in the meeting/event from a quiet location so as to prevent any distracting background noise. (For instance, even birdsong can mask the frequencies occupied by speakers‘ voices to the extent that the interpreters can no longer hear well enough what is being said.) All participants should be requested to ensure their microphones are muted whenever they are not speaking.
- **Ethernet cables**
  Any device used to connect to a video conference, especially events involving interpretation, should be connected to the internet via Ethernet cable. This ensures greater stability than Wi-Fi can offer, minimising the problem of dropped or choppy connections, which leads to intelligibility problems.
- **Up-to-date software**
  Participants should be reminded to download the most recent version of their preferred browser/desktop client/app before the meeting begins.
- **Test run**
  Arrange a test run with both interpreters and speakers in advance of the meeting. This serves to familiarise everyone with the equipment and system used. Also, a test run is an ideal opportunity to verify whether one’s headset/microphone is working satisfactorily. For this reason, a test run should be done using the same setup as will be used at the actual event (headset, desktop PC, laptop).
- **Information**
  Provide the interpreting team with a full set of information about the event (list of participants, information on the speakers, agenda, any slides/presentations to be shown, name of someone to contact if problems occur during the event - and a preferred means of communication).
- **Videos**
  Video conferencing platforms are ideal for sharing presentations and other media during the meeting. Any material that is spontaneously shared (e.g., a presentation on good practices) will not normally be interpretable without preparation (unless it contains very little spoken content). Speakers should be reminded of this challenge.
- **Guidance for participants**

When the meeting starts, take some time to familiarise participants with the interpreting function (before explaining any of the other functions of the platform). Remember that any explanation of the interpreting function will have to be given in all of the participants' languages (e.g., consecutively by the interpreters). This introduction should be done in such a way as to allow participants enough time to learn about the function, try it out, and ask any questions they may have.

- **Chat feature**
  Most video conferencing tools have a chat function that participants can use to type a comment or question. Ahead of the event, consider how you want participants to use the chat and what language they should use, and let the participants know. It can make sense to ask someone from the organising team (or a translator) to translate any chat comments or questions. Alternatively, the facilitator (provided they speak the language/s in question) can read out the chat messages, enabling the interpreters to interpret them into their languages.
- **Breaks**
  Online interpreting is more tiring than working from a booth at an in-person meeting. Participants at online meetings, too, tend to tire more quickly when looking at a screen. Among the added difficulties for the interpreters is that the quality of the audio can vary greatly. Some speakers may prefer to switch off their cameras, meaning their voice appears to come out of thin air; no visual cues are available to aid comprehension. Finally, the functions offered by the platforms may be less intuitive. All in all, then, the programme needs to allow for sufficient breaks.

Legal section

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