

Sign Language Interpreter Guidelines For international/European level meetings

Date: 25 May 2012

1. What are sign languages?

Sign languages are natural languages that have the same linguistic properties as spoken languages. They have evolved over the years in different Deaf Communities and vary greatly between countries and regions. There is not one universal sign language in the world; in fact some countries have more than one sign language or dialect.

However, an auxiliary language often referred to as International Sign (IS) has developed for use at international gatherings. This is not a fully-fledged language, however, it is a communication solution when having to provide access to a diverse audience. It cannot replace national sign languages but can be an acceptable solution at European and international level meetings and events, although it is not optimal.

2. What is a sign language interpreter?

A sign language interpreter is a professional who is fluent in two or more (sign) languages and interprets between a source language and a target language and mediate across cultures. The interpreter's task is to facilitate communication in a neutral manner, ensuring equal access to information and participation. Sign language interpreters can be both Deaf and hearing but should always carry appropriate sign language interpreter qualification from the respective country. A sign language interpreter is bound to a Code of Ethics, ensuring impartiality, confidentiality, linguistic and professional competence, as well as professional growth and development.

3. The right to a sign language interpreter

When booking a sign language interpreter the Deaf sign language user must be consulted on their language and interpreter preferences, especially for high-level meetings. Event organisers are responsible to ensure participation in public events by providing interpreting services. Offering this kind of service encourages Deaf people to attend and be involved, ensuring equal access and opportunities that are also available to a hearing audience.

4. Organising adequate sign language interpretation

How many interpreters are required?

- If the event lasts longer than one hour, at least two interpreters must be provided. Large conferences and workshops require at least three interpreters.
- Interpreters must be given appropriate break times, as they are co-working at all times, supporting their colleague. Therefore, if the participants require interpretation during breaks (e.g. for networking), additional interpreters must be provided to ensure the quality of interpretation.

- In certain special settings, where there is for example a Deaf panellist and Deaf participants in the audience, a minimum of four interpreters is required.
- If there is a team of interpreters, a co-ordinator must be appointed.

What information must be provided to interpreters in advance?

- All presentations, scripts, and background materials, including the agenda with the names of presenters must be sent to the interpreters prior to the event (at least two days in advance).

Where should sign language interpreters be placed?

- Sign language interpreters must be visible; appropriate lighting depending on the preference of the Deaf audience must be provided.

Who is responsible for the interpreter's selection and costs?

- The Deaf person must always be consulted about his/her preference of seating (of both the interpreter and the Deaf person him/herself).
- The organising party is responsible for the adequate remuneration of professional sign language interpreters, similarly to spoken language interpreters. Depending on the assignment and availability of interpreters in the host place this must include appropriate accommodation and travel cost reimbursements.

5. Tips for speakers

- Speak naturally. Reading out a written paper is likely to result in poor and inadequate interpretation.
- As with spoken language interpretation, there will be a slight delay in the interpretation.
- When using audiovisual media, provide captions or alternative formats for all audio content, including sounds.

6. Recommendations

EUD and efsli strongly recommend interpretation in all national sign languages, if possible. Especially topics of high complexity can only be fully grasped if interpreted into the Deaf person's national sign language. Qualified Deaf interpreters should be used when interpreting from one sign language into another sign language.

EUD and efsli support the notion that interpreters must first become professional and sufficiently experienced interpreters at national level including the knowledge of other national signed and spoken languages before they can interpret from and into IS.

The organising party should adopt an anticipatory approach. The booking of sign language interpreters requires pre-planning. The Deaf sign language user can assist the organiser in recommending professional and experienced interpreters.

EUD is the European Union of the Deaf, representing the rights and views of Deaf sign language users across Europe (www.eud.eu).

efsli is the European Forum of Sign Language interpreters, representing the interests of sign language interpreters across Europe (www.efsli.org).