

6 Approaches to Interpreting and How to Save Cash

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1 Consecutive Interpreting (CI)

This approach to interpreting is where the speaker in the original language speaks first, and then pauses. During those pauses the interpreter translates what has been said into the target language.

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This means, inevitably, that it takes twice as long to deliver the content (at least) in the target language.

This also assumes that everything runs smoothly, and that the interpreter has a perfect memory (or takes accurate notes) of what was said, misses nothing, and that there is no time and force compression without having previously considered where etc.

This is the reason why Consecutive Interpreting has been abandoned in many circumstances since World War 2, and replaced by simultaneous interpreting.

It does remain prevalent however in pressure for delivery of the target language content which could

certain circumstances, for example where arrangements for simultaneous working are too burdensome (cost, premises, etc.) and in certain specific contexts such as court interpreting (including arbitration hearings and similar), medical interpreting and certain on-site business contexts, in addition to diplomatic interpreting.

It should not be thought that consecutive interpreting does not involve the use of equipment: for small groups this may even be possible in certain circumstances, but normally a public address system with microphones for speakers and interpreters will be needed, and possibly a system of headsets with switchable channels, according to the number of languages being handled at the same event. It may even require the use of soundproof booths if several consecutive channels are being used at the same time.

It should be noted that the cost of equipment hire will often exceed the cost of interpreter services.

Agencies will almost never do more than simply contact personnel for attendance during the event, or at most, advise some possible equipment hire companies.

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2 Simultaneous Interpreting (SI)

This approach to interpreting is where the speaker in the original language speaks at the same time as the interpreter, who translates what has been said into the target language with a lag of only a few seconds at most.

Time is saved very considerably for the event, since the interpreting takes place simultaneously with the speech being delivered, regardless of the number of language booths involved.

This requires the use of certain equipment in order to be possible, including the hire of soundproof booths (at least one per language), an audio system with microphones to pick up the speakers and relay to the interpreters (usually via a mixing desk) interpreter consoles (usually two per booth), a system to relay the output from the booths (again through the mixing desk) to the required number of output channels, and some form of headset systems to be distributed throughout the audience, with minimal controls (usually channel switching and volume controls).

It should be noted that despite there being very often many interpreters active in several booths for multilingual events, the cost of equipment hire will frequently greatly exceed the cost of the interpreters themselves, often by many orders of magnitude.

Savings can be obtained by event organisers contacting consultant interpreters well in advance of the event, while the timetable of breakout sessions, for example has not yet been defined, so that overall costs can be planned in such a way that pointless duplication of equipment and personnel are avoided.

It is unheard of for language agencies to advise in this way, though interpreters are more than willing to help event organisers with precisely this kind of maximum cost and efficiency planning (and with assistance with finding suitable equipment providers).

Early contact with consultant interpreters is therefore very strongly recommended in all circumstances.

Simultaneous interpreting is the most common mode of interpreting for physical events of all kinds, such as conferences, exhibitions, lectures, etc. It is also prevalent for certain types of high-value arbitrations, etc.

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3 Tour Guide Systems (Bidule)

This system is used virtually exclusively for small groups, such as touring businessmen or academics, or for small meetings of up to say a maximum of 30 attendees, such as certain board meetings and the like. This is because of inherent limitations in the equipment used.

A bidule is a small microphone and radio transmitter module connected to a series of headsets for attendees, with minimal channel switching functions.

Since there are no booths involved, this is normally used where there is only one target language involved, because of issues of sound interference if there were to be colleagues working in a separate channel in relatively small premises without soundproofing.

Equipment costs are typically much lower than for simultaneous interpreting with booths, as there is no fixed equipment and it is all normally provided portably.

The actual interpreting takes place in simultaneous mode, but typically the interpreter will position themselves as far away as possible from the speakers to avoid acoustic interference, but will still need to be able to hear what is being said (which can be an issue if there is no public address system in use).

This is an excellent way to provide quality service at a low cost – providing care is taken to ensure that spare transmission units with charged batteries are available at a moment's notice (they have a tendency to be less reliable than receiver units).

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4 Whispered Interpreting (Chuchotage)

This is a form of interpreting that is only really suited for very small groups of people, (say 6 at most), because what is involved is precisely what the name of the technique suggests: simultaneous interpreting is delivered with no equipment directly by the interpreter into the ears of the listeners.

Obviously, because this kind of interpreting is only possible for small groups (one can physically only assemble a small number of people around the interpreter), its cost is low, since there is no equipment hire involved.

It does however, rely upon some small area being available in the venue where the listeners can assemble without disturbing other event attendees.

One should also be aware that for prolonged sessions in this mode, it will be necessary to arrange for personnel handover at regular intervals without loss of content during handover.

The arrangement of seating may be problematic, especially if there are physical restrictions on the movements of listeners: e.g. sitting twisted round for 30 minutes to listen to a speech may be tolerable for some, but 2 hours becomes a form of torture for even the fittest person.

This should be planned for at the event planning stage, especially if it is to be used in breakout sessions etc. Very small groups of 1-3 people however, should not have this issue.

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5 Over-the-phone Interpreting (OTP)

This form of interpreting is commonly used in community interpreting (dealing with practical matters for foreign language speakers), in medical interviews, and in some jurisdictions in small claims courts or in petty criminal cases.

It is relatively simple to organise, involving the use of conference calls, and the work is typically charged by the minute, and performed in consecutive mode.

Linguistic demands are usually not very high and typically non-professional interpreters are used, since foreign language speakers with no qualifications can perform this adequately.

We do NOT provide this service at present.

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6 Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (RSI)

Please also see our *Special Report and Guide-lines for Success*, available for download at the website below.

This is a new form of interpreting which is still in its infancy, but which has been projected into the limelight by the restrictions imposed by the COVID outbreak since early 2020.

It initially developed as a means of saving cash on equipment hire, since that is the greatest item of expense in standard conference events: the concept was that interpreters would work remotely via video link, thus saving the need for booth hire, and at the venue output could be assured through smartphones, via headphone jacks and special software installed for the event.

However, while these systems were in their infancy, the COVID outbreak began and made it almost impossible to host events as before, and so the platforms found themselves projected to the fore, being in some cases virtually the sole mode of interpreting available for events that have since moved to cyberspace online.

The problem is that while there are a number of applications that support remote online interpreting, and some can work relatively well, the whole field is relatively immature, and systems are fraught with problems most of which have not been resolved.

On one side there are conference call applications, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Cisco Webex, all of which are now used quite frequently in court cases, business meetings, and small online conferences, product launches and the like.

The problem is that none of these applications were ever designed with interpreting in mind, and in even the most advanced of them, Zoom, the interpreting function has been added as an afterthought and is not properly integrated in the program.

Furthermore, control of the event (including handling interpreters) is often left to event hosts, who are typically completely unaware of how interpreting works, and are more concerned with the event in its main language: this means, for example, it happens from time to time that interpreters get inadvertently disconnected with no possibility of reconnection.

There are also the more mature conference interpreting platforms, such as Interactio, Voiceboxer, Interprefy and more, which claim to offer solutions to cater to interpreter needs.

Apart from the fact that some of these platforms in fact act like language agencies, and do not hesitate to take super-profits from both clients and interpreters by dubious ethical means, the actual programs still present several difficulties in use.

In almost every case, interpreters are expected to work from home studios, which may or not be suitably equipped, using internet access which may or may not be adequate in terms of

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latency (lag between input and output), and without the assistance of a colleague in the same location.

This means there must be messaging of some kind between the interpreters are booth partners, and extra video feeds are required for presentation slides, messages to/from audio technicians, booth partners for handover timing and event organisers, in addition to monitoring event slides and if possible a video feed of speakers for body language issues etc.

All this adds considerably to cognitive load, which is already extreme in simultaneous interpreting, since the source has to be listened to and simultaneously interpreted into the target language, while monitoring most of the rest -in a booth notes between colleagues pass almost naturally, and it is possible to look across from a monitor to the booth window etc, ut none of this is possible with online platforms.

In addition, there is the additional risk of acoustic shock, which is loud extraneous noise that can in extreme cases burst interpreter eardrums and terminate careers – there have been several such cases in the Canadian Parliament remote interpreting sessions this year.

All of these factors, and the capital costs of making sure one has dual internet connections / dual computers available for use for dual purposes (video feeds etc.), plus some form of protection against acoustic shock means that interpreters are now being required to bear additional capital costs just in order to be able to provide their service.

Unfortunately, platform companies have largely acted unscrupulously to drive interpreter prices down, not content with the equipment rental savings they provide, and some insist on charges by the minute (as in telephone interpreting) and have been recruiting personnel from pools of unqualified people, for example in India, which then raises intelligibility issues for listeners, amongst others.

On the other hand, some more professional interpreters have started to charge extra for remote simultaneous interpreting work, because timing almost never corresponds to expectations, and to reflect the capital burden placed upon them, but most of all, because of the increased cognitive load.

To give an illustration of what is involved: typically interpreters work in pairs, and change over every 25-30 minutes. They do this because the work is so intellectually demanding that output quality starts to drop after 30 minutes at most, and will drop exponentially thereafter. In remote interpreting, almost nobody is able to continue beyond 20 minutes before handing over.

That does not prevent unscrupulous agencies and/or platforms from attempting to persuade interpreters to work for up to 1-2 hours without a partner. If that happens, then intelligibility for listeners is at serious risk.

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Nevertheless, it is clear that remote simultaneous interpreting will be here to stay in the long term. Many of the issues will be ironed out in practise, as better designed platforms become available (for example where output control is placed in the hands of interpreters instead of hosts).

It is already clear from the last few months of working that the nature of meetings now being interpreted online is smaller in scale than normal large conferences; and even once the large conference market reopens, this sector is likely to continue to be served by these platforms.

One interesting approach is a hybrid one, where interpreters work from interpreting hubs, located in either specialist premises or universities or other locations with large populations of qualified personnel. This enables booth partner, audio protection and other technical issues to be handled centrally.

However, to sum up, RSI is doubtless here to stay, but needs more work before it can be regarded as equally reliable as more traditional approaches.

The key here is to take a balanced approach: use RSI to save on equipment and travel / accommodation costs for an event, but it cannot be used to cut corners on the actual source of the output: the interpreters themselves.

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How to Save Cash

Careful Event Planning

We can help you save money on your future events by attention being made to the number of breakout sessions that will be needed during the event, for example, and ensuring as far as possible that those attendees that need interpreting are located in sub-venues by language as far as possible.

Clearly, this has to be done event by event, on an individual basis, based upon the locations of known attendees, even online.

Choice of Interpreting Mode

Even in major international conferences, not all content will need to be interpreted simultaneously, especially if the presentations that need to be given in a different language are relatively short.

In such circumstances there is a potential source of cost-savings by only having the speech that needs to be interpreted done individually in consecutive mode, which means considerable savings in terms of booths and audio equipment, since the interpreting team can also be on stage (typically to one side) to convey the content using the public address system of the venue.

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Choice of Break-out Interpreting Systems

Additional savings may be found if in an event, it is found that numbers of attendees for any given language drop enough for alternative solutions to be considered. This will involve savings in terms of equipment hire (especially booths) if tour guide systems can be used, or for even smaller groups, whispered interpreting is a possibility.

Once more, this will have to be analysed with the event organiser on an individual event basis. Obviously, this will have to be tailored by the event organisers in the light of the number of attendees per target language, assuming consecutive interpretation will not be a possibility (for example where the same source is conveyed into several different tongues at the same time)..

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Prioritising Fixed Costs

The hire of the venue, catering, equipment hire, interpreters in pairs (or threes for longer events without breaks) are all areas where there is a potential for savings.

Setting the priorities for the event is crucial: for example, ensuring that people who have travelled thousands of miles to be present can follow the proceedings should take priority over the star ratings of the hotel accommodation, or the luxuriousness of buffet menus, etc.

The source of the success of an international event is the ability of participants to understand what is going on, first and foremost, and that is why it is, in our view, the absolute top priority to plan the interpreting approach as early as possible, so budgets can be met and everyone returns home content.

To sum up: never try and save money on interpreting personnel. It may even be possible to find a resident in a third-world nation who is prepared to break some of the practical guidelines set out above, or accept other working conditions, or work for less than properly qualified and experienced interpreters.

But do you really want to risk attendees going home without understanding the content of the event they paid to attend? Just think how that will impact your own professional reputation over the short medium and long term.

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Use of Bi-active Interpreters

What this expression means is using interpreters that can work out of and into two separate languages.

The cost saving calculation works at any price point but for the purpose of argument, let us assume that an event is planned with 3 languages, say English (EN), Chinese (ZH) and Spanish (ES) as they are the world's most spoken languages.

The event can work with three booths, one for each target language, with each booth working into one target language, so all permutations are covered.

The cost at say 800 USD per booth (three booths each with two interpreters) comes to 6 x 800 USD = 4800 USD.

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In addition all the equipment needed to provide three booths will have to be hired, at considerable cost.

If, on the other hand, it is possible to find bi-active interpreters, who work both to and from their chosen language (a.k.a. providing “retour”), the entire event can be covered with two booths only, as follows:

One booth works EN<>ES, and one booth does EN<>ZH.

Interpreter charges are assumed to be constant, so the total interpreter costs would be: 4 X 800 USD = 3200 USD. This represents a cost saving of 33 1/3%.

In addition there will be considerable savings in terms of costs of infrastructure (booths and equipment).

A word of caution however: whilst this may be easy to arrange in places with large supplies of suitably qualified interpreters (major centres of interpreting, such as New York, Brussels, Geneva etc.) this may be difficult to arrange in other locations.

This does not mean it is not worthwhile trying to do it, and limited travel costs can be faced if the result overall is a significant cost saving, and it should be recalled that it is the total amount saved that counts, not the percentage!.

It should be also pointed out that in theory, this will always be possible in Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (though hybrid events may suffer the same issues as physical meetings, if there are insufficient interpreters available at interpreting hub locations).

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