

10

Interpreters

by **IZZY BIRCH** with contributions from **KATY OSWALD, HAWA AWURO SAM, and SONYA RUPAREL**

The interpreter in an immersion does far more than translate between different languages. Their role is to interpret not only what is being said but also the cultural dynamics that influence the interaction between host and visitor. They may advise the visitor on how to behave, and help the host understand the world from which their visitor has come.

Interpreters are in a position of considerable power, which makes their selection and training critical to the success of the immersion. Their personal attributes and values – such as their ability to empathise with both host and visitor and to keep their personal views or feelings to themselves – can be as important as their technical skills. Bosse Kramsjo (Section 4) identifies the availability of good interpreters as a key challenge. Well-educated, city-born interpreters ‘can carry with them “bags” full of contempt or disregard towards the villagers,’ he writes. The guidelines for facilitators prepared by the Exposure and Dialogue Programme highlight the importance of their role and the need for discretion:

You are there but you are not there. You should be the mirror through which the host and the guests look at each other.¹

¹ EDP (2002) *Guidelines for Facilitators of Exposure and Dialogue Programmes*. Bonn: Exposure and Dialogue Programme.

Katy Oswald’s reflections

Interpreters are sometimes closely associated with the organisation arranging the immersion, and can be highly experienced development workers in their own right. In the case of an immersion organised for DfID staff (UK Department for International Development) by ActionAid China in 2006, the interpreter was a Party secretary from local government. **Katy Oswald**, one of the participants in that immersion, described the impact of the experience on him:

One of the most interesting aspects of this immersion from my perspective was the experience of a local county Party secretary, who accompanied me as translator. He said that he had learnt lessons from my ‘bottom up’ attitude and was impressed by my wanting to experience life in the village (such as insisting on walking to a neighbouring village when he offered his official car). He also said that he was more aware of the problems facing the villagers. One of the recommendations I made to ActionAid China was to offer local government officials the opportunity to attend immersion visits as it seemed that he had gained as much from the visit as I had.

Hawa Awuro Sam’s reflections

In other instances an interpreter may be a young college-

leaver at the start of their career, who has had the requisite training in an international language. In such cases the experience can also be an opportunity for them to learn, as Hawa Awuro Sam, a development studies student from Ghana, describes:

For me, I understood better and gained practical experience especially on the art of listening and hearing, which I had read about. As I went round with my visitor, I realised that she was trying hard to come down to our level by genuinely listening and accepting to be part of anything offered. Even though I knew that in her position she must have had some of these experiences – and if I were in her shoes I would have said so – it was like she wanted to feel or taste it again for the sake of the process. She rarely cut into a talk when her hosts were speaking, and only asked me to tell her what they said afterwards.

When asked what advice they would give to others, interpreters trained by ActionAid in various countries mentioned the importance of patience, humility, honesty (for example, translating what is actually said rather than what the interpreter thinks should be said), good listening skills, stamina, and a deep understanding of their environment.

Sonya Ruparel's reflections

The following account, written by Sonya Ruparel of ActionAid, shows what can go wrong when these qualities are absent, and how the behaviour of the interpreter can make or break an immersion. Far from offering themselves as a mirror, the interpreter in this instance created a wall between the host family and their guest.

This is a real account of how an immersion can be undermined if you do not have a good interpreter, and how one's own behaviour can inhibit learning. The interpreter allocated to me was employed by a partner organisation which worked in the community that was hosting the immersion. She therefore already had a certain 'status' because of her job, and was known by people in the village.

I found that the flow of the conversation was difficult to maintain. It was inhibited by my interpreter asking her own questions of both me and my host, and choosing to explain to me what it meant for the family to have me to stay. She did not translate all my questions, but rather responded to them herself.

My hosts let my interpreter lead me around. I asked them if I could help with the cooking, but this ended up

“Even though I knew that in her position she must have had some of these experiences – and if I were in her shoes I would have said so – it was like she wanted to feel or taste it again for the sake of the process.”

with my interpreter taking over and telling me what to do. After a while, when I wanted something interpreted, I had to say: 'please could you translate that' at the end of the sentence. At one point I asked my interpreter not to answer on my host's behalf but simply to translate, and this clearly upset her.

The help that I gave the family started to look very tokenistic. I helped with the cooking, but would get on with a non-essential task while my host went off and did something else leaving me to my interpreter.

Another regret I have is taking my camera. In the past this has not been a problem, but my interpreter decided that as long as I had a photograph of me 'doing something' I need not continue doing it. She made people pose for the camera. This made me feel quite uncomfortable, but I felt that I couldn't stop her once she had organised something with other people as it would look churlish. I did say at one point that I preferred not to have posed snaps, but this still didn't restrain her.

After we had cooked breakfast my host mother wanted to show me the fields. We walked there at a fast pace, with my attempts at conversation continually thwarted by not being translated and the interpreter unable to keep up. On the way to the field she received a phone call which meant that she walked 20 paces behind us talking on her mobile. There was no way that I could make conversation.

We all did about an hour and a half's work, pulling weeds out of the groundnut field. My back started to ache within about 15 minutes, and I asked my host if her back hurt. She admitted that it hurt all the time but that she was used to it. We carried firewood back from the field to her house, and I am not sure what happened to her after this. My interpreter also disappeared somewhere. This was a regular occurrence: I later learnt that she went off to listen to some meetings that her organisation was running in the village. I talked with some children who had a reasonable level of English. My in-

interpreter came and found me, and interrupted my conversation, asking the children questions of her own. She asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. After a short while she turned to me and told me that she had just told the girls never to listen to the boys as they are all liars! She then asked me if I had anything to add. I was very shocked and disagreed with her, and asked her to say that I believed that both boys and girls should learn to respect each other and treat each other equally. As far as I know this was translated, and then she told me that what I had said had created trouble between the boys and girls. Once again, I am unsure of the translation and how I was interpreted.

Later on I asked the eldest daughter of the house if she minded if I accompanied her to the clinic. Once again my interpreter used this visit to reinforce power issues by insisting that we walk to the front of the queue and that my host should be given her medication immediately. This was extremely embarrassing, but by this point I had stopped trying to say anything to my interpreter as I was aware that I only had a few more hours left of the immersion.

Overall, this was a frustrating experience, caused by my own inhibitions and by an overpowering 'interpreter' who did not fully understand either her or my role in the immersion.

CONTACT DETAILS

Izzy Birch
10 Pearce Drive
Chipping Norton
Oxon
OX7 5HY
Email: izzymbirch@yahoo.com

Sonya Ruparel
Operations Support Manager and Partnership
Co-ordinator (DfID), International Partnership
Development
ActionAid
Hamlyn House
Macdonald Road
London N19 5PG
Tel: + 44 20 7561 7653
Email: Sonya.Ruparel@actionaid.org

Katy Oswald
Social Development Advisor
DfID China
1 Palace Street
London
SW1E 5HE, UK
Tel: + 44 20 7023 0000
Email: K-Oswald@dfid.gov.uk