

Video interpreting in schools – the participants' experience



InterpreterLine is Australia's leading telephone and video interpreting specialists. The reliable, intuitive and easy-to-manage video interpreting TANDBERG system is being deployed in Victorian schools.

InterpreterLine's video interpreting facility (TANDBERG endpoints and infrastructure) using high-speed broadband connection has been installed in several Victorian government schools in 2010, with particular attention to making it available in several provincial schools in regions where local interpreting resources may be inadequate. Traditionally here interpreters have always travelled from Melbourne to attend regional appointments, or telephone interpreting has been used.

Now video conference technology can augment such practices, by enabling the highest qualified interpreter to conduct their interpreting via a video link from InterpreterLine's offices in the Melbourne CBD and Sydney CBD. For many regional institutions that require language services, travel costs can be a real problem in terms of budget; some regional purchasers of interpreting services will pay the greater part of their interpreting budget not for the actual interpreting but for travel by the interpreter.

And while telephone interpreting is an option, it is more difficult to use in complex cases, or where the visuals are important, or where there are large numbers of participants in an interview.

On 19 August 2010 we witnessed one such video interpreting encounter, in a provincial school, where an enrolment and interview with a family was conducted by video link, and the interpreter in the East African language Kiswahili being located in Melbourne.

After the successful interview, teacher Peter remarked on the experience of video interpreting:

"It was difficult at first. It changes everything about how I learned to work with interpreters: I have always been mindful in a parent interview to concentrate solely on the parent, to ignore the interpreter who is present, to focus only on the parent, maintain eye contact etc. But now with video technology the tendency is to look at the interpreter on the screen, and you have to remember to focus again on the parent, that is your prime relationship."

However, now with some experience of video interpreting, he finds he can adjust and the relationship with the parent can be fully maintained, with a good communication flow.

Peter also sees advantages in using video technology as it has helped to foster cooperation between schools. In one case, a family had one child enrolling in their Primary School, another child in the local High School, and by having the video conference technology at their school it was possible for a staff member to come over from the High School and to do all enrolment procedures and get to know the family all in one go. Otherwise if each school had to book an on-site interpreter, “You are always playing catch up. They might be enrolled without an interpreter often, and then only when the interpreter is booked some time later do you get to know the family.” Having the video conference facility at their school will make it a magnet for others to use as well, thus maximising the facility.

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Peter also commented that the video conference technology is “infinitely preferable” to telephone interpreting, particularly in a group situation as this enrolment was, where several staff members and family members were present.

Meanwhile, from the interpreter’s viewpoint, Kiswahili interpreter Richard says he does not mind travelling to jobs, but he is very happy with the video conference technology: “Face to face interpreting is best” he says, “but second is video interpreting, which is superior to telephone interpreting”. He finds that telephone interpreting, while useful and appropriate in many situations, gets very tiring if it goes beyond half an hour, with the degree of concentration needed and lack of visual cues and body language. So video conference technology is better; it still has a “distance feeling” but he finds concentration does not get stretched even in long video interviews; the one problem is to make sure the lighting is right so that faces don’t become shadowy or fuzzy.

So, from both sides, we can see the benefits of video interpreting and the unexpected advantages and even pulling power of video conference technology – school staff find new ways of using it, and find new ways of collaborating even across schools, while the interpreter acknowledges its superiority to telephone interpreting, and can fit in more actual interpreting rather than sitting behind the wheel of a car.

For further information about InterpreterLine visit interpreterline.com.au

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