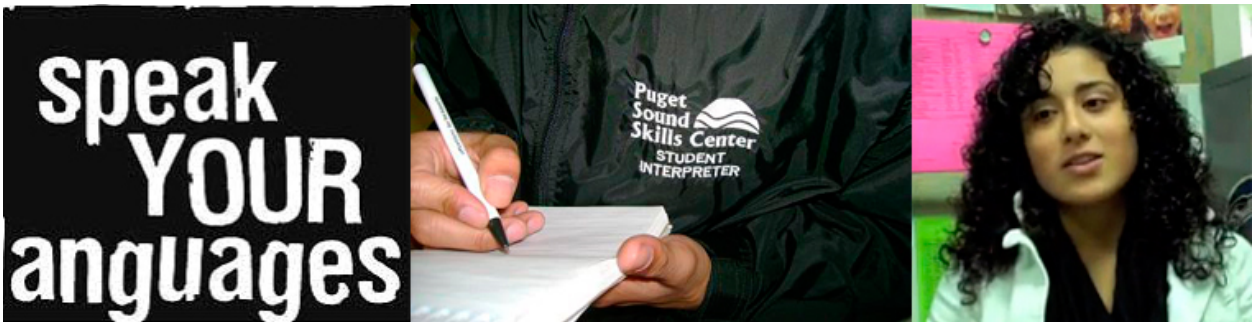
Students train as interpreters, with benefits for all involved



by Barbara Cervone | October 2012

BURIEN, WA—On a fall morning in this community outside Seattle, most of the people waiting in line at the local food bank were elderly immigrants from Ukraine. From her post near the front desk Valentina, a local high school senior, spotted a woman hunched in frustration, struggling to understand a food-bank staffer's repeated instructions.

With little hesitation, she stepped in. "I've been in that position myself," recalls Valentina, herself a Russian immigrant. "The person keeps talking, raising his voice as he grows impatient." She knew just what to tell him: "If he wanted the lady to understand him, he'd have to pause between sentences to give me time to interpret. I also told him he'd need to speak slowly and respectfully."

Valentina's experience as a newcomer served her well, but an unusual program in the Highline School District has served her even better. For more than a year, she has replaced her afternoon high-school electives with the Student Interpreter program at the nearby Puget Sound Skills Center.

Open to bilingual high school juniors and seniors, the program offers this district's English language learners an unusual leg up: the opportunity to gain real-world experience as interpreters. If they wish, they also gain entree to the professional translation and interpretation job market. Valentina herself is training to become a medical interpreter.

Step by step, learning to interpret

Top Ten Behavioral Skills

Positioning: The interpreter stands a few steps behind and to the side of the speaker.

Eye Contact: The interpreter does not look at the participants.

Accuracy: The interpreter's message is the same as the speaker's message.

Completeness: The interpreter's message is complete. Nothing is left out.

Enunciation: The interpreter speaks clearly.

Volume: The interpreter speaks loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Posture: The interpreter stands up straight and does not rock or fidget.

Poise & Composure: The interpreter appears relaxed and "recovers" from mistakes without giggling or falling apart.

Reference to Self: The interpreter always refers to him/herself as "the interpreter."

Managing Participants: The interpreter makes the correct requests when necessary.

In a school district where nearly 18,000 students come from families who speak over 80 different languages, the need for skilled interpreters has mushroomed. David Cotlove and Courney Searls-Ridge designed the Student Interpreter program to harness and build on the skills of youth who have personal experience with the challenges of a new language.

The program immerses students in the thicket of on-the-spot interpreting, whatever level of skill they have at the start. "The students come to us either thinking they are better than they are," says Searls-Ridge, "or they have no confidence at all."

Either way the program meets students where they are, says the program's core instructor, Betsy Ainsworth-Grimm—and then demands the most.

"Did I think learning to be a professional interpreter was going to be easy?" asks Mayrani, a recent graduate of the program, who is now employed as an in-house interpreter at LC Interpreters in Burien. "No! Did I think it was going to be this hard? No!"

Students begin by "shadowing": simply repeating what was said in the same language in which it was spoken. This requires remembering and repeating the message, but not transferring meaning from one language into another language.

Once they've mastered shadowing, the students move on. They learn the top ten behavioral skills behind successful interpreting. They become familiar with positioning: standing in one-on-one situations a few steps behind and to the side of the speaker to encourage direct communication between two parties. ("You never form a triangle," explains 11th grader Guillermo.) They hone their ability to be accurate and complete, making sure their message is the same as the speaker's. They practice how to enunciate, speak loudly, and maintain composure. They learn to refer to themselves as "the interpreter" and to avoid eye contact.

There's no hiding here. Teacher Ainsworth-Grimm records students on video as they role-play these behaviors, then invites students to critique each other.

The students also dissect issues like confidentiality and role boundaries. Ainsworth-Grimm gives them ethical dilemmas and sets them to work. "We read the dilemma and related articles," explains Adriana, who came to the U.S. from Baja, Mexico when she was four. "We write about

what happened, what went wrong, what's the ethic involved. Then we say what we would do if we were in that situation. It's a different kind of role-playing."

Going public



Once students are ready to put their new skills to the test, they fan out into elementary and middle schools in their community where interpreters are badly needed.

Lupe volunteered in the office at the middle school she had attended. "Kids would arrive who didn't know English, I'd interpret for them, show them around the school. The teachers, I'd interpret for them, too."

All the students take their turn interpreting at parent nights and open houses, cultural events and informational workshops (such as a fire safety presentation by the local fire department), and math and literacy nights. Speaking loudly and clearly when interpreting in front of a large group is a big challenge, they agree. "When you get nervous, the first thing that goes is your voice," one student says.



Maria remembers preparing to interpret at an upcoming math night for parents. The teachers gave her a list of key concepts and vocabulary in advance, but the translations were far from cut-and-dried: "I found myself stuck on something you'd think was simple: how to interpret odd and even."

Guillermo interprets at a homeless mission and at his church. "I started off so nervous, I had to keep asking people as politely as I could to slow down when they spoke," he says. But he got better at using the context to figure out a word he didn't know and found a rhythm that worked for him. "Soon people tell me that I'm good, that I'm doing a good job. And that makes me want to improve lots more."

The students are also trained to recognize situations that require an adult interpreter or pose a conflict of interest for the student interpreter. They carry a **printed card** that lays out the boundaries and concerns: not interpreting when personal information is likely to be disclosed, in situations that may become adversarial, or where they do not understand the concepts or vocabulary.

Interpreting for parents

For most children of non-English-speaking parents, interpreting for their elders is second nature, a family responsibility they did not choose but cannot shirk. "Hands down, it's the hardest interpreting of all," Ainsworth-Grimm says.

There's the issue of confidentiality. The child must hear and share information that perhaps they shouldn't: a conversation between a mother and a nurse about a miscarriage; a change in

welfare status when one parent, after a bitter dispute, returns to the home country. There's also the issue of disrupting the balance of power at home.

"It's hard to explain to your parents that you really shouldn't be interpreting for them, because of confidentiality," says Adriana. "They get angry and say, 'You're my child, this is what you're supposed to do!'"

Sometimes the language is too technical or obscure for the child to understand, let alone translate. (What's an MRI? The Naturalization Self Test?) Or it's more revealing then the child can bear. "I was at welfare with my mom," says Valentina. "We were applying for food stamps because we ourselves were low on our own income, due to the economy."

And then there's sheer embarrassment, natural when teens are out in public with their parents, compounded when their parents don't know the "rules." Maria cringes when she thinks about taking her parents shopping. "In Mexico, you always bargain for the price, and when I take them shopping, they're always trying to negotiate with the cashier," she says. "It's embarrassing. And when I tell them there's no bargaining in the typical stores here, they think I'm starting an argument and I get in trouble."

Win-win

Such complications aside, the Student Interpreter program wins high marks from all concerned.

Students graduate from the program with increased vocabulary and better reading, writing, and speaking skills in both their languages. Students who are successful in the program can earn college credit. They also may prepare for the Washington State medical interpreter certification exam, opening the door to work as professional medical interpreters. One former student passed the certification exam in English/Spanish at the end of her junior year.

Several program graduates are studying to be bilingual teachers or nurses. One tutors international students at a community college, to help pay her tuition at a local university.

The benefits to clients are both small and incalculable. The elderly Russian woman at the food bank is one of many whose dignity Valentina has bolstered with her interpreting skills. The frustrated staffer won too: he got his message across.

"They tell me I'm a big help," Guillermo says of the Spanish-speaking families that rely on him at the homeless mission.

At an evening Mother's Day celebration at an elementary school, a student interpreter accompanied the principal as she walked around the building and chatted with her many Latino families. "It was a simple yet profound way for me to make a personal connection with parents I'd never been able to communicate with other than a nod and a smile," the principal said afterward.