Telephone Interpreting

Interpreting over the telephone can be done, although usually the sound quality and stability of phone connections is insufficient.

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It is used when two or more participants in a meeting (a phone call) do not speak the same language. Interpretation is usually provided into one other language, but can be offered in several languages. Meetings of this kind are typically short.

It can also be used at a regular meeting when a person who is not present calls in to speak via a phone link.

Technical requirements

For this kind of interpretation you will need

- very good, clear-sound, non-crackling phone connections;
- a headset phone (rather than a single earpiece phone) for the interpreter;
- a quality connection from the phone line to the simultaneous interpretation system, if it is a call-in from a speaker who is not in the meeting room and if simultaneous interpretation is used in the room.
- feedback blackout: interpreters must not hear their own voice in their headsets.

Method of interpretation

Telephone conversations between two or more parties are usually interpreted consecutively – one party speaks in say Spanish, the interpreter listens then translates consecutively into English for the other party. The other party replies in English and the interpreter translates consecutively into Spanish, and so forth.

If it is a phone-in from an outside party into a meeting room where the rest of participants are listening in more than one language, the interpreter(s) will translate consecutively what the caller says. It may be necessary to ask the caller to pause for translation, if his intervention is long.

If it is a call into a meeting room where simultaneous interpretation is used, the phone call needs to be fed into the simultaneous interpreting (SI) system so that interpreters can listen to it and translate simultaneously into the various conference languages. This only works well if the sound quality of the phone call that technicians feed into the SI system is good enough – not often the case. (Link to ISO standards frequency range specifications.)

An alternative backup arrangement, such as having someone in the room repeat what the phone-in speaker says, may be advisable in case sound quality is too poor.
AIIC does not recommend simultaneous telephone interpreting, for the reasons exposed. It should only be used as a palliative when the circumstances do not allow for normal conference interpretation.

**Planning your meeting**

The interpreter should ideally be present at the place where one or more of the participants are calling from. If you arrange otherwise, allow for more switchover time.

For conference calls, you may have one interpreter present at each point or several interpreters in one spot. Conference calls require strict moderation; discuss the arrangements with your consultant interpreter.

You may want to arrange for separate phone lines for interpreting output.

If you plan to use a hands-free conference phone in a room with several speakers, make sure its microphone range is adequate.

Always have a dry run in advance to test sound quality, especially if the arrangements are complex or unusual.

Ask your **consultant interpreter** about the number of interpreters you need and where they should be.

**Preparation**

In telephone interpreting there is no visual support whatsoever, which means interpreters are deprived of about half the message. Therefore, it is even more important that interpreters are **fully briefed** about the subject of the meeting and the participants. Tell your interpreter(s) in advance who the participants are, what their positions are in the company or organisation and why they are holding a telephone conference.

Give interpreters the background documentation that participants have and, especially, any document they will discuss. For instance, if this is a telephone conference between production managers of a company in different countries, give the interpreters background material on what the company makes and on the project the managers will discuss.

Give interpreters the URL of the website where all documents pertaining to the teleconference are stored. They should be able to consult the documents **before the meeting**, like all delegates.

Brief the participants regarding the presence of interpreters and any additional rules of interaction ensuing from this fact.

Remember AIIC interpreters are bound by a professional secrecy oath.

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**Recommended citation format:**

<https://aiic.net/p/5921>. 