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Advocacy for English Language Learners and the Role of Interpreters to Assist Counselors

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Abstract

This paper focuses on addressing issues in advocating for clients whose native languages are not English. As immigrants and other English language learners continue to come to the United States, counselor educators and supervisors have opportunities to encourage their bilingual or multilingual counselor education students to become professional clinical mental health interpreters to better serve the needs of such individuals. The authors argue that counselor education programs have opportunities to prepare students and provide the knowledge, abilities, and skills necessary to work successfully with language diverse clients.

Keywords: advocacy, bilingual, culturally competent, native language, English language learners (ELLs), English as a Second Language (ESL), interpretation, translation

The constant shift in demographics continues to change the face of the United States (American Immigration Council, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). Many new immigrants come to the United States with their cultures, customs, mores, and native languages, which often differ from the dominant language and culture (Nassar-McMillan, 2014). As such, counselors face challenges in serving and trying to meet the mental health needs of these different linguistic populations (U. S. Census Bureau, 2013, 2014; Vega et al., 2012; Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2004; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007). Advocacy is of paramount importance to professional counselors in that doing what is ethically and morally right for each individual is part of the profession, despite counselor and client linguistic and cultural differences, ways of being, and believing (Schulte & Schulte, 1995). Along the lines of advocacy for all

linguistically and culturally diverse individuals (McCall-Perez, 2000), the United States is increasingly growing more diverse linguistically and culturally and there are increasing needs for both interpreters and translators, more so in states with high multilingual populations such as California, New Mexico, Texas, New Jersey, New York, Nevada, Florida, Arizona, and Hawaii (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013, 2014). The need for professional counselors and supervisors who are fluent in languages other than English increases daily as the face of America continues to change (Capps, Fix, & Mwozu, 2015; Faubert & Gonzalez, 2016; Fry & Gonzales, 2008; Rangel, 2013).

As conscientious professionals, we have a moral and ethical obligation to meet such individuals' needs, to hear their voices, and to in good faith interpret the message(s) being conveyed. Counselor education programs can provide the opportunity to prepare their respective professional counselors to be effective advocates for clients whose native languages are not English.

Working Together and Learning From Each Other

Advocacy requires counselor educators and supervisors to be intentional regarding the academic and professional development of all students (Yep, 2011). McCall-Perez (2000) provided evidence that supports the need for counselors to advocate for their clients, especially when equity requires meeting the needs of English language learners (ELLs). In addition, bilingual and multilingual professional counselors are equally important in meeting the ELLs' schooling and clinical mental health needs (O'bryon & Rogers, 2010). Counselor educators and supervisors have a fiduciary responsibility to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves.

The presence of native speakers of languages other than English in counselor education programs enhances the possibility that professional counselors can be effective advocates for clients whose native languages are not English (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). As such, advocacy, when possible and contingent on demographics, requires counselor education departments to utilize and retain their monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual students to prepare them to work effectively with clients from any native language group (Aud, Fox, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010). By working together, everyone's efforts and skills become enhanced where all gain valuable insights in working with different populations. For many ELLs, not being able to communicate in English becomes an obstacle in expressing themselves (Olson, 2012; Tarasawa, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999). Counselor educators and supervisors can advocate and open lines of communication by strategically encouraging their professional monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual students to work together and learn from each other. The section that follows briefly touches on how working with individuals who are different from ourselves can enhance and teach us skills to become advocates for those who typically do not have a voice in society.

Personalizing the 'other' in counselor education programs. Using Anderson's (1997) postmodern, collaborative approach, counselor educators and supervisors can walk counselor education students through their personal and family experiences with their native languages and have students consider these experiences in their social contexts (Carterall, 1985; Freire, 1973; Kyunghie, Jung, Hee, & Alcazar-Bejerano, 2015). The end goal sheds light on the difficulties many ELLs experience when they cannot communicate in English (Valenzuela, 1999; Welner & Carter, 2013). An exercise

to sensitize what the ‘other’ may feel or experience can be done through role-playing in the classroom. Strategically forming pairs or a triad with a mix of native English speakers and those of other languages allows the sharing of varied personal experiences (Faubert & Gonzalez, 2016). Simply allowing a short counseling session and or activity, say, in a non-English language, will enable colleagues to walk in the shoes of the ‘other’ and thereby sensitize their perceptions/attitudes as they reflect on the experience with the hope of developing a commitment to advocacy. This experience allows individuals to reflect and provide support in advocating for each other, especially for those who struggled in the activity. Hopefully, this also provides insight on how to advocate for future clients. In carrying out such a simple exercise, many students will experience what Freire (2003) called *conscientization*, where individuals reconstruct their personal understandings to appreciate and respect those who have different lived experiences from their own (Faubert & Locke, 2005). If anything, this exercise provides a window into how and what the ‘other’ individuals feel and the struggles they may face on a daily basis when they cannot express themselves in English.

Further, through this activity, the primary goal is to take the student from classroom learning to experiential advocacy by providing, whenever possible, authentic experiences to gain understanding and appreciation for one another, thereby honing their empathy for and commitment to advocacy (Torres & Wallace, 2013). This commitment to advocacy is not only for students to become advocates on behalf of clients but for counselor educators and supervisors to become advocates on behalf of their colleagues as well.

Positive outcomes from such a short activity highlight the different sets of knowledge, abilities, and skills that each student brings to the table. As such, students can learn to appreciate one another in preparing to work with linguistically diverse clients (Faubert & Locke, 2005). Such shared responsibility between and among monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual colleagues can only enhance knowledge, abilities and skills among students, thereby enhancing relevance and increasing rigor for a counselor education department (Camarota & Zeigler, 2014; Makarova & Herzog, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999).

Beyond the counselor education program: Advocacy through professional development. Individuals learn as they interact in actual social contexts; they also learn through professional development to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities. The art of learning is not limited to classrooms; professionals have the capacity to teach themselves. For example, they can read E. Gonzalez and Faubert (2009) for an introduction to the theories of language development. In addition to professional reading, they can attend workshops, engage in social opportunities, enroll in renewal classes, and interact with people whose native language is different from theirs in social contexts or settings (Blum, 2005; Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Vedder & Horenczyk, 2006).

Given the language diversity of recent immigrants to the United States, their need for welcome, and their struggle to make the transition from one culture and language to another, counselor educators and supervisors have abundant opportunity to be advocates for the embracing of 21st century immigrants (Capps et al., 2015; Fry & Gonzales, 2008; Gambino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014; Turner, 2015).

Counselor educators and supervisors have the opportunity to train mental health professionals to be companions with these immigrants toward success in their new

homes. As the face of the United States continues to change daily, a shared vision of advocacy needs to be at the forefront of all counselor education departments. One tenet of a shared vision in counselor education programs is working with individuals who can act as interpreters and translators. In every place of employment, the need to communicate with people who speak a language other than English can be found.

Interpreters and Translators: A Rising Need and in High Demand

As we continue to move further into the 21st century, the United States is increasingly growing more diverse both linguistically and culturally (American Immigration Council, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, 2014). A rising need for interpreters and translators can be found in almost every major town and/or city in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013, 2014). As conscientious professionals when working with the different linguistically and cultural populations, we have a professional responsibility and obligation to respectfully listen, hear their voices and faithfully interpret the message(s) being conveyed. As such, many counselor education programs can assist and train their students to work with such populations.

Understanding Interpretation and Translation

A distinction between translation and interpretation is helpful for counselors to keep in mind. The two concepts go hand in hand, but they are different. Translation, in its simplest form, is seen as oral to oral, written to oral, and oral to written; translations in the strictest sense are as close to literal as possible. As oral tradition became written, translation always included the written text (D. R. Acosta, personal communication, March 16, 2016).

Translators must know the language, culture, and history, that is, the context, of the written text from which they are reading in order to acquire a translation as close to the original meaning as possible (Hurtado-Albir, 2008). Only when the translator knows context will the essential meaning of the text be accurate in the new language. This is where translation and interpretation overlap. If the translation of words is not interpreted in context, the translation will be literal, not giving attention to meaning (Hurtado-Albir, 2008).

Translation without accurate interpretation poses serious issues. The translator moves written text literally, that is, word for word, resulting in the loss of meaning; the interpreter, on the other hand, applies meaning (Hurtado-Albir, 2008). Intriguing examples of the translation/interpretation interaction between languages are found in idioms and folk sayings. Often, the translation is relatively straightforward, and its meaning is obscure in the new language. Only when someone from the original culture explains the idiom or folk saying can the meaning be interpreted accurately. To summarize, translation at its core does not include consideration of emotion, culture, or history to understand its text; on the other hand, interpretation includes context leading to the understanding of meaning (Hurtado-Albir, 2008). In effective counseling, one cannot be operative without the other (D. R. Acosta, personal communication, March 16, 2016).

Another important concept related to the translation/interpretation interaction is *hermeneuo*, a Greek word translated into English as hermeneutics, meaning to interpret what is translated according to the original intent of the author; hermeneutics reminds

counselors that interpretation cannot be separated from translation (Hurtado-Albir, 2008). The translation/interpretation interaction moves words from text (written) to oral, oral to text (written), or from text (written) to text (written) in such a way that contextual meaning is preserved; in other words, as translation occurs, meaning is being interpreted (D. R. Acosta, personal communication, March 16, 2016).

Understanding the nuances of interpretation and translation is essential in order to accommodate and facilitate a conversation with accuracy. Successful interpreters capture nuanced cognitions and feelings for meaning. They are masters at picking up voice pitch and intonation and other nonverbal/non-vocal cues; subtleties of culture are conveyed (Hurtado-Albir, 2008).

In the upcoming sections, two short case scenarios highlight the importance of accuracy when interpreting and translating. But before this, the need for interpretation and translation in counseling settings is addressed.

The Need for Interpreters in Counseling Settings

Everyone has a story, a need, those reflective moments to share or vent with someone. How the native languages of counselors and clients are used in counseling is fundamental to building therapeutic relationships. Keers-Sanchez (2003) grappled with the need for a “nationwide, oral interpretation program” (p. 557) in health care. Keers-Sanchez found that, too often, major mistakes were made in medical procedures/instructions and medical/patient information, and client-counselor privilege information often was incorrect due to lack of accurately providing the correct translation of vital information. Condon (2003) stated that safety experts worry health care providers too often are not making professional interpreter and translator services available to patients and families. As such, these language barriers cause an increase in the risk of medication errors, wrong procedures, avoidable readmissions, and other adverse events. Lack of interpreters in any profession can prevent a large segment of the population from receiving the benefits they deserve (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2015). Advocating for interpreters who have an understanding of the language, culture, and historical context, with formal training in the client’s native language as well as in the second language, is essential to meet the needs of the continually changing demographics in our society (Cox, Willis, & Coustasse, 2014).

Faubert and Gonzalez (2008) wrote about the importance of knowing the stages of language development in order to be effective with clients whose first language is not English (Freeman & Freeman, 2011; Garcia, 2012; Ovando & Combs, 2011). E. Gonzalez and Faubert (2009) also provided snapshots of major theories of language development helpful to professional counselors. Faubert and Gonzalez (2016) provided evidence of the need for professional counselors who can be effective across languages and with interpreters (Locke, 1992, 1998; Locke & Bailey, 2014; Santiago-Rivera, 1995). In addition, Faubert and Locke (2005) reported on the emotional aspects of native language in counseling. Keeping such things in mind as a reflective practitioner, it is imperative that interpreters understand the language and cultural and historical context of the clients for whom they are interpreting in order to “be faithful and respect [the] original intention of client” (D. R. Acosta, personal communication, March 16, 2016).

Monolingual clients, counselors, and interpreters. Monolingual clients with native languages unfamiliar to their professional counselors provide unique challenges. Professional interpreters can be the link between counselors and clients. Interpreters, counselors, and clients develop rhythms of communication based upon reciprocal respect and trust. Using interpreters does not necessarily come naturally to professional counselors (Tribe & Lane, 2009). Searight (2013) and Searight and Searight (2009) pointed out that “few clinicians receive formal training in providing interpreter-aided psychological services” (p. 444). When an interpreter is utilized with the consent of all parties, a triad is formed. The relationship becomes more complex; however, the goal is to form a relationship of trust in order to serve the clients and their needs. To demonstrate this, let us contextualize the following scenario of Luisa.

Luisa

Luisa is the first person in her family who has had the opportunity to go to college. She earned a full academic scholarship, and her family is very proud of her. Luisa has three younger siblings, one brother and two sisters. One of her sisters is a junior in high school. The other is in the ninth grade. Her brother is the youngest and in the sixth grade. Her parents, who do not speak English at all, often remind Luisa that she is setting the example for her brother and sisters.

Luisa’s first year of college went by uneventfully. She commuted to and from campus; so she went to class, studied, returned home, and studied. In addition, she held a part-time job to help her family and pay her expenses.

In October of her sophomore year, Luisa was walking from campus to the bus stop after class and library study. This is something she had done all during her first year and since school began in August of her sophomore year. She had never had any problems.

It was around 7 PM. She was crossing the street to catch the bus to get home when Luisa was struck by a speeding car. The car sped off leaving Luisa in critical condition. She was rushed to the nearby hospital. The family was called and informed of the accident. Within minutes, they were at the hospital. The mother ran into the hospital cried and yelled in Spanish for Luisa. As the siblings tried to comfort her, the doctor, who spoke no Spanish, used a nurse to talk to the mother. The doctor, respectful and as sensitive as she could be, spoke of what transpired based on the limited information she had before her; the nurse, with her limited Spanish and trying to be as accurate as possible, hovering over each word the doctor spoke, translated for the doctor as best as she could. The mother was informed of Luisa’s passing. The mother sobbed, cried, and yelled, and although she did not understand a word the doctor said, she understood bits and pieces from the nurse. Both the doctor and the nurse tried to be as open as possible in this very difficult situation, hoping to be understanding and sympathetic towards the mother.

In this informal formed triad—the mother, the doctor, and the nurse—the communication lines were somewhat blurred. Each person had their own meaning-making system playing out, which in many cases is tied to culture and language in the way information is expressed, processed and received. In the case of the mother, her acute sense of loss was expressed to a higher degree, especially in time of death. The

meaning making of the nurse who translated may not have been totally accurate, yet the mother understood the situation. The doctor did her best and relied on the nurse, who had limited interpreting skills in Spanish.

As in the case of this triadic relationship, Yakushko (2010) spoke of how a relationship between professional counselors and interpreters can be successful. Two themes related to the triadic relationship were identified, namely, personality and training. Related to personality, Yakushko identified “flexibility, openness, willingness to learn, patience, and humanity” (p. 452) as beneficial and necessary to the triadic relationship, which in this case, both the doctor and the nurse practiced.

Flexibility facilitates the understanding of instantaneous changes in the meaning of communicated messages. What counselors think they see might be turned on its head by what interpreters say and how they say it. Openness requires counselors to be able to overcome their biases and respect the perspective in the communication. Willingness to learn is demonstrated when counselors listen and hear what may be unfamiliar. Patience, especially patience with self, is characteristic of effective counselors who work with interpreters; counselors who are used to listening and hearing, evaluating, and facilitating now must lean on interpreters to help them do all these essential activities. Humanity is what each member of the triad shares; if counselors keep in mind the shared humanity of the members of the triad, then success is more nearly certain (Yakushko, 2010). In this unfortunate event of Luisa passing, the doctor and the nurse did all they could given the limited nuances of culture and language of the mother. Although the nurse was not a professional interpreter, she translated what she thought was essential to convey meaning on behalf of the doctor.

On a different note, the following story illustrates the personality characteristics of an effective counselor and interpreter relationship in identifying the personality characteristics required to be effective with this client. Names and stories have been altered to protect the client’s identity:

Evo Ayma

An indigenous, Bolivian-born, 37-year-old male named Evo Ayma lived in the United States for 6 years. He was attending counseling sessions with an interpreter. He was a bilingual speaker of Ampara, an indigenous language of the Bolivian highlands; he also spoke Spanish. Evo spoke Ampara with his wife and children. He spoke Spanish in a restaurant where he worked as a dishwasher. He spoke no English.

The counselor was a monolingual, English speaker. The interpreter was bilingual in Spanish and English. The counseling sessions took place in Spanish. Evo reported that he had dreams and wondered what they meant. Evo told the counselor that his mother had placed a curse on his head before he left Bolivia, which he greatly feared. He relayed a dream of his being taken into a cave high in the Bolivian mountains by spirits where he was protected from the howling wind. In the cave was his favorite food, which he ate with gusto; the food made him feel at peace. Evo wondered out loud if he would be able to get rid of the curse or know what his dreams meant.

In this particular event, the professional interpreter was able to capture emotion, intonation, motivation, accuracy, point of view, nuances, and cultural and linguistic subtleties based on a grasp and knowledge of culture and language with some historical

context. The professional interpreter was able to relay with accuracy what the client was conveying to, in this case, the monolingual counselor.

Tribe and Lane (2009) spoke to this skill, emphasizing how professional counselors can benefit from the cultural, linguistic, and historical contextual insights of interpreters, especially in being sensitive to clients' emotional experiences and their motivation (Biever et al., 2002) during the process.

Tribe and Lane (2009) also pointed out that interpreters can help counselors understand the nuances of stories, points of view, and values of clients from settings unfamiliar to counselors. Once professional counselors, interpreters, and clients are comfortable with one another, counseling can have optimal outcomes, as in the case of Evo Ayma.

Considerations for Working With Professional Interpreters

Evidence supports the belief that people who are professional interpreters can better remember content they have heard than a control group of persons who are not professional interpreters (Stavarakaki, Megari, Kosmidis, Apostolidou, & Takou, 2012). Professional interpreters can perform simultaneous interpretation effectively. The quality of professional interpreters and their training in working specifically with professional counselors is important to consider when engaging interpreters (Searight, 2013). This is important to keep in mind for those professional counselors who desire to work with a professional interpreter.

Professional, clinical, mental health interpreters are trained to accurately convey clients' communication to counselors and counselors' communication to clients. When interpreters are not trained in counseling, their error rate can become an ethical issue (Searight, 2013). Encouraging bilingual individuals (Faubert & Gonzalez, 2008), licensed professional counselors to become professional interpreters can lessen the number of errors in interpretation.

In addition, what counselors and professional interpreters working together need to understand is that interpretation is significantly more than moving words from text (written) to oral, oral to text (written), or from text (written) to text (written); interpretation embodies transfer of emotions, nuances, and subtleties imbedded throughout the discourse (D. R. Acosta, personal communication, March 16, 2016). The authors believe that when interpreters have a grasp and knowledge of cultural, language and historical context, they can provide simultaneous interpretation with ease. Knowing this will facilitate the triad and decrease the rate of error in translation on behalf of the interpreter to the counselor and vice versa.

Moreover, interpreters have mastery of the languages, culture, and historical context in which counselor and client are working (Hurtado-Albir, 2008). Helpful interpreters have extensive knowledge of the counseling discipline, are well trained, and demonstrate mastery of interpretative skills (Searight, 2013). Professional counselors and interpreters engage in pre-session and post-session planning and evaluation; without such sharing, simultaneous interpretation can result in frustration and even failure (Paone & Malott, 2008). This pre-session is vital not only to building great relationships, but also understanding the intended goals and outcomes.

The professional counselor and professional interpreter understand that

simultaneous interpretation is no easy task. Interpreters engaged in simultaneous interpretation speak over counselors when counselors are speaking and over clients when clients are speaking. These interpreters mirror the tone of voice, body language, rapidity of speech, and other cues of both counselors and clients. Simultaneous interpretation accommodates all cues important to mutual understanding between counselors and a client (Searight & Searight, 2009; Searight, 2013). The purpose of simultaneous interpretation is to capture as accurately as possible the monolingual client's and counselor's intentions. In order for communication to be fruitful, simultaneous interpretation accurately captures the meaning making that is moving between counselor and client.

Encouraging Counselors to Become Professional Interpreters

Counselor educators and supervisors have the opportunity to encourage their bilingual or multilingual counselor education students to become professional clinical mental health interpreters. As soon as alumni of counselor education programs have their licenses to practice counseling, they have the opportunity to be trained as professional clinical mental health interpreters. The need is very great in schools and clinical settings. Sometimes, even in private practices, professional clinical mental health interpreters are used. Licensed professional counselors enjoy the change between functioning as a licensed professional counselor and as a professional interpreter (L.V. Gutierrez, personal communication, December, 2015).

Counselor educators and supervisors can inspire motivation when preparing future counselors for the experience of working with interpreters (Biever et al., 2002). For example, one of the authors invited a professional interpreter into the classroom to demonstrate and have a discussion about effective interpretation and translation. With the appropriate permissions, counselor education students were given the opportunity to observe an interpretation actually taking place. This professor has encouraged bilingual students to become professional interpreters as well as monolingual counselors to work with professional interpreters. These and other experiences in training can mitigate the stress associated with the presence of an interpreter.

Moreover, the professional counselor and client might have native languages different from English and different from one another. To further illustrate this point, a Vietnamese native speaker, who also speaks English, was in the author's counseling department and counseled a client who is a monolingual Spanish speaker. A local professional interpreter, who is also a licensed professional counselor, was asked to help. "Why," you might ask, "doesn't the Spanish-speaking professional counselor work with the Spanish-speaking client?" It just so happens that in this agency, the Spanish-speaking professional counselor does Employee Assistance Program counseling exclusively. She is used as an interpreter when any counselor needs help with Spanish-speaking clients or families. Encouraging our bilingual or multilingual counselor education students to become professional clinical mental health interpreters is vital to capture the meanings of counselors and clients as accurately and professionally as possible (Searight, 2013; Searight & Searight, 2009; Tribe & Lane, 2009).

To reiterate this point, a former student (L.V. Gutierrez, personal communication, December, 2015) shared what led her to become a professional interpreter based on her

daily experiences when working with different cultural and linguistic populations:

When counselors are seeing children, and parents are present, interpreters can be especially helpful. When parents do not speak the languages of therapists, and their children do, parents can feel intimidated and excluded. Interpreters can help parents feel competent and included about what is happening between counselors and their children.

After being licensed and after a session in which Gutierrez was interpreting, the client gave the interpreter a hug and proclaimed in their common, native language, “*Tu eres mi voz!*” (You are my voice!).

Summary

Counselor educators and supervisors have an ethical responsibility to prepare all their students to become effective advocates in providing welcoming professional settings for clients whose native languages are not English (Paone & Malott, 2008). This is echoed as Schulte and Schulte (1995) stated that “Respect for persons is an absolute, though formal, first principle of morality” (p. 47). Since these words were published, the United States has experienced the greatest number of immigrants since the 19th century (U. S. Census Bureau, 2013, 2014). Today’s immigrants arrive with their cultures and languages and are ready to contribute to the development of the United States as did immigrants of the 19th century (American Immigration Council, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; U. S. Census Bureau, 2013, 2014). Counselor educators and supervisors have an obligation to launch graduates with the knowledge, abilities, and skills necessary to advocate for the myriad of cultural and language groups they will meet in schools or clinical practices.

Immigrants are coming from many different countries (Gonzalez, 2011; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014) and continents from which persons have not always been welcome in the United States. They come with their cultures, customs, mores, folkways, and native languages, which are, very often, different from the dominant language and culture in the United States (Nassar-McMillan, 2014). These facts reveal profound opportunities for counselor educators and supervisors to be leaders in advocating for language diverse clients (McCall-Perez, 2000) and meeting their mental health needs. Students will only be effective counselors of language diverse clients if counselor educators and supervisors successfully educate their students for the 21st century and advocate in the classroom, in their counselor education departments, in their universities, in their professional organizations, and, in many cases, before their legislators.

Paone and Malott (2008) wrote, “Limited understanding of the challenge inherent in counselor-interpreter collaboration may potentially result in inadequate or ineffective mental health services” (p. 130). On the other hand, adequate preparation for professional counselors, interpreters, and clients can make counseling experiences more than adequate and most effective. Counselor educators and supervisors can encourage their bilingual students or supervisees to become professional interpreters. With a combination of effective education, competent supervision, and advocacy, counselor education students can be prepared to work successfully with language diverse clients and interpreters.

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