Interpreting in Zoom

A how-to guide

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About the author

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Trinidad Clares Flores is a Chartered Linguist with the Chartered Institute of Linguists, and is an English-Spanish freelance translator, interpreter and trainer based in Cardiff (UK). She has been freelancing since 2000 and specialises in the technical (IT), legal and medical fields. As a conference interpreter, Trinidad has worked in European Works Councils, institutional conferences, seminars, workshops, business meetings, and training courses. She is also an external lecturer at Cardiff University.

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Interpreting in Zoom

Zoom has fast become the most popular program to hold virtual meetings because it's easy to use and cost friendly. As Zoom now enables simultaneous interpreting in up to eight languages, it has also become very popular amongst those who require interpreting services for their online events.

There are plenty of Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (RSI) platforms which have been built specifically for this purpose and therefore offer more advanced and relevant features for interpreting but they generally have a higher cost so many clients are voting with their feet and choosing Zoom instead. For interpreters, the standard RSI platforms provide an environment which more closely resembles the traditional booth – despite their flaws – but more and more assignments are taking place in Zoom so we should be prepared to cater for these.

The aim of this miniguide is to give interpreters the necessary information to provide a professional interpreting service in Zoom. From the equipment needed to interpret remotely to how to set the correct settings in Zoom and the various workarounds to listen to your partner and take relay, you will be ready to take any assignment that comes your way.

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Equipment needed to interpret professionally in Zoom

In order to provide a professional quality sound, we need to make sure we have the correct equipment.

At the very least, you need to have a high-speed wired internet connection – wifi is less stable – and a quiet room with no interruptions. A sign on the door telling your children that the person in the room is not a parent but an interpreter won't stop a cat from disturbing you!

It's also advisable to have two computers: one should be dedicated exclusively to interpreting, the second one so you can access the presentations, glossaries and any other reference material and also communicate with your partner and the client (you can also use phone/tablet for this).

You can choose between a headset with an integrated microphone and a set of headphones plus a microphone. If you choose a headset, the recommendations from many colleagues is that it incorporates

noise-cancelling features, it's binaural (i.e. it has 2 ear pieces) and it has integrated volume and mute controls, which are quicker to press than a button on your computer. It can either have a USB or 3.5 mm jack connection, but it shouldn't be wireless (such as Bluetooth). Finally, it should be light and comfortable as you are going to be wearing it for hours at a time, so it's better if it's "on ear" rather than "over the ear", i.e. the ear pieces are just about the size of your ears.

If you prefer to have separate headphones and microphone, there are plenty of condenser microphones on the market which provide good quality sound and tend to have a USB connection. For the headphones, comfort is also important so avoid headphones that are too big and tight on your ears because they will become really uncomfortable and you won't be able to hear your rendition properly.

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How to set up correctly in Zoom

Having the correct settings is essential to avoid last-minute stress on the job so make sure you have done the following before the event:

If you haven't already, download the latest Zoom client to your computer and make sure you have the following settings:

In "Settings", select "Audio", make sure that the "Automatically adjust microphone volume" is off and set it up manually by using the slider above it.

In "Advanced", make sure the box "Show in meeting option to 'Enable original sound' from microphone" is checked.

Also, make sure you disable the options "Supress Persistent Background Noise" and "Supress Intermittent Background Noise".

On the day of the event, arrange with the client to connect to the meeting at least 30 minutes before it starts to make sure everything is working well.

Connect to the event with the link provided (or the meeting ID and password) in the main device which you will use to interpret.

If you need to take relay, you can then connect again from a second device with the same email address to listen in as a panellist. To make things easier for your client, you can rename yourself as "Interpreter_Language_name" in the main device so the client can easily assign this profile as an interpreter and as "Listening_Language_name" in the second device so that the client can keep this as a panellist. More information about this set-up in the next section.

The host will have previously assigned interpreters to the meeting, but he/she has to start Interpretation manually once the meeting is running and can add participants as interpreters then as well. When the host starts Interpretation, you will see a small dialog box with the message "You have been assigned as an interpreter" and your source and target languages. Make sure the active language (the language you are interpreting into) is highlighted in white.

> *If you are using a second device to take relay, you will see the Interpretation icon (a globe) and will be able to choose the language in the pop-up menu. Make sure you enable the option "Mute original audio" to avoid hearing the floor twice (through the main connection as an interpreter and through the second connection as a participant).*

Workarounds to listen to your partner and take relay from other booths

Zoom is missing two basic and very important features for simultaneous interpreting: the ability to hear your booth partner when he/she is interpreting for monitoring purposes and to have a smooth handover and the ability to take relay.

There are several workarounds to overcome this problem. Which is more appropriate to use will depend on the nature of the assignment:

Connection to the Zoom event as an interpreter and communication with your partner via an external programme

This option works if you don't need to take relay from other booths so you just need to communicate with your partner in order to handover properly and also to hear their rendition so that you can help with any issues and maintain consistency.

In this situation, I have used a video call in WhatsApp which allowed me to both hear and see my partner at the same time. We used a post-it note system to handover and communicate, although I must say that trying to help your partner with terminology using this system is very complicated. You can of course use the chat box in Zoom to send private messages to your partner, but this is dangerous because of the risk of inadvertently sending to all.

There are of course many other programmes that would allow you to communicate with your partner outside of Zoom which would make it safer and easier.

If you use this system, you have to remember to mute yourself in the WhatsApp videocall when you do the handover otherwise your partner would pick up background noise from you and you also have to remember to unmute yourself in WhatsApp when you start interpreting so that your partner can hear you. It's easy to forget to do this as you already have to mute/unmute yourself in the Zoom meeting but all in all, this is the simplest way of working in Zoom as you keep communication with your partner totally separate from the Zoom meeting so there is no interference or echo and less room for mistakes.

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Connection to the Zoom event as an interpreter in your main device (laptop) and a second connection as a panellist in another device (phone, tablet or laptop)

If some participants speak in a different language to yours or the main floor language, you'll need to be able to hear the English channel so you can take relay from here and you can only do this by connecting to the event as a panellist in another device because, as an interpreter in Zoom, you can only hear the floor. With this system, you can also hear your partner when you select your language channel.

In order to hear your partner or another booth, you can either use a set of earbuds which you can insert underneath your normal headphones or you can just use the microphone in your phone and set it to a volume just loud enough for you to hear it at the same time as the floor through your normal headphones in the main connection.

Hearing your partner makes handovers easier but you still need a system to be able to communicate and help each other. In this case, WhatsApp or Skype chats are fine to just send short written messages, especially if you use the Desktop version, because it's a lot easier and faster to type.

Connection to the Zoom event as an interpreter in your main device (laptop) and a second connection as a panellist in another device (phone, tablet or laptop) with a sound mixer

This setup is the same as the previous one but using a sound mixer means you can hear both audio sources at the same time through your headphones so there is no need to listen through the extra set. This is also a better option because it gives you more control and there is less echo.

With the sound mixer I have used (Hart Just Mixer S), the setup is relatively simple:
It has 3 input 3.5 mm jacks (IN1, IN2 and IN3) to connect your audio sources: here you connect your microphone (which is then connected to the computer via a USB port) and the phone/tablet which you are using for the second connection. On the bottom left-hand side it has another jack for your headphones so that you can hear both audio sources together and you can control the volume in the different knobs. It is battery or USB-powered but having tested it in battery mode, I noticed there was a lot of interference so a colleague recommended connecting it to a power bank in USB mode and this seems to work much better.

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Helping the client with their Zoom set-up

Although many companies are now using Zoom to run their meetings, they are not necessarily aware of what interpreters need to do our job properly so it's in our interest to help our client have the correct set-up. If they have not run an event with the Interpretation feature before, refer them to Zoom's instructions here.

Make sure you have a trial run with the client so they get the chance to practice setting up the Interpretation option, assigning you as interpreter (and panellist if necessary) and that you have the chance to practice interpreting and the handover with your partner.

Let the client know that all the event speakers should be wearing suitable headsets to provide clean and background noise-free sound. Using the in-built computer microphone picks up any ambient noise and makes the sound less clean which will make it much harder to interpret. If no proper headsets are available, ask any speakers to at least use their mobile phone earbuds.

Make sure they are using a wired Internet connection and switch their camera off if the connection is unstable in order to allow for better sound. Also ask the client to ask speakers/panellists to mute themselves and switch their cameras off when they are not speaking in order to avoid background noise.

If you have to use two separate connections to Zoom to take relay, explain to the client that you should be assigned as a "panellist" in the second account rather than as a "participant" so that you can join the meeting and be ready in both devices before the actual event start time.

Interpreting in Zoom can be tricky, but we can make it much easier for ourselves by following these basic rules and making sure the client is also aware of how it works.

About CIOL

CIOL (Chartered Institute of Linguists) is the leading professional body for people using foreign language skills at work, setting the standard for linguists worldwide. Membership offers professional recognition, and our range of membership grades leads to Chartership, recognised worldwide as the gold standard for practitioners, whatever their profession, publicly understood as a badge of quality and competence. We offer many benefits and services, such as mentoring and access to networks. Our awarding organisation, CIOL Qualifications, delivers fully regulated professional language qualifications, such as the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting and the Diploma in Translation, recognised by government departments, agencies, business, universities and schools.

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