

All power to you



Feedback with intent to improve is a gift. **Brett Best and Rachel Wilkins** examine its part in the professional growth of sign language interpreters

We all love the feeling of finishing a job and receiving positive praise, but what about the jobs where we receive some suggestions for improvement? Or when we leave feeling unsure that the message was conveyed accurately, either by ourselves or our co-workers? How many of us effectively manage feedback?

In previous research, we have explored the perceived prevalence of horizontal violence in the BSL/English interpreting profession (see Wilkins & Best, 2020). Horizontal violence is defined as ‘persistent behaviours such as gossip, diminishing comments, devaluing others’ professional worth and criticism, perpetrated by members of a group toward one another, whether consistently or inconsistently, that cause harm, anxiety and stress in the receiver’ (Ott, 2012:15).

When reviewing horizontal violence survey responses and talking with interpreters further about the concept, feedback was a recurring theme. It became clear that the lines between feedback and horizontal violence are sometimes blurred; it is imperative to note that criticism is not, in itself, horizontal violence. Horizontal violence happens when the intent is to cause

psychological distress in the recipient. Feedback given with the intent to improve an interpreted event, however, is necessary to ensure the development of the profession and to maintain a high standard for those using interpreting services.

Awareness around horizontal violence is still developing in our industry, and how it relates to our culture of feedback is yet to be explored. Given the value to professional development – both individually and as an industry – of being able to give and implement professional feedback, we wanted to explore the culture of feedback among BSL/English interpreters and how this may or may not relate to perceptions of horizontal violence.

Note: The term ‘feedback’ can be exchanged for ‘debrief’ in practice. This can make it feel less intimidating and help focus discussions on the overall work product instead of the individual.

The unwritten rule and the importance of feedback

There may be an unwritten rule among SLIs whereby we somehow learn ‘not to draw attention to an interpretation that is not working,’ either because there is a culture of

complacency that we learn to perpetuate or because we just don’t know how to suggest a solution (Byrne 2014:1).

One of our survey participants summed up what many of us may feel when grappling with this unwritten rule: ‘What keeps me awake at night is times when your co-worker is messing things up badly – I was never taught what to do... I worry about crushing them vs the good of the interpretation.’

Not knowing how to intervene in an interpretation that is going off the rails may be heightened by perceived power differentials between interpreters. Given the tiered (trainee/qualified) entry system into our profession, many of us may have entered the ranks with a master-apprentice mentality. Even post-qualification, we may feel uncomfortable drawing attention to the efficacy of an interpretation produced by a practitioner whom we deem to be more experienced or accomplished. Likewise, our perceived status in this invisible hierarchy may also impact our willingness to receive information from those we feel are less experienced.

These considerations are all problematic because checking in on the perceived effectiveness of an interpretation or intervening in an interpretation that clearly is not working is a professional responsibility. At times it may be necessary, for example when a colleague’s work product may be having a negative impact on the deaf or hearing customers.

We may begin to re-write the so-called unwritten rule by focusing on the effectiveness of a collaboratively produced work product rather than on the performance of any individual interpreter.

It is important to realise that the unwritten rule not only allows ineffective interpretations to persist, but it also stifles opportunities for development – for individuals, for teams of co-workers and clients and for the profession at large.

Re-framing feedback as an opportunity for growth

Psychologists use the term ‘cognitive reappraisal’ to describe the ability to view upsetting or surprising information as helpful and productive data. The ability to consciously exercise cognitive reappraisal when considering critical feedback leads to professional growth. Eurich (2018) reported that those who successfully incorporated feedback to make improvements did so by re-framing the feedback they received as useful information, even if receiving the feedback was initially an unpleasant shock.

This is why it is important to try to glean what you can from feedback for your professional growth, no matter how it is delivered or whether or not you agree with it. Viewing feedback as a gift – even when it is packaged badly and delivered poorly – can help us improve the services we deliver.

In their book entitled *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback*, Well, Stone and Heen (2014) argue that the thousands spent on training employees how to give feedback is misspent. Instead, people should be trained how to receive feedback. This is because no matter how tactfully feedback is given, the receiver ultimately decides whether or not they

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‘Horizontal violence happens when the intent is to cause psychological distress in the recipient’

choose to do anything with it. Therefore, focusing on those receiving the feedback would arguably make for a better return on investment for businesses.

The receiver holds all the power

In the words of Eurich (2018:1), 'Feedback is a gift. The receiver decides what – if anything – to do with it'.

View feedback as a gift. The observer is in a unique position and able to see things that you cannot from their standpoint. Use that to your advantage. Above all, keep in mind that critical feedback is more useful – positive feedback is a short-term, feel-good gift, but feedback for development is the real gift. Lastly, be empathetic; it may not have been easy or comfortable to give the feedback.

Barriers to being open to receiving feedback

It is important to understand the reasons why receiving feedback may be uncomfortable. If we can become more consciously aware of why we may be resistant to feedback, then we can more conscientiously approach the information that we are given.

Emmart (2016:1) states that 'Feedback sits at the intersection of two human needs – to learn and grow, or achieve mastery, and the need for acceptance and approval of me just as I am now.'

First, there are physical considerations that may impact how receptive we are to feedback. Being hungry, tired, cold, exhausted from a long assignment, or emotionally drained from having just finished a complicated job will all impact one's frame of mind.

Other barriers include how the feedback is delivered, who is giving it and who is

present, your own relationship with feedback, whether you agree with the truthfulness of the feedback and what you feel it says about your identity. These are resistance triggers. Furthermore, we may not mentally be in a learning space but rather in a co-working space, as an equal to our colleague. This can create internal struggle when receiving feedback.

So how can you get yourself into the mindset to receive? Well, in short, you do not have to. You do not have to fully receive the information that you have been given at that moment. One strategy is to use a pre-prepared sentence to thank your co-worker for the 'gift' and then open it later. This gives you the time and space you need to process the feedback when you are ready and in the right space to receive it. Some examples of pre-prepared stock phrases are:

- ▲ 'That is very useful – thank you.'
- ▲ 'I will feed that into my reflective practice.'
- ▲ 'Could I contact you later to discuss that?'

Using these phrases also ensures that you do not react emotionally, try to defend, justify or excuse yourself, making the process easier for both the person giving feedback and you receiving it and will help encourage the practice of giving feedback in the long term. The last suggestion above leaves the conversation open to revisit after you have 'opened' the feedback.

Set aside some time after the booking to go through the feedback in your own mind,

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'Positive feedback is a short-term, feel-good gift, but feedback for development is the real gift'

try to write down what was said and reflect on the observations given to you. Don't feel bad about yourself. It is not about you personally; you are looking for what you can take from the feedback for your professional development.

It's about the work

'Taking things personally is a fear response that happens when you perceive situations as threatening to your ego or identity,' says Melody Wilding, executive coach.

The objective for all professional SLIs should be to deliver the optimum work product in a specific set of circumstances for particular clients. All participants in an interpreted event hold responsibility for helping this to happen. Ultimately, therefore, the focus is on the effectiveness of the work that is produced instead of individual practitioners.

Detaching from our work is difficult, especially in our industry. It is often more than just a job for us. We are usually driven by a passion for what we do, a love of the language and a strong connection to the community we serve.

This makes detaching from the 'work' very difficult. Receiving criticism about how we did an aspect of our work can feel very personal because we do not have a line separating us from our work; it is an extension of who we are; therefore, it feels like it is we who are being criticised, not our work.

However, it is important to keep top of mind the objective that we are setting out to achieve as professionals – an optimum interpretation for a given situation and client/s. The job is not about us. Feedback is a call to re-examine the choices made in a given context.

Tips for asking for feedback

Asking for feedback is one way to further our professional development by becoming more aware of areas that we can improve.

- ▲ It is best to ask for the feedback before the interpreted event. This way everyone is able to establish their needs and expectations for feedback.
- ▲ You may make it known that you would (or would not) be open to feedback – in general or on specific areas that you have been working on. It is okay to state that you are not currently in a learning space and would prefer not to receive feedback; however, this would necessarily preclude feedback that was deemed immediately necessary by other professionals present to ensure an accurate interpretation. In other words, it is okay to express that you are not in the mental state to process feedback as a learning opportunity, but it is not okay to expect others to follow the unwritten rule if the job is not successful.
- ▲ You may wish to ask if there could be time set aside after the event or if your co-worker is happy to email you following the assignment.
- ▲ You may wish to ask for specific things you feel you need to focus on such as vocal intonation or pace, clarity of fingerspelling, rapport with client. Be aware that asking for more than a couple of specific areas may be too much to expect your co-worker to observe. Also be mindful that by establishing that you are open to feedback, even if you ask for specific areas, something may come up that you were not expecting/did not ask for or know that you had done. This could be far more useful than the features that you were aware of needing work, but it could also be upsetting.

The more we practice setting up feedback and discussing it openly with our co-workers, the more it will become a cultural norm and part of our practice.

It is important to appreciate the unique position of the observer. Regardless of experience, they have full access to the language that you both share and an advantage in seeing everything you produce. An objective observer is more likely to detect our errors than we are (Kahneman, 2011).

Giving feedback

Feedback should not be delivered with an aim in mind for the recipient; the giver of the feedback cannot control whether the recipient uses that feedback or not. Give clear and non-judgmental, objective observations. The feedback should be related to the interpretation only, not an opinion about them personally.

The following are useful tips for giving feedback from Witter-Merithew (2001:6-7):

- ▲ Describe behaviour in terms of more or less effective or ineffective, rather than as good or bad. Remember to feed back rather than criticise by using non-violent communication instead of finger pointing.
- ▲ Non-violent communication strategies are useful to ensure that the receiver does not feel attacked or judged (Rosenberg, 2007).
- ▲ Share ideas rather than give advice. Be resourceful and knowledgeable about what is available for skill development.
- ▲ Engage in conversation to explore alternatives and resources rather than giving answers, solutions or cures.
- ▲ Focus on behaviour that the receiver can do something about rather than

‘The feedback should be related to the interpretation only, not an opinion about them [the recipient] personally’

shortcomings over which the receiver has no control.

- ▲ Do not try to convince or persuade.
- ▲ Use direct observations (rather than what you have heard others say).
- ▲ Give feedback as soon as possible after the event, unless you need time to make the feedback more neutral and useful. If the job was particularly emotional or stressful, you may need time to gather your thoughts first.
- ▲ Give your undivided attention.

Our survey: Do BSL/English interpreters have a culture of feedback?

In September 2019, our survey was posted on E-Newsli, a listserv with over 700 members, and was also distributed through various social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. There were 148 respondents (84.5% of respondents identified as female; 15.5% identified as male).

We wanted to know how primed our respondent pool was on the topic, so we asked how many had viewed the webinar on feedback – which presented much of the information above – that we had given three weeks prior to the survey going out. The majority (81%) said that they had not viewed our webinar; 13.6% reported watching the webinar live, and 5.4% said they watched it at a later time.

Receiving feedback – what you said

Just over half of the survey participants (50.7%) reported being taught how to receive feedback. This is less than those who reported being taught how to give feedback (53.4%), showing that there may be more of a focus on how to give feedback. Most respondents (53.4%) reported learning about how to receive feedback during interpreter training with other avenues of learning being via ‘reading around the subject yourself’ (28.8%); ‘other workshops’ (not workshops specifically on feedback) (27.4%); during peer group (26%) and feedback workshop (20.5%).

Most survey participants (55%) reported using what they have been taught with regard to receiving feedback, although 26.2% stated that they have only used this information a few times.

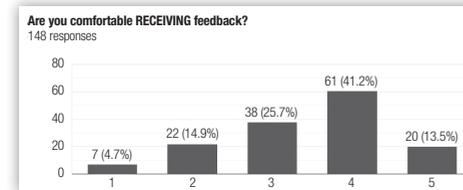


Figure 1: Comfort with receiving feedback

When asked how comfortable we feel receiving feedback on a scale of 1 (very uncomfortable) to 5 (very comfortable), most respondents (41.2%) rated themselves fairly comfortable with a score of 4 (Figure 1). Most interpreters who took part in the survey, however, rarely receive feedback. When asked how often feedback is received on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being ‘Never’ and 5 being ‘Pretty much every co-worked booking,’ 51.4% rated their frequency for receiving feedback a 2.

This low score indicating infrequently receiving feedback is not necessarily

because it isn’t being solicited. When interpreters were asked how often they asked for feedback with 1 being ‘Never’ and 5 being ‘Nearly every opportunity,’ most (25.9%) rated themselves a 2, indicating that they didn’t ask for feedback very often (Figure 2). However, 24.5% rated themselves a 4, showing that there are interpreters who ask for feedback fairly often.

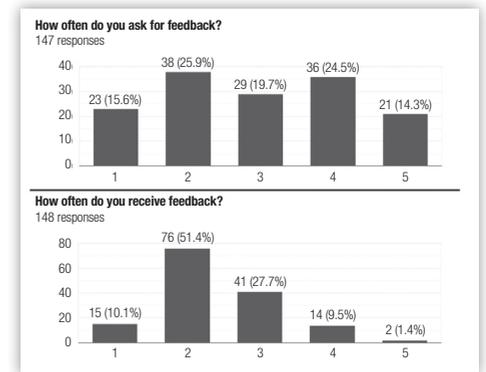


Figure 2: How often feedback is requested vs how often it is received

Interpreters, therefore, report asking for feedback more often than receiving it. Survey respondents were mostly thankful for the feedback they received (45.3%), although some (21.6%) felt apprehensive about it and 11.5% were neutral.

Giving feedback – what you said

Most respondents (53.4%) said that they had received training in giving feedback. The most frequently reported avenues for this training were through interpreter training (57.8%), ‘reading around the subject yourself’ (28.9%), feedback workshop (22.9%) and during peer group (21.7%).

Most interpreters (57.3%) also reported using the techniques that they learned.

‘Most respondents were very uncomfortable giving feedback if it had not been requested’

Several respondents said in an open text field that the training they received in giving feedback included instructions to be specific, give examples and offer something constructive in the form of ideas, suggestions or strategies. Of those respondents who contributed to this open text field, 16.5% reported being taught the sandwich method – giving a positive comment, then the constructive feedback, followed by another positive comment. As one respondent pointed out, with this method being so widely known, however, one can easily see it happening and question the legitimacy of the positive comments.

When asked (Figure 3) how comfortable we feel when giving feedback when it is requested, on a scale of 1 (very uncomfortable) to 5 (very comfortable), most rated themselves a 3 (29.7%). Just over a quarter (27.6%) felt fairly comfortable, with a score of 4, and 22.1% were a bit uncomfortable with a self-given score of 3.

In comparison, when asked how comfortable interpreters feel when giving feedback when it has not been asked for, most respondents (52.8%) were very uncomfortable and rated themselves a 1. This shows that most respondents were only somewhat comfortable giving feedback when it had been solicited and were very uncomfortable giving feedback if it had not been requested. It may be easy, therefore, to slip into the norm of an unwritten rule. Despite not feeling very comfortable giving feedback,

of those who have given feedback, the majority (58.7%) felt that recipients were generally receptive to the feedback, with 35% unsure about how it was received and a minority feeling that it was not received well.

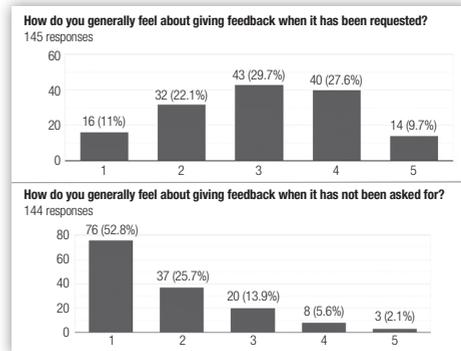


Figure 3: Feelings about giving feedback – requested vs unsolicited

This may explain why most survey participants rarely give feedback. When asked to rate how often they give feedback on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being ‘Never’ and 5 being ‘Pretty much every co-worked booking,’ the majority (44.6%) rated themselves a 2. The top reasons for not regularly giving feedback – chosen from a multiple-choice list with a write-in option – were as follows: ‘Worried about the reaction I will receive’ (25.8%); ‘I often do not feel like feedback is needed’ (19.5%); ‘Not confident in how to give feedback’ (15.6%).

We analysed the results against demographic features such as gender, age, and years of experience. The only factor that stood out was gender, with men reporting feeling more comfortable with giving feedback, especially when it was requested. The gender differences are seen in Figures 4 and 5.

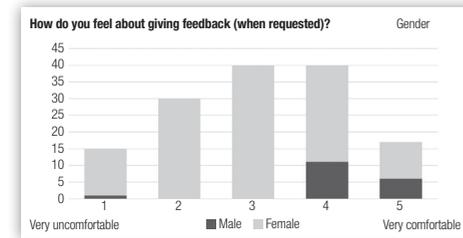


Figure 4: Gender difference for giving requested feedback

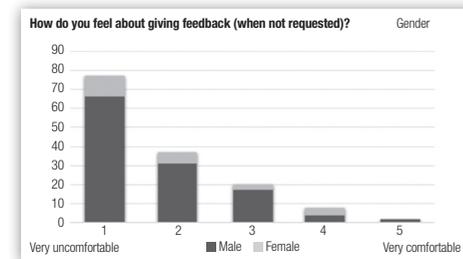


Figure 5: Gender difference for giving unsolicited feedback

Feedback or horizontal violence?

The questions that brought us to this survey centred on where the line is between feedback and horizontal violence. In the moment, it can be very difficult to tell if a comment is criticism with intent to harm (horizontal violence) or well-intended feedback.

Horizontal violence happens when the intent is to cause psychological distress in the recipient. Survey results show that some interpreters avoid giving feedback precisely because they don’t want to cause any psychological discomfort in the recipient.

When survey participants were asked if they had ever experienced horizontal violence, just over half (51.4%) said that they had while 24.3% were unsure. Of those who felt that they had experienced horizontal violence, we asked if they felt that the incident was related to feedback/criticism.

Interestingly, most of the respondents (52.1%) said No. 26.6% said Maybe, while only 21.3% said that their incidence of horizontal violence had been related to feedback/criticism. This indicates that interpreters may often be able to distinguish between horizontal violence and well-intended feedback. If, however, there are incidents which blur the distinction, the following flowchart and approach may help determine how to frame the experience:

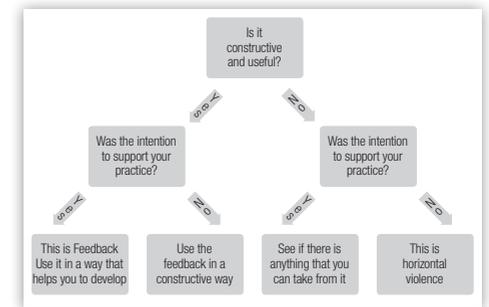


Figure 6: Flowchart showing horizontal violence vs feedback

In differentiating feedback from possible horizontal violence, it is important to try to align your understanding with the giver’s intentions. Approach the comment with curiosity and ask questions to better understand the giver’s intent. Try to emotionally detach from the comment and take what you can as useful feedback.

It is easy to either react with emotion or to find yourself lost for words when confronted with horizontal violence or with something that initially feels like it may be horizontal violence. It is therefore useful to have thought about your potential response prior to it happening. Spend some time thinking about what would be a good response for you. Responses are individual; everyone is different. You might be

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comfortable with being direct, or you may want to have a stock phrase ready for retort that gives you time to process the comment and leaves the conversation open for you to respond at a later time. Above all, do respond in some way. In our previous research, many of those surveyed regretted not responding at all, but no one reported regretting the way that they responded.

Normalising feedback

BSL/English SLIs report being generally uncomfortable giving feedback, despite slightly more training apparently focusing on this area.

‘Try to emotionally detach from the comment and take what you can as useful feedback’

Receiving and giving feedback are skills, and, like most skills, they require practice and a willingness to improve. Becoming more comfortable with feedback can normalise it and create a culture where we can engage in collaborative professional practice to re-write the unwritten rule and ensure the best standards possible. 

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