Emma Eccles Jones College of Education & Human Services
Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice
UtahState University®

POLICY

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Linguistic Accessibility for IDRPP Programs

Introduction

Linguistic accessibility is paramount to creating inclusive programs for diverse populations because language is the primary medium to convey information, services, and resources. In a world that is increasingly globalized and interconnected, diverse populations often consist of individuals who speak many languages and come from varying cultural backgrounds. Ensuring that programs are linguistically accessible means that information is presented in a manner that is understandable to all, regardless of their native tongue or linguistic proficiency. This promotes equality and inclusivity and ensures everyone can fully participate, benefit from opportunities, and engage in communal activities. Ignoring linguistic accessibility can inadvertently marginalize and exclude certain groups, leading to a lack of representation, reduced opportunities, and potential disparities in outcomes. As such, linguistic accessibility is not just a matter of effective communication, but a cornerstone of social justice and equity.

Linguistic accessibility is essential for the equitable dissemination of information and services. For Utah State University's (USU) Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice (IDRPP), ensuring that all individuals can access our programs in a language and format they understand is not just a matter of compliance but a commitment to our core values of inclusivity and equity.

Rationale for Language Access Plans

Developing Language Access Plans (LAPs) fosters inclusivity and ensures equitable access to vital information, resources, and services. In a pluralistic society, individuals come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and the inability to understand essential content can lead to significant disadvantages, including missed opportunities, lack of awareness about rights, or inability to access critical services. Ensuring the accessibility of content and materials is not merely about compliance or ticking a box; it is about recognizing and respecting the diversity within our communities. By developing and implementing LAPs, organizations signal their commitment to promoting fairness, reducing disparities, and embracing diversity. Moreover, linguistically accessible content increases the reach and impact of programs, facilitating broader community engagement and fostering trust. In essence, LAPs are both a moral and practical investment, ensuring that no individual is left behind because of linguistic barriers.

A language access plan serves as a roadmap to ensure that linguistic barriers do not prevent individuals from accessing services or information. The following principles clearly outline the need for such plans.

- **Communication is a Right:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act highlight the necessity of accessible communication for all (National Council on Disability, 2003).

- **Increasing Diversity:** In an increasingly diverse society, the number of languages spoken and the variety of communication needs have expanded (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

- **Improved Outcomes:** Clear communication leads to better outcomes. For instance, individuals with disabilities achieve better health and educational results when materials are linguistically accessible (Flores, 2006).

Regardless of their language, all people we serve deserve meaningful access to programs and activities that are conducted or supported by federal funds. Most of the funding we receive at the IDRPP is federal or federal flow-through funding, which means we also have a responsibility to ensure that we are doing our best to meet the needs of the diverse populations we serve. Two executive orders affirm the federal government's commitment to improving language access services and ensuring full participation by individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP).

- **Executive Order 13166**: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency (August 2000; this order *requires* each federal agency to create a Language Access Plan [LAP]).

- **Executive Order 14091**: Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (February 2023).

Importance of Providing Materials in Various Languages and Formats

Providing materials in various languages and formats is a cornerstone of inclusive communication and equitable outreach. In an increasingly interconnected world, our societies host a rich tapestry of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Offering content in diverse languages ensures that a broader audience can access, understand, and benefit from the information, irrespective of their linguistic heritage. Furthermore, embracing multiple formats, such as braille, audio, and visual aids, addresses the varied needs of individuals, including those with disabilities. This holistic approach not only upholds the principles of equality and nondiscrimination, but also amplifies the reach and efficacy of the material. It promotes active participation, facilitates informed decision-making, and fosters a sense of belonging among all community members. Ultimately, diversifying languages and formats is not just a logistical consideration but a testament to an organization's commitment to genuine accessibility and community engagement.

Providing materials in multiple languages and formats demonstrates our commitment to the following.

- **Inclusivity:** To foster an inclusive environment, materials should be available in multiple languages, accommodating the needs of the population we serve.

- **Diverse Learning Needs:** Beyond language, materials should be available in formats accessible to those with visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities. For example, materials can be provided in braille, large print, or with auditory accompaniments.

- **Cultural Competence:** Programs considering cultural nuances are more effective in reaching their intended audiences (Betancourt et al., 2003).

- **Trust and Confidence:** Acknowledging individual preferences and needs fosters trust and ensures our audience feels respected and understood. If we want people to engage with our programs, we need to demonstrate that we are thinking about their needs and have materials that meet them.

Why Translation Software is Not Sufficient

The easiest method in our modern world is to utilize many artificial intelligence (AI)-powered translation tools. Online or AI-powered translation tools, while impressive in their technological advancements, have inherent limitations that make them insufficient for ensuring clients have access to accurate and timely information, especially in professional or specialized contexts.

- **Nuances and Context**: Languages are deeply tied to culture, and certain nuances or idiomatic expressions might not be captured accurately by automated tools. These tools often rely on literal translations, which can lead to misinterpretations.

- **Specialized Terminology**: In areas like medicine, law, or social services, specialized terminology requires precise translation. AI tools might not always be updated with the latest industry-specific terms or might translate them inaccurately.

- **Lack of Human Review**: Human translators not only translate words but also review and ensure the context aligns with the intended message. AI tools lack this layer of human oversight and judgment.

- **Grammatical and Structural Errors**: While these tools have improved over time, they can still produce grammatical and structural mistakes that can alter the meaning of a sentence or make it difficult to comprehend.

- **Confidentiality Concerns**: Using online translation platforms for sensitive information could raise data privacy concerns, as not all platforms guarantee complete confidentiality of the translated content.

- **Cultural Sensitivity**: AI tools might not be programmed to be aware of cultural sensitivities or localized contexts, potentially leading to translations that could be perceived as offensive or inappropriate.

- **Limitations with Less Common Languages**: For less widely spoken languages, the databases of these AI tools might not be as comprehensive, leading to less accurate translations.

- **Continual Updates Needed**: Language is dynamic, with new terms, slang, and expressions emerging regularly. AI-powered tools need continual updates to stay relevant, and there is always a lag between the emergence of new language elements and their incorporation into these tools.

While AI-powered translation tools are helpful for quick translations or understanding the gist of content, they are not yet a replacement for human translators, especially in professional, sensitive, or specialized contexts where

accuracy, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity are paramount.

Conclusion

Language accessibility is fundamental to ensuring inclusive and equitable communication in our diverse global society. The development of LAPs stands as a testament to an organization's commitment to fostering inclusivity and ensuring that all individuals, irrespective of linguistic background, can fully access, comprehend, and benefit from critical information and services. While technological advancements, such as AI-powered translation tools, offer great promise, they cannot replace the nuanced understanding and cultural sensitivity that human communities bring. Engaging directly with these communities is paramount, as it guarantees the accuracy of translations and ensures the cultural relevance and utility of the materials. By integrating both structured LAPs and the invaluable insights of human communities, organizations can truly cater to the diverse linguistic needs of their audience, fostering genuine understanding and trust.

Linguistic accessibility is not just a best practice but an essential commitment to inclusivity and equality. As USU's IDRPP looks towards the future, it is paramount to ensure that all programs and materials are linguistically accessible to cater to the diverse needs of our community. By prioritizing linguistic accessibility, we reinforce our commitment to serving all individuals, irrespective of their linguistic or cultural backgrounds, leading to more inclusive, effective, and equitable programs at the IDRPP.

Sample Language Access Plan Template for IDRPP Programs

- Introduction and Purpose

  This Language Access Plan (LAP) is designed to ensure that individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) and those with disabilities have equal access to our programs, services, and activities. We recognize that clear communication is paramount in delivering effective services.

- Identification of LEP Populations

  - **Assessment:** Conduct regular assessments to identify the linguistic needs of the populations we serve. This involves evaluating census data, client demographics, and intake assessments.
  - **Stakeholder Collaboration**: Engage with community organizations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders to ensure that our LAP is comprehensive and addresses the needs of the populations we serve.
  - **Feedback:** Regular feedback loops with clients and staff will ensure we continuously identify emerging linguistic needs.

- Language Assistance Services

  - **Translation Services:** Partnership with professional translation services to ensure key documents (e.g., application forms or information brochures) are available in the most frequently encountered languages.
  - **Interpretation Services:** Onsite or remote interpretation services will be available for clients during consultations or group activities.
  - **Alternative Formats:** Materials will be provided in plain language, braille, large print, audio, etc., for those with visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities.

- Staff Training

  Project leads and coordinators should regularly evaluate staff competencies and skills to determine if additional training or skill development is necessary to ensure that our projects can adequately meet the linguistic needs of clients and stakeholders. Some potential areas for staff training may include the following.

  - **Cultural Competence:** Regular training to promote cultural/linguistic competency and awareness.
  - **Effective Use of Interpreters/Translators:** Ensure staff knows how to work with interpreters effectively and understands the protocols involved.
  - **Identifying LEP Needs:** Training on how to identify and document clients' language needs.

- Notice to the Public

  - **Signage:** Signs should also be posted in public areas, informing individuals of their right to free language-assistance services.

- **Website and Digital Platforms:** An announcement about available language services should be made prominently on the organization's website and social media channels. Direct links to translated materials and alternative formats should be readily available in a clear and accessible location.

- Monitoring and Evaluation

  - **Annual Review:** The LAP will be reviewed annually to assess its effectiveness. Feedback from clients and staff will be essential in this evaluation.
  - **Feedback Mechanism:** A feedback system will be established for clients and staff to report on the effectiveness of language assistance services. This should be included in event evaluations, websites, and outreach materials.
  - **Continuous Improvement:** Based on feedback and the annual review, continuous improvements will be made to the LAP.

- Grievance Procedure

  Clients who believe our services provided inadequate language assistance can file a grievance. A clear and transparent process will be outlined for clients, ensuring their concerns are addressed promptly.

- Resources Allocation

  Project directors and coordinators should allocate adequate resources in terms of budget and personnel to ensure the effective implementation of the LAP. This includes funding for translation services, interpreter services, staff training, and monitoring and evaluation activities.

- Conclusion

  Our commitment to linguistic accessibility underscores our dedication to serving all individuals equitably. By implementing this LAP, the IDRPP aims to ensure that no individual is denied service or experiences a diminished quality of service because of language barriers.