



# Lost in translation

How technology could revolutionise how schools with migrant students overcome language barriers.

Beverley Head reports.

**M**ore than half of all migrants to Australia each year are children or young people aged 18 years or under. Many of them – particularly children of refugee parents – speak little or poor English.

While government schools embrace these children and offer them access to English as a second language (ESL) programs, many still grapple with the language barrier.

For schools in large cities this can be overcome relatively easily, by contacting interpreters who may already have contracts to supply their services to departments of education and hence schools. But as more migrants, and particularly refugees, make their way into regional Australia, the availability of interpreters can swiftly dry up.

Technology, however, is once again being harnessed to overcome the tyranny of distance.

A 2008 trial of videoconferencing in Victoria found that it was possible to provide interpreter services – as long as a good telecommunications connection and videoconferencing equipment was available.

Based on the results of the trial, a handful of Victorian schools have just received grants to install videoconferencing equipment, with some expecting to be up and running by May.

Meanwhile, in NSW, the Connected Classrooms initiative, which is rolling out interactive whiteboards featuring videoconferencing capability and an upgraded broadband communications link, could allow interpretation to be conducted through videoconferences.

Ismail Akinci, CEO of InterpreterLine, which has a contract to supply interpretation services to the Victorian government, first started investigating videoconferencing around six years ago. But, he says, until recently the technology wasn't good enough or cheap enough to make it work for schools.

Akinci, nevertheless, recognised that a videoconference provided a good forum for

remote interpretation. Better than a telephone because “interpreters are required to interject at points in the conversation where their memory is at capacity. Those are the dynamics involved. The idea is that an interpreter is the conduit and two parties communicate as though you're not there.”

The other driving force was the relative dearth of skilled interpreters, and their general concentration in metropolitan areas.

Schools in regional areas might request an interpreter (occasionally specifying the gender of the interpreter needed in order to manage cultural sensitivities), but it could take an entire day for the interpreter to travel to the school, interpret for a meeting, and then return to base.

“The clients could not afford having an interpreter from the city – three quarters of the costs are spent on travel,” he says, and even then there could be a lead time of two to three weeks

by May. The system will also be made available to around 30 schools in and around Geelong, traditionally an area where migrants choose to settle.

Macer says school-aged new arrivals to Australia are entitled to ESL tuition during their first year of residency. At present Macer is managing 70 ESL students in primary school and 40 in secondary school.

“The majority of students have been born in refugee camps on the Thai border. These students who identify as an ethnic minority from Burma speak Karen or Karenni and make up about 70 per cent of the current student intake. We work with students but they are all enrolled in their given school,” he says.

Having access to videoconference-based interpretation is expected to help streamline communications between schools, students and parents.

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to ensure that the interpreter could be made available for an entire day.

Peter Macer is the co-ordinator of the Geelong English Language Centre, based at Bell Park North Public School. He believes that videoconferencing can help schools overcome language barriers.

Macer was involved in a two-month trial run by the Victorian government in 2008 at the North Geelong Secondary College, which proved successful. Earlier this year he learned that Bell Park North had received a \$20,000 government grant to install videoconferencing equipment to support the English Language Centre.

He hopes the system will be up and running

Having the technology is one thing, getting people to use it another, as Macer explains.

“One challenge is educating the mainstream school about the use of interpreters and the need to use the booking service for onsite or telephone interviews.”

When the videoconferencing service was trialled the tendency was for schools to “save up” any issues which needed an interpreter and then book a videoconferencing slot. However, there is a real advantage in not having to wait.”

Akinci says both videoconferencing and communications have advanced significantly since he first started exploring the technology six years ago. Today, he claims it is relatively

Continued on page 23 ▶



Continued from page 20

to set up a conference, even wirelessly, using IP access over a public communications network.

Even with 2000 interpreters on the books, mainly in Victoria and NSW, Akinci says it is difficult to meet current demand for interpreter services. The videoconference option may help.

He has now set up two booths in offices in Sydney and Melbourne equipped with Tandberg videoconferencing units that interpreters can hire for sessions with schools that also have videoconference equipment.

In Victoria a condition of the government tender to supply interpretation services was that InterpreterLine be able to provide videoconference-based interpretation. It is only now, with the roll out of equipment to the schools,

letters to 1000 NSW schools informing them about InterpreterLine's services, and to date received a handful of responses.

He believes that once the system is up and running demand will grow quickly.

"When you talk about this in six months or a year I think other principals will require this as they see other principals tap into it."

While the videoconference equipment being installed in Victoria has the primary application of supporting interpreters in schools, there are other applications already being considered, according to Macer.

"The main use is to access interpreters for clarification regarding student issues or queries, and to give feedback

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that this facility is being used.

A different system operates in the other states. In NSW, for example, a telephone-based interpretation system is available free of charge to government schools, although that does have limitations and clearly can't be used for Auslan interpretation.

Unlike Victoria, however, NSW government schools are being equipped with videoconferencing units through the Connected Classroom initiative. Akinci has sent

in teacher parent interviews. In the pilot, we used it with Year 9, 10 and 11 students to provide some clarification about their course selections."

Macer says the system is being installed in a room which can hold 12 to 15 people, making it feasible for one group of students to communicate with another, class to class. He also expects the technology to be used by teachers to facilitate professional development, and can ultimately see community applications for the technology.

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