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Language and other barriers

One of the main challenges an arbiter may face during international tournaments, especially when young children are involved, is a language barrier. It happens very often that participants only speak their own native language or their level of another language is not high enough to explain what happened in their game and why they are seeking the arbiter's assistance. What to do in such cases?

Well, there are a few things that you can do before the tournament starts and during its course, should the need arise.

If you are preparing for a youth international event, it is very important to choose the arbiters to cover as many languages as possible. It may not be possible to cover all native languages, but try, at least, to go for the basic ones. This is one of the reasons why in European and World events there is a ratio of local vs foreign arbiters. They bring, not only experience, but also communication skills.

If you are the Chief Arbiter, make a list of all the languages everyone can speak, including all arbiters and other tournament staff, and distribute it to the match arbiters, so that they know who to look for and where. If the playing venue is divided in two or more halls, it might be helpful to arrange the match arbiters so that in each hall there are arbiters who speak the basic languages.

If you are a match arbiter, take a note of where you can find arbiters who speak the languages of the players in your sector. As a pro tip, you might even ask them to write down for you and teach you how to pronounce a few basic words, such as "draw", "resign", "touch", "clock" etc.

One thing to keep in mind, is that, even if you do speak the language of the player who calls you, you still may not be able to understand their claim. The player may be in an emotional state (tears may be involved...), or may lack the proper vocabulary to explain, even in their own native language, what exactly happened. In more than one cases, I have encountered children who use the words "draw", "3-fold" and "stalemate" because basically they do lead to the same result.

They could also be speaking about an illegal move that occurred, but not be able to reinstate the position or give you the last 3-4 moves, which are not relevant to the case. Here, besides a high level of understanding of the player's language, you will also need some experience as an arbiter, as the vast majority of the cases you will encounter are typical. If you find yourself in a situation where you cannot understand the player or cannot explain to them your decision and nobody else can help you, the only solution may be to call the Head of Delegation and ask them to translate. In youth events, there is usually a nearby place where adults are gathered and you can reach them there. Be a little bit careful in such a case and try to minimise the communication between the player and the Head of Delegation, who could also be a strong player and a coach. If the contact is prolonged and in a language that you do not understand, it may cause suspicion from other players /coaches /parents, especially if the adult comes to the player's board and sees the current position. There is one thing to remember above all. Children (as all kinds of players) want to be heard. Do not neglect this need, treat them with respect and give them the time and space to express their request. Show them that you hear them and that you are doing your best to understand them. This will teach them to trust the arbiters and feel safe and comfortable during their games.

As a final note, multi-lingual arbiters are always useful in international events and that is why they can score extra points in our Call of Interest!

ECU Arbiters Council

The ECU Arbiters Council publishes monthly articles in the ECU Magazine about its activities.

Detailed information can be found on the official website: arbiters.europechess.org