



Thinking of Taking up Translation?

or Good Translators are Made, not Born

by Courtney Searls-Ridge

Translation and Interpretation Institute, Academic Director of Translation

Like interpreters, translators need a variety of skills and traits to be successful in their art, and many of these qualities overlap. We assume, of course, that a good translator will by definition be bilingual. But the opposite is not necessarily true. A bilingual person still needs certain other skills, expertise, and personality traits to be a good translator.

1. To be successful a translator must be fluent in two languages and cultures.

Does this mean that someone who was raised bilingually will be a better translator than someone who acquires his or her second language later in life? Not necessarily. Often people raised in bilingual households are “fluent” in two languages, but do not know the intricacies of either language well enough to translate. Sometimes they are not familiar enough with the culture that goes with the home language. If they have never formally learned the home language, they may not have the analytical linguistic skills needed to be a good translator. Some may not know how to read or write the home language.

On the other hand, how do people become fluent enough to be a good translator if they have not been raised bilingually? Most people who acquired their second language later in life picked up their second language skills on the street or at work and/or formally studied their second language in high school and college. Some have advanced degrees in linguistics or in one or two languages. These people, although fluent in both languages, may never have the same in-depth knowledge of slang, colloquialisms, and nuances of their second language as someone raised with the language from childhood.

There is no easy answer to the question of which one will make the better translator. But most good translators do have one experience in common: they have all lived for extended periods in countries where their second language is spoken. It is not enough to have grown up in a household speaking a language if you never have an opportunity to live in a country where that language is spoken and evolving. Nor is it enough merely to study a language. Most good translators have lived for several years in a country where their second language is spoken.

2. To be successful a translator must have a good general education in addition to the prerequisite language skills.

This does not mean that translators need advanced degrees to find work. However, successful translators usually read a lot, have many interests, and enjoy learning about new, obscure subjects. Many translators

have had other careers before becoming translators, providing them with an area of expertise in addition to a solid general education. As in interpreting, most translation projects deal with more than one subject area. The American Translators Association accreditation exam consists of five passages to translate of which the candidate must choose three. It would be extremely difficult to pass this exam without a broad general education, self-taught or otherwise.

3. To be successful a translator must have above-average writing skills in the target language.

In the United States today many students are graduating from high school and college with inadequate writing skills. You cannot be a good translator unless you are an excellent writer in your first language. Translators are expected to “write” technical manuals, marketing material, ad copy, and scientific studies. To do this you must feel confident about your writing skills. Only the detail-oriented translator will be able to produce the quality translation necessary to guarantee repeat business from clients.

4. To be successful a translator must have excellent computer skills and a willingness to continue to learn new technology.

The ubiquitous computer has moved the translation industry to the cutting edge of modern technology. It is no longer enough to be a good typist. Today’s translator must have advanced computer skills. The modern translator is responsible for developing and maintaining terminology databases, for formatting complicated documents, for transferring files for every conceivable platform. In the Pacific Northwest, many translators are working in the field of software localization. Increasingly, we are required to work with translation software, or machine translation as it is known in the field.

5. To be successful a translator must have good business skills, including marketing, negotiating, pricing, and time management.

The majority of translators in the United States are freelancers; they must market themselves to translation companies and direct clients. Translation companies receive so many unsolicited resumes a week that many do not bother to acknowledge them. Successful translators have found ways to market themselves so that they stand out. They know how to negotiate fair and competitive fees for their work. They have learned how to manage their time in such a way that they can find balance in their lives and still meet deadlines.

6. To be successful a translator must get along well with others.

The image of the solitary translator in a lonely room surrounded by books has long ago given way to reality. The modern freelance translator interacts daily with colleagues, clients, and project managers by email, telephone, and networking in person at professional conferences. Today’s translator consults regularly about terminology conundrums, software problems, business practices, and ethics.

7. To be successful a translator must know his or her limitations in all of the areas mentioned above.

No one enters the field of translation with all of the skills and traits necessary to be successful. Many of these “prerequisites” come with experience. But if you are aware of what is required to be successful, and you know which areas to work on, you are already on your way to success.