

Shots Rapidly Fired by Bill Lise

Comments made by Bill Lise at Project Osaka, a one-day Japanese/English translators' conference held on November 28, 2009 in Osaka.

More information available at:

<http://www.lise.jp/honyaku.html>

Self-Introduction

- Patent translator & litigation interpreter
- Translating full-time for over 30 years
- Electrical engineer in my former life

Beginnings

- First regular paying “job” was language related.
- Came to Japan 40+ years ago to serve as a Russian-language specialist on intelligence gathering platforms.
- My Japanese was self-taught.

シヤノバ復帰

- Back in the “world,” I worked in a fiber optics lab of the then Western Electric while obtaining an electrical engineering degree.
- One day an electrical measuring instrument company was looking for someone to start up and manage their Japan operation. I was that person.

Entry into Translation

- Although I was the branch manager, I did some J2E translation (mostly market information and competitors' technical information)
- The chance to translate was valuable, but developing spoken Japanese usable in sales was equally valuable in terms of getting translation clients and setting rates later. More on that in a moment.
- When it came time to go home, I declined.

First “Paid” Translation Job

- An ex-employee asked me to translate an instruction manual for one of his products (a blood pressure gauge) and the pay was two of the products. It made me wonder whether there are people out there who paying real money for translation.

Subsequent Work

- I targeted my former competitors and clients.
- I mentioned the name of my former employer in doing sales.
- I currently lurk at events attended by US attorneys, 弁理士, and personnel from intellectual property departments of Japanese manufacturers.

Field-Specific Knowledge

- The myth of “general translation” is just that—a myth.
- All translated texts are “about” something.
- Texts that are not “about “ much are not very valuable to a client.

Acquiring Field-Specific Knowledge

- Formal education—it helps but is not the only way.
- Real-life experience—can obviate the need to spend years in formal education.
- Reading in both your source and target languages in your field of specialty. If that is painful because the subject matter is boring to you, you might be in for a lucrative but boring career.

Good Spoken Japanese Can Greatly Affect Your Earning Power as an NSE Japanese-to-English Translator

- Opens doors to Japanese direct clients.
- Avoids slammed doors when visiting even non-Japanese firms if the keeper of the gate is a NJS.

Rare Opportunity to Sell in Japanese

- I had more sales leads than people to handle them, forcing me to sell to Japanese clients.
- At first, I visited clients with one of my experienced salesmen, essentially copying his tricks of the trade. Later I went out on my own.
- The sales skills I acquired were valuable in selling translation services as well.

Invest Now for the Future

- For beginning translators, unless you are aiming at avoiding contact with Japanese clients, time spent in acquiring sales-ready spoken Japanese is very likely going to be a good investment.
- However, decades of interaction with translators strongly indicates to me that, if you have not acquired that level of Japanese in ten years or even five years of effort, your chances of doing it by starting now are slim.

Japanese-Language Qualifications

- Unlikely to affect either your earnings or your ability to find work in Japan.
- One possible exception is looking for work from a foreign firm, for example, which might not have the ability to judge your Japanese ability themselves.

Translation Qualifications

- ATA certification might be of concern to US translation agencies.
- It has not been an issue for me. People never ask; I never tell.

Summary Advice

- Acquire field-specific knowledge.
- If you are early enough in your career, invest time now in acquiring good spoken Japanese; later is almost certainly going to be too late.