

Jennifer Thomé
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Jennifer Thomé is a freelance translator and interpreter and the founder of TurnkeyTranslator.com, an online school that teaches bilinguals of all academic backgrounds how to become freelance translators, interpreters, transcribers, and foreign language marketers.

Talia: Hey everyone. Today I am with Jennifer Thomé. Jennifer is a Mandarin Chinese and German translator and interpreter. With years of linguistic experience under her belt, she knows how to teach others how to start an interpretation and translation career even if you do not have formal training or a degree. If you're bilingual and want to know more about how to use your other languages to work from home for you, then this interview is for you. Hi Jennifer!

Jennifer: Hi Talia.

Talia: Can you tell us a little bit more about your background and how you became a translator and interpreter?

Jennifer: Sure. So I really don't have a background per se. I eventually got a background but when I started out in this field, I didn't have a background at all. It was just me being helpful to the people in my community, right? So when I was 20 years old on a whim I moved to China. And even with my limited Chinese skills, people would always ask me for help with English. And so I was translating signs for government doors and restaurants menus and all sorts of things. And eventually that progressed. And so as I learned a bit more about the language, I got different types of jobs and eventually people started paying. But I always worked in marketing and publishing. That was my job. And then translation was something I did to help other people, right? And then I was in marketing for quite a while, worked my way up the ladder. And when I had my second child, I said, "You know what? I don't want to do marketing anymore." Because it's exhausting. I'm always out of the house, I'm never home, I'm answering emails all night. And so I said, you know what? I'm going to stop and I'm going to figure out a way to make money. I never even thought of translation, right? So I was kind of doing jobs here and there, odd jobs, helping people and maybe making a little bit of money. And then when somebody learned I quit my job, they said, "Hey, do you want to work for us?" I said, "Sure." And I made a thousand dollars the first week and it was like, all right. I'm on my way to replacing my salary, right? So without a formal company, a career, certificate, any of that, I became a translator. And it had a lot of ups and downs and then as I went along and I think we'll talk about this more, I figured out how to actually land really good jobs in translation.

Talia: Nice. So I think-

Jennifer: And you're going to ask me about it so I'm going to stop there.

Talia: So I think maybe do you think that some of your other skills that you utilized ... because it sounds like ... I know what I'm hearing, so much attitude there, like a great attitude of helping people, right? I feel like that's such a really under talked about skill that is so important. Like if you just help people, you'll find and be helpful, useful, then people really response to that. And then you're like, "Oh I have these skills. How can I help you? What can I do for you?"

Jennifer: Exactly. And I think that's ... to flip that around, I think the things that we do like, that comes very naturally to us, right? So a lot of us are afraid to become freelancers or to start a new career because we don't feel qualified. And when we come from a place of helping other people, it's so natural and we end up doing a better job because we care. We're not just thinking, like, okay. How much am I earning per hour? Or per minute? We're really thinking about I want to help you when it's coming from that place. And that's very empowering. So even though I'm qualified but I'm not always the most qualified, I mean I'm not a native Chinese speaker, right? But people hire me because they know they can count on me and they know I'm coming from a place where I'm going to do a really good job.

Talia: Right, because you really care, right? And you're going to use all the experience that you have to give it the best service that you can. And give them all a little nuance that maybe someone who is a native Chinese speaker might not. So there are other qualities you can bring, I think. It sounds like this is not something that you've always wanted to do. You sort of fell into it. You sort of used what you had and then fell into this new career. Would you recommend all students or people who want to get into translating already know multiple languages? Or how did you start learning?

Jennifer: Curiosity, right? So I grew up speaking German and English. Those are my two native languages. But I worked primarily in Chinese. If you're in this field, I guess there's a spectrum. There's always a spectrum for any freelance career and you do it at home. And you can start from really basic stuff. So even as a student, you can do some odd translation jobs or do projects for people in other countries that will pay for your tuition. And then as you progress, you can go and be a professional freelance translator and make \$200,000 dollars a year. That's all do-able. But there's something for everyone on that spectrum. And that's a lot what I talk about, because for me I'm a very text orientated person. And so I do do interpretation which is speaking a lot. But I really love written stuff and I flourish in that field. Whereas other people, they just talk.

And what inspired me actually to create this course was I was ... we were redoing our kitchen and the man who was doing the tiles didn't speak English. But he brought his son who was born in the states. So he's an immigrant. His son was born here. And his son always translates. And I said, "Well what do you want to do when you finish high school?" He goes, "I don't know. I don't have any talents." And I was like, "Do you know how much I get paid to do exactly what you're doing for your dad?" Like in a medical setting or a legal setting. And you don't need a ton of training to do that. And you can do it ... I mean, I just had a case this morning where somebody said, "Can I pay you \$500 dollars just to inquire something?" And I said, "Sure, let's hop on the phone." And so basically for three hours I got really crazy rates.

So there's something for everyone on that spectrum. And so that young man inspired me to create this course, because I started there. I was like, "Am I really allowed to be paid for this work, because I'm not qualified. I'm not trained. I'm not whatever." But there's so many people like that because a second language is such a common skill.

Talia: And I think with any job as well, attitude is so much of it. If you bring the right attitude and you've got the right skills, you don't always have to be the best. You just have to help the most and be the most useful. So tell us a little bit about your course Turn Key Translator. What can students expect to learn from it?

Jennifer: Yeah, so this course is basically what I did to become successful as a translator, because in the beginning it was just helping other people. And then when I first thought about doing it professionally, it was a lot of pitfalls. So really jobs where I didn't ask the right questions beforehand and

my hourly rate turned out to be \$2 per hour. And it's like, "What have I done?" For really grueling work. So taking all of these mistakes that I've made and then everything I did to really get to the place where I'm now, where my hourly rate starts at \$40 but it goes up to a couple of hundred depending on the project.

So the first section is all about building your platform. That is just creating the materials that you need to promote yourself, talking about how to promote yourself, and creating work samples that show what you can do. Because we often think, "Well, I haven't done it before so I can't do it." Well it's translation. It's not brain surgery. It's not being published. So talking about how to create these materials that you're going to show to potential clients and how to talk about yourself. Because truth be told, 80% of my work comes from my network and just me opening my mouth and telling people about what I do.

And then we also talk about finding those clients, landing those clients, making those clients really happy so that you become their go to person, and spacing your projects, I think that's critical in this field because you want to do a good job. But it's not just doing a good job. It's doing a good job in a smart way, because you can spend 100 hours doing a project or 20 hours doing a project and you get the same result if you work smart. So how to really optimize your time.

And then I talk about scaling your business. Do you want to go bigger with this? Do you want to land bigger clients? Do you want to create a team? I mean, I've done all of those things. And so for some jobs, I hire out part of it. And it just increases my hourly rate so much because I'm doing less work. And then the last section is all about managing it. How to get it all done, how to invoice your clients, how to make sure that you get paid, how to deal with legal and ethical questions. I talk about all of those.

Talia: Wow, it really sounds like you cover everything which is amazing.

Jennifer: I try to.

Talia: It was a really good point you made about asking the right questions and then finding out that your hourly rate is actually \$2 an hour. I've definitely been there.

Jennifer: ... a transcription, right? So transcription is actually a really good entry level because a lot of these jobs ... let's say you're a native Spanish speaker and your English is so so. They don't need your English to be great because you're transcribing Spanish into Spanish. Or maybe English into Spanish. So I talk about if you're good at this and not good at this, or if this language is stronger and this one's weaker, we go through all of that. So this was transcription, and transcription pays between \$1 to \$2.50 dollars per audio minute. Sometimes even more. But what I didn't realize is that A) the speaker was super fast. So it was the faster speaker I had ever heard. And so I had to slow it down, so the workload doubled automatically. And then the second thing I didn't clarify beforehand was that they wanted time stamps. This means that every time a new sentence starts, you have to look and see, okay 10:22:25. And that just made the project just so unbearably long. And so even though it was an hour of audio, it took me two days. It was ridiculous.

Talia: Yeah, wow.

Jennifer: Lessons learned.

Talia: Yeah, definitely. That's why this course comes in handy, so people don't have to go through that.

Jennifer: Exactly. And it was so frustrating and I just wanted to throw in the towel and I said, "You know what? You just learned something really valuable."

Talia: Absolutely.

Jennifer: And now when I have those questions to ask ahead of time. Like well, can I please listen to an example? Do you need timestamps? Do you need this? What format do you need? And now, I mean ... my hourly rate shot up because of that.

Talia: Yeah. And you can have things in contract so it's really clear. If this, then this. So that-

Jennifer: We talk about such as. Yeah.

Talia: So you're not absolutely not in a good place. Okay, perfect. So how do you actually determine your rate and get it, while we're on the rates?

Jennifer: So inside the freebees, actually, for attending this ... and inside the freebees, there is the ideal hourly rate calculator. And basically rather than saying, okay, I want to make \$40,000 dollars a year. That's way too ambiguous, right? Because you're not factoring in your vacation time, your health care needs. You know if you're in the states, it's crazy. Your taxes. And so I put together an Excel sheet where you type in, like, this is how much money I want to take home. This is how many vacation days I want to have. And it actually goes backwards and calculates how much you actually need to bring in in an income. So if you want to make \$60,000 dollars a year, you don't just need to earn \$60,000 dollars. You know, if you want to take a months vacation, you need to bring your hourly rate up to compensate for that month. And yeah, it goes in and it calculates the whole thing for you.

And everybody is always so amazed when they do it because on the one side, you really get a lot of clarity on how much you need to earn. But you also feel empowered to ask for that. Because so often we say, like, okay, \$10 bucks an hour. That's okay. I can make this much per week, right? But you don't realize how much of that is going to your taxes and your expenses and your vacation time and your healthcare needs. So it really empowers you to feel like, yes, I can ask for \$80 bucks an hour for this project because that is what I need to get paid to survive. I mean, that's just surviving. That's not even how much I want.

Talia: Right. So just really getting clarity around what you're earning and where that money's going once you bring it in.

Jennifer: Absolutely. And how much to ask for, right?

Talia: Perfect. And not feel bad about it, right? If you've done all these numbers before and you know exactly what's happening, then you ... like you said, you don't feel bad about it. You're just bringing in what you're making, which isn't a lot of comfort necessarily. Then you're like, actually I might be able to ask for a little bit more.

Jennifer: I really go over it a lot in the course, but I want to empower people to ask for that money because when I got started, I went through this period where I was earning well. But I didn't have money. So I went back and I did this exercise and I said, well, okay. I'm spending like an hour on each client debating on how much to ask. And I would check with my friends saying, "Do you think it's okay if I ask for this much?" Well that's a huge waste of time, right? I found that you can just ask for it

and usually the answer is yes. Or they come back and say, "Well our budget is this." So rather than starting here and finding out you were too low, you start here and either they meet you here ... I don't know if I'm still on screen. There we go. And they might come down but they'll still meet you higher than where you were going to go in the first place.

Talia: Right. Because you're either undercutting yourself or giving them a really good deal. So yeah, I've definitely done that, though, worried about what I'm charging because I think I'm not going to get the job. But then I get the job and it's actually so much more work and for not enough money. And it doesn't end up being worth it. And then you start feeling resentment as well when you're doing all this work.

Jennifer: Yeah and then you end up back in a desk job and missing your children and your life.

Talia: Right, totally. I mean, I couldn't go back now personally. I think once you get a taste of the work-at-home life, you just can't go back.

Jennifer: You can't.

Talia: So I have some notes here that you don't actually have a morning routine. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how does that influence your work-at-home life?

Jennifer: So I've got a family, right? I've got two young kids at home so I know morning routines are very important and I've done them and they're wonderful but they don't really mesh well with my life. So what I have instead is an evening routine. And I sit down every night after the kids go to sleep and I just give myself that space where I say, okay, if I want to write, then I write. If I was to dream, then I dream. If I just want to have a glass of wine and forget about it, then I do that. But every night I try to sit down and make a list of what I need to do the next day and set a priority.

And that way the next day, when I wake up, like after all the morning chaos, right? Because there's so much chaos when you're existing with other people in a space. Once that's all gone, I'm not sitting down. Like when I was doing the morning routine, I feel great from 5:00 AM to 6:00 AM and then at 8:30, when everybody was gone, I'd be like, "Oh my goodness, where am I?" So I reserve more time for that in the evening for self-care. And then in the morning, it's like all right. We're going to hit the ground running. And that allows me to be so quick in the day. Like it's all planned out. It's all there. I'm energized. I'm on the ball. And then I get to have that morning where I just get to be myself. I get to hang out with the kids, it's not planned, it's not ... I'm all about self-care but the morning just never worked for me.

Talia: Fair enough. So you just created a life that worked for you. Why not?

Jennifer: Yeah. And what I like to do is sometimes in the evenings, I just take care of all those stupid things I don't want to deal with the next day. And that can be bills or washing the dishes. And then it's just like the next day, you just start and you're working on something that is either earning you money or it's meaningful.

Talia: Right. Or you enjoy doing it.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Talia: Nice. Nice. Oh, I love that. Thank you for those tips. I'm the same. I'm not really a morning routine kind of girl. I just ... but sometimes you've got to do those things you don't want to do. You've got to find a time in the day when you can get them done and it's not going to interrupt all the things that you do want to do.

Jennifer: And at the end of the day, that's what I need to recover. That's when I just want to get stuff done and go to bed. So there's, I've got incentive. In the morning, I get all ... and then I feel like I'm behind on everything already and frustrated that my kid ruined my meditative high.

Talia: Right. Well it's sort of nice as well that you can spend that time with your children and just be present, so you're not having to think, "Oh, something's being disruptive." Actually, I'm here with my children and that is what I'm doing right now. I'm with them and that they've got my time. That's really precious.

Jennifer: ... right? The other thing that really motivated me, because I'm super shy and I'm an introvert. And so when I started making this course, it took forever because I was like, oh no. I can't go on camera. I can't do anything. But yeah, just ... I think that people who have multiple languages often come from immigrant families. And our families rely more on us, right? So I am technically not an immigrant but I am married to an immigrant and so there are things that I have to take care of for my mother-in-law or my sister-in-law. And I never had the flexibility to do that when I had a day job.

And so I thought, well, if I'm like this ... I'm pretty fluent in both languages but I think other people really struggle to find the time to do all of these obligations; what if you have a career that you can build around that with skills you already have? You don't have to go get a fancy degree, you don't have to get licensed. Like you can do this. I do it for people in my network. I do it for companies. But it's flexible. And it works around my life rather than having to fit in my family and my life around my work ... and that really got me over the confidence hump, right? I'm going to help these people.

Talia: Right. We've only got one life. We may as well have the joy of helping people but also helping and being there for our own family, right?

Jennifer: Exactly.

Talia: Well, if someone's on the fence about deciding if this is right for them, what would you say to those people?

Jennifer: Well, I'd say that ultimately it's up to you to create a life that you love and that works for you. So it is a career change. It is something that requires work. It doesn't require a lot of start-up capital but you do have to show up and you do have to be confident enough to go and talk to people and find clients. So if you're willing to put in that in exchange for a career that's really flexible and rewarding, then I think you should go for it. And I think if you look at all the different clients I've had, I've worked for international translation companies doing jobs that paid like \$10 bucks an hour to \$100 bucks an hour. But I've also helped people who needed help filling out college applications or buying insurance. So I'd just charge them an hourly rate and it depends on what I'm doing. So it works in all parts of life.

And the other thing I would say is that it's a really good stepping stone career. So let's say you're a student or you're a stay-at-home mom right now and you just want to bring in some extra income. When I have students like this, I tell them pick something in the career you want to work at. Because more and more companies want to hire bilinguals. It's a huge asset for your career. But what I found is they don't just want to hire someone who's bilingual. They also want a little bit of experience. So let's

say you're studying business or you're studying art. You can find translation work in that field. It exists in all fields. Like it can be in health care. And so you can start taking in jobs. Let's say in medical interpretation or medical translation. Medical record translation. And you get experience while you're getting paid and it aligns with your goal of becoming a nurse or whatever. So it's a really cool stepping stone. You don't have to do it forever. But you can learn so much while you're doing it.

Talia: Absolutely. And it's really useful so when you do go into that field, you'll have that little bit of extra knowledge and extra insight as well.

Jennifer: You've got the insight, you've got real life experience, and you have experience doing it in second or third language.

Talia: Right.

Jennifer: A lot of the consulting work I do now, one of my first jobs was at a law firm and it was really just like checking contracts and it was super boring and it was super tedious. But it gave me legal expertise. And so a lot of the consulting work I have now is people who may work with a lawyer. I'm not a lawyer, right? But they may not trust that lawyer and so they're saying, "Will you just review this for me? Can you make sure I'm not getting stiffed here?" You know, if you want a second opinion. Or they might just have like rental contracts or they need help figuring out what this contract means that's from whatever. So yeah, it really helps to be a stepping stone in your future career.

Talia: Nice. I really like that. Very smart. Well thank you so much, Jennifer. So if- Sorry.

Jennifer: ... we're very polite.

Talia: Sorry?

Jennifer: That's the German. Very polite. If you say thank you, I'll say thank you.

Talia: I know, I should have left some space for you to say thank you. I'm really sorry. So being bilingual has so many benefits and opens up so many doors you could have never imagined. If you'd like to utilize your already existing skills language, or learn something new like Jennifer, it can bring you the work at home freedom you're looking for. Just for watching this video, you can download Jennifer's set of forms Financial Skills for Freelance Creatives.

So Jennifer, I know you mentioned before about the form that you punch in all your details of how much you want to earn and it gives you a little bit of information around that, like what you should be charging and things like that. Is there anything else on those forms that you want to share with us?

Jennifer: Yeah. So it's a set of ten forms and Excel sheets and I call it the Forms for Creative Freelancers because it's not just for translators. So other people can use this as well because I also work as a writer part-time. And that was my first job. So I still have some residual freelance jobs. And so it's all the skills, financial skills, you need around being a freelancer. So like how do you figure out your hourly rates? How do you keep track of your projects, which in translation is so essential because they're kind of piecemeal at times. How do you invoice your clients and make sure you get paid? How do you keep track of all your clients? Because if you're not keeping track of them, when you have a lull in your business and you want to follow up, you're going to spend so much time trying to find all that client

information. So there's a client tracker and a project tracker. So it's really all the things you need to streamline and optimize your business as a creative freelancer and or translator.

Talia: Nice, wow, this is a great freebee. Awesome. So how many sheets, how many forms, come in that bundle?

Jennifer: Ten in total.

Talia: Beautiful. Wow. Okay, great.

Jennifer: And one of them is the going rates for language jobs and creative jobs. So if somebody's interested to see how much you can earn on average, right? That's perfect. Because you can go through it and see what the hourly rate is, what the per word rate is.

Talia: Great. Awesome. That's super useful. Thank you. And so Jennifer's course Turn Key Translator is part of Work-At-Home School, so it's at a \$297 value. This course is included in the price of your Work-At-Home School membership and you're getting the confidence in the language you're translating and learn how to build your portfolio and find the right clients for your business.

Thank you again, Jennifer.

Jennifer: Yeah, thank you Talia. Have a great day.

Talia: You, too. Cheers.

Jennifer: Bye.

Talia: Bye.