Decentralizing learning in a polylingual literary translation workshop

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A course structure for an inclusive classroom

Teachers in translation studies programs are painfully aware that the opportunity to teach a language-specific practicum is rare. In language programs without translation specialization, this chance is even more scarce—there are just not enough students within the same language program who are sufficiently advanced or interested. Add to that the unlikelihood of the students sharing similar linguistic competencies, the directionality of translation, and level of advancement (undergraduate, graduate, and PhD), and the task seems nearly impossible. But what if we could design a course around each student's individual linguistic and cultural profile that would automatically include everyone?

The proposed course structure evolved from the necessity to truly differentiate teaching for each individual student who had expertise in languages I did not know. It engaged each student on a personal level within their language pair, and kept each student connected to others not by formal means of enrollment into one and the same course, but through deep and balanced intellectual and social engagement akin to that of rotating intellectual leadership and mentorship.

In this multilingual classroom, each student played the role of an expert in his or her language and culture, while my task was to create a dynamic platform for information exchange, accumulation of knowledge, and translation practice. I activated the language and culture knowledge that students already possessed natively through acquisition or intuition. I

systematized this knowledge through the texts of other experts in translation studies and related disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, semantics, terminology studies, etc. The exercises and the final project allowed for individualized practice, and provided venues for students to share their newly acquired knowledge about their working languages with each other. The combination of the students' knowledge with knowledge from related disciplines produced a scientifically-informed (instead of intuitive) decision-making base for translation process. Their relevant linguistic backgrounds, heightened awareness of asymmetrical linguistic phenomena, and ability to analyze and compare distinct cultural elements professionalized their translation practice in new ways. This differentiated approach worked so well both for me and my translation students that I have since incorporated student-generated content into all the classes I teach, including those for monolingual and international students.

This approach could be adapted for any type of a student. Students enrolled in this course could be complete bilingual newbies, aspiring language learners, or professional translation studies students. Obviously, advanced language learners in translation studies programs are the best audience for this course, but a non-university student who would like to try their hand at literary translation would be as suitable a participant. For example, high school students who are advanced language learners would make a great contingent for this course or immigrant or bilingual retirees may enjoy it in lifelong learning programs.

Conditions for success in this course include students' interest in translation and creative writing, and sufficient language competency for them to read literature in the original, mostly without a dictionary.

This course can also be modified for community-style learning, such as a workshop or a club for bilingual children and their parents or for any bilingual individuals who are interested in attempting literary translation. The community-based workshop will be of interest to public librarians running programs for their increasingly bilingual communities. A librarian with an interest in translation would become a group leader who would learn along with the students. A public reading of translations at the end of the workshop could be the crowning event of such a program. In the college environment, whether a professional translation program is offered or only a few translation courses, a course of this sort would support and promote language learning at higher levels.

This type of multilingual workshop allows for a unique relationship among the participants. Each student chooses a bilingual author who works in the same two languages as this student. In a way, students are apprenticed to these bilingual, self-translating authors and not to the instructor who most likely *does not* work in their language pair(s). The classroom is not dominated by either instructor's or the native English speakers' linguistic and cultural expertise, and a student with a unique language pair doesn't find himself or herself alone anymore.

Armed with systematic knowledge about the culture-specific linguistic and cultural elements studied in class and possessed of a good understanding of their author's social and political standing as a multilingual individual, studied independently, the students feel that their translation choices are purposeful and well informed. The last part of the final project described below is an analytical essay in which students compare their own translations to those of their chosen bilingual authors. Students consistently report this experience of translating and comparing as liberating. By the end of the course, they understand how asymmetric linguistic phenomena work in their language pair, they understand why the chosen author made his or her

choices as a translator and a multilingual individual, and they feel they can justify their own choices as well.

In this classroom, active and independent learning turns students' intuitive knowledge into professional expertise about their own language and culture (including English-speaking cultures). The classroom thus becomes a safe space to explore one's biculturalism and one's established or emerging bilingual identity (Titus and Butcher 2020)[1]. The proposed setup balances out the hierarchy between the teacher and the students through shared responsibility for knowledge acquisition and dissemination, and it encourages even those students with hierarchical deference to the teacher in their cultural backgrounds to overcome their shyness and speak up in class. Most importantly, the dynamics of information exchange among peers about cultural differences and similarities is acquired knowledge; it is not handed down or dominated by some student's expertise in English. Each potentially new culture and language for each student is associated with specific individuals in class; and as a truly balanced knowledge exchange it gets to be absorbed, I believe, without the flare of exoticism and much more quickly, with less resistance or indifference than in a traditional classroom.

Subject matter

In terms of subject matter, this course examines universally present culture-specific phenomena that are challenging to translate, such as realia, humor, emotions, non-verbal behavior, etc., and offers methodical solutions to translating these elements based on what is known about them in related disciplines. Due to my own language background and in keeping with the design of this course, the primary texts I have chosen are excerpts from texts written mostly in Russian and

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[1] Titus, Freddie and Jennifer T. Butcher. "Biculturalism." *Multicultural Instructional Design* (2020): n. pag.

their translations. This selection dictates to a great degree my choice of translation challenges to discuss; however, these challenges exist in other languages and are sufficiently universal for the purposes of this discussion and illustration. If the translation challenges or culture-specific elements I discuss do not exist in your working languages, I encourage you to adjust the list of challenges and examine them according to the proposed methodology, using related disciplines. For example, Thai students as well as students of other Asian languages could benefit from a unit on honorifics, while students of Italian, Russian, and German could use a unit focused on diminutive suffixes. The goal here is to show students how to cope with unique culture-specific translation challenges in a systematic way.

Because each student will choose a parallel text published in their language pair, they can transfer the knowledge gleaned from the classroom to the text they are studying in the original, see how their authors coped with the challenges discussed in class, contemplate optimal solutions, and share them in class. In this manner, students not only learn the subject matter (linguistic and cultural phenomena) and the skill (translation), but also supply each other with a wealth of knowledge about linguistic and cultural features from parts of the world represented in class that are not limited to the instructor's expertise. This knowledge will be highly personalized and animated, "made alive" in a sense, for them in the persons of their fellow students. If the class is sufficiently small, students might even have the chance to read the literary works with which their fellow students chose to work during the semester. They can read them in translation and use these readings in common discussion. For example, if a student working with Spanish chose *House on the Lagoon* by Rosario Ferré, everyone in class reads this book or its parts in English or another shared language. The same happens with other students' choices.

Methods

I am based in the US, where all students work with English, so English is one of my students'
working languages—but it does not have to be. The most important thing is that you and your
students can understand each other, that you all share at least one language.

The course has three major components: learning about and practicing literary translation,
learning about bilingualism and intercultural communication, and learning about one's own
bilingual self.

Students examine selected writings by authors who are published bilingually, reflecting
on the ways that the practice of translation may be informed by cases of self-translation, and
encountering biographical aspects of bilingualism that directly relate to the translators' self-
perceptions and the experience of translation. The emphasis is on the authors' strategies in self-
translation at the juncture where language meets culture and where one would be hard-pressed to
find prescriptive methods of translating. Along the way, students learn how bilingualism relates
to self, creativity, national and ethnic identity, and politics. They analyze different discourse
strategies in English and another language as manifested in the bilingual text pairs of their
choice. They develop bilingual reading strategies. They reflect upon bilingual linguistic identity.

There are three kinds of readings: a literary or autobiographical work selected for the
project by each student individually; autobiographical essays related to bilingualism (such as
Isabele de Courtivron's *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity* or any
other similar collection of essays); and theoretical essays in translation studies, bilingualism, and
intercultural communication (such as select readings from Carol Myers-Scotton's *Multiple
Voices: An Introduction to Bilingualism)*. In non-academic environments, the third type of text
can be condensed and presented by the instructor in a digested form.

During the course, students have an opportunity to engage their language abilities and interests creatively and independently, to reflect on the relation between bilingualism and translation, bilingualism and creative writing, translation and creative writing, and to ponder their own relationship to their linguistic realities and identities. They study how bilingual writers, who have creative license to change their own text, deal with these aspects of language. Students form an understanding of the guidelines for reviewing a literary translation professionally—they become sophisticated readers of translations and learn to read and translate code-switching texts.

Parallel Project

This section describes how students work with their bilingual authors and their texts. This project runs parallel to the shared readings and discussions on culture-specific aspects of language and serves as a testing ground for ideas and topics brought up in class:

1. Each student identifies an author who writes in two languages or collaborates on translations in a specific language pair that is also the student's working language pair. Ideally, the author will be translating into English because the students will have to do the same.

2. Students identify texts written and translated by their authors.

3. Students get acquainted with their authors as intellectuals and as bilingual individuals through reading their biographies and composing an annotated bibliography.

4. Students apply the knowledge received in class to their translation practices.

Learning Objectives

- Learn to navigate various catalogues and databases for research on available translations.

- Diagnose the chosen author as a bilingual, i.e., find out what kind of a bilingual the author is.

- Identify what issues most interest the author-translator as a creative individual and what kind of translation bias he or she will be most likely to embrace.

- Identify specific cultural and linguistic difficulties in the text for which literary translation does not have standard solutions.

- Translate a selected passage, compare it to the author's translation, and write an analytical comparative essay incorporating the material studied in class.

Ultimately, the students will see not only how their translation choices differ from those of their authors, they will also be able to predict where their translation will differ most from the author's; they will know why they made specific choices (thereby increasing their self-awareness as translators and bilingual individuals); and they will know how and why their authors made their choices.

Grading

All stages of the project earn an equal number of points even though the activities differ drastically from each other. If, like Jesse Stommel[2], you are a fan of ungrading, all assignments could be graded according to Peter Elbow's one of much simpler scales (1 point scale = turned

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[2] Stommel, Jesse, "Ungrading: An Introduction," June 11, 2021, https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-introduction/, accessed September 2, 2022.

in; 2 point scale = pass/fail; 3 point scale = weak/satisfactory/strong) (Elbow 1997). The nature

of the assignments, the proprietary expertise that students acquire in the course and that are

inaccessible to the instructor, the necessary self-reliance in the process of learning about one's

languages, the metacognitive essays they write on the processes of self-discovery and translation

("Metacognition")[3], the powerful personal interest in the self-discovery as bilingual individuals –

all assure students' deep interest and motivation in learning and producing quality work.

Stage	Project Activity	Points	Description
1	Project Activity 1: Finding a Bilingual Author and Diagnosing Your Author's Bilingualism[4]	50	Identify your bilingual author, research his or her biography, post the author's profile as that of a bilingual individual. Ideally your author will be translating *into* English. 1-2 pages
2	Project Activity 2: Annotated Bibliography[5]	50	Create an annotated bibliography of the author's works relevant to this class. 2-3 pages
3	Project Activity 3: Choosing	50	Identify your author's text published in two languages that are also your working languages. Get hold of both texts—you will have to scan and share the passage you translate. Identify a specific chapter or chapters that

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[3] https://citls.lafayette.edu/principles-of-ungrading-practice/

[4] Collaboration with the library is essential to help students search the databases effectively. The International & Area Studies Library and Slavic Reference Service at the University of Illinois, for example, has created an excellent LibGuide, *Translations and Translation Studies in the Russian, Eastern European & Eurasian Context*, especially for Translation Studies. I direct students to study "Translations at UIUC," particularly the section titled "Treatment of Translations in Library Catalogues," and use the site's databases to find their author's creative output. Many databases collected here are not limited to Slavic languages. I encourage students to read database descriptions and instructions on how to use them to perform searches. Techniques similar to those described in the above Guide can be used to search the World Catalogue (WorldCat). Students share their choice of author and written works through the graded Discussion Forum post.

[5] Students don't need to read their author's entire oeuvre, but they will have to find out what each major title is about to select suitable items for their bibliography and their final project. Of course, not every bilingual author writes about bilingualism; nevertheless, many contemplate their linguistic identity in fiction and non-fiction.

	Your Text and Passage		engage one or more problems of cultural or linguistic transfer discussed in class. ~3000-3500 words
4	Project Activity 4: Translating the Chosen Chapter into English	50	Translate the chosen excerpt into English, considering issues discussed in class.
5	Project Activity 5: Comparative Analysis of Your and Your Author's Translations	50	Write an analytical commentary to your translation: ● justifying your choice of the passage ● discussing the challenges ● explaining your translation choices and the difference with those of your author's (highly detailed stylistic analysis). ● considering how the author's bilingualism influenced or could influence the method of translation and how this method differs (perhaps) from your choices and from the methods we have studied in this course (methodological analysis of the translation). 10-15 pages double-spaced.

The predominance of independent, differentiated learning and engagement with a bilingual author as a mentor, limits the instructor's authority and ability to grade all the work done in class. For this reason, grading student work relies heavily on the evaluation of participation, metacognitive, reflective essays, and intensity of student engagement with materials and ideas discussed in class and applied in personal projects. I evaluate translations only when students translate into English, Russian, or Ukrainian; translations into students' languages that are not English have the purpose of engaging students with the material and are for the sake of the experience, but these translations are not graded. However, students write a graded meta-commentary about these translations into other languages. Rubrics, or rather prompts, for grading commentary are provided for each specific assignment. If there is more than one student in class working in the same language pair, peers may be asked to comment on each other's work or to work together.

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