

## LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR TRANSLATION STUDENTS<sup>1</sup>

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Literature is generally seen to play a valid role in language teaching, and therefore should have its place in the language curriculum of translation students. However, before a subject can be taught successfully, it is essential to have an appropriately designed syllabus. This paper aims to address these two particular issues: to ascertain the worth of literature in the context of language teaching for translation students, and to examine the criteria we need to consider in selecting literary texts.

To attempt a detailed definition of literature, examining its ramifications and potential pitfalls, is happily beyond my domain of discussion. Still it is necessary to clarify what the term in this paper is supposed to mean. For working purposes, I accept the somewhat commonsensical delimitation of literature as *belle lettres*. In this light, we shall now turn to the question of the role of literature in language teaching for translation students.

One of the fascinations of literature lies in the enjoyment that it offers. Literary texts provide us with much aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure in that the writers often seek to delineate their vision of human experience through a creative, emotive use of language. They contrast sharply with the pedestrian figures and insipid dialogues of language textbooks whose meanings, as Widdowson remarks, "are made explicit [and are] carefully prepared for easy assimilation" (1982:212). Because of its symbolic density, literature provides much impetus for language learning. As a subject, it

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certainly ought to be included in the curriculum of language teaching for translation students.

Also, literature serves to enhance the students' language competence. Because of its capacity for providing pleasure and enjoyment, the subject, as McKay argues, can increase the students' "motivation to interact with a text and thus, ultimately increase their reading proficiency" (1982:531). Indeed, literature offers the students ample opportunities to develop their interpretative power--an important asset in language learning and translation, both of which disciplines greatly involve the skill of comprehension.

In degree rather than in kind, literature distinguishes itself from other types of academic discourse. In the latter--in particular, non-fiction essays--the writer supplies as much detail as possible to make his meaning direct and clear (Irmscher, 1975:108). But in the former, the writer "leaves much for the reader to conjecture and imagine" (Irmscher, 1975:108), and things are often deliberately left unexplained. The literary text is "less explicitly contextualized and less linear" (Gajdusek, 1988:231) than other written texts. Its purpose--the writer's vision it exemplifies--is generally portrayed through a subtle and vivid use of language, and is therefore considerably more fluid and dynamic than the meaning of informational texts. Consequently, to make sense of a literary text, one constantly has to look for clues through a careful examination of the linguistic features it embodies. Only through a close interaction with the text, a personal response to its unique use of language, can its full purport be appreciated (Widdowson, 1975:75). Here the chief value of literary studies is manifestly underscored. In unravelling the possible meanings of a literary work, one engages in an exercise which invariably induces one to make inferences, formulate ideas, and analyze a text closely for evidence, all of which activities contribute to sharpening one's critical faculty.

More significantly, literary studies provide a good training ground for creative discourse. Indeed, recent schema theory has affirmed that reading is essentially "an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the

text" (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983:556). According to this theory, the text does not by itself carry meaning; rather, it provides directions for the reader to construct meanings from their cognitive frameworks (schemata) composed of previously acquired knowledge, feelings, personality and culture (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983:556). Fundamentally, this vigorous process characterizes all reading, irrespective of its purpose. Because it is more diffusive than ordinary discourse, literature urges the reader to adopt an even more interactive approach. In reading a literary work, one is often encouraged to recreate its meaning or the reality the writer attempts to represent through actively seeking evidence from the text and his own knowledge of the world. In this light, literary studies serves as a considerable aid to language learning: it deepens the learners' sensitivity to language through heightening their critical ability and creative power.

As a vehicle for fostering interpretative skill, literature has special relevance for translation students. Translation, according to Larson, is a craft which consists in the attempt to "discover the meaning of the source text and to use receptor language forms which express this meaning in a natural way" (1984:4). The definition implies that before translation can be attempted, the translator has first to understand the text itself. Hence, interpretation plays a crucial part in the translation process. Often the translator, as Duff maintains, has to "convey not only what is said but also what is implied" (1980:87). To do so, he needs to be sensitive to the "emotional colouring" of the language (Duff, 1980:87). Insofar as literature can serve the function of developing one's sensitivity to language, it is definitely an asset to the translation student. Moreover, far from a mere parasitic act upon the original text, translation is essentially creative. The translator is constantly required to take on the task of examining the words, structures, emotional and cultural contexts of the source text in order to discover its meaning, before recreating it in the natural form of the receptor language (Larson, 1984:3). As demonstrated, literary studies is an effective means of sharpening one's critical intellect and creative ingenuity. It is therefore highly pertinent to translation students who greatly depend upon their interpretative power to cope with their work.

To be an adept translator, one needs not only to be a proficient reader, but a skillful writer. Competence in writing is another benefit that translation students--and all language learners, for that matter--can seek through literature. Collie and Slater note that literature can familiarize students with "many features of the written language--the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas--which broaden and enrich their own writing skills" (1987:5). There is little doubt that the subject helps increase the students' linguistic knowledge (Povey, 1979; McKay, 1982; Sage, 1987). More importantly, however, it allows them the opportunity of putting such knowledge to use (McKay, 1982; Sage, 1987). Frequently, they are required to write about what they have read, to present in a critical essay what they know and understand about a literary text, be it a poem, a play, a novel or a short-story. In negotiating the possible meanings of a literary work, they commit themselves to the task of analyzing the text, selecting from it details and quotations as evidence to support their judgement (Spack, 1985:715). Often they undergo the vigorous process of "discovering, writing, rewriting, and editing" (Spack, 1985:715) to arrive at a coherent meaning.

Clearly, such an exercise is worthwhile, as it seeks to develop in them the ability to formulate and organize ideas, and to discover meaning for themselves through the use of language. Also, it allows them insights into the nature of a written communication--that "it is intended to be read, reflected on, and responded to" (Spack, 1985:720). An understanding of this interactive relationship between the writer and reader will induce them to write judiciously to achieve their desired effect. Recognizing that writing is primarily a means of communication, they would exercise more care in using and organizing language to shape the reader's interpretation of what they have written. Another advantage that can be gleaned from asking students to constantly write about the literary works they read is that they can acquire a firmer mastery of language. In an article that examines the use of literary texts in the teaching of reading and writing, Spack avers that numerous

examples can be cited of "students accurately using language that they had come into contact with purely through reading and writing about what they had read" (1985:21).

Proficiency in writing is obviously an important attribute of the translator. Apart from aiming for a sound interpretation of the source text, he seeks to express its meaning in a manner that is natural to the target language reader. Larson emphasizes that an effective translation is one that "does not sound like a translation" (1984:16). Rather, it appears as though it were written originally in the target language (Larson, 1984:16). To achieve this, a high awareness of the target language reader's needs and expectations, and a deftness in the target language are required. Here literary studies seem particularly instrumental to translation students, as it has proven to be an effective means of nurturing these qualities.

Literary studies also provide a good training ground for the skills of listening and speaking. The subject itself offers ample interesting topics for discussion, which encourage oral practice. And frequently, a literary text is read out in full or in parts by the teacher, or a record or tape version of it is played for the purposes of bringing out its rhythmic quality and stimulating interest. Thus, when used orally, literature can develop the students' listening ability (Moody, 1971:7). As a tool for developing oral and listening skills, literature does not seem to have much direct bearing on translation, since the translator does not greatly depend upon these two skills to perform their work. Nonetheless, speaking and listening are important aspects of language learning, and a proficiency in them surely contributes to an overall mastery of the language one studies. Though not obviously appropriate to translators, these two skills are particularly valuable to their counterparts in interpretation. Here perhaps it is necessary to draw a distinction between the translator and the interpreter. As Weber suggests, "the product of the translator is meant to be read, whereas that of the interpreter is meant to be listened to" (1984:3). The latter has the job of deciphering the message of the original speaker and rendering it orally in the natural form of the receptor language. To

accomplish this, he has to have a high level of competence in both the skills of listening and speaking.

It has been stressed that the translator's principal role is to understand the meaning of the source text, and to express it in the form of the target language. As Snell-Hornby postulates, since language is an integral part of culture, the translator needs not only to be proficient in two languages, but at home in two cultures (1988:42). In short, he has got to be bi-lingual and bi-cultural (Snell-Hornby, 1988:42). Although the latter cannot be easily achieved, it is a worthwhile goal to strive for, since translation, as will be demonstrated later, is in the main a cross-cultural event. One of the major aims of literary studies is to heighten the learners' cultural awareness. Here again the subject has its place in the context of language teaching for translation students. Marckwardt points out that the most effective way of learning a foreign culture is to observe "people in contexts, in situations where they act and react to each other in terms of their culture" (1978:49). Literary studies is certainly a convenient source of material for such a purpose. It offers a rich context in which the characters' actions, thoughts and emotions are displayed, all of which provide insights into the "codes and preoccupations" of the society they represent (Collie and Slater, 1987:4). (However, we have to be cautious when employing literature as an instrument for transmitting culture, a point which will be elaborated upon in the later part of this discussion.) In general, "cultural literacy" is vital to the translator. An adequate understanding of the source text invariably entails an understanding of the cultural background which conditions it. To translate the text effectively, the translator also needs to have a fair degree of familiarity with the target culture. More often than not, literal translation is infeasible. To ensure that his work appears comprehensible to the target reader, the translator seeks to recreate the meaning of the source text in the target language and its culture. In this light, literature is, to a large extent, what Snell-Hornby calls "an act of communication across cultural barriers" (1988:47). To achieve this end, the translator certainly needs to cultivate in

himself a high level of "cultural literacy," a quality that can be effectively developed through the study of literature.

The study of literature, however, is not merely concerned with skill acquisition. It serves the larger purpose of fostering in us a comprehensive outlook on life. What literary texts ultimately seek to portray--universal human values and the values of the culture from which they spring--contributes to our understanding of ourselves and our relations with our fellow beings (Marckwardt, 1978:6). Through literary studies, we learn to become more mature, liberal and responsible people. Its encouragement for sympathy and tolerance, its plea for open-mindedness, is surely an admirable educational aim that learners readily embrace. In view of this grand purpose, there is all the more reason for the inclusion of literature in the translation curriculum. Responsibility is indubitably a quality valued in all professions, including translation. Further, flexibility is one of the most important aptitudes of the translator. As Percival observes, it applies to all aspects of a translator's work, notably his attempt at recreating the meaning of the source text (1983:94). Through literature, the translation students can attain a growth in understanding, a flexibility of mind, which undoubtedly facilitates their efficient handling of their work.

That literature plays an essential role in language teaching for translation students is manifest. The key to its success hinges largely on the texts selected. Well-chosen texts will, of course, facilitate learning; ill-chosen ones, however, may alienate student interest, irrespective of the teacher's skill and experience. In determining what literary texts would work best in the translation classroom, one needs to be clear about the major purposes that translation students should seek to accomplish through reading literature. As stated earlier, these aims comprise (a) the enjoyment and appreciation of literary texts, (b) the refinement of language skills, (c) cultural enrichment, and (d) growth in understanding. Together they furnish a broad framework from which guidelines may be elicited for selecting appropriate texts.

Povey suggests that a "workable" literary text is one that the teacher himself or herself enjoys (1979:164). One of the chief attractions of literature is that it delights. Students will keenly feel this effect if the teachers enjoy the texts they are teaching. The latter's enthusiasm enables them to share readily with the former the joy they have derived from the literary works. However, teachers need to make sure that the texts they wish to read with their students generally appeal to them, taking into account their age, level, and general interest (Yorke, 1980:314). For instance, a stylistically intricate or culturally unfamiliar text may be more suitable material for senior classes than for freshmen classes. Marckwardt observes that "the translated works of authors who write in English can serve as an index of what kind of literature is of interest to the reading public in that country" (1978:43). Thus, teachers might like to include in their reading list for translation students texts which are available in translation. In this way, students will also have the opportunity of attempting contrastive analysis on their own, an extra effort to be encouraged, as it contributes to sharpening their critical faculty.

It is also important to select texts of an appropriate length. Texts that are too long, as Sage observes, might pose "the question of how to maintain students' interest" (1987:87). Of course, a common method of getting around it is the use of extracts. But we need to exercise great care before we can effectively use them to generate student response. Ample background information is required in order to put a particular extract in context; otherwise the students will not be able to relate it to the work as a whole, and thus miss its meaning. Even so, the students will not be able to appreciate thoroughly the figurative resonance of the text, as they have not read it in full. Thus, if our translation students are to derive any interest from their reading, they should, wherever possible, be encouraged to work with the full text. If a poem that we intend to choose happens to be too long, we can choose a few shorter poems by the same writer instead. In any case, the teacher would have to decide on what the right length is, on the basis of his or her experience, judgement, and the general language proficiency level of his or her class.

Choosing texts that stimulate interest is, of course, a key criterion for text selection. Of equal importance, however, is the choice of texts that lend themselves to student discussion and personal experience (Brumfit, 1986:32). This principle has to be observed, if we are to fulfill the aim of raising the translation students' language proficiency. Unless they take an active interactive role in making sense of the text and its language, either through group discussion or individual exploration, they are not fully utilizing the opportunity advanced by the subject for language learning. To encourage group discussion and individual response, texts with themes that students can identify should be chosen (McKay, 1982:532). Different themes will, of course, have different degrees of popularity at different levels. For example, a work like Romeo and Juliet, with its theme of youthful passions, would have wide appeal among college juniors, whereas the adult or mature students would probably be more able to appreciate the problem of aging as presented in a work such as King Lear. In any event, texts with appropriate themes will serve to arouse more student response, a crucial step in the process of language learning through literature.

It has already been said that stylistically intricate texts may not be entirely suitable for students at every level. But this does not mean that they should altogether be avoided. In fact, texts with a moderate degree of stylistic difficulty may well suit our purpose of developing the translation students' language learning capacity. Povey notes that wrestling with somewhat complicated texts necessitates the language learners to "read with careful comprehension and attention to detail" (1979:165). Such a technique is exactly what we, too, wish to instill in our translation students.

There is also the question of the use of modern or pre-modern texts. Many ESL writers emphasize that the former are more easily accessible to students in terms of both language and culture (Adeyanju, 1978; Marckwardt, 1978; Sowden, 1986; Sage, 1987), and they therefore should occupy a large portion of our own anthology for students. While this observation is by and large true,

one need not confine oneself to rigidly choosing contemporary literary material. Here again, it is useful to quote Povey:

...even here many have discovered that the most unexpected and improbable texts are enthusiastically received because of some fancied association with students' experience.... There is no reason not to experiment. After all, some societies in which a teacher might be working may be a lot closer to Elizabethan England, nineteenth century America or even Classical Greece than present-day California and New York (1979:164).

Doubtlessly many themes can be found in the "older" literary texts, some of which our students could readily identify. Moreover, the language of these texts is not necessarily more difficult than that of contemporary ones. In fact, a good deal of modern writers--Eliot, Faulkner, Joyce, to name a few--would appear to many of our students to be stylistically obscure. Thus, if carefully chosen, pre-modern texts can stimulate student response as well as, if not better than, their modern counterparts. There is also an extra benefit for translation students to have a more balanced reading list containing both traditional and contemporary materials: it offers them a broader picture of the cultural and socio-historical background of the country whose language they are learning.

This leads us to the next major criterion for text selection--that the texts chosen should be "culturally significant" (Adeyanju, 1978; Sage, 1987). As indicated earlier, the issue of employing literature as a transmitter of culture is tricky, and one needs to be cautious when applying this principle in text selection. Regardless of what approach they take--historical, genre or topical--most literature teachers are inclined to include in their syllabus the "established" authors and canons, which run the gamut of the writer of Beowulf, Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Jacobean, the Metaphysicals, the

Cavaliers, the Augustans, the Romantics, the Victorians, the Moderns, etc. These authors and canons are chosen partly because they are the basis on which the teachers' academic training is found, and partly because they are often deemed highly representative of the culture in which they are embedded. Thus conveniently, these household names find their way into both the native and non-native curricula. But if we are to teach translation students about a foreign culture through literature, we need to be mindful of how and what kind of culture is represented by the texts chosen. There are good reasons to believe that these "established" literary works are basically western-biased and class-biased. Their authors were, to a great extent, patronized by established institutions like the court, the royalty, their own privileged background, and the educational institutions. Further, the world views which undergird their works were ones of a chain, an organic order, where everyone should basically be content with his own lot, and in the case of the Romantics and Moderns, ones of Nature and Artistic Order, where people could escape from the world. It behooves the existing power structure to endorse these works because they support the status quo or escaping from it--in short, political conformity and inertia. One may argue that there are still plenty of realist writers, say Dickens and Norris on both sides of the Atlantic, who attempt to satirize and criticize the existing social order. Granted this, the problem nonetheless remains: the realistic vision exemplified by these writers is only one representation of the world, not the one and only real representation of the world. So, what are the unconscious perimeters of that representation unbeknownst to the authors themselves? What is left unrepresented? These are questions that one might go on asking. The following comments by Thiong'o on the effect of teaching solely "great" western writers to Kenyan children are strikingly revealing:

Our children are made to look, analyze, and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans. Worse still, these children are confronted with a distorted image of themselves and of their history as reflected and interpreted in European imperialist literature. They see

how Prospero sees Caliban and not how Caliban sees Prospero; how Crusoe discovers and remakes Man Friday in Crusoe's image, but never how Friday views himself and his heroic struggles against centuries of Crusoe's exploitation and oppression (1986:225).

Hence, we must not muffle the minority voices of the source culture that would otherwise be neglected, should the traditional great books of the world curriculum be insisted upon. These voices might be writers of black literature, hispanic literature, women literature, etc., whose world views are vastly different from those of traditional established writers. A more progressive curriculum with the inclusion of these marginal writers, their works, and the representations of culture, is ultimately worthwhile. Since many translation students originate from either the developing or underdeveloped countries, historically exploited by the west, it is sad and ironic that they become uncritical receptacles of those established cultural representations that instill political acceptance, conformity and inertia. They are the ones who can least afford to be co-opted by them. On a more general level, an "inclusive" literature curriculum would make the subject all the more valid to translation students. On the one hand, such a program expressly serves the purpose of deepening their cultural awareness. On the other hand, by presenting authors with diverse and perhaps conflicting points of view, it sheds light on the complexity of human experience, thereby encouraging us to approach our problems with greater patience and our relations with our fellow beings with more understanding and tolerance. In this way, the ultimate aim that we wish to accomplish--that of fostering in the students a mature, comprehensive outlook on life-- would be accomplished.

Indisputably, literature is a worthwhile subject which deserves a lasting place in the curriculum of language teaching for translation students.

Predominantly, it provides us with much pleasure and enjoyment. It is also a useful tool for developing language skills and transmitting culture. Most significantly, it allows us insight into the human world, contributing to our

growth in understanding. Altogether, these aims form the basis on which we formulate broad criteria for selecting texts, a crucial step towards making literature work effectively among students. In our search for appropriate texts, we constantly need to exercise our own judgement and to experiment. In general, texts chosen should be culturally significant, and are likely to arouse students' interest, and encourage discussion and students' personal response. Texts that fulfill these criteria will surely facilitate effective teaching in the literature classroom for translation students.

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