

# Translators in schools

## Ulrike Nichols reports on a stimulating professional development day designed to equip translators with the skills to run workshops in schools



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Tuesday 26 November, London. The Free Word Centre. 36 translators, language teachers and writers came together to explore how to promote language learning in UK primary and secondary schools. This was the first workshop in a series, organised by Robina Pelham Burn of the Stephen Spender Trust.

To begin, we were divided into three groups and Sam Holmes showed us 'translations gone wrong', warming up the room with laughter and the reminder that language is embedded in culture. Then Sam's fellow course leader Sarah Ardizzone played music while showing us the illustrations from a children's book: *Little Red Riding Hood*. This story offered seemingly endless opportunities. We found words for the images and ultimately wrote out the story before looking at the French original. While we tried to find fitting English translations, we discussed coherence, flow, register, and style. It became clear that the way *Little Red Riding Hood* and the wolf are talking to each other marks a choice: of register, manners, and custom. Not a minute passed without an engaged discussion and heated debates about terminology and style.

Suddenly, Sam reminded us that we might be doing this in a school environment and shook everything up with a game of Taboo: describe a term, without using the words you would usually use to do so. We had to shift our focus away from the story and towards vocabulary building, while playing with language yet again.

Sam then discussed teaching objectives while Sarah approached this topic from seven perspectives: dubbing, subtitling, storyboarding,

re-assigning the roles of the characters, mime, chorus versus individual speech, and multilingualism. Having had no experience in a primary-school setting, I found Sam's approach and differentiation between the objective and the outcome when planning a workshop particularly useful. We may want children to become interested in languages, but the result of a workshop should be something demonstrable. In other words, our goal might be for children to develop a new skill or enhance an existing one, while the outcome would be the hands-on work they did

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to achieve this objective. Recalling my own time at school, where I learned lists of vocabulary and produced literary and probably meaningless translations, the idea that playing with words could be rewarded is extraordinary. And yet, we were rewarded then and there ourselves. All of us produced translations of the story from French into English, regardless of our working languages.

### Engaging interest

In the afternoon, we tackled the issue of classroom management. What were our fears? What were our negative experiences? Using role play, we discussed some behavioural strategies we could employ to be masters and commanders in tricky

situations. I became aware how scary the life of a teacher can be but also that we have a distinct asset: as strangers in the room, we have the advantage of having something to offer that may excite the children's curiosity. Once we have caught their attention, they will listen to us. (At least in theory.)

Towards the end of the afternoon it was our turn to actively engage again. As preparation, we had been asked to bring a children's book that we would want to use in our own version of this workshop with children from a school in London. We paired up, and the books everybody had brought were beautiful. We had chosen texts that could draw on the children's knowledge of common literary themes (dragons, detectives) but simultaneously also point to differences that might be questionable (stereotypes of other countries).

### Panel discussion

We parted after a very intriguing panel discussion with four experts on bringing translation into schools: Nick Mair, Head of MFL at Dulwich College, Chair of the Independent Schools Modern Languages Association and Chair of the Speak to the Future campaign; Emma Langley, co-founder and publisher at independent children's publishing house Phoenix Yard Books and a Master's student in Education at Cambridge University; Vicky Macleroy, lecturer in secondary English with media and drama at Goldsmiths; and Canan Marasligil, a writer, literary translator, editor and screenwriter. They answered our questions on payment, approaching schools, knowing the curriculum, co-operating with teachers, bringing in collaborating artists, and how to be prepared and flexible at the same time. As challenging as it all sounded, they illustrated that it is not only possible but also very rewarding.

For that reason I am looking forward to part two in January: putting ourselves to the test and conducting a workshop with school children. 