

The youth of today

Charlotte Ryland of the Stephen Spender Trust explains the organisation's work in promoting creative translation in the classroom

Anyone familiar with the modern foreign languages (MFL) curriculum in UK schools will know that translation is often presented as a dry, inauthentic and mechanical exercise. Teachers tend to be averse to it because it is assessed very inflexibly, and feel that they are trying to second-guess mark schemes rather than share the experience of mediating between languages.

However, a survey of 600 MFL teachers in the UK last year found that the majority felt that the most important outcome of their work was 'students' knowledge of other cultures and a positive, tolerant attitude towards these – what might be termed "intercultural understanding". Yet meaningful and rich engagement with culture has been gradually eroded from curricula over recent decades, with the latest proposals for a new GCSE risking further attrition. It is hard not to connect that cultural paucity with the massive decline in the number of MFL learners in recent decades. At the Stephen Spender Trust and its sister organisation, the Translation Exchange, we have faith in the power of culture to reinvigorate a dying subject.

Young language detectives

For over 10 years the Stephen Spender Trust has been developing education programmes that highlight the creativity inherent in translation, beginning with our 'Translation Nation' and 'Translators in Schools' initiatives. These programmes are linked to our national prize for poetry translation, which last year engaged 1,000 under-18s in translating poetry into English. We are now scaling up our work, embedding creative translation into MFL and English classes across the UK through teacher-translator partnerships, resources and training.

We work with professional translators to bring picture books, poems, graphic novels and prose in multiple languages into classrooms. By making these texts accessible and interactive, creative translation opens up new worlds to whole classes of young people from primary age upwards. Recognising that linguists are not walking dictionaries, we foster an ethos of exploration and discovery – participants in our workshops are 'language detectives', using glossaries and other resources to decode the text. The final stage of any translation activity is creative writing, from producing a polished literary translation to writing one's own poem or picture book that draws on similar themes to the original.

Rather than learning phrases that might benefit them on future trips abroad, or being told that 'having a language' will enhance

their career prospects and increase their earning power, these young translators have a rich and exciting experience in the here and now. They decode each phrase in the original language because they want to find out what it means and then to make it their own. It's meaningful, and they enjoy doing it.

Making the most of multilingual identities

A further, and crucial, benefit of creative translation is its scope for validating multilingual identities. There are over one million speakers of 'English as an additional language' (EAL) in UK schools today, a number which has risen hugely while those learning a 'modern foreign language' have plummeted. Built into the structure of our creative translation workshops are opportunities for recognising and celebrating the languages present in the classroom. This might be as simple as our 'multilingual monsters' starter activity, encouraging everyone to label the body parts of a monster with words from as many different languages as they can. We're always keen to include English slang too, showing that even when children code-switch as they move between the classroom and the playground, they are translating, too. Linked in with this, the 'Spotlight' strand of the Stephen Spender Prize focuses on one community language each year.

Surviving the pandemic

Creative translation enables young people to have a meaningful, authentic cultural experience in another language. And that is particularly welcome at this time of closed borders and social isolation. School trips are off limits, and exchanges were in major decline even before Covid, so the opportunity to experience cultures through their texts, to meet translators and international authors virtually, suddenly becomes a line to the outside world. 

These young translators have a rich and exciting experience in the here and now

To find out more, please visit www.stephen-spender.org. If you'd like to get involved with our education work, please email stacie@stephen-spender.org.



Charlotte Ryland is director of the Stephen Spender Trust and founding director of the Queen's College Translation Exchange (Oxford), organisations promoting language-learning, multilingualism and translation. She co-founded the Future of Languages forum, which is developing a vision for teaching and learning languages in the UK.