Lesson Plan:
Teaching Translation with the Public Domain

by Catherine Addington

Audience

While advanced or professional translators may translate from their native language(s) into learned languages, it is generally considered best practice to translate from learned languages into one's native language(s), especially at the introductory level. This concept, known as the "mother tongue principle" or the "native speaker principle," originated in the **Nairobi UNESCO Declaration of 1976**:

> (d) a translator should, as far as possible, translate into his own mother tongue or into a language of which he or she has a mastery equal to that of his or her mother tongue.

However, it is not a hard-and-fast rule and may be disregarded at instructor discretion. Nevertheless, since the below lesson plan uses an English source text, it is ideal for implementation in a classroom where English is the students' target language. To use this lesson plan in a classroom where English is the students' native language, the instructor should choose a target-language public-domain text to replace "Plowmen." Such texts can be found by searching by language in collections such as **Project Gutenberg**, **Archive.org**, or **Wikisource**. Alternatively, allowing students to choose their own source text by identifying, selecting, and voting on works in these collections would be an excellent way to encourage familiarity with these resources.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- identify and analyze elements of rhetorical style (such as rhyme, meter, wordplay, and diction) in the source-language text
- articulate their own principles of decision-making when translating to the target language, as well as identify those of their peers
- understand and exercise their legal rights to work with public-domain materials as a translator
- make informed decisions about their own status as copyright holders

Materials

- Copies of the source-language text for each student
  Sample: "Plowmen," from *New Hampshire* by Robert Frost, 1923:

  > A plow, they say, to plow the snow.
  > They cannot mean to plant it, no—
  > Unless in bitterness to mock
  > At having cultivated rock.

- Chalkboard, whiteboard, or other display
- Student access to online or print dictionaries to facilitate the translation

Scope

- Approximately 50 minutes but can be scaled up or down by alternating length of source text, adding exercises, or varying length of workshop aspect
- Ideal for a group of 20 students or fewer

Lesson Plan

Public Domain: Know Your Rights

1. Ask students what they know about copyright and the public domain. Collectively make a list on the board of the types of works that can be in the public domain (books, film, music, etc). Then make a list of the types of things you can do with public domain works (adapt, perform, publish, profit, etc).
2. If translation is not suggested by students, make sure to add it. For a longer lesson, share information about securing translation rights from PEN America's **Translation FAQs**. Note the section on public-domain texts being free to translate without permission.
3. If working with "Plowmen," share context about the 1923 corpus and Public Domain Day 2019 with students (see **Duke Center for the Study of the Public Domain**).

Analyze Source-Language Poem

1. Ask students to read the entire poem silently and aloud. Provide visual confirmation on a presentation slide or on the board that reading the entire poem is the first step when translating. (Many novice translators will begin translating line-by-line before reading the entire work!)
2. Have students briefly research the poet, collection, and any relevant context, again noting that research is the second step when translating. For "Plowmen," a quick Wikipedia scan is sufficient—check in with students and make sure they are aware of the New Hampshire setting of the poem.
3. Think-pair-share: ask students to close-read the poem individually, agaian noting that critical analysis is the third step when translating. Prompt students to prepare a paraphrase of the poem's meaning and a list of the rhetorical devices involved. Depending on the students' experience with studying poetry, you might prompt more specific analysis: what kind of meter does the poem have? What kind of words does it use? Does it rhyme? After having students check their comprehension and analysis in pairs, open it up to class discussion, making a list of rhetorical features on the board.
4. Possible elements include rhyme (consonant), meter (iambic tetrameter), wordplay (plowing earth, plowing snow), diction, and tone.
5. Ensure students understand the poem's basic message: it's a comical poem based on the shared use of "plow" for plowing the earth (digging deep and planting) and plowing snow (clearing it away). Context comes in handy here: New Hampshire soil is rocky, so you wouldn't plant snow in it except as a joke.
6. Ask students to individually rank the features by importance, which will become their guiding principles for translation. (Establishing these principles is the fourth step.) Which elements are essential for the translation? Again, more specific questions may be necessary: is the word "plow" used for both earth and snow in the target language? How important is this to the translation? Knowing that this poem is a joke about rocky New Hampshire soil, is it permissible or important to preserve a certain level of localness / foreignness in the translation? What is most important to the student to preserve, and what are they willing to sacrifice?

Translate Poem to Target Language

1. Have students draft translations individually, using dictionaries (and perhaps even rhyming dictionaries) as necessary. Then workshop in pairs.
2. Ask students to append a brief translator's note to introduce their translations, articulating the decision-making principles they used to complete it. Since this poem is only four lines, it could be as short as one sentence.

Compare (and Publish) Translations

- Option 1 (in-class): Ask students to share observations from their workshop. What similar or different priorities did their classmates have? How similar or different were the resulting translations? Have a few sample students read their translations aloud and discuss as a class how the student's translation principles are reflected in their work.
- Option 2 (homework): Ask students to publish their translations and translator's notes on a shared intranet, blog, or ePortfolio, or in a class zine. In addition to publishing their translations, ask students to choose a Creative Commons license to append to their work and to justify their decision regarding their own translation's copyright status. Then have students read and reflect on their peers' translations, noting how their principles were reflected in their work.

Review Translation Steps

Summarize and document the basic steps of translation as demonstrated above:

1. Read the entire work to be translated.
2. Research the work's author, publishing information, and historical context.
3. Critically analyze the work, identifying important qualities of the work.
4. Rank the qualities of the work by importance, creating a set of guidelines for the translation.
5. Translate, adjusting the principles as necessary, gathering feedback from others, and revising.
6. When the translation is complete, append a translator's note explaining the decisions and principles behind the translation.
7. Before publishing, choose the copyright status of the translation and include the appropriate license and documentation.

Possibilities for Extension

- Divide the class into two halves and give them two different source texts. After running through the workshop as above, ask students to switch translations with a classmate who worked on the opposite text. Have them reverse-translate back to the source language, then compare with the actual source. Finish by reflecting on the similarities and differences: what might be the contributing causes to each? (e.g.: If vocabulary was largely stable, is that a reflection of the source text's diction? If rhyme was lost or gained, what does that say about the translator's priorities?)
- Expand to texts beyond "Plowmen," empowering students to choose their own materials. Encourage them to look for public-domain materials that have different stylistic priorities, historical context, or genre conventions.
- If teaching students with a beginner or intermediate grasp of the source language, refer them to public-domain language-learning materials, such as those at **FSILanguageCourses.net**, **Yojik**, and **LiveLingua**.

License

Credits

This lesson plan was written by **Catherine Addington**, borrowing from observations of translation instructors **Gustavo Pellón**, **Nieves García Prados**, **Alexa Jeffress**, and **Melissa Frost**. Public-domain language-learning materials were recommended by **Ivan Plis**.

This document was composed in **Ulysses** using **Brian's Simple PDF Style**.