

## Creative Translation in Educational Contexts in the 2020s

### Findings and Recommendations

#### Key Findings

- ❖ **Creative translation** is a practice that goes far beyond a straight-forward linguistic exercise. It offers exciting possibilities to explore creativity and critical thinking in the foreign language, English language, and literature classrooms.
- ❖ **Increasing standardisation** of curricula and assessment as well as restrictions on permitted topics of study or discussion in the education systems of the United Kingdom and the United States may limit opportunities to bring creative translation into the classroom. However, these constraints may also be viewed as a chance for cultural organisations to shape curriculum development.
- ❖ Creative translation is a powerful tool for **social justice**.
- ❖ Developing targeted, flexible, and continued **support for teachers** will allow them to engage with creative translation more readily.

#### Background

In January 2019, the Queen's College Translation Exchange (QTE) and Stephen Spender Trust (SST) held a forum for researchers and practitioners of "creative translation in the classroom" and foreign languages teachers. As well as being the name of one of SST's core programmes, the phrase "creative translation in the classroom" was used during the forum and in the associated report to describe a range of initiatives that use translation as a tool for reading world literature, developing self-expression, and provoking critical reflection. Creative translation, it was affirmed, could offer a raft of **cross-curricular and social benefits** to young people. The group at the forum agreed that one of creative translation's roles was to raise the profile of translation as an activity. The report concluded with several recommendations suggested by attendees, including targeting specific age groups, working with teacher training courses, and combining creative translation with multilingual performance.

Building on this event, QTE and SST worked together to research the impact of their creative translation programmes from 2020 onwards, supported by the John Fell Fund and The Queen's College, both University of Oxford. The project culminated in an online symposium in March 2022. This current report discusses the findings and recommendations that emerged from the symposium, with the view to establishing connections between organisations, teachers, and researchers, further developing the field of creative translation, and mapping out practical steps and future possibilities.

The report begins by outlining the format of the symposium, which took place in March 2023, and introducing the panellists. Next, we discuss in turn four themes that emerged

across the symposium: 1. Definition and Uses of Creative Translation; 2. Rise of Standardisation; 3. Social Justice; 4. Resourcing and Upskilling Teachers. Each thematic section includes a list of recommendations. The report concludes with an overview of the benefits of creative translation.

### **Symposium Format**

On 2 March 2022, the symposium ‘Creative Translation in Educational Contexts in the 2020s’ drew together 9 panellists who all work to bring creative translation to young people, including representatives from the main programmes in the UK and US. The symposium was divided into three panels, which grouped together specialists in three areas.

Panel 1: Research-Informed Practice in the UK context with Stacie Allan (SA — SST), Katrina Barnes (KB — secondary school languages teacher and researcher), and Gitanjali Patel (GP — Shadow Heroes; written statement). Chaired by Holly Langstaff (QTE).

Panel 2: Creative Translation Practice the United States with Eric Fishman (EF — educator and translator), Mark Hauber (MH — Centre for the Art of Translation [CAT]), and Nadia Kalman (NK — WWB Campus). Chaired by Katrina Barnes.

Panel 3: The Role of Research in Creative Translation with Clémentine Beauvais (CB — University of York), Sonia Colina (SC — University of Arizona), and Maria González-Davies (MGD — University Ramon Llull, Barcelona). Chaired by Stacie Allan.

Each panellist began by presenting a five-minute overview of their work and its aims, identifying any challenges and potential solutions, and outlining their ideal vision for using creative translation in educational contexts. The panel chair then led a discussion with the panellists that included questions from the audience.

The symposium focused on the practical considerations and the potential for delivering creative translation activities, with a particular eye to current events, including the Covid-19 pandemic, educational policy reforms in different countries, and the socio-political climate (e.g. Black Lives Matter, Brexit). The panellists discussed individual successes and identified where the main challenges lie before considering how to increase the impact of their work on young people and where creativity sits within the field of translation studies.

### **Emerging themes**

Across the three panels, the discussions addressed the significant potential for creative translation, the challenges of introducing the practice into different educational contexts, and strategies for overcoming barriers or working within existing constraints. Notably, each panellist spoke about how creative translation could open many other doors, and how it went beyond a purely linguistic exercise to draw out students’ creative potential and provoke critical reflection amongst them.

## 1. Definition and Uses of Creative Translation

All panellists presented creative translation as a flexible and expansive practice in terms of application and scope, which could bring a range of holistic benefits to young people. In particular, when employed in contextualised and purposeful ways, translation provided a **springboard for creativity and critical thinking**. Whilst the potential for introducing creative translation in a diverse range of subject areas, from philosophy to dance, was mentioned, the discussions largely focused on its inclusion in the foreign language acquisition or English language and literature classrooms.

SC and MGD spoke about the evolving place of translation within foreign language teaching pedagogy and practice. A lack of common understanding between the fields of translation and language teaching meant that translation was previously considered almost a “dirty word” (SC) in research on foreign language education. However, the benefits of employing translation as a learning tool are increasingly being recognised. MGD emphasised the need to consider translation as a form of **real-world communication**, rather than employing it to test knowledge, e.g. translating decontextualised sentences as part of an exam. Instead, students should be aware that translingualing (translation, code switching) occurs naturally in everyday life. Introducing translation in this way may benefit other areas, such as problem-solving, managing uncertainty, and collaboration. SC summed up that **translation is for everybody**: by helping society understand how languages work, it can therefore help society understand others better.

KB spoke of her direct experience introducing creative translation into the classroom at a secondary school in England. Her research found that it provided additional motivation for young people to study languages, as it transformed languages **from a knowledge-based to a skills-based** subject that included critical thinking and intercultural communicative competence. Creative translation also offers opportunities for performance and entering competitions, such as the annual Stephen Spender Prize, which were found to increase motivation and give learning languages an immediate and recognisable purpose. SA remarked that translation in itself brings meaningful, purposeful, and engaging content into the classroom. Moreover, translation had a positive impact on student’s broader learning experience. For KB, the **tolerance of ambiguity** inherent to translation could go some way to undoing the fear amongst students of getting something wrong, whilst SA said that finding new ways of saying things can be empowering. Both reflect Anthony Pym’s idea of there being more than one viable text, mentioned by MGD. Creative translation thus has the potential for foreign language learners to increase their understanding of the communicative functions of language.

Other panellists spoke about how translation builds pupil’s literacy and literary analysis skills and paves the way to develop broader benefits, such as **accessing diverse cultural content and critical thinking**. CB, who focuses on literary education with young children including pre-readers, has observed that experiential understanding of complex concepts (e.g. poetics, translation theory) emerge in a more intuitive way through translation than through creative writing workshops. Translation activities also provide less rigidity than grammar exercises and more rigour than creative writing. MH outlined how CAT’s Poetry Inside Out (PIO) programme has developed ‘Fundamentals’ (poetry translation, talking and listening, collaboration) and ‘Key Practices’ (reading aloud, focus on depth rather than breadth, deep

engagement with the work, time for presenting and defending work, repetition) in order to create a cross-cultural literacy curriculum. NK detailed how WWB Campus connects students and educators to eye-opening contemporary literature from across the globe by offering different approaches to analysing texts and their cultural contexts. GP demonstrated how these approaches can lead to critical reflection, describing translation as “the perfect medium through which to engage in questions of representation, self-expression, colonial history and the power of language since it is a site of plurality and form of cultural mediation, which allows us to both examine the world and our position within it”. With elementary school students, EF develops family collaboration projects based on translating texts from heritage languages. The questions that these projects raise situate translation within **histories of oppression** in the US (e.g. that of indigenous people).

### Recommendations

- ❖ To make the most of its potential benefits, translation should always be employed in contextualised and purposeful ways that go beyond a purely linguistic exercise.

## 2. Rise of Standardisation

Panellists who work both in the UK and US noted how increasing standardisation of the curriculum taught in schools and of assessment methods could pose a barrier to integrating creative translation into educational contexts. Moreover, creative translation practice itself seems **resistant to producing systematised outcomes**. Whilst this may go against the trend of standardisation, the absence of a predetermined output creates an **experimental space in which students can thrive**.

In the UK, national curricula are in place across the four nations. Speaking specifically about the context of England, SA relayed the practical difficulties, including cost and timing, of delivering activities to schools that do not directly address the content of the national curriculum and how school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic have sharpened them. As a former teacher in a secondary school, KB spoke of the need to justify to the wider department any curriculum time spent on creative translation activities, rather than exam preparations, and any extended time spent working in English. This ‘obsession’ with standardised assessment hampered the ability to inspire students, so KB used the passages that appeared in textbooks as the basis for creative translation activities, thereby incorporating **a more expansive approach to language teaching ‘by stealth’**.

The US-based panellists presented an educational context where the literacy curriculum was increasingly becoming standardised through the Common Core State Standards Initiative, standardised assessment was being introduced, and the surveillance of teachers was becoming common. Working within this context, EF looks for **cracks in the curricula** where there might be room for interpretation or space to bring in a critical lens through translation practice. A common curriculum, as MH acknowledged, means that teachers are asked to do so many different things, which, in turn, makes convincing them

why creative translation is a productive activity more challenging. Nevertheless, MH stated that by developing resources that adhered to national standards, organisations had the chance to **shape the curriculum taught in schools**.

In stark contrast to the UK and the US, MGD presented the case of Spain where a plurilingual approach is currently being implemented nationally. Though teachers and parents may at first be reluctant to support plurilingualism, MGD emphasised how it better reflected the fact that language practices are always contextualised and situated. In these methods, outcomes cannot be predicted but are entirely dependent on the contexts and on the school. CB echoes the desire to move away from the systemisation or predictability of outcomes. Within CB's research, subjects have been observed to emerge in an unpredictable way. Whilst acknowledging that a lack of predefined outcomes might be seen as a limitation by bodies funding education research, CB suggests that **creative translation's unpredictability should be seen as a strength**.

### Recommendations

- ❖ To make integration easier, teachers could draw on existing materials (e.g. textbooks) to find source texts or use set texts for creative translation activities.
- ❖ By aligning with national standards, organisations could contribute to shaping what is taught in schools.
- ❖ Creative translation practitioners should not seek to predefine all outcomes for their activities, but rather offer space in which some outcomes emerge organically.

### **3. Social Justice**

Many of the panellists asserted that creative translation provided a powerful tool for social justice, understood broadly as the **manifestation of fairness within the classroom environment**. For some participants, this involved, as an initial step, moving away from Eurocentric sources and spotlighting works and languages from across the world. For others, this could take the shape of critical reflection on the power dynamics between languages within a given society.

KB spoke about creative translation's ability to guide students towards curiosity, which could lead to an **acceptance of difference**. Whilst creative translation no doubt inspired a greater interest in languages amongst former students, KB believes its true potential lies in provoking much wider discussion as a multi-faceted tool for achieving social justice rather than exam results. SA spoke about how SST has worked with its creative translation practitioners to move away from using predominantly Eurocentric texts, particularly in Spanish or French translation workshops. Evaluation of SST's programmes has shown that this shift **increases students' knowledge about where languages are spoken and how historical events shaped the distribution of languages across the world**.

Working into English, using glossaries, and making multilingual students the experts in the classroom can bring the languages spoken in the school community into the classroom. For

MGD, this reflects our **plurilingual reality** and offers the potential to reflect the linguistic ecology of classrooms. SC also discussed how translation activities could encourage creativity amongst multilingual students in particular, and **support them to become more linguistically aware by understanding the value of multilingualism to society and within the classroom**. Whilst recognising its exciting potential, it was acknowledged that delivering multilingual activities requires additional time and space as well as a more flexible approach.

Many panellists spoke of the potential for discussing difficult topics through the medium of translation. GP's organisation Shadow Heroes explicitly uses translation to explore issues of representation, self-expression, colonial history and the power of language. Similarly, EF's class projects specifically address critical bilingualism and critical monolingualism by questioning immigrants' historical assimilation into whiteness and the accompanying loss of heritage languages. These projects draw on the linguistic competencies of students, their families, and the wider community to reflect on **questions of identity and power**. Aiming for social justice, however, is not straightforward or without controversy. EF mentioned the movement and counter movements for teaching ethnic studies in the US and how adding a critical lens to translation activities may conflict with the law in certain States. NK also mentioned how working in a hierarchical system can lead to fears amongst teachers, given the political climate. Therefore, adequate support for delivering these creative translation activities is vital.

### Recommendations

- ❖ Creative translation activities could, where possible, involve multiple languages to reflect our linguistically complex reality and affirm the identities of multilingual students.
- ❖ Organisations could support teachers to lead discussions about difficult subjects that emerge from translation activities.

## **4. Resourcing and Upskilling Teachers**

With a consensus amongst participants that regular interventions over time would reap the most benefits, **teachers were identified as playing a major role in the delivery of creative translation activities**. For example, SA proposed that teachers could act as advocates of the holistic benefits of creative translation as a means of supporting overall educational goals. For EF too, student- and teacher-driven initiatives have more meaningful impact. However, many of the participants recognised that teachers often lack the knowledge, confidence, or language skills to deliver these types of activities in spite of the clear need, as MH articulated, for diverse teaching materials to reflect an increasingly diverse student body. Teacher training, as NK stated, does not prepare teachers to engage with world literature.

The panels discussed what resources could be made available to teachers. KB identified that finding suitable texts often takes time, so SST's authentic text database, as well as having a glossary available, was a big help. When setting up WWB Campus, NK recognised that a one-

size-fits-all approach of providing a single lesson plan would not work. Instead, WWB Campus publishes texts accompanied by a raft of support materials, including different types of media (films, music, interviews). In addition, the readings are short, a good match for normally taught texts, and connect with the Common Core Standards, which helps make the rewards for engaging with the material palpable. MH spoke about CAT's provision of a 'Teacher's Toolbox' and 'Poem Pages' (biography, glossary, phrase-by-phrase and 'make it flow' workbook) that teachers can use to take students through the process of translation. CB suggested that one simple way of integrating creative translation would be as an alternative task to creative writing, which fools students into thinking it's the easier option at the same time. Whilst these initiatives provide a rewarding way of enriching students' learning, the time and effort of implementing and delivering them cannot be denied.

**Connecting with likeminded teachers is important.** KB found this much-needed community of practice and support through SST.

To have the most impact, CS stated that **ideally teachers should be trained in college or through professional development schemes** to design these activities, which, in turn, would create a trickle-down effect. MGD spoke about a major research project integrating these methods based around a four-phase reflective cycle.<sup>1</sup> The intervention begins with a focus group with teachers to challenge their own beliefs about translation. Through this process, teachers change their mindset thanks to the support of the research team. This intervention can be successfully integrated as an additional activity or parallel project. On a smaller scale, MH stated that the role of organisations should be to **demystify these practices**, since poetry and translation can be uncharted territory for some teachers. CAT provides professional development to teachers to familiarise them with the role of creative translation and how to integrate it into their subject matter. Similarly, SST runs an annual series of interactive webinars for teachers, each of which includes dedicated time for discussion and peer support.

### Recommendations

- ❖ Organisations should provide teachers with a variety of materials (contextual information, approaches, lesson plans, extension exercises) alongside relevant and diverse texts to support the integration of creative translation into individual teaching practices.
- ❖ Organisations could target trainee teachers to develop their creative translation competencies in the early stages of their career and, thereafter, integrate them into their pedagogical practices.
- ❖ Organisations should consider how to foster a community of practitioners amongst teachers engaging in creative translation, as a means of providing peer support.

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<sup>1</sup> González-Davies, Maria & David Soler-Ortínez. 2020. Use of translation and plurilingual practices in language learning: A formative intervention model. *Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts* 7 (1).



## **Key Benefits of Creative Translation**

- ❖ By helping society understand how languages work, translation can help society understand others better.
- ❖ Translation brings meaningful, purposeful, and engaging content and literature from across the world into the classroom.
- ❖ Creative translation can increase motivation for learning languages by giving them an immediate and recognisable purpose.
- ❖ Translation can be a powerful tool to explore issues of representation, self-expression, colonial history and the power of language.
- ❖ Translation activities can encourage creativity amongst multilingual students and support them to understand the value of multilingualism.

*This report was prepared by Dr Stacie Allan for the Queen's College Translation Exchange, as part of the Creative Translation in the Classroom project funded by the John Fell Fund and The Queen's College, Oxford.*

*For more information about creative translation in education, see [www.stephen-spender.org](http://www.stephen-spender.org) and [www.queens.ox.ac.uk/translation-exchange](http://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/translation-exchange)*

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