

The Role of Translation in Teaching English Literature

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Abstract

Thapa proposes a new mode of teaching English literature giving priority to the art of translation. He suggests that translation could be used as a creative strategy for teaching in the colleges and the universities. He says that teaching literature through the mode of translation can actually provide a fresh impetus towards the understanding of English literature and enhance literary creativity.

Keywords: Translation Mode, Creativity, Literature, College, University

The Indian educational system has come to a lot of criticism due to its adherence to the conventional ways of imparting education. We still rely heavily on the rote system of education where the students are required to memorize just to bring it out during the examination. To a great extent, the real meaning of education which is creativity is lost in this system of education. A need is felt where the present system can be supplemented by additional teaching methods which can bring an all-round formation of the students without radically changing the existing set-up. This is my motivation for presenting this paper and the objective is therefore to propose a new mode of teaching English literature giving priority to creativity by utilizing the art of translation. In this enterprise the art of interpreting a text from a source language to its subsequent production in a target language is known as translation.

Translation and Creativity

When a translator translates the source text to the target text what he/she actually does is to render the interpretation of the source text. Interpretation here connotes to the collective assumptions to which he arrives at after the process of reading the text. Hence interpretation depends upon the process of reading and since it is in itself a product - interpretation is actually creation. When we try to come to an assumption, we are actually trying to create by using the process of reading.

This theory is very applicable to literary translations. In literature, it is not possible to have an exact rendition of the source text due to contextual and linguistic restrictions. Hence it becomes clear that literary translations are actually interpretations. To translate a literary work the translator has to go beyond the word for word translation. He/she has to be creative. She/he has to rely very much on the reading of the source text and find cultural and literary equivalents to render the translated work as close

as possible to the source text. There are instances in English Literature, where we find the personality of the translator influencing the translated work. It is also very well known that no two translations of the same source can be the same. This is due to the difference in the interpretations of the translators again because of the difference in their approach to reading the text. Thus in literature, there is a thin line dividing translation and interpretation which also is true between translation and creation.

The Translation Mode and Teaching of Literature

In a college or a university class, English literature is taught through two conventional modes- the Lecture mode and the Group Discussion mode. These two existing modes of teaching is grossly insufficient towards encouraging the students to think on their own. In the Lecture mode, the teacher may impose his interpretation of the literary text or try to influence the class with his views about it. Similarly, in a Group Discussion mode, the teacher may determine the questions or topics to be discussed. This leaves the students with very little scope for creativity. This is where the role of translation in teaching literature comes in.

When a student is encouraged to translate, she/he is actually being encouraged to be creative. Translation requires that he should have a profound knowledge of the text. Here is a need to know the minutest details of the literary text which is to be translated. Due to this the translator comes closest to a work in comparison to a reader or a critic. While translating, he can actually identify himself with the writer of the original text. This ability to empathize with the original writer is responsible for the interpretation and subsequent production of the target text. The great critic T.S. Elliot writes that a good poet is one who can feel a thought.¹Hence translation enables a student to feel a thought. This is the most important ingredient of creativity.

In the translation mode, the students are required to understand the text on their own which leads to a wide range of interpretations. This diversity in their interpretations helps to study the differences of their approach to the reading of the text which in turn proves that a correct reading method leads to correct interpretations. Thus, in this way translation encourages the students to develop their comprehension skills.

The objective of teaching literature is not to make students aware of the general interpretations of the given text, or to interpret the meaning of the text for them. It is to mould them into good critics so that they may be able to read a literary text and interpret on their own. The literary text is only a means to make them aware of the general steps in which a work can be interpreted. So in this case, a literary text loses any significance because its interpretation is not the final aim but the methods of interpretation are the actual objective of teaching literature with a prescribed text. Jonathan Culler, while explaining the meaning of creativity in the use of language refers to this knowledge about the methods of interpreting literature as literary competence. Culler states that the potential meaning of a literary work is only realized if the reader applies a theory

1 T. S. Elliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" in *Selected Essays*, London, Faber and Faber, 1921, pp. 281-291.

of discourse in the act of reading.² Thus, literary competence consists of the implicit understanding of the conventions of literary observation which tells one what to look for while reading a text like character analysis, theme, plot construction etc. Thus if the objective of literature teaching is literary competence then the focus should be on the process of reading and not on what is being read. Herein lies the importance of translation in teaching literature because it allows the students to come up with new vistas of interpretations.

Application of the Translation Mode

The art of translation can be introduced in the Under-Graduate and Post-Graduate level in the same way as essay-writing, critical resume and many other writing skills have been introduced. This art form can be demonstrated by the Lecturer through an interactive session in the class in the same way as other writing skills are taught. It could be a paper on its own with a choice of specialization later on in the Post-Graduate and M. Phil course. As far as the source text is concerned, the university can prescribe the texts keeping in mind the ethnicity of its students and the literary qualities of the text. A general list containing the names of the texts covering all regional language could be prescribed in the syllabus from which the students can choose one of their likings. The list of the source texts needs to be upgraded with the academic advancement of the students. The higher the level of education, the more challenging the source text will be. In this way the level of their ability to translate also rises which will ultimately prove to be beneficial for the development of their creative skills.

Limitation of this Mode of Teaching

The most prominent limitation to this mode of teaching would be to implement it on universities which cater to students from a vast array of ethnic backgrounds. In this case, the prescribed list of source texts could prove to be too vast and challenging. Hence this mode may not be very suitable for central universities. It may not be as effective as in a regional university or an autonomous college.

Then again it may become difficult to attract the students' interest towards this new art if their teachers do not make the teaching process interesting. Translation should be an enjoyable experience and if the teacher fails to convince the students about its interesting and useful traits, it can be just like another creative writing exercise.

Conclusion

However despite all its limitations, translation as a mode of teaching can prove to be very effective especially for the students of the Indian sub-continent. This is because students of this region are mostly bi-lingual and in some cases multi-lingual. Teaching literature through the mode of translation can actually provide a fresh impetus towards the understanding of English literature and literary creativity.

2 Cfr. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, London, Routledge and Kagen Paul, 1975.