Poetry as a Multi-cultural Pedagogy

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Abstract

Translated texts assigned in English language education systems expose students to international cultures, even as their experiences with the origin languages may be limited. But several circumstances have converged to minimize the positive cross-cultural influence of standard translations like *War and Peace* and *Les Misérables*. Declining readership in both general and student populations, changes in academic requirements, and the shorter attention spans documented as a consequence of modern technology all support our case for integrating multilingual poetry translations into cross-cultural training. Poetry is compact, pedagogically appropriate for all ages, and can be made easily available and attractive in print and digital formats alike. The cultural soup embedded in a poem transfers its nuance in its translation, and its compressed and immediate emotional impact can help critique the negative stereotypes of other cultures. Seeing poems in their origin languages on one page and their translations on an opposing page acquaints readers with multiple languages--without the demanding work translation often requires. We are incorporating multi-lingual poetry translations into all levels of cross-cultural curricula, beginning with a series of primary grade texts, and using the same character sets as the series advances to help keep students engaged with the poetry.

Our love/hate relationship with technology is centuries old, but its core dynamic is alive, kicking, and looming large in our future. Technology's innovations (we often love them) continue to force us to change, to adjust, to adapt (we may hate that). Each advanced technology, as Clive Thompson noted, "pushes us towards new forms of behavior while nudging us away from older, familiar ones" (Thompson, 2013, p. 8). Two examples of such behavior have been particularly noteworthy in recent years. One is that we are reading many more short digital texts than longer print form texts. The other is that our attention spans seem to be shrinking.

It is pretty clear that the short digital reading formats have become increasingly popular. A Pew Research Institute study found that "more than eight-in-ten U.S. adults (86%) say they get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet" (Shearer, 2023). And while other studies show that print is still the preferred method for reading literature, there has definitely also been an increase in reading literary works in digital formats. E-books, for example, are consistently gaining in popularity. Faverio and Ferrin found that although "print book readers and audiobook listeners remain mostly unchanged from 2019, there has been an uptick in the share of Americans who report reading e-books, from 25% to 30%." (Faverio & Ferrin, 2023).

Regardless of format (whether we're talking print or digital) it is evident that many readers would rather read shorter texts than longer ones. And while individual preferences might change depending on the context and reason for reading, many opt for the least time-consuming way to receive information. Elena Spirovska Tevdovska surveyed 53 non-native English speakers who are studying English because they want a career teaching English as a second language. She found that these students think "using short stories [shorter texts] makes the task of reading easier for the students compared with the other literary genres . . . in schools, students' interest is increasingly difficult to motivate, especially when it comes to literary texts in EFL/ESL classrooms" (Tevdovska, 2016, p. 163). Notably, disease outbreaks have hastened this shift to shorter texts in educational settings. During the 2009 H1N1 (swine flu) infections, colleges and universities put course readings online. And because educators were limited by copyright laws to posting only one chapter of a text, they were assigning students just a fraction of the material that had been assigned to their predecessors. Later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, journal articles and other online resources were often assigned as substitutes for the book-length texts housed in closed libraries (Baron & Mangen, 2021, p. 262).

Academia's shorter reading assignments have been important as one of several influences contributing to the decline in long-text form readership, but adult book reading in the general population has also decreased. A 2022 study found (for reasons yet to be determined) that Americans are reading fewer books than they were five years ago (Jones, 2023). Many, like Naomi Baron, ask whether it is "possible that short form social media is exacerbating this trend?" (Baron & Mangen, 2021, p. 253). Not only possible, but probable. Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are predominant sources of information for young people, and, of course, for many others as well. But we don't know for sure whether some of the decline in book reading is due as well to the disruptions of COVID 19 or to innovative technology or perhaps to a lack of interest or of time. Most likely, it's a combination of these and other factors.

In addition to all of the speculation, conflicting accounts about long form print literature complicate this issue of declining readership. The *WordsRated* website reports an all-time high for print book sales during the pandemic years 2020 and 2021--years when we know for certain that romance genre sales skyrocketed. But even though many people may be buying (and presumably reading) print texts, many are also taking advantage of smart phones, computers, kindles and other devices to access the digital formats that substitute for (often high priced) print books. Short-form digital videos (first introduced on the platform Vine) are also replacing longer-form videos, a process made more effective by TikTok, and one

now being imitated by other social media platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube shorts--where long attention spans are not required.

So, people are still reading, but many are reading differently than they have in the past. And though their reading habits have become increasingly more varied and difficult to track than when print was the main source of written information, evidence suggests that online reading, (which favors brevity), is encouraging both authors and publishers to create shorter texts (Baron & Mangen, 2021, p. 255).

It's not clear what came into focus first: the realization that we're reading shorter texts--or the belief that our attention spans are considerably shorter than they used to be. Shorter attention spans are often cited as a direct result of the tech revolution. And there's no question that tech-immersed students will usually engage more readily with short texts than with longer ones. Whether the collective reading and listening attention span has or has not significantly decreased, the *belief* that it has is influencing some educators to develop pedagogies addressing it as a problem. Neil Bradbury writes that "in the current climate of curriculum reform . . . several institutions have reduced their lectures to 15 min in length based upon the *'common knowledge'* [our italics] and *'consensus'* [our italics] that there is a decline in students' attention 10–15 min into lectures" (Bradbury**,** 2016, p. 509). Bradbury pushes back on this assumption by questioning the data that support it: "A literature review on this topic reveals many discussions referring to prior studies but scant few primary investigations. Alarmingly, the most often cited source for a rapid decline in student attention during a lecture barely discusses student attention at all. Of the studies that do attempt to measure attention, many suffer from methodological flaws and subjectivity in data collection" (p. 509).

Although primary data may not be conclusive, it is clear that longer attention spans are operative when a reader, a listener or a game player becomes deeply absorbed in the material. This is astoundingly obvious in the amount of time students and others spend playing digital games. Surveys have shown that engagement times are not only significant but are continuing to increase. A Nielsen company study found that "the amount of time spent playing video games . . . increased steadily, from 5.1 h/week in 2011 to 6.5 h/week in 2017" (The Nielsen Company, 2017). The following year that number increased again. Informal surveys of our own students indicate that many of them now spend an *average* of about 3 hours *a day* gaming.

Einstein once said that a protracted attention span was the secret of his so-called genius: "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer" (Gray, 2013). But even though educators agree that extended periods of concentration are crucial for effective learning, we don't tend to train specifically for lengthening attention spans. It's true though that many game-related programs in the formal curricula are inadvertently teaching students to do just that. *Mavis Beacon* is a highly successful example of how learning a skill that requires concentration and practice (in this case typing), can stretch concentration time by gamifying the study material.

If shorter attention spans and a preference for shorter texts really are consequences of modern technology, let's ask how these two behavioral changes can best be positioned to meet our current cross-cultural curriculum goals. Ji-Yeon Jo offers us a simply worded definition of this curricula as promoting a "mixture of cultures in which a student is made aware of his or her own and other cultures" (Jo, 2012). Currently, English language-based school systems expose students to international cultures in widely different ways and for different reasons. In the higher grades, a cross-cultural curriculum often focuses on various literary genres: postcolonial, comparative, diaspora, indigenous, world literature, mythology, folktales, and others. Students may read texts translated from other languages into English in these courses. As they do, they absorb knowledge about the social orders that contextualize the origin languages of the text. Reading *Les Misérables* introduces them to interesting tensions in France's social network. Reading *War and Peace* immerses them in the intrigues and complexities of Russian history and

temperament. Such immersion can offer rich cross-cultural experiences, even though exposure to the origin languages of these texts may be (and usually is) limited or non-existent. Unfortunately, in recent years several factors (including the gradual immersion of shorter texts and shorter attention spans) have been converging to make these shared experiences much less common.

Two questions: what are we going to offer students in place of those long-form translated texts that required extended hours of concentrated reading? And what kind of changes do we need to make in cross-cultural pedagogies that will help reduce ethnocentrism, language barriers, and stereotyping, and instead, promote cultural integration?

Game-based pedagogies are one answer, but given the information we have about short texts and short attention spans, we can make another suggestion. Since one of the purposes of cross-cultural education is to familiarize students with the habits and languages of other countries, we think integrating multilingual poetry translations into their textbooks at all levels of cross-cultural training is a good idea. This strategy would not only expose children who are learning to read to the look of other languages, it would also support and complement the already popular *Word Family* pedagogy--one of the most common methods used in teaching first graders to read, and one that has them learn words that sound alike, have similar endings and often rhyme, like cat, hat, bat, sat, mat.

Engaging with translated poetry exposes young students to multiple cultures beyond their familiar surroundings, so that they gain insight into the languages and experiences contextualizing the verses. The cultural soup embedded in a poem transfers its nuance in its translation, and a poem's compressed and immediate emotional impact can stimulate interest in and even help interrogate stereotyped negative impressions of other cultures. Because poetry is compact, it serves the current preferences for shortened texts well. It can also be pedagogically appropriate for all ages, and made easily available and attractive in print and digital formats alike.

It's true that students in the later grades often have negative attitudes toward poetry--a good reason to start students from square one and run a familiar poetry translation thread through their academic years. We already expose children to poetry at a very young age when we teach them nursery rhymes, songs, and fables that rhyme. In the process, children begin to engage with language, learn to extract information, and recall it by listening, reading, and using rhyme. We can gradually build on these early experiences by continuing to include poetry in primary education and beyond. This may work better than to stop teaching poetry as a main source of language learning and then reintroduce it in more sophisticated forms later on--forms that may include obscure meanings and "poetic" language that many students couldn't care less about.

We can reach beyond the standard English language canon to include poetry that will resonate with students of any age, beginning when they are first learning to read. Incorporating multi-cultural poetry translations into all levels of a cross-cultural curriculum will give our young students an interesting way to understand other cultures and to become better global citizens. These multi lingual poetry texts offer them opportunities to learn more intimately (and learn more easily) about other languages and cultures. Seeing poems in their origin languages and reading their English translations on opposing pages, they can become familiar with the look and structures of multiple languages without the demanding work translation often requires.

The Spanish/English example shown here, as is the case with all poems in the series, will include illustrations designed to represent the cultural context of the poem. This poem, tailored for first graders who are learning to read with word family pedagogies, suggests how a teacher might work with the English rhymes and introduce the difference between *too* and *two* as well. Depending on their objectives

(and perhaps on the cultural composition of their classes) teachers may or may not want to point out that word families can be found in the Spanish poem too: e.g., *gato, plato*, *pato.*

El Gato y el Pato	**The Cat and the Duck**
Tarde llego el gato	The cat was late
Pero tomo del plato	But he drank from the plate
En todo sus pies quatro	On all four of his feet.
Y tambien el pato	And the duck drank too
Aunque solamente en dos.	Though he had but two.
Paola Jackson (Spanish)	Paola Jackson (English)

Illustrated by Patti Willis

Students will become familiar with the origin languages of translated poems as they see them often in successive grades and in subsequent texts in the series. Eventually, as they become accustomed to their unique forms, they can be expected to identify their origin cultures, even though they can't *read* the languages. The cat and the duck will appear again in the second grade, third grade, and all the subsequent texts in the series--immersed in different activities designed to keep students interested in the progress of this unlikely pair. The poems translated from the languages of other countries will follow the same pattern.

The following poem, translated from Russian to English, illustrates how an upper grade text in the multi-lingual poetry series handles the evolution of a Russian boy who had been first introduced in a primary grade reader. His father is now away at war, a conflict teachers may or may not want to discuss. He has grown more insightful, more questioning, more linguistically capable--just as have the students reading about him.

Мой папа	**My Dad**
Где папа?--спросил я у мамы опять--	"Where is father?" I asked my mom.
Неужто решился пойти воевать?	"Is he at war?" Then she went numb.
Нет!--мама сказала, глаза отводя--	When finally she answered, "He's just very busy"
Он много работает, детка… Хотя	She turned away, whispering "Where is he? Where is he?"
Я даже не знаю… Ну где он теперь?	Then I heard a creak at the entrance door
Ты должен дождаться! Вдруг скрипнула дверь…	Just like I'd heard so often before.
Вошел незнакомец, пропахший войной.	And the stranger who left his shoes on the floor
Похож он на папу, но словно, не мой.	Looked like my Dad--but was followed by War
Irina Golovacheva (Russian)	And he wasn't my Dad anymore.
	Irina Golovacheva (English)

In a world where technology is shaping our reading habits and attention spans, it becomes more vital than ever to find strategies that will encourage our students to take their studies seriously. Integrating multilingual poetry into their curricula can be a powerful tool in this endeavor, prompting them to get to know and appreciate diverse cultures. Our hope is that these texts will not only enrich their cultural awareness, but also encourage them to become actively involved in celebrating and embracing the diversity of our global family.

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