

LESSON PLAN



Experimental Translation

By Olaya Barr

In this class, T&W teaching artist [Olaya Barr](#) and T&W education associate [India Gonzalez](#), a graduate student at New York University, challenged students to translate a text written in a foreign language, nearly 200 years ago! Is it possible to translate a text if you don't know the original language? As a translator, is our duty to be loyal to the original text, or to create an artful and creative interpretation suited to the modern reader? How much of our own voice can we put in a translated poem, and what happens if we follow every cognate?

Using their own interpretations, their experiences with foreign languages, and the texts of others, students wrote their own ideal translations of a 19th-century poem.

Grade: 6th

Common Core State Standards (Refer to the [ELA Standards > Writing > Grade 6](#) and the [ELA Standards > Anchor Standards > Reading](#)):

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.5: With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- First work individually to interpret a text, and then collaboratively to create a single poem integrating each student's interpretation.
- Ascertain that translation is a daily activity: we translate between languages, but we also can translate feelings into music or thoughts into words.
- Become more comfortable examining a text written in a foreign language.

- Students become familiar with a 19th-century poetic style.

Guiding Questions:

- Are there words or expressions that are “untranslatable”?
- How does your monolingualism or bilingualism affect the way you read a text?
- Do you think translation should be an analytical and objective task, or a creative, freeing one?
- How does word choice transform the tone of a poem?
- How can two words with the same meaning conjure different images?

LESSON

Warm-Up (5 minutes):

Students write a response to quote on the board by Italian author and philosopher Umberto Eco: “Translation is the art of failure.”

Introduction to Form (5 minutes):

Discuss students’ personal experiences translating with friends, family members, or while traveling. What are the challenges that come up? If we think of translation as a conversion from one medium to another, what other ways do we translate? As translators, we will play the roles of researchers, detectives, interpreters, and creative writers.

Mentor Text and Discussion (15 minutes):

Introduce the poem [“Rima XIII”](#) by [Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer](#), a Spanish post-romanticist poet and writer, and also a playwright, literary columnist, and visual artist. Students work individually to analyze the work in its original Spanish form, looking at words to try to extrapolate what the poem could possibly be about. There are experimental writers who do this extreme literal, hyper-subjective, translation as an art form. Are there any words that look familiar? What is the shape of the poem and is there any repetition? Any cognates that stand out? Are there Spanish-speaking students who can describe the tone of the poem?

Writing (18 minutes):

Students begin by circling words that look like English words, underlining repeated words and phrases, and annotating the page with hypotheses concerning the poem’s content.

After individual analysis, three translations of “Rima XIII” are projected on the board, one by Richard Haney-Jardine, one by an anonymous author, and one by Google Translate. Any surprises or revelations? Any phrases or words that you could write more elegantly? What is the downside of the Google Translate version?

The students then work in small groups to integrate what they now know about the content of the poem to write a version in their own style. They should allow the published translations to inform their new translation, but there should be no plagiarism or verbatim replicated stanzas. Do they want to make a modern version of the poem? Do they want to preserve the romanticism and classic feel of Bécquer’s voice? What images and sentiments should stand out?

Closing (7 minutes):

A representative from each group reads aloud one of their translated stanzas, and defends why they wrote it the way they did. What line are they most proud of? Which part of the poem was the hardest to translate?

Materials:

“Rima XIII” by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, and two published translations of the poem, alongside a GoogleTranslate version

“Rima XII”

By Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer

Tu pupila es azul y cuando ríes
su claridad suave me recuerda
el trémulo fulgor de la mañana
que en el mar se refleja.

Tu pupila es azul y cuando lloras
las transparentes lágrimas en ella
se me figuran gotas de rocío
sobre una violeta.

Tu pupila es azul y si en su fondo
como un punto de luz radia una idea
me parece en el cielo de la tarde
una perdida estrella.

“Rhyme XIII. How blue your eyes are”

Translated by Richard Haney-Jardine

How blue your eyes are, and when you laugh
How their soft clarity reminds me
Of the tremulous shine of morning
The sea reflects upon its waters.

How blue your eyes are, and when you cry
How the crystal tears that well up in them
seem to me the drops of dew
That collect upon a violet.

How blue your eyes are, and how their depths
Can radiate an idea like a point of light,
How much they seem to me a lost star
In the evening sky! Oh!

“Rhyme XIII”

Anonymous Translation

Your eye is blue, and when you laugh
its soft brightness reminds me
Of the shimmering glint of morning
that is reflected in the sea.

Your eye is blue, and when you cry,
the transparent tears in it
seem to me drops of dew
upon a violet.

Your eye is blue, and if in its depths
like a point of light an idea radiates,
it seems to me a
lost star in the evening sky! Ah!

“Rhyme XIII”

Google Translate

Your pupil is blue and, when you laugh,
its clarity süave reminds me
the shimmering morning glow
that in the sea is reflected.

Your pupil is blue and, when you cry,
the transparent tears in it
I see drops of dew
on a víioleta.

Your pupil is blue, and if in your background
as a point of light radiates an idea,
it seems to me in the evening sky
a lost star.

