

POETRY INSIDE OUT

# Poetry Inside Out

## Teaching Translation to Enhance Literacy

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*Molly:* Our group picked the translation—*that the tree wakes with music in its chest*—because when a bird puts a nest in the hole of a tree and sings, the tree will sound musical. And because the bird was in a hole in the tree it really sounded like the tree was singing. Also, “chest” rhymes with “nest.” He (the poet Espino) wanted nature to be presented in a fun way.

*Saul:* In line three of the poem our group thinks the translation should say *that the tree wakes up with music in its chest* because when the bird made its nest in a hole in the tree it probably hatched an egg and the baby started chirping. When the baby chirped it sounded like music that was coming from the tree. This translation flows because in the line before, they use the word “nest,” and like the other groups said, “chest” rhymes with “nest.” This translation also goes with the whole meaning of the poem, that is that the tree became alive because its heart was full with music. Also the bird was happy and that is why it is singing.

*Molly:* When thirty-four people read the same thing they each come up with different ideas. Their minds picture different things because they understand the words differently. The thing that happens is that each mind works in its own way so we see things differently and then our mind makes its own connections.

**S**OMETHING QUITE REMARKABLE is happening here. This discussion, mid-way through a sixteen-lesson program called Poetry Inside Out, is being held by linguistically diverse middle school

students from the lowest performing school in a large, diverse urban school district. They have just spent more than two hours translating a poem and then discussing the rationale behind their word choices. What is so compelling about this curriculum that it captures students’ attention at this level and for this length of time? As a former Poetry Inside Out student explained,

In the process of translation, one comes to know a poem so well, so intimately, as each word is pondered, considered,

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*After several years as a bilingual teacher in Oakland Unified School district, Marty Rutherford left the classroom, completed her doctorate in language and literacy at UC Berkeley, and worked on disseminating culturally relevant, high-expectation literacy programs that offered the promise of transforming high poverty schools into vibrant learning communities. Currently she is director of research and dissemination for the Center for the Art of Translation’s Poetry Inside Out.*

and wrestled with, that a little bit of the author’s brilliancy is rubbed into the translator, and one understands, even if it is unconsciously, something more about language and poetry.

Poetry Inside Out (PIO), established in 2000 by the Center for the Art of Translation, is an engaging, innovative language arts curriculum that heightens participants’ awareness of the function of language and their creative self-expression. PIO has worked with more than five thousand students throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and is now in the process of bringing the program to a national audience. This fall PIO partnered with Teachers & Writers Collaborative to begin a pilot project in New York City.

The PIO curriculum is structured around sixteen workshops in which students encounter great poems in the language in which they were written—Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, and many others—and engage in the practice of literary translation. Students then use these newly translated poems as inspiration and resource for composing their own poems. The synergy of the two practices—translating and composing poetry—allows PIO participants to hone their awareness of language while building essential cognitive and literary skills. The poems and translations produced by participants in PIO reflect their profound responses to language, culture, society, and themselves.

The work that PIO asks of students—doing literary translations and writing poetry—is not easy. It is work that requires concentration and perseverance. Yet our students eagerly delve into this work. Why? Because they are inspired. They are inspired by reading and translating great poems from renowned poets and from their peers. They are inspired by writing poems and by having their fellow students read these poems. This work allows our students to see themselves in a new light, with bigger possibilities. This fourth-grade PIO student speaks for many:

I feel different about myself. In PIO you get to express yourself more and you

change by pieces. Translating poems is like forming a puzzle and once you are almost done it is like turning on a light. And then in your own life you start looking for the puzzles . . . looking for the way for me to be better . . . the puzzles are hiding and when you find them, and solve them, your life has more light, like the poems.

Literary translation is fundamental to the program because it leads to a deeper understanding of the form and function of language. Translating poetry generates the closest possible relationship with text, in part because attention to syntax, grammar, vocabulary, rhythm, nuances, and colloquialisms of both the original language and the language into which the poem is being translated is vital to the process. The back and forth from one language to another, and between the whole and the parts, is what allows the translator to build a new version of the text. A fourth-grade PIO student describes her process, “When I translate a poem I look for what the author is trying to tell us, but you have to figure it out. You need to look at all the words and what they mean. It’s like a riddle.”

Students come to understand, when learning to translate, that a piece of writing isn’t “finished” until someone has read and interpreted it.

The deeper understanding of language that students gain from translating poems comes into play when they begin to compose their own poems. This process includes learning new forms and ways with words. Breaking the rules, making the rules, amassing skills, all build students’ capacity to communicate with clarity. They experience that writing is useful for exploring ideas—lived and learned—and to communicate with others. As one sixth-grade PIO student explained: “When we started I didn’t know anything about what it meant to write poetry or what it would be like to say things you really mean, but now I do.”

**Poem and translation**  
**FIFTH-GRADE PIO STUDENT**

No todo en la vida  
 No todo en la vida  
 es tristeza hasta  
 una lágrima derramando  
 de tu mejilla hace cosquillas

Not everything in life  
 Not everything in life  
 is sadness even  
 a teardrop running down  
 your cheek tickles you

### How it works

A Poetry Inside Out workshop consists of sixteen lessons that are presented in three sequential and scaffolded parts. PIO workshop occurs two to three times a week for one hour in order to insure continuity. During a typical workshop the teacher and students read, recite, and discuss poems by great authors from around the world in the language in which these poems were written. Participants then engage in the work of creating a literary translation, considering the context, lines, words, cadences, and the structure of the poem. Influenced by this experience they then produce their own poetry inspired by the authors they study. Although each PIO unit is modified to fit the particular needs of each class—modifications can include the choice of poems, poets, countries, and languages—the workshop format remains the same.

### Cycle One

The emphasis in the first six classes is on learning basic translation skills using poems that become increasingly more complex to translate. Translation affords students one of the closest possible engagements with the text. When students translate, the process is so layered they not only build the necessary skills to move the text from the source language to a new language; they also come to see that poems have different characteristics and qualities. A poet commu-

nicates many concepts, including feelings, emotions, opinions, and perspectives. The language itself can be subtle, bold, aggressive, full of slang, or very elegant. PIO students figure this out as they translate the poems. The act of translating necessitates moving from the whole to the part and back to the whole again, considering each word and phrase on its own and within the context of the piece.

One way we help students learn to do literary translation is through a protocol we call the “translation circle.” To begin the translation process, students are given a “poem page” which includes the poem in its original language, a short biography of the poet and a glossary that serves as a key for translating. Here’s an example of how the process works:

A group of sixth-graders is given the poem, “Formas y Colores,” by the Mexican author David Huerta. After the whole class works with the poem a bit—reading it aloud, talking a bit about the poet, his or her place of origin, and the language of the poem—students move into pre-arranged groups of four and begin their translation circles. Within each group, students first work in pairs reading the poem and arriving at a phrase-by-phrase translation. This work includes re-reading the poem, listening carefully for clues about meaning from personal knowledge, pronunciation, context, the glossary, or a dictionary. Once they complete the phrase-by-phrase translation the students join with the other half of their translation circle and this group works together to create a version of the poem that “flows.” After this, each student writes their own final translation of the poem.

The version shown here is by a sixth-grader bilingual in Spanish and English. It is important to note here that although in this particular example the student translator speaks the language of the original poem, the use of the glossary also allows students to translate poems written in languages with which they are unfamiliar. The attention to language, the careful re-crafting of the “make it flow” version is striking. The essence and meaning of the poem influences word choice.

## Formas y Colores

DAVID HUERTA

Original Language	Phrase-by-phrase	Make it flow
Escucha una palabra con atención,	Listen one word with focus	Listen to a word with attention
cualquier palabra.	Which ever word	Any word
Es puro sonido	Is pure sound	It is pure sound
pero algo quiere decir:	But something it wants to say	It has something to say
Naranja, una fruta;	Orange, a fruit	Orange, a fruit
avión, máquina que vuela;	Plane, machine that flies	Airplane, a flying machine
Clodomiro, nombre de una persona;	Clodomiro, name of a person	Clodomiro, a name
Azucena, flor blanca.	Lily, white flower	Azucena, white flower
Ahora vuelve a escucharlas	Now return to listen to them	Now come back and listen again
y encuéntrales formas y colores	And encounter the forms and colores	And find the forms and colors

### Cycle Two

In this part of the curriculum the emphasis turns to learning about the craft of writing poetry. Building on what was learned from their translation practice, we continue with practical lessons about basic poetic elements, such as line and stanza, repetition, refrain, and the way a poem is constructed. We also work with poetic forms, including couplets, quatrains, ballads, odes, pantoums, haikus, tankas, sonnets, and others, and the use of various forms of figurative language. Once again, we use renowned poets, other students' poems, and translation as key inspirational tools.

What follows is a poem written by the same bilingual student whose translation was presented above. Building upon what was learned from translating and applying lessons about crafting poetry, this piece was created.

### Words

Listen to the each word.

Every word.

Listen for the meaning.

Different meanings.

What is the difference?

Do you hear it?

Words flow

through your mind

like a river.

You choose the way.

You choose the end.

It goes to you mind

It goes to you heart.

### Cycle Three

Participants apply what they have learned thus far to the production of a written and oral presentation of their work. Students may choose to revise a previously composed piece, or they may create a new poem. Within the Poetry Inside Out curriculum, all classes produce a volume of student work that includes original poems and translations. Students also perform their work in a variety of ways, from simple classroom presentations to more ambitious efforts, such as school-wide exhibitions, cross-school poetry slams, back-to-school night presentations, and school-wide assemblies. Every few years, a selection of poems from all PIO classrooms across the country are published in the *Center for the Art of Translation's Poetry Inside Out Anthology*.

Sometimes you feel something inside in your heart and then poetry comes and you can spread it out—like wave of emotions. Writing poetry is like sharing your mind with someone else that may have felt the same thing.

— *PIO student interviews*

With every Poetry Inside Out workshop, students teach us the importance of this work. Poetry Inside Out students come to know that almost everything we do requires translation in some form, whether we are reading a street sign, reading our friends, reading the world... we translate. Translation is about interpretation—moving something from one context and making it comprehensible in another.

Translation made me use words that I knew but did not say, . . . made me think of other words with other people with different languages, . . . made me use words that I didn't even know. Translation helped me learn how to say what I want to say, . . . how to chose my words, and say what I mean for the people who read my poems to understand.

— *PIO student interviews*

How do we do this? Simply. We introduce students to a few tricks of the trade. We teach them how to translate through the introduction of a few basic protocols. And then we practice. We teach them how to write poetry by teaching the basic structure and form, and we play and practice those skills. Most importantly, through the poems we choose and the activities we use, we show students that we see them as smart, capable people able to learn seemingly complex and important things. This is the single most essential part of PIO. As a fifth-grade student working in a bilingual immersion school said, "When we saw what artists and Latino poets wrote we thought we could do those things . . . we could be like them." Learning to write poetry provides our students with a vehicle for learning to say what they "really mean" through the practice of constantly questioning word choice to find the best way of expressing their intended message.

American psychologist and educational theorist Jerome Bruner's famously said that "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development." (*The Process of Education*, 1960: 11–16) and we have found this to be true of the PIO program. The poems we choose for the PIO project are great works, and the translation process is rigorous. But students recognize when they are given work that matters and it makes a difference. Our choice of content explicitly tells our students that we think well of them and that they are eminently capable of using their minds well—when the content is something worthy of their minds. Students see the Poetry Inside Out program as an intellectually sophisticated endeavor and by extension they come to see themselves as intellectually sophisticated. While this quality is not unique to PIO, it is a quality worth emulating. When students understand the importance of using their minds well—they do just that. ☺