

## ART AS A GATEWAY. A TRANSCULTURAL APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH

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### **Abstract**

*Language has always been an accurate reflection of the changes affecting any aspect of reality as it is a living organism dependent on and promoting human development. It is a mirror encapsulating within its depth different stages in the evolution of thought and action, but it is also an indispensable instrument enabling this evolution. Teaching language implies, therefore, learning about reality but also changing it through the multiple perspectives that such an enterprise entails. One of the perspectives we may apply to the teaching of a language is art. Its transfiguring light may totally change our perception of the world. In the act of studying the artistic dimension of reality, language acquires a new value, turning from an instrument for communication into a complex expression of beauty and refined thought. Functionality gives way to creativity and, in the process, language and the world mutually reflect and enrich each other. Studying English or any foreign language means coming into contact with other cultures and learning from them by looking at reality through the lens of art. Language becomes a transcultural “ray of light”, using art as a gateway to other worlds.*

**Key words:** artistic expression, culture, creativity, teaching language, transcultural approach

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### **1. Introduction**

Language has always been an accurate reflection of the changes affecting any aspect of reality as it is a living organism dependent on and promoting human development. It is a mirror encapsulating within its depth different stages in the evolution of thought and action, but it is also an indispensable instrument enabling this evolution or any type of human endeavour. Teaching

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language implies, therefore, learning about reality but also changing it through the multiple perspectives that such an enterprise entails.

One of the perspectives that we can see the teaching of a language from is art and its transfiguring light can totally change our perception of the world and, through that, the world itself. In the act of studying the artistic dimension of reality, language acquires a new value, turning from an instrument for communication into a complex expression of beauty and refined thought. Functionality gives way to creativity and, in the process, language becomes enriched by the beauty of the reflected world, adding to it, at the same time. Studying English or any foreign language, for that matter, means coming into contact with other cultures and learning from them by looking at reality through the lens of art. Language becomes a transcultural “ray of light”, using art as a gateway to other worlds.

The cultural interaction between countries is one of the most important features of modern existence and the role that language plays in such an “encounter” is essential. English, therefore, acts as a common denominator for the different cultures which are forced to co-exist and to interact by the demands of today’s multicultural world. As such, studying English as a foreign language brings students into contact with important dimensions defining other nations (customs, attitudes, institutional practices, landmarks, cultural products), among which art occupies a significant place. Thus, studying English implies exploiting not only the interdisciplinary potential inherent in the study of every language, but also its transcultural dimension, since a universal language has the power of transcending cultural and linguistic barriers.

## **2. Teaching through Poetry**

Art grants a privileged access to other cultures, giving language the possibility to “inhabit” the spirit of the other and to welcome the other’s visit, at the same time. It is what Paul Ricœur called “the hospitality of language” when dealing with the problem of translation (p. 48).

And, when it comes to language, it is, indeed, a matter of translation occurring at two levels: transferring thoughts and images into words, in the first place; secondly, transferring ideas, meanings, concepts and even feelings from one culture into another. This double process of “translation” leads to the creation of systems and sub-systems of cultural representations based on the dialogic nature of language: the inner verbal exchange taking place within human consciousness is followed by interpersonal interaction and, ultimately, by intercultural dialogue. As Ricœur argued, texts (including the ones resulting from such interactions, we might add)

reveal a certain vision of the world (p.115) so, by decoding them, we can see things through the Other's eyes and enrich our cultural experience. In fact, all the "texts" ever produced can be regarded as contributions to the making up of a universal Text as a meeting ground for different disciplines, cultures and perspectives on a complex world that allows "translation", but only up to a certain point.

A significant part of this universal Text is represented by poetry, which renders the spirit of a country by means of a complex whole encapsulating content, form, musicality, depth of feeling. Due to its cultural value, lyrical creation has to "embark" on a transcultural journey and suffer the transformations of the translating process, thus enabling cultural interaction and enrichment. Translating poetry is, obviously, a very difficult enterprise involving both gain and loss and requiring cultural and linguistic competence on the part of the translator. In spite of the pessimistic view according to which it is precisely poetry that gets lost in translation (Robert Frost), we have to try and allow the contact between cultures even from such a difficult position as this.

Translating poetry imposes certain limitations that make the process arduous and even painful, as the translator has to come to terms with the inevitable loss accompanying cultural transfer. The requirements that need to be observed when translating poetry involve: choosing words carefully, paying particular attention to connotations and stylistic elements, finding the linguistic item that contains most of the semantic features of the source language word, rearranging grammatical structures according to the target language linguistic rules, observing prosodic features (rhythm and rhyme). All these aspects turn translating into an endeavour resembling the pursuit of an artist, therefore this activity cannot be approached by any Romanian student of English. However, the gifted ones can find the task very challenging and rewarding, at the same time, and they can approach it either within the setting created by a literary workshop or during class, as a break from the routine of too much task-based teaching.

By translating poems or particular stanzas from Romanian into English, the student has the opportunity to instil "drops" of Romanian culture into the vast "ocean" surrounding us all. Probably, the first choice for such a task would be Eminescu, as he is the most representative Romanian poet. Several approaches can be tried for such an activity: students can either analyse a translated variant of a poem or stanza and solve different exercises (selecting words from a series; ordering jumbled words, lines or stanzas; commenting on a particular choice of words) or they can actually try and translate certain lines or stanzas from a poem. Nigel Armstrong, in *Translation, Linguistics, Culture* (pp.150-155), mentions a series of methods that can be employed for translation, of which linguistic transposition, modulation and equivalence or

pragmatic translation seem particularly important when it comes to translating poetry. Linguistic transposition involves replacing the source language word or structure with a target language word or structure from a different category. Modulation refers to a change in the viewpoint and it is mainly semantic. Equivalence or pragmatic translation is a type of modulation that involves idioms and set phrases.

Students can start from a relatively easy exercise based on selecting the most appropriate words from a series and filling in the gaps. For example, for the first stanza of *Luceafărul* by Eminescu (“A fost odată ca-n povești, / A fost ca niciodată. / Din rude mari împărătești, / O prea frumoasă fată.”), they have to fill in the gaps of the following translated variant: “Like never before, ... (1) .../ As in a fairy-tale, / There was, of ... (2) ... lineage born, / A ... (3) ... far too ... (4) ...”. Students have to choose from the following series of words or phrases the most suitable ones, taking into account lexical, semantic, stylistic or prosodic features and explaining their choices:

- in the old days; once; at one time; once upon a time; in times of yore.
- noble; aristocratic; highborn; kingly; royal.
- young woman; maiden; young lady; damsel; miss.
- beautiful; attractive; fair; charming; lovely.

The choice that seems the most appropriate for the first gap would be “in times of yore”, firstly because it sends to a distant and mythical time and, secondly, because it has the right number of syllables that is required for the rhythm of the stanza to be maintained. In addition, “yore” rhymes with “before”, contributing to the musicality of the lines, along with the rhythm. For the second gap, “noble” would probably be the most suitable alternative because, semantically, it is close to the required meaning and, prosodically, it fits in perfectly with the rhythmic pattern of the stanza. Although “kingly” or “royal” would be closer to the meaning of the Romanian word (“împărătești”), they lack the poetical quality found in the double alliterations created by introducing “noble” (the repetition of /b/ and /l/). The noun “maiden” can be selected for the third gap, all the other alternatives having unwanted connotations (“young woman” – maturity; “young lady” – aristocracy; “damsel” – frivolity; “miss” – polite, even condescending, modern behaviour) that would add unintended meanings or associations. For the last gap the most suitable choice would probably be “fair”, as the word meets all the criteria taken into consideration, also providing the second element (/f/) in the alliteration meant to render the original one in the Romanian poem. Such an exercise would prepare students for the more serious work needed in order to actually translate Romanian poetry into English. What is even more difficult than

rendering the unity between form and content in such a way as to awaken the same emotional response for the target language reader is transferring cultural specificity. As the last phrase itself suggests, the features that individualize the spirit of a country can only make comprehension by the Other difficult, therefore universality has to replace specificity whenever necessary.

The paradox is that, through translation, whatever is unique in a country's culture disappears, being replaced by something that can be understood and recognized according to a different cultural perspective. For example, in the first two lines of Eminescu's *Sara pe deal* ("Sara pe deal buciumul sună cu jale,/Turmele-l urc, stele le scapără-n cale,"), the Romanian reader finds images representative of Romanian culture and rural tradition. These images will inevitably lose their associations in their English translation, as the Other does not look upon being a shepherd in quite the same way as Romanians do. In a translation such as the following: "On hills the alphorn mourns as evening ends the day,/Flocks climb them and the stars flicker and light their way," the feeling of cultural loss is acute from the very beginning. The auditory image in "the alphorn mourns" does not trigger the same emotional response for a foreign reader as the Romanian correspondent does for the source language reader. The Romanian – English dictionary itself presents the English phrase "alp(en) horn" (p. 164) as an approximation for the Romanian word "bucium", which clearly indicates incomplete linguistic and semantic overlapping between the two languages. If we read the definition given in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, which adds the information that such an instrument is "used chiefly by Swiss herdsmen" (p. 35), then we become even more aware of the cultural gap between countries.

Nevertheless, this cannot stop us from trying to bridge this gap by resorting to any strategy or technique that can be used. Linguistic transposition can be seen working in the replacement of the Romanian complex verb+adverbial structure ("sună cu jale") by a single verb ("mourns"), which does not really render the emotional depth felt by the Romanian reader. There are, however, compensations for some of the losses: the poetic note introduced by the ending of the first line can be seen to counterbalance the regional colour of "sara"; the musicality of the lines is maintained by preserving the rhythmic pattern and the alliteration in the second line.

Through translation, English acts as a cultural mediator, inviting other cultures to recognize both the elements that unite us and the ones that differentiate us. As Ricœur remarked, we have to accept this difference as an inevitable part of our cultural exchange (pp. 132-133), and reconcile with the fact that, although there is no perfect translatability, there is no absolute untranslatability either.

### 3. The Poetry of Sound and Image

Another angle that we can approach this double process of translation from is the one offered by painting, an art celebrating beauty in all its forms. The painter has to transfer his artistic vision onto canvas, materializing it through the creative use of colours and shapes and, at the other end, the “beholder” has to complete this “translation” process by decoding the artistic message according to his own ability. During the English class, the student can be offered the chance to come into contact with different works of art belonging to different cultures. French painting, for example, would introduce the student to a world of remarkable creations that would be a feast for the eyes. It would be difficult to choose from so many masterpieces, but any choice we make will certainly be the right one. For example, Renoir’s work *Au Moulin de la Galette*, painted in 1876, presents a slice of French reality from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, taking the student on an imaginary journey into space and time. The artist created the painting in a year when the French were suffering from the defeat in the war against the Germans. As an escape from such bitter memories, they took advantage of any opportunity for entertainment and this is what Renoir captured in his painting: Parisian seamstresses and workers dancing (waltzing) and chatting in an open-air café on top of Montmartre hill.

After a short presentation of the context in which the work was painted, the students can focus on the visual elements, analysing the use of colours, shapes, light and shadow interplay. This can be done by filling in a chart, by ticking the right box, by choosing the correct variant or by finishing off sentences. Taking into account that Renoir was an Impressionist painter, which meant interest in capturing light and casting it on the canvas through the use of primary colours, the students can comment on the effect produced by such a painting technique as opposed to the ones used by Expressionism (focused on depicting emotions and subjective responses to objects or events) or Pointillism (the use of a dense scatter of numerous tiny points of light), for instance. They can also imagine the conversations taking place between the characters portrayed in the painting and they can role-play them by making use of the historical details presented by the teacher (information on the social classes that the characters belonged to, on the economic condition of the country after the war, on the dress-code that was considered appropriate).

Another painting that the students can analyse is Carl Spitzweg’s *The Poor Poet* (1839), a work of art which, in Germany, is surpassed in popularity only by Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. The teacher can explain why the painting is so appreciated by the Germans (probably due to its simplicity and emotional appeal) and can ask students to describe the painting, giving particular attention to those objects symbolizing the poor state poets were in at that particular time and place. In the 19<sup>th</sup>

century, Germany did not really have a high esteem for poets, who therefore had to make a living by doing anything else. Painters, on the other hand, enjoyed more popularity and, thus, were able to earn a living more easily. The students can comment on the contrast between the light outside and the darkness and the coldness inside, enlarging upon the poet's or the artist's condition throughout centuries. The fact that Spitzweg's poet has to set his writings on fire in order to keep himself warm is symbolic of the sacrificial nature of being an artist anywhere and anytime in this world.

Students can also come into contact with Italian culture by reflecting on Botticelli's *The Adoration of the Magi*, a Renaissance painting on a religious subject: the Feast of the Epiphany. The discussion will progress from the religious aspect (the revealing of Jesus Christ to the three magi) to its artistic re-creation. The magi were considered the patron saints of pilgrims and travellers, therefore Florence, which owed its wealth to trade, worshipped them. The students can analyse the way in which the characters are positioned and the symbolic function of the setting (the ruin of the Roman temple signifying the collapse of the old heathen world). Through English, the student can thus cross particular cultural boundaries to get to universally recognized dimensions and symbols.

Music is another point of access into the Other's realm and we can, for example, approach Russian music by giving students the chance to listen to Shostakovich's *The Second Waltz*. Biographical notes can provide the introduction to the listening exercise, either in the form of a short presentation or as an exercise asking students to order the main events in the composer's life. During the listening part of the activity the students can solve different tasks: writing down all the impressions and associations triggered by the music, choosing the most appropriate answer, finishing off sentences. As a post-listening exercise they can choose a movie that would benefit from having such a musical piece as a soundtrack (originally, the music was created for the film *The First Echelon*) and explain the effect it might have on the listener/ spectator.

As music and film usually go together, we cannot end our cultural journey under an English passport without referring to American movies. One movie that deserves our attention is *The Pianist* (2002), directed by Roman Polanski, a movie which is based on the true story of a Polish pianist who managed to survive the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War. As the title indicates, art plays an important role in the film, securing an identity and providing an escape for a dehumanised Jewish Pole struggling to live in a hostile environment. While seeing fragments from the movie, students can attempt to describe the character's suffering, either in the form of diary entries or in the form of a poem. They can also draw parallels with works treating the same subject, such as movies (*Schindler's List*) or books (Elie Wiesel's *Night*). Art becomes,

in this way, a gateway to history, reflecting both the beauty and the grief of a world forced to cope with the suffering of loss.

## **Conclusions**

Studying English does not always have to be focused on linguistic rules, vocabulary items, everyday topics or functional language. Occasionally, when we get too tired of our routine and common tasks, we can open another door to reality, a door which takes us on a different journey, where “beauty” is the key-word. Poetry, painting, music and movies can all shed different lights on the world, revealing another side of the human personality – the creative dimension – without which our life would certainly be poorer. Why should the Romanian student of English know only useful and practical things like asking for directions and apologising? Is practicality the only aspect that characterizes our today’s world? The answer is, obviously, “no”, otherwise there would be no more artists endeavouring to re-create the world and no public interested in seeing or acquiring those “re-creations”.

In dealing with art, language becomes a reflection of the beauty depicted by the artist. By studying art through English, the student is influenced by those reflections of beauty and he is carried into the artist’s world, enriching it and becoming himself enriched at the same time. The study of English becomes a “venue” for artistic interactions leading to cultural exchanges. Language and art, as essential elements of one’s culture, work together, guiding the learner along a beautiful journey that knows no boundaries.

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