MEDIATION SKILLS - TRADITION OR INNOVATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE METHODOLOGY

Maria Ionela NEAGU

Abstract

The paper aims to draw a survey on the traditional approaches to teaching mediation skills in foreign languages as compared to the modernist approach as it has been identified within some of the Council of Europe's documents of language policy. The sources used in order to support our views have been some of the English textbooks currently in use in Romanian upper secondary education and the corresponding curricula.

The communicative activities are generally discussed in terms of reception, interaction, production and mediation, each of them referring to either the written or the spoken language. As such, the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) introduces the well-known foreign language skills as: reading and listening (the receptive skills), speaking and writing (the productive skills) accompanied by the various corresponding receptive and productive activities, followed by mediation and interaction, two other skills that focus on the relationship between the two interlocutors necessary to initiate communication. Unlike the traditional methodologies, the CEFR analyses and brings forward the use of communicative strategies that the learners should be aware about and that should be practiced until the learning process becomes conscious and responsible. Metacognitive principles such as planning, execution, evaluation and repair will lead to the learners' autonomous acquisition of a foreign language.

Another innovating feature is represented by the approach adopted with a view to the dynamic process of communication supported by the relationship between the transmitter and the receiver of the message, which most of the times are subjected to an exchange of roles. Classifying the activities according to the four skills meant a unidirectional view of the communication process in which each learner had to be able to read, speak, listen and write in a foreign language. The new approach introduces new communicative competences which the learner should master in order to communicate whenever he has an interlocutor and wants to engage in the mediation between other interlocutors. These new competences are interaction and mediation.

During the mediation activities the user of the language is not concerned to express his own ideas, but to simply act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other as speakers of different languages. Among the mediation activities and contexts, be they either oral or written, the Common European Framework of Reference identifies the following types:

1. oral mediation:

- Simultaneous interpretation (conferences, meetings, formal discourses, etc.)
- Consecutive interpretation (welcome speeches, speeches of touristic guides)

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- Informal interpretation: between foreigners visiting your country, for native speakers abroad, between friends, relatives, clients, foreign guests; translating signs, menius, etc.

2. written mediation:

- Accurate translations (eg. contracts, legal texts, etc.); literary translations; summarizing the gist of newspaper articles; paraphrasing.

Mediation strategies cover those means of dealing with the variety of resources in order to process the information and to establish the equivalent meaning when sending the message.

- Planning refers to the analysis of interlocutors' needs, enlarging upon knowledge background, locating resources and preparing the glossary.
- Execution: at this stage the mediator needs an overall perspective in processing the material, finding the equivalent terms, overcoming the obstacles.
- Evaluation involves checking the firmness of the language and the degree in which the two versions overlap.
- Repair: adjusting the speech using dictionaries, thesauruses, experts' opinions and other sources.

While dealing with a text in a foreign language, the learner has to evolve from the simple act of copying and selecting some words or sentences, to the summing up of more complex discourses and even to the production of a presentation based on various sources.

There have not been designed any scales of descriptors of performance for oral mediation. As far as the written mediation is concerned, the grid entitled *Processing texts* describes the learner's evolution from the simple transcription of short texts (which corresponds to the lowest levels A1 and A2) to the paraphrasing and summarising skills in the case of complex and longer texts (ability representative for upper levels of performance ranging from B1 to C2).

In Romania, the new Curricula for modern languages (OM no.3410/ 07.03.2006) taught in upper secondary education were revised in 2006 according to the new approaches proposed in CEFR by the Council of Europe's experts. The competence-centered curricula introduced new target objectives corresponding to the interaction skills and mediation abilities besides the traditional receptive and productive competences on which they mainly focused so far. Moreover, the level of performance that any highschool graduate should achieve in a foreign language was also established, as follows: Level B2 in all competences in the first foreign language; Level B2 in receptive skills and B1 in productive skills in the second foreign language of study; Level A2 in all competences in the third foreign language.

As long as the whole curriculum should be a coherent system, it means that all its components (curricula, textbooks, didactic process) should aim towards the same levels of performance. In order to achieve such coherence, common criteria should be applied in assessing the level of performance targeted by each curricular component.

In spite of the fact that it has been designed to reach other purposes, the written assessment criteria grid enclosed in the Council of Europe's Manual for Relating language

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examinations to the CEFR supports the type of analysis needed in assessing any written production.

The descriptors of performance have been conceived on a vertical axis which shapes the gradual stages of the progress recorded by the learner from the Basic User (Level A1) to the Proficient User (Level C2), as well as on a horizontal axis which covers the main productive linguistic competences and communicative strategies required in order to reach each level of performance. While assessing the written activities suggested by a certain textbook, one has to take into account not only the task, the genre of the production (letter, review, essay, report, story) or its theme, but also the strategies that the learners should be able to make use of in order to solve the task, such as:

- the rhetorical functions expected in the response elicited (describing, narrating, arguing, persuading, comparing and contrasting and so on);
- the register the learner is expected to adopt in his response;
- the domain to which the expected response is imagined to belong (personal, public, occupational, educational);
- the expected level of grammatical accuracy;
- the expected level of lexical ability to be dispplayed in the response;
- the expected level of discoursal ability.

As for the assessment of reading/listening texts and tasks, one has to consider on the one hand, the features of the suggested text and on the other hand, the patterns of each item within each reading/listening task. The analysis to follow draws both on the Dutch CEFR Grid which guides any assessor in the analysis of text sources, item types and strategies used in reading/listening and on the CEFR Grid for Writing developed by ALTE members. As the process of written mediation involves integrated skills, reception and production combined, we have made use of the above criteria to assess the level of performance targeted by the mediation activities suggested in the units of ***Prospects Super-Advanced***, textbook currently in use for studying English as the first foreign language in the 12th grade.

First of all, we must notice that each of the 20 units of the textbook includes several types of tasks that aim at developing written production skills. Taking into account the genre of the expected response we can classify the target productions of these activities into three main categories according to the productive competences to be developed, as follows: Written Mediation (mainly summarizing texts as suggested by the CEFR grid *Processing texts*), Written production (narrative, descriptive or argumentative essays, assessed according to the CEFR grids *Creative writing* and *Reports and essays*) and Written Interaction (mainly formal or informal letters, as mentioned within the CEFR grids for *Overall Written Interaction*, *Correspondence*, *Notes, messages and forms*).

Further on, we draw a synthetic presentation of the written mediation activities suggested by the authors of this textbook, associating them to the representative descriptors of performance from the CEFR scales which argue in favor of assessing the tasks at a certain level of performance. This procedure will also help us identify the degree of correspondence with the prescriptions of the curricula.

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UNIT	MEDIATION TASKS	DESCRIPTORS OF PERFORMANCE (CEFR SCALES)	LEVEL
U1	Complete the summary in 60 words. (W 1, p. 4)	*Can collate short pieces of information from several sources and summarise them for somebody else. Can paraphrase short written passages in a simple fashion, using the original text wording and ordering.* (Processing texts)	**B1**
U2	Essay (150 words): summarise the narrative text and comment upon its style and effect on the reader (W1, p.10)	*Is skilled at using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next.* (Identifying cues and inferring)	**C1**
		Can summarise a wide range of factual and imaginative texts, commenting on and discussing contrasting points of view and the main themes. (Processing texts)	**B2**
U4	Essay (150 words): summarise the narrative text and comment upon its style and effect on the reader (W1a, p.22)	*Is skilled at using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next.* (Identifying cues and inferring)	**C1**
U4	Summarise the literary excerpt (100 words) (W1b, p.22)	*Can summarise the plot and the sequence of events in a film or play.* (Processing texts)	**B2**
U6	Essay (150 words): summarise the narrative text and comment upon its style and effect on the reader (W2, p.34)	*Is skilled at using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next.* (Identifying cues and inferring)	**C1**
		Can summarise a wide range of factual and imaginative texts, commenting on and discussing contrasting points of view and the main themes. (Processing texts)	**B2**
U8	Essay (250 words) based upon the listening: *Aborigieni* (W, p.46)	*Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources.* (Reports and essays) *Can summarise extracts from news items, interviews or documentaries containing opinions, argument and discussion.* (Processing texts)	**B2**
U9	Summary (100 words) of a literary excerpt. (W1, p.50)	*Can summarise extracts from news items, interviews or documentaries containing opinions, argument and discussion.* (Processing texts)	**B2**
U10	Summary of a literary excerpt (W1, p.54)	*Can summarise extracts from news items, interviews or documentaries containing opinions, argument and discussion.* Can summarise the plot and the sequence of events in a film or a play. (Processing texts)	**B2**
U13	Summary (100 words) of a literary excerpt (W1, p.74)	Can summarise the plot and the sequence of events in a film or a play. (Processing texts)	**B2+**
U14	Summary (100 words) of a newspaper article.	*Can summarise extracts from news items, interviews or documentaries containing opinions, argument and discussion.* (Processing texts)	**B2**
U15	Opinion essay based on listening (300 words). (Wb, p.87)	*Can write clear, detailed descriptions of real or imaginary events and experiences marking the relationship between ideas in clear connected text and following the established conventions of the genre concerned.* (Creative writing)	**B2+**
U15	Summary (50 words) of a newspaper article. (Wa, p.87)	*Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources.* (Reports and essays) *Can summarise extracts from news items, interviews or documentaries containing opinions, argument and discussion.* (Processing texts)	**B2**

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U17	Comment upon the literary excerpt. (W1, p.98)	*Is skilled at using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next.* (Identifying cues and inferring)	**C1**
U18	Literary essay: analyzing a poem (W, p.104)	*Can produce clear, smoothly flowing complex reports, articles and essays which present a case or give critical appreciation of proposals or literary works.* (Reports and essays)	**C2**
U19	Commenting upon a literary excerpt. (W, p.110)	*Is skilled at using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next.* (Identifying cues and inferring)	**C1**

It comes out that the degree of difficulty of the written tasks is generally determined by the way in which the task is constructed concerning the length and structure of the text to be produced. The more developed, detailed and argumented the elicited response is, the higher the target level of performance. Among the other factors that influence to a great extent the degree of difficulty of the written tasks, we must mention here:

- the genre of the expected response: stories and personal letters (B1); movie or book reviews and formal/informal letters (B2); detailed descriptions of events and argumentative essays (B2+);
- the genre of the input text (in the case of mediation activities): letters, brochures, short newspaper articles, short stories (A2); movies, plays (B2); news, documentaries, interviews, specialized articles (B2+); long argumentative texts (C1-C2);
- the thematic domain: personal (A1-A2); personal and educational (B1); public and occupational (B2-C1);
- the degree of coherence of the text produced: basic connectors *and/then* (A1); simple linkers *and/but/because* (A2); simple, discrete elements (B1); a limited number of cohesive devices (B2); organizational patterns and a large range of cohesive devices (C1-C2);
- the expected degree of grammatical and lexical accuracy: simple phrases and structures (A2); frequent structures and lexical circumlocutions (B1); lack of errors that might lead to the misunderstanding of the expressed meaning (B2); high degree of grammatical accuracy and good control of the idiomatic and colloquial expressions (C1).

Half of the mediation tasks within the units of *Prospects Super-Advanced* target a higher level of performance (B2/C1 or even C2) than the one prescribed (B2) by the curricula for the 12th grade. There are slight differences between the two curricular components which allow the teacher to select the most suitable activities depending on the level of his/her pupils. That is why we suggest the use of standardized tests in order to diagnose the real level of performance of the pupils' communicative competences and to find the appropriate remedies for the noticed gaps.

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