

Online teaching and assessment of linguistic mediation in the Official School of Languages

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ABSTRACT

Both teachers and students fear mediation and even more since Covid19 was declared as a global pandemic forcing everyone meet online teaching and learning. This paper aims to share how to teach linguistic mediation strategies to advanced English C levels optimizing the Moodle¹ platform in the Official Schools of Languages (OSL). The main objective is to demonstrate how mediation strategies can be taught through both synchronous and asynchronous sessions by analyzing and discussing students' contributions and observations made during the course 2020/21 in the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas a Distancia de Canaria (AEOI) in the level C1 of English.

Keywords: Linguistic mediation, OSL, AEOI, foreign language teaching, e-learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The abrupt introduction of Mediation in the Official Schools of Languages (OSL) as a compulsory and assessed 'skill' together with Covid-19 shutting down schools and centers all over the globe has actually led to a totally unexpected situation for most teachers and students enrolled on the OSL.

As pointed out by Olazarán (2020), "The rush to introduce this competence in the curriculum of foreign language teaching, which contains both a written and oral test, has caused several inconveniences for teachers of the OSL and created uncertainty for students. Carlos Remón, deputy director of the OSL of Pamplona, agrees on its abrupt introduction and shows concern towards both the teacher and the student community, but affirms that it is a mere basic decree that had to be applied at that exact moment".²

Despite the fact that there has been a great deal of research done on mediation in the field of Translation and Interpretation, with a long record on exploring the use of translation in learning contexts that are not exclusively related to training professional translators (Laviosa y González-Davies [eds.] 2020)³, there is still not enough research concerning the introduction of mediation in the field of foreign language learning. In the recent years, some research on the connection between mediation and Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) has been conducted by authors such as Mayr (2009)⁴ or Leung & Jenkins (2020)⁵, who study the roles of plurilingual and multicultural learning contexts during the acquisition of mediation, enhancing autonomous work and learning.

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the linguistic mediation descriptors and strategies for English advanced learners (C levels) and to illustrate the use of Moodle activities and resources to teach and assess them.

2. LINGUISTIC MEDIATION

2.1. An overview of the concept of mediation

The 2001 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptive scheme first gave the concept of mediation a key position in the action-oriented approach. It was introduced additionally to the four traditional skills, as one of the four modes of communication, that is: reception, interaction, production and mediation⁵.

	RECEPTION	PRODUCTION	INTERACTION	MEDIATION
Planning	<i>Framing</i>	Planning	N/A	
Execution	Inferring	Compensating	Turn-taking Cooperating	Linking to previous knowledge Adapting language Breaking down complicated info Amplifying a dense text Streamlining a text
Evaluation & Repair	<i>Monitoring</i>	Monitoring and self-correction	Asking for clarification <i>Communication repair</i>	

Figure 1. Chart of the four modes of communications provided by the CEFR.

Some years later, in 2018, the Council of Europe together with a number of institutions in the field of language education, produced an extended version of the illustrative descriptors that complements the original ones contained in the body of the 2001 CEFR text. Among some innovations on key aspects such as reactions to creative texts, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, CEFR profiles and some others, they also clarify the descriptors for mediation for all levels.

2.2. What are our advanced English learners expected to do?

In this paper, we will focus on teaching mediation for learners aiming at C1 level finals and certification exams. We are meant to teach written and oral mediation throughout the course, but our students will only be assessed in both oral and written in their certification exams, and only oral mediation in their finals in May.

The rubric we use to assess oral and written mediation focuses on two aspects:

Communication management

- Explain data(e.g. in graphs, diagrams, charts etc.) identifying and selecting the main aspects, additional details and relevant examples, rephrasing without any effort.
- Process text in a coherent way, by organizing ideas using a wide range of cohesive devices in order to transmit the relevant details for the listener or reader in the most effective way (they have 2-3 minutes for oral mediation and around 80 words for the written one).

Task adequacy:

- Identify the needs of the addressee in a precise and effective way to adapt language and register to the purpose, situation, addressee, and channel of communication in a flexible and efficient way.
- Develop content as required transmitting complex ideas without any effort, extending information, or providing with relevant examples and clarifications for the target addressee.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this section is to illustrate some of the previous theoretical considerations with qualitative data taken from synchronous and asynchronous tasks provided to students of the C1 level of the AEOI during the course 2020/21 to meet the descriptors presented in the previous section (2).

3.1. Using synchronous and asynchronous activities and resources wisely

E-learning comprises both synchronous and asynchronous work, and it is important for students to understand this. We monitor then through both types, so we need to arrange and plan our activities accordingly.

For example, in synchronous sessions we show them practical samples of the strategies they need to use in mediation, and then we check understanding through asynchronous tools.

Moodle offers multiple tools for synchronous sessions. Blackboard allows us to practice both productive and receptive skills, and, of course, mediation.

3.2. Mediation strategies and Moodle resources to teach them

Concerning strategies, there is a wide range of Moodle activities and resources we can use. In this section, we will provide examples of how to train students to nail the target mediation strategies using certain Moodle tools.

3.2.1. Linking to previous knowledge and breaking down complicated information

The following task was shared with this group of students during a synchronous session in Moodle, using the external tool Blackboard.

You work as a history teacher at a high school and you need to talk to your 15-year old students about the Baby Boomer generation. You have this picture on your course book. Connect and expand some of the following complex and relevant events and data to engage your students and make them really understand this generation. 2-3 mins.

BABY BOOMERS

The Cold War
Rock 'N' Roll
Civil Rights
76,000,000
G.I. Bill
Cuban Missile Crisis

Figure: Mediation activity shared during a synchronous session in Blackboard

As the task reads, students were expected to make this complex content more accessible to the audience (15-year-old students) by explaining difficult aspects more explicitly and adding helpful detail.

Oral performances of students were recorded, and the following one transcript for the purpose of this paper:

(‘Good morning dear students. Well, we have been learning about generational differences for a couple of days, and in today’s session we’re working on the largest social generation: Baby Boomers. How old are your parents?’) This student was trying to activate the listeners’ background knowledge connecting the term to concepts a 15-year-old knows, which can help the student understand what you are trying to explain (CEFR 2001: 128). *(If they were born between 1946 and 1964, your parents belong to the baby boomers generation! This generation has experienced some of the most important events in American history. The Cold War and the Cuban Missile crisis brought fear to everyone in the United States. Both involved the United States being at stake of being attacked by other nations. Still, this generation was able to stand up and fight for their rights and finally, in 1964 the Civil Rights Act was signed, banning segregation based on race and national origin in public places)* By just focusing on the impact this three complex events had on this generation, this student transmits content which is too dense or complex for the audience to understand, making it more accessible by explaining difficult aspects more explicitly and adding helpful detail (CEFR 2001: 128). *(So, next time you see your parents, say thank*

you! In our next session, we will talk about the next generation: Generation Z. Don't forget to do your homework. See you next day!')

3.2.1.1. Adapting language

The glossary activity enables participants to create and maintain a list of definitions, like a dictionary, in which they collect and organize resources or information in an asynchronous way. The following figure shows a C1 level's student's entry for the word *Globalization*

Add a new entry

Browse by alphabet

Browse by category


Browse the glossary using this index

Special | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | ALL

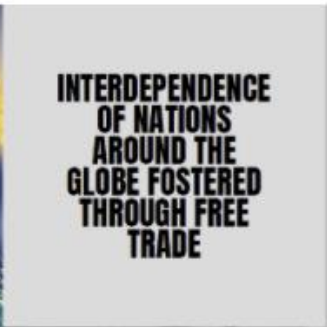
Globalisation

The increase of trade around the world, especially by large companies producing and trading goods in many different countries.


(Online Cambridge Dictionary)




GLOBALIZATION
Comparatives with The...



**INTERDEPENDENCE
OF NATIONS
AROUND THE
GLOBE FOSTERED
THROUGH FREE
TRADE**



'GLOBE'
**SPREAD OF
PRODUCTS,
TECHNOLOGY,
INFORMATION, AND
JOBS ACROSS
NATIONAL BORDERS
AND CULTURES**



Pros

Figure 3. Student's Word entry

By providing a description that relates all terms in certain way, this student has successfully built conceptual knowledge, which helps them explain technical terminology and difficult concepts when communicating with non-experts (CEFR 2001: 128), another strategy they need to know to adapt language when explaining a new concept in order to mediate.

Closely related to this last strategy is learning how to make maximum use of learner's online dictionaries. By doing so, learners will learn to adapt their language (e.g. syntax, idiomaticity, jargon) in order to make a complex specialist topic accessible to recipients who are not familiar with it (CEFR 2001: p.128)⁷.

Moodle allows us to add any external resources needed to complement the teaching experience: files, external tools and links... Offering and teaching an effective use of online dictionaries to our students, we can help them "foster his productive use of language, rather than just as an aid to comprehension"⁷

Added by selecting the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) tool, students can have access to both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, including online dictionaries for learners, where our students can find different definitions according to their language for the same word. Being aware of the language constraints speakers with different competencies/levels can have when understanding terms they hear for the first time seems to help our students paraphrase and interpret complex, technical texts, using suitably non-technical language for a listener or reader who does not have specialist knowledge (CEFR 2018: p.128)⁷.

Concerning exclusively synchronous sessions, the external tool Blackboard allows us to perform any sort of interacting activity to train mediation strategies. Let's take a jigsaw reading in Blackboard as an example.

Blackboard offers the possibility to divide participants into different rooms within the same session, so we divide students into A and B. We can monitor them jumping from one group to another while they share ideas from both texts and give them some feedback on accuracy for example.

The fact that they have to share ideas categorizing the main points and presenting them in a logically connected pattern helps them reinforce the message and thus facilitate understanding of a complex issue (CEFR 2018: p.129)⁷.

A database is an asynchronous activity that allows students to build data, display and search a bank of entries on a selected topic in a collaborative way. Participants can comment on their mates' entries, which is a way of expanding knowledge and checking for understanding.

We can easily monitor and mark our students' participations, and check whether or not they are expanding the right content in the right way according to the given audience in the task. In order to avoid participants checking others contributions before theirs, you can also limit the maximum number of entries per participants.

This activity allows assessment, so if you want to assess this strategy, just activate the approval required and the number of entries required for completion, so you can revise their contributions and record results.

3.2.1.2. Streamlining a text

An e-voting activity module enables students to vote via their smartphone or their laptop and have the results displayed on a graph in real time. It has proved to be ideal to capture the attention of wide groups, very common in online teaching. The following task was done synchronously:

You work for the Human Resources department of a big company and are asked - for the second time- to give a brief talk on the corporate dressing code to some employees who've been reported not dressing appropriately. They claim to belong to the hipster culture and demand their right to express themselves with their attires. Please make sure you reorganize the information from this company's appendix on the dress code in order to focus on the points they should take into consideration. (Check the appendix with your corporate dressing code)

Which of the following points do these employees really need to understand?

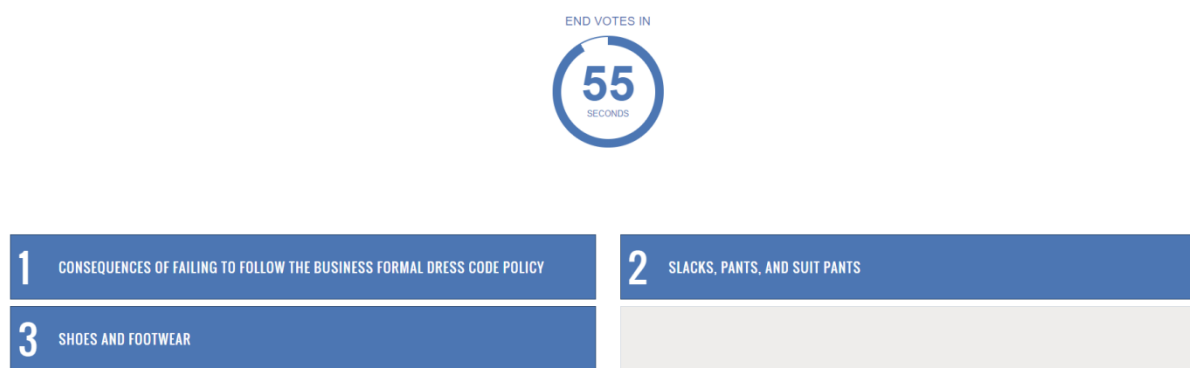


Figure: Sample question for them to vote

The results obtained showed that this task helped students recognize what chapters from the code were pertinent to those workers, and discard the ones that were not relevant for the target audience (CEFR 2018: p.129)

4. CONCLUSIONS

It is an undeniable truth that online teaching requires a ridiculous amount of time and effort, but as we have seen throughout this paper, online platforms offer plenty of possibilities to fulfill our learning targets and fully involve learners in the process, especially when teaching mediation in the given context. The fact that students are aware of the necessary mediation strategies they aim at level C1 is vital, and Moodle gives us the chance to apply a completely student-centered approach by providing us with varied resources and activities, both synchronous and asynchronous to adapt to the needs and goals of our students in the AEOL. In this hybrid learning model, the advantages seem to outweigh the difficulties. As stated by the National Association for College Admission Counselling (NACAC), “Synchronous learning enhances classroom engagement and allows for a more dynamic exploration of topics, ideas, and concepts, while asynchronous learning gives both students and teachers certain flexibility, letting them set the pace”⁹.

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