

The relevance of Mediation for the implementation of the EU Language Policy of Multilingualism

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Abstract: Mediation constitutes an important process through which social communication and social meaning are interpreted and circulated through the help of an intermediary between persons who are unable to participate in direct communication. Mediation can take place either within a single society or between two societies, nations, and cultures where ideas and values are not shared which may cause misunderstandings to arise. There have been radical social and political changes in Europe due to increased mobility, wider contacts with Europeans, development of tourism, student exchange programs, and new countries becoming members of the EU, factors which have led to EU enlargement and as a consequence the adoption of educational policies to promote and encourage plurilingualism and multiculturalism among European citizens. The language activities employing mediation strategies such as explaining an existing text in different words, form a considerable part of the everyday use of language catering for societies' communication needs. This paper attempts to demonstrate the importance of mediation activities in contemporary multicultural societies in facilitating communication between persons who are unable to communicate with each other by enhancing the linguistic and intercultural communication among speakers of different languages, dialects or registers.

Keywords: mediation, CEFR, multilingualism, plurilingual repertoire, intercultural interaction, cross-cultural understanding, plurilingual and pluricultural competences, communicative competence.

I. INTRODUCTION

The CEFR is the result of the Council of Europe's involvement in the development of language teaching, learning and assessment. A major emphasis is placed on the cultural dimension of changing European societies, including activities such as the promotion of the intercultural dialogue and regard for the cultural heritage of various societies. The Council was set up, among other things, to promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values and cutting across different cultures (Morrow, 2004: 4). This objective is the most interesting and the most relevant to the discussion, since both cultural awareness and appreciation of the value of cultural identity can be achieved through intercultural mediation.

A challenging task for the Council of Europe is to encourage Europeans to look beyond their own culture and overcome their inability to linguistically understand what is happening in other European countries. Therefore, the Council of Europe has long been preoccupied with the promotion of language teaching/learning objectives aimed at the development of intercultural awareness, objectives which comprise a major part of the development of competence in another language or other languages (Morrow, 2004: 4-5).

The main objective regarding the creation of the CEFR is to provide a common basis for the discussion of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations and textbooks across Europe. It defines levels of proficiency across six levels by describing the language abilities acquired at each level – A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 – including a descriptor expressed in positive “can-do” statements for reception, production, interaction and mediation, i.e. translation, interpretation (Council of Europe, 2001: 1). Heyworth (2004: 182) states that the CEFR proficiency levels have been

adopted by organizations of language teaching and assessment. Various examinations boards, many of which as members of ALTE such as Cambridge ESOL, the Goethe Institute and the Alliance Française, have calibrated their examinations according to the six levels and course book levels are indicated accordingly.

II. MEDIATION ACTIVITIES IN THE CEFR

In the CEFR (2001: 14) descriptive scheme, communicative tasks consist of language activities which are divided into Reception, Production, Interaction and Mediation (principally translation and interpretation), each of which can be accomplished orally or in writing, or in a combination of speaking and writing. Apart from the well-known skills of reading and listening (the receptive skills) speaking and writing (the productive skills) accompanied by the various corresponding receptive and productive activities, the CEFR includes mediation and interaction, which constitute two other skills that focus on the relationship between two interlocutors where it is necessary to initiate communication through the intervention of a translator or interpreter.

The mediation activities involve both reception and production and consist of translation and interpretation (such as summarising, reporting, or (re)formulation of statements). The language activities employing mediation, of explaining an existing text in different words, form a considerable part of the everyday use of language catering for societies' communication needs. Mediation, however, had not been taken up on a large scale in the CEFR 2001; one of the reasons for the limited use of mediation activities is the fact that, as opposed to the other three language activities of Reception, Production and Interaction, no illustrative scales with can-do statements were available. However, the CEFR, Companion Volume 2018 included considerable updates on a number of elements including new mediation concepts which had not been developed and discussed in the earlier version. The definition of mediation offered in the CEFR/CV suggests that mediation activities involve "passing on new information in an appropriate form; collaborating to construct new meaning; encouraging others to construct or understand new meaning, and creating the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning." (CEFR/CV 2018: 99). In correspondence with this definition, the new updated CEFR/CV 2018 contains scales and descriptors for mediation connected to the different proficiency levels which can be categorised in three different groups i.e. mediating communication in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, mediating concepts such as brainstorming and developing concepts and texts involving text reformulation (CEFR/CV, 2018: 106). Furthermore, mediation strategies are included referring to the techniques that a language user should apply in processing a source text to be received appropriately by the recipient. The mediation strategies mainly refer to strategies linking to previous knowledge, adapting language and breaking down information that is complicated as well as simplifying or streamlining a complex text (CEFR/CV, 2018:126). The language activity of mediation described in the CEFR/CV needs to be further developed through the inclusion of the mediation activity into the curriculum and the detailed description of the different forms of mediation activities involved in training the language learners in using their mediation skills optimally.

III. MEDIATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE EU LANGUAGE LEARNING POLICY OF MULTILINGUALISM

The inclusion of the parameter of mediation in the CEFR suggests a change in direction regarding foreign language pedagogy and opens up a new dimension in the teaching, learning and assessment of languages. The underlying principle for this change in foreign language didactics is the notion of multilingualism, which constitutes a fundamental part of the EU's language and language education policies. Multilingualism assumed a new role with the establishment of the European Union that followed the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the acquisition of multilingual proficiency through the learning of Community languages, i.e., official languages of the European Union, proposed by the 1+2 language learning policy.

According to this policy, all European citizens should be able to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to the mother tongue. One of the main objectives of the Lisbon Strategy adopted by the EU member states in 2000 was the improvement of foreign language learning. There was a change of focus regarding EU language education policy in that foreign language learning was regarded as important not only for cultural advancement but also in terms of mobility and European competitiveness (Mackiewicz, 2009: 4). Multilingualism is closely interwoven with the societal, political and economic developments that have taken place in the EU over the past few years. These include:

- the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007;

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- increasing intra-European trade and mobility of workers;
- globalisation and internationalisation in many fields of human activity
- increasing collaboration between the EU and third countries;
- revitalisation of regions within Member States, and of cross-border regions;
- migration into the Union – to the extent that practically all Member States are now migration countries;
- rampant developments in ICT, facilitating, among other things, instant communication from practically any place in the world to any other;
- creation of a European Higher Education Area and a European Research Area, and an internationalisation of universities and research institutes;
- the advent of knowledge-based economies. (Mackiewicz, 2009: 5)

Indeed, there has been an increase in the number of languages spoken in the EU due to its enlargement and many EU countries are hosts to a large number of speakers of other EU languages, together with the migrant population including speakers of non-official EU languages. This situation has resulted in EU member states becoming multilingual and multicultural with the implementation of multilingual policies focusing on both the individual and the society. According to Mackiewicz (2009: 6) societal multilingualism and linguistic and cultural diversity are values of paramount importance. They require the enforcement and implementation of policies, strategies and practices because multilingualism and multilingual competence no longer simply facilitates communication and understanding between the Union citizens but also contributes to the dialogue between groups at local, regional, and national level and promotes international communication and dialogue as well.

An aspect of multilingualism that is reinforced by the EU is the individuals' benefits in terms of employment prospects and access not only to different cultures but also to services and rights which comprises one of the primary aims of democratic citizenry. Biseth (2008: 5) argues that there is a close relationship between language education, multilingualism and democracy. He claims that linguistic proficiency in different languages plays an important role in contributing towards member states adapting to linguistic diversity within their nations' boundaries, since democracy entails the participation of all citizens including people who come from linguistic minorities.

Multilingualism refers to the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to communicate in different languages within a range of different contexts, i.e., family, school, working environment and "is seen as being of crucial importance to the Lisbon goals of competitiveness, growth, better jobs, social cohesion, and international dialogue, trade and cooperation" (Mackiewicz, 2009: 6). In the light of the above, it could be inferred that multilingualism is directly associated with the Union's economic and general political aims.

Individuals can be expected to learn a certain number of languages and for this reason language mediation, notably translation and interpretation, has gained increased importance for economic performance and social cohesion. Translation and interpretation as well as other forms of linguistic mediation, such as community interpreting, are not just a means of facilitating communication between speakers of different languages within multilingual communities but are indispensable in enabling Europeans to have access to different cultures. From this perspective, multilingualism is closely related to language education aimed at the development of the interlinguistic mediation abilities which constitutes an important value and a significant characteristic of European cultural identity.

Through the implementation of policies for democratic citizenship and social cohesion, the Council of Europe attaches the highest importance to improving the ability of Europeans to communicate with each other through the development of plurilingualism "as a basis for the maintenance of European social and cultural diversity and mutual respect and solidarity" (Mendes and Moreira, 2005: 3). The individual's plurilingual repertoire is made up of different languages and language varieties at different levels of proficiency and includes different types of competences. Therefore, it is important for language education to ensure the development of the language learners' plurilingual repertoire which is related to the development of the intercultural competence, i.e., the ability to move and mediate among people of various languages and cultures.

IV. MULTILINGUALISM AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural communicative competence is central to European citizens living and working in a multilingual and multicultural Europe. The foreign language classroom is the place for intercultural interactions and the construction of meaning and identities in order to create a society based upon respect for human dignity, democratic citizenship and mutual comprehension. (Mendes and Moreira, 2005: 2). Moreover, Beacco and Byram (2003: 34) contend that the development of intercultural mediation ability constitutes a goal of language teaching that enables the plurilingual individual to acquire a capacity for living in the multilingual environment of contemporary Europe.

Consequently, European language policies emphasise the benefits of plurilingualism and the importance of language education in promoting European citizenry and social identity among the citizens of member states, objectives which embody political goals pursued by the Council of Europe. Mediation has a decisive role to play in the formation of plurilingual and pluricultural competence because it involves interaction in, understanding of, sensitivity to, and respect for other linguistic and cultural communities, not only through learning and using foreign languages but also through the individual's ability to interpret and mediate between different cultures and linguistic systems. Intercultural interaction with the "Other" should be approached and handled through the processes of mediation and negotiation, placing the individual between identities and cultures. This position constitutes the heart of intercultural competence whose purpose is to promote a) cross-cultural understanding in interactions with people from different language and cultural backgrounds and b) the ability to manage features of cultural differences.

More specifically, the mediation of languages and cultures creates a common ground where communication is made possible between two individuals without having to abandon their self-identities when in contact with the "Other". A person's ability to form "an intersection in oneself of the discursive contexts of two distinct languages and cultures creates a third space of cultural definition "a third culture in its own right" (Kramsch, 1993: 23). This entails the formation of a third identity, which can draw upon the L1 and L2 cultures in enunciating personal meanings. A critical foreign language pedagogy which concentrates on the social processes of enunciation demonstrates the ability of revealing the codes "under which speakers in cross-cultural encounters operate, and of constructing something different and hybrid from these cross-cultural encounters" (Kramsch, 1996: 7). Intercultural encounters, as argued above, are characterised by hybridity, in which members of different groups engaged in social interaction with each other have to activate these interpretive processes in order to understand each other "in highly altered hybrid and culturally mixed situations of intercultural communication" (Scollon and Scollon, 200: 13). In the context of the foreign language classroom, the production of oral and written texts by language learners should not be considered only in terms of grammatical and lexical enunciation or in terms of expressing the thoughts of their authors but "as situated utterances contributing to the construction, perpetuation, or subversion of particular contexts" (Kramsch, 1996: 8).

V. CONCLUSION

The interface of mediation and multilingualism forms a particular linguistic, social and cultural contact zone where meaning of languages, identities and relationships are reassessed and renegotiated. In the mediation activity, as has been previously mentioned, the language user acts as an intermediary between two or more persons who are unable to communicate directly. Since mediation is a language-learning skill that is useful in real life situations, it is important to make EFL learners aware of the competences, skills and strategies required in the mediation activities. Foreign language teachers should include this language activity in their curriculum together with promoting classroom-based evaluation practice. Mediation is not just a language learning tool, but a skill which is not only useful but also fundamental in everyday life situations as well. It places emphasis on the interconnection between mediation and the notions of negotiation and interpretation of social meaning among different languages and cultures, an essential element for the development of intercultural competence.

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