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Mediation and the CEFR: descriptors for an undervalued concept

Abstract

This paper presents a 2014–7 Council of Europe project that developed CEFR illustrative descriptors for mediation, the fourth communicative language activity presented in the CEFR's descriptive scheme to complement reception, production and interaction. This area was not covered in the original set developed from the 1993–7 Swiss National Research Project (North 2000, North & Schneider 1998; Schneider & North 2000). Following Piccardo (2012), the project developed the fuller implications of the way mediation is presented in the CEFR, encompassing mediating concepts, mediating communication and mediating a text. The approach taken followed a three-stage, mixed methods, developmental design, as in the original Swiss project. The descriptors are available online in English in a *CEFR Companion Volume*, with French and German versions to follow by early 2018.

Summary

Conceptualizing mediation

The CEFR introduced mediation as the fourth mode of communication alongside reception, production and interaction. Mediation is more complex than the other three modes since it often encompasses all of them. Another attribute is that users/learners are not usually concerned with their own ideas or expression (as in production) but with the ideas of others, which they are mediating. The CEFR stresses the social, collaborative vision of language by seeing the user/learner as a social agent, as well as recognising that mediating as an intermediary spans the linguistic, cultural and social dimensions. The key concepts relating to mediation are introduced in the CEFR as “[making] communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason to communicate with each other directly. ... Mediation language activities, (re)processing an existing text, occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies.” (CEFR Section 2.1.3; underlining added).

However, the concept of mediation has a long history in both diplomacy and philosophy. For Hegel, thought was a mediation process through which knowledge was acquired, a view to which Marx and Engels added a social dimension and the work of Vygotsky explained how social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition: with every concept appearing twice, first at the social, then at the individual level. The interdependence of individual and collective, cognitive and social, intrapersonal and interpersonal is crucial to the understanding of mediation. In the socio-cultural view of learning the concept of ‘*linguaging*,’ alone or with others, is the way thought is articulated in order to mediate meaning.

Descriptor development

The development process was closely modelled on that used to produce the original CEFR illustrative descriptors following three broad phases in a mixed-method developmental design. Work on cross-linguistic mediation led naturally to consideration of plurilingual and pluricultural competences. In addition, a new scale for phonology was developed because the existing CEFR scale for *Phonological control*, alone amongst the CEFR illustrative scales, took an implied native speaker as a point of reference with unrealistic expectations for B2.

demic, and professional life and in today's globalised world this mediation is frequently cross-linguistic. In knowledge-based societies, an ability to sift and process information – perhaps in more than one language – to identify and pass on what is relevant, is also of constantly increasing importance. In order to help to bring out the relevance of the mediation descriptors to different areas, examples related to the four domains outlined in the CEFR (public, private, occupational, educational) have been provided for each of the descriptors for mediation activities.

One can quickly recognise a number of contexts to which the mediation descriptors may prove useful and identify which particular scales might be relevant to which groups. Possible examples of these groups in addition to second language learners at school, are migrant children in schools, teachers giving subjects through an additional language, international students following university preparation courses, adult migrants, people working with adult migrants, businessmen, and seminar leaders/trainers.

The vision of the CEFR encourages and values the dynamic and collaborative nature of user/learners' trajectories. We hope that the results of this project will enable CEFR users to appreciate the nature and relevance of mediation in (language) education at all levels. We believe that the provision of the new illustrative descriptors will be a stimulus to users of the CEFR to consider the forms in which mediation through language takes place in their context, the categories of mediation that appear relevant, and the place of plurilingual and pluricultural competence in their curriculum.

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