

MEDIATION TECHNIQUES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Language learning and cultural mediation / translation is a new field of research and work that is still in the development phase and has only recently started to receive attention. There are different definitions, concepts and historical developments on this theme in various countries. But it is obvious; mediation / translation is inherent in language learning process and should be considered a fifth skill to be practised within the language classroom, alongside reading, listening, speaking and writing.

We view mediation as: 1) a social practice the purpose of which is to work against communication breakdowns, to fill information gaps and / or interpret meanings for others who can not understand what is said or written; 2) the production of a target text from an initial one in order to communicate its content, taking into account internal and external factors of intercultural communicative situations. It is somewhat different from other activities and is not achieved by overlapping or juxtaposing of various competences.

There can be little doubt that one general use of translation is as a scaffolding activity, when L1 assistance is warranted, and there tends to be much mental translation in situations where L1 is excluded. On this view, one of the central techniques of any foreign language teacher is or should be “the sandwich technique”. It is the quickest way to make authentic classroom communication possible: statement in L2, restatement in L1, as a kind of whispered interpreting, and again in L2. The point is that students should be free to ask how to say things in L2, or should simply insert the L1 expression, rather than stop talking. Word equations can indeed be misleading, but an everyday reality shows that one-to-one equivalences are not an illusion, if we locate it at the level of collocations, word groups, and sentences.

However, quite different kinds of activities can be used at the other end of the scale, with learners who are able to use translation as a communicative activity that draws on some levels in all other language skills. The easiest way to start mediation / translation activities is from spoken interactions. Numerous simulated situations can be created in class in order to get students to act as mediators, interpreters in roles where they are obliged to use L2 and L1 in order to create understanding. They simulate an interaction, for example between a journalist and a specialist on the topic chosen for the lesson. Students take turns to interpret what is said in the other language. They are allowed to ask for a limited number of repetitions or clarifications. This reduces the chances of misunderstandings. Gestures and facial expressions can be a useful way of getting around a point if students are stuck. One way to break with a literalist conception of translation and to adapt messages to the situation is to make students translate fast, and organize races between them. They will quickly learn how to render messages rather than words, and how to select the parts of the message that are most needed. Students are these days using many written modes of communication that are based on speed and features of spoken language. Short text messages, be they SMS on mobile phones or tweets on Twitter, are ideal for translation races.

In practical terms, written mediation also brings a number of beneficial aspects to the general process of language learning. Students should be required to: relay the key information in L2 or make a written comment in L2, using the L1 text as a stimulus; summarize, explain, interpret or freely render a L1 text into the target language. Comparing and reflecting on the various possibilities of translation, mediation provides deep insight into the nature of languages and cultures.

Mediation / translation skills are necessary in professional and educational fields, in public and in private domains in modern societies.