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Investigating Mediation as Translanguaging Practice in a Testing Context: Towards the Development of Levelled Mediation Descriptors

Bio data

Maria Stathopoulou is a graduate of the Faculty of English Language and Literature, University of Athens (honors degree). She holds a PhD (with distinction) and an MA degree in Applied Linguistics (valedictorian) from the same faculty. She is currently working for the Research Centre for Language Teaching, Testing and Assessment, University of Athens, as a research asssociate. Since 2008, she has been a member of the English team preparing the national exams for the Greek State Certificate of Foreign Language Competence (known as KPG). She is also involved in the "Teaching of English to Very Young Learners" project, known as PEAP, and is a member of the research team responsible for the linking of the KPG exams to the mainstream educational system. Additionally, she has been involved in the KPG test-taking strategies project and has helped organize some KPG experimental classes at state institutions. She has also been awarded the Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund (Sylff) by The Tokyo Foundation. Her work, which primarily focuses on EFL testing and assessment, the evaluation of mediation performance and the investigation of test-taking strategies, has been presented in national and international conferences. Her recent papers are: The linguistic characteristics of written mediation tasks which is to appear in Versita (Polland) and Test-taking strategies in the KPG reading test: Instrument construction & investigation results, which appears in The Journal of Applied Linguistics (JAL).

Abstract

This paper reports on findings of a longitudinal research project exploring the complex nature of interlinguistic mediation -a communicative undertaking which entails purposeful selection of information by the mediator from a source text in one language and relaying this information into another language, with the intention of bridging the communication gap between interlocutors. Although in today's multilingual contexts, it is essential for individuals to have acquired the skills and strategies that will enable them to use two or more languages in a parallel fashion (an ability foreseen by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), mediation as translanguaging practice has not received much attention, probably for reasons related to the monolingual paradigm in mainstream language teaching and testing. Given that the CEFR provides no benchmarked illustrative descriptors relevant to mediation, this research has set out to investigate what counts as successful mediation. Specifically, by drawing data from the KPG English Corpus, which comprises collections of written texts (scripts) produced by users of English who have sat for the Greek national standardized foreign language exams (known as KPG) -the only examination system in Europe which assesses test-takers' mediation ability- this study identifies successful mediation strategies in scripts of different proficiency levels from different KPG writing test papers over a period of six (6) years. The paper actually presents an inductively and empirically derived Inventory of successful mediation strategies which may contribute to the creation of standardized measures and clear benchmarks for reliable assessment of mediation competence thus complementing the CEFR.

Short paper

The focus and context of the research
Motivation for the research
The present paper deals with the notion of (intelinguistic) mediation, which involves relaying in one language messages purposefully extracted from a source text in another language, so as to restore communication gaps between interlocutors. It attempts to define mediation on the basis of results derived from a large-scale research project, which investigated what counts as successful mediation in a testing context (cf. Stathopoulou, 2013)[1] and ultimately stresses the importance of developing levelled descriptors relevant to mediation on the basis of empirical evidence. What is discussed herein is actually based on research which has drawn data from the Greek national foreign language exams (known as KPG), which is the only examination system in Europe which has legitimized mediation by assessing test-takers' mediation competence (cf. Dendrinos, 2006). In fact, consistent with the recommendations of the European Commission and the Council of Europe to promote multilingualism, the KPG exams assess written and oral mediation performance from B1 level onwards thus promoting linguistic diversity (rather than one single language, i.e. English).[2]

To set the context, the aforementioned project is related to recent research in promoting multilingualism and more specifically it is placed within a wide context of ongoing research conducted in Europe engaged in setting standards for language learning and assessment (cf. Green, 2010; Krumm, 2007; Alderson et al, 2004). In this context, scholarship addresses questions such as, What does multilingual literacy (or multilingual competence) entail and on the basis of what criteria can it be assessed (cf. Garcia, Flores and Woodley, 2012; Dendrinos, 2012; Shohamy, 2011; Lenz and Berthele, 2010; Coste and Simon, 2009; García, Barlett and Kleifgen, 2006)? What skills should language learners develop in order to participate effectively in today's multilingual and superdiverse[3] societies (cf. Hornberger and Link, 2012, Hornberger, 2007) and through what foreign language education pedagogies can the ability to use translanguaging4 and interlinguistic mediation techniques be developed (cf. García, Flores and Woodley, 2012; Gort and Pontier, 2012; Hambye and Richards, 2012; Yagmur and Extra, 2011, Creese and Blackledge, 2010)?

What triggered discussions in relation to the aforementioned issues in the field of bilingual education and foreign language pedagogies is the urgent need for communication in the new multilingual environments which impose new realities, challenges and demands on language users. As a consequence, in the new multilingual contexts of social, political and economic struggles (García, 2008: 388) and cultural diversity, people use translanguaging (or polylanguaging[5]) techniques drawing upon the resources they have from a variety of contexts and languages, and ultimately resort to the use of mediation. As a matter of fact, it seems very likely for a person to act as a mediator, i.e., to find himself/herself in a situation in which s/he has to serve as a linguistic and cultural bridge between individuals who do not share the same language

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[1] Doctoral research under the supervision of Professor B. Dendrinos, University of Athens. Note that this research is related to the work which is being carried out at the Research Centre for Language Teaching, Testing and Assessment (RCeL) (http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr). This work is co-funded by the European Social Fund and the Greek National State – (NSRF), under the project of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens entitled "Differentiated and Graded National Foreign Language Exams".

2 For further information concerning the rationale and the underlying ideology of the KPG exams, see Dendrinos (2009). Also visit: http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/kpg

[3] Within the framework of ethnic, migration, racial and sociology studies, Vertovec (2007, 2009) uses the term of 'superdiversity' to refer to the example of England and particularly London which is "the predominant locus of immigration and it is where super-diversity is at its most marked" (Vertovec, 2007: 1042).

[4] Translanguaging describes the use of literacy practices to "move back and forth with ease and comfort between and among different languages and dialects, different social classes, and different cultural and artistic forms" (Guerra, 2004: 8).

[5] Polylanguaging refers to the use of different linguistic resources associated with different languages available in the user's repertoire (Jørgensen and Møller, 2012; Jørgensen, et al, 2011, Jørgensen, 2010, 2008).

and relay messages from one language to the other for a given communicative goal. Interlingual mediation thus seems to be an important aspect of human intercultural communication that deserves particular attention in any discussion for foreign language testing and appropriate language pedagogies.

The notion of mediation in foreign language didactics became widely known with its inclusion in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) which considers mediation activity as an important part of someone's language proficiency. However, it has not received as much attention as the activities of reception, production and interaction. As a matter of fact, no benchmarked illustrative scales for the mediatory use of language are available therein (cf. Alderson 2007, Little 2007, North 2007). Given this void, the particular language activity has seldom been included in foreign language curricula or featured in classroom activities until recently,[6] and its investigation is at embryonic stages.[7]

What thus motivated the research, extensions of which are presented herein, is the need to further explore interlingual mediation, which has been absent in the scene of foreign language testing and teaching probably for reasons related to the monolingual paradigm in mainstream language teaching and testing, which is still real in our days, as Dendrinos (2012) maintains.

Interlingual mediation as translanguaging practice: theoretical considerations
Interlingual mediation is considered as a form of translanguaging as it is a language practice which involves, as Garcia et al. (2011) would put it, a 'hybrid practice of languaging'. Translanguaging, which is also referred to in the literature as 'transcultural repositioning' (Richardson-Bruna, 2007: 235),[8] is a term introduced by Williams (1994, 1996) and refers to the alternation of languages in multiple modes, i.e., spoken and written, receptive and productive (cf. García, 2009a; Baker, 2001a, 2001b; Williams 1994). In 'translanguaging', the input (reading or listening) tends to be in one language and the output (speaking or writing) in the other language. The issue of translanguaging has become commonplace in discussions among scholars dealing with communication within a context of social, political, and economic struggles (García, 2008: 388) unavoidably occurring in today's contexts of linguistic and cultural pluralism. García (2009b) argues that rather than focusing on the language itself, translanguaging makes it clear that there are no clear-cut boundaries between the languages employed. In much the same vein, Canagarajah (2011) points out that multilingual competence emerges out of local practices where multiple languages are negotiated for communication; [...] competence does not consist of separate competencies for each language, but a multicompetence that functions symbiotically for the different languages in language user's repertoire.

In this paper, mediation as translanguaging practice is sharply distinguished from the meaning it takes in the CEFR, which sees it as somehow synonymous with (professional) translation and interpretation (Council of Europe, 2001). Translation requires unconditional respect of the content of the source text, and the aim of the translator or the interpreter is to render every single message of the original text (Dendrinos and Stathopoulou, 2010, 2011). Equally important is the requisite that the target text be in the same textual form as the source text. On the contrary, the aim of the mediator, unlike the translator (or the interpreter), is to select from the source text information relevant to the task at hand and to render it appropriately for the context of situation. In

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[6] In Greece, the newly developed National Curriculum for Foreign Languages actually includes illustrative descriptors for the mediatory use of language, which are empirically developed and are partly based on the task-analysis results presented in Stathopoulou (2013) (cf. Dendrinos and Stathopoulou, 2011).
[7] Another research also focusing on the KPG exams has been conducted by Stathopoulou (2009) within the framework of her MA studies at the University of Athens.
[8] 'Transcultural repositioning' describes the use of literacy practices to "move back and forth with ease and comfort between and among different languages and dialects, different social classes, and different cultural and artistic forms" (Guerra, 2004: 8).

other words, while reproduction of a text establishing equivalents between two texts is the very essence of translation, mediation involves relaying of certain pieces of information from a source text to a target text.

Overall, the mediator is viewed as a plurilingual social actor actively participating in the intercultural communicative event, drawing on source language content and shaping new meanings in the target language.

Mediation competence and performance: Towards developing levelled descriptors

In response to the need for further investigation as to what ensures the success of mediation, the research project, several implications of which are discussed in the present paper, has attempted to constitute a step towards shedding light on aspects of this unexplored area. While the aim of the research was to acquire a general understanding of the mechanisms of interlinguistic mediation in a testing context by analysing mediation tasks and texts (i.e., scripts as result of mediation tasks),[9] the aim of this paper is to raise awareness of the gap in research as to what mediation is and to suggest a framework for the development of mediation-specific can-do statements which will include a lexicogrammatical description of mediators' language production. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of mediation tasks and learner corpora (KPG mediation scripts) for the purposes of the aforementioned research project, has led to the development of an empirically and inductively derived framework (the so-called, Inventory of Written Mediation Strategies (IWMS)) (Stathopoulou, 2013), which can be used in the future for the construction of levelled mediation strategy descriptors.

By exploring what successful (written) mediation is through textual analysis, the study, the extensions of which are herein discussed, constitutes a systematic attempt to complement the CEFR by developing objective criteria so as to describe levelled language proficiency, which will in turn facilitate the development of standards in language teaching and testing (cf. Green, 2010; Krumm, 2007; Alderson et al, 2004), intended to help the mutual recognition of qualifications gained in different learning contexts. As a matter of fact, the findings derived from this investigation may contribute to the development of empirically validated descriptors related to the simultaneous use of more than one language.

Any attempt to create mediation specific descriptors could take into account that language users' ability to mediate and translanguage does not only involve being competent in two languages making use of their linguistic knowledge but it also entails being competent in shuttling between languages and in crossing linguistic borders in order to communicate by relaying information from one language to the other according to the rules and possibilities of the communicative encounter (Stathopoulou, 2013). This sort of competence is related to the ability to use a number of different mediation strategies (see examples in Table 1), which are defined as those strategies needed in order to successfully relay information from one language to another for a given communicative purpose.

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[9] The corpus included texts having been produced over a period of four (4) years by KPG candidates sitting for the B1, B2 and C1 level exam and the total number of words comprising it was almost 53.000. The RCeL has been digitalizing KPG candidates' scripts since 2004 with a view to developing a corpus which will be used for the investigation of the Greek Foreign Language Learner's Profile (Gotsoulia and Dendrinos, 2011). The corpus now consists of about five million words. A range of A1-C1 level scripts rated as fully satisfactory, moderately satisfactory and unsatisfactory comprise the corpus.

Mediation Strategies
01. Creative blending between extracted and extra-textual information
02. Combining information
03. Summarising
04. Reorganising extracted information
05. Condensing (at sentence level) by combining two (or more) short sentences into one (sentence fusion)
06. Expanding
07. Paraphrasing

Table 1: Mediation strategies as presented and defined by Stathopoulou (2013)

To elaborate on the table above, the mediator may combine information from different sources, i.e., his/her background knowledge on a topic (i.e., the case of creative blending between inserted and extracted information) or the source text which is in a different language from the target text (i.e., the case of combining of extracted information). S/he may also reorganise source text sentences or whole paragraphs and may summarize source information to its gist, either through a sentence or through more than one sentence. Additionally, the mediator may use a variety of paraphrasing strategies (i.e., reformulation of the exact words of the source text) both at the level of text and sentence and may expand or condense the initially used sentences. Of course, as research has indicated the aforementioned strategies are not independent of the task. Being thus able to mediate also implies "dealing with task requirements in such a way that the outcome will include -apart from the appropriate language- those mediation strategies conducive to the task at hand, consequently contributing to the success of mediation" (Stathopoulou 2013: 311).

Given thus the inextricable link between task and performance, mediation-specific can-do statements are also important to take into account both task requirements and actual performance. As a matter of fact, any effort undertaken up to now towards the development of mediation-specific descriptors, i.e., the Profile Deutsch,[10] has not taken into consideration the tasks and their demands thus providing descriptors which are not articulated as task-dependent communicative production.

In addition to the above, the mediation-specific descriptors based on empirical evidence should not only specify the mediation strategies needed for learners of different levels when being involved in different mediation tasks but also describe the language to be used by learners at each proficiency level. As a matter of fact, the linguistic documentation of the mediation competence across the CEFR language proficiency levels by systematically analysing the language found in texts produced by mediators of different levels will contribute to the creation of language-specific descriptors, which will add grammatical and lexical details of the target language to CEFR's functional characterization of the different levels (Hawkins and Filipović, 2012: 5).

Conclusion
Empirically validated descriptors for different levels of language proficiency are definitely in demand in order to supplement the rather vague CEFR descriptors or the language proficiency descriptors of various language testing systems and curricula. But descriptors related to the simultaneous use of more than one language, whether in a real-life communicative encounter or in a testing situation, are missing altogether –even in CEFR terms– while studies and research regarding mediation and other multilingual practices

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[10] The *Profile Deutsh* (Glaboniat et al, 2005) includes can-do objectives at different proficiency levels, which were set out for the various categories of activity according to their treatment in the CEFR: reception, production, interaction and mediation.

are generally wanting.[11] It is exactly this void that this research was intended to fill, given the lack of objective criteria to describe mediation skills and strategies in the CEFR. The resulting descriptors relevant to mediation could inform mediation task design for testing (or teaching) purposes in the future and could generally constitute the basis for the development of multilingual curricula, language exam specifications, and foreign language materials.

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[11] Shohamy, who claims that all assessment policies and practices are based on monolingual constructs not allowing other languages to 'smuggle in' (2011: 1), argues in favour of the adoption of different types of multilingual testing and assessment policies and practices. In addition, Dendrinos (in press, 2013) maintains that locally-controlled testing suites may serve as counter-hegemonic alternatives to the profit-driven global language testing industry.

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