



Mediation as a Tool of Teaching Foreign Languages

Nataliya Belenkova

People's Friendship University of Russia (Russian)

Abstract

Mediation as a kind of language activity is very important for interaction between people. It is implemented mainly as translation and interpreting. However, translation and interpreting can be considered as not only the objective of learning and teaching but as very efficient tools of teaching a foreign language especially when the linguistic system of the native language differs greatly from the linguistic system of the foreign language.

The paper presents the practical experience how translation and interpreting are used in Russian education institutions for teaching and learning foreign languages. Other kinds of information transformation (such as paraphrasing, making summaries etc.) are examined. Pedagogical experience of different levels of Russian education institutions starting from primary schools and including higher education is provided. The topicality of the problem is determined by the educational potential of different kinds of mediation for foreign languages teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages considers mediation as a language activity along with listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Mediation includes such activities as translation, interpretation, a paraphrase, summary and record [1]. All these forms of mediation should be taught regularly and systematically. The objective of mediation training is realized at linguistic and non-linguistic higher education institutions. On the other hand, translation, interpretation, paraphrase and summary are widely used in the current practice of teaching English as a foreign language at schools, colleges and universities. The mediation activities are practiced in teaching all aspects of English inter alia lexis, grammar as well as reading and listening, speaking and writing.

2. Mediation in Teaching Lexis and Grammar

Nowadays Russian educational environment assumes that learning English as a foreign language starts when children are from 4 to 6 years old. The starting point of teaching English at this age is different: learning the ABC, learning separate words or simple communicative phrases. Apparently, the native language cannot be completely avoided at the initial stage. A teacher must say some words about the difference of English and Russian alphabets or say that in the morning, we usually say "Good morning" and going to bed, we say "Good night". Pictures presenting definite objects can be very helpful in learning foreign words and their meanings. However, when pictures are not very transparent or we speak about abstract notions the image might be useless. Therefore, to get the meaning of the word we must interpret it into the native language.

The problem of the word meaning awareness is greater when we deal with English for specific purposes. If we compare the terms from the law setting we can see that the English word "lawyer" has its equivalent in the Russian language. The meaning of the word can be explained in a descriptive way in a statement e.g. "Plevako was a famous Russian lawyer". In fact, Fyodor Plevako (1842 – 1909) was a well-known Russian lawyer so we hope that the lawyers-to-be know this person and can guess the meaning of the word. Another way to avoid the Russian language in learning word meanings is to apply derivatives. Young learners are fond of playing computer games "Tower Defense" so they can realize that a defender is a person who defends/protects someone or something in the courtroom. The assignment as "Guess the meaning of the words" which contains e.g. such words as "factor, combination, location, physical characteristics" etc., is also very important for learners.

Interpretation is very topical when the meanings of the words do not overlap. In the Russian language "jury" is not a body of 12 people responsible for the verdict in the courtroom. It is associated with a group of artists, painters, cinema directors or singers evaluating artistic talents of music, dancing or theatre competition participants and awarding prizes at the competitions, exhibitions, contests [2]. Interpretation is urgent when one language has the concepts that another language does not. E.g. such notions as "solicitor" and "barrister" are not differentiated in the Russian language and must be interpreted for the learners studying English as a foreign language.



The necessity of interpretation and translation is more obvious when teaching and learning grammar is focused on. Apparently, we cannot speak about teaching grammar to preschool children. Schoolchildren start to get elementary information about English grammar at the first or second forms at primary school. First, learners study such grammar topics as “Singular and plural of the nouns”, “The possessive form of the nouns”, “The verb to be in the present, past and future. Affirmative and negative forms, questions”.

The input of each grammar rule is accompanied by vast explanations, a lot of examples and their interpretation. The perception of the verb “to be” and its role in the sentence is very complicated for Russian learners. Even such simple statements as “It is a book” or “I am happy” causes much difficulties if we transform these statements according to the Russian language rules we will have the following sentences “It book”, “I happy”. The question “Are you a schoolboy/schoolgirl?” can be transformed into Russian “You schoolboy/schoolgirl?”. Interrogation can be distinguished only through intonation. As there are no auxiliary verbs in the Russian present tense, it takes a teacher much time and efforts to make the learners memorize the rules and train the correct usage. Among the assignments used for this purpose are “Fill in the gaps”, “Choose the right verb form”, “Make sentences of the words” etc.

Moreover interpretation and translation of the utterances with the grammar rule and vocabulary studied are also very popular in the Russian educational environment. In this connection, it should be noted that in most cases interpretation is realized from the foreign language into the Russian language, and translation is realized from Russian into English. The translation is often a home assignment for schoolchildren of secondary and high school. Here a teacher can check such abilities as the right choice of words and phrases, the correct use of grammar rules and forms, spelling and punctuation. Besides schoolchildren are motivated to use dictionaries, reference books and educational software.

Learners’ thinking activity is actualized in their native language i.e. in Russian. To understand, memorize and then to use a linguistic phenomena or item in communication better a learner must practise a lot of Russian-English and English-Russian assignments. Paraphrasing the rhyme “the more we learn, the more we know” we can say “the more we train and practice, the more we know”.

3. Mediation in Teaching Language Activities

Paraphrase, summary and record are used in teaching language activities. According to Cambridge Dictionary Online “record is a piece of information or a description of an event that is written on paper or stored on a computer” [3].

Written recording is used when learners are taught listening. Usually for educative purposes, they listen to the information two times. First the students’ concentration is focused on the comprehension of the message content. The main question they should answer is “What is the information about?” Listening to the same issue for the second time the students should be ready to describe some details, comment or discuss some issue. Records made while listening help greatly to do the assignments. On the upper stage of education at high school or universities listeners make records of the information that draws their attention or causes much interest during conferences, professional or academic presentations or seminars. These records can consist of phrases or even separate words, but the records are like prompts that assist learners to remember the subject matter of the utterance, academic report etc. At the same time, making records can be very useful in training learners’ writing abilities (e.g. spelling) and such skill as focusing on and writing down the most important issues of the information heard.

Summary is determined as “a short, clear description that gives the main facts or ideas about something” [3]. It is very close to the recording but can be realized both in writing and orally. Such assignment as summary is supposed to be exercised in the mid of primary school i.e. the 3-d form. First, it is an oral practice, later by the end of the comprehensive school and at higher education institution summary can be trained in writing as well.

If this activity is done orally it develops such speaking skills as “describing in simple way experiences and events; giving reasons and background; explaining opinions and plans; narrating a story or a plot of a book or an article, a film etc.; describing personal emotions” [1].

In a written form summary helps to develop such skills as writing short, simple notes and messages; simple connected texts on familiar topics; writing essay or reports, expressing personal points of view. Paraphrase is one of the most complicated mediating activities as it assumes a complete transformation of the original utterance. Making a summary or recording a learner can use the words and the grammar structure of the text he/she is dealing with. In case of paraphrasing, a student should select appropriate words and expressions reflecting the meaning of the authentic statement.



Moreover, a learner should be able to change the structure of grammar patterns to make it simpler and more transparent to the interlocutor.

Another way to use mediation as a tool of learning is to assess students' knowledge. Interpretation as well as other means can be used to check whether the information listened to or read is transparent to the learners. Traditional methodology insists on the use of the tasks avoiding the native language. But when the content is too complicated for understanding or if the students' foreign language skills are not formed enough or supposing at the beginning of University studies they feel too shy to express anything in a foreign language, interpretation can be very useful and helpful.

4. Conclusion

Mediation is not only a language activity but also a very effective tool of teaching a foreign language at all levels of education from a primary school to higher education institution. It helps to teach vocabulary and grammar, improve listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, assess the students' reference level. Translation, interpreting, paraphrase, summary and record used for teaching purposes cannot be considered as language activities but can be assumed as the initial stage of the mediation as a language activity and can be designate as pre-mediation

References

- [1] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. – Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004. – 260 p.
- [2] http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/dic_music/78/%D0%96%D0%AE%D0%A0%D0%98
- [3] <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/record>