

ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM TASKS IN ESP COURSES: SPACE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF INTRALINGUISTIC MEDIATION SKILLS

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to analyze the potential of particular blended learning tasks with regard to the development of students' intralinguistic mediation skills in a foreign language. In accordance with the current trends in designing higher education language curricula, the paper deals with the issues of English Medium Instruction (EMI, as summarized e.g., by Macaro 2018 or Lasagabaster 2022) and draws on newly formulated categories of the updated Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Our primary perspective is represented by the category of mediation, which has significantly broadened its scope owing to the analyses carried out by North and Piccardo (2016) and now constitutes a very important part of the updated version of CEFR. Our focus is on the so-called intralinguistic mediation, i.e. mediation within the same language, deliberately implemented into the university curricula of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in order to establish conditions for subsequent EMI teaching. The empirical part presents a thorough description of an integrated blended learning assignment consisting of an online discussion forum in LMS Moodle and the follow-up classroom presentation task, in terms of the key theoretical constructs, namely mediation activities, and mediation strategies. Based on that, the paper presents the results of a small-scale empirical investigation carried out by means of a semi-structured questionnaire and aimed at identifying the students' perceptions of key aspects of mediation implemented into the integrated ESP learning tasks. The research outcomes are interpreted in relation to our previous studies on the potential of ESP online discussion forums and the specifics of establishing the EMI teaching contexts. The main implication is that the concept of mediation seems to be highly meaningful for the successful integration of the most relevant learning and communication modes, i.e. written and spoken language interaction and production in both online and classroom learning environments.

Keywords: *EMI, ESP, CEFR, Moodle, mediation.*

1. Introduction

Online discussion forum represents a valuable task widely used both in distance learning and blended learning schemes. The field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in higher education offers numerous possibilities for its implementation aimed at the complex development of students' language skills. As presented in the previous empirical investigations carried out by the authors of this text, ESP online discussion forums can constitute a very effective component of longer integrated blended learning tasks (Brebera, Bezdickova 2019) as well as provide valuable opportunities for students' active language use within the so-called microlearning schemes (Brebera 2021). Based on these findings, it seems to be highly desirable to apply other relevant perspectives on online discussion forums extending the primary ESP viewpoint so that the current discourse in the area of foreign language education might be enriched and potentially further developed.

Firstly, the potential of ESP online discussion forums needs to be perceived according to the position of ESP language courses defined within the continuum ranging from purely language-dominant goals towards content-dominant course objectives (Macaro 2018, p.29) that represent the so-called English Medium Instruction (EMI). From this perspective, ESP online discussion forums should be designed with the aim of achieving an appropriate level of integrating the subject-specific content with the language-focused one so that it could prepare the students for studying their special subjects in the English language, i.e., in the EMI format (Brebera, Bezdickova 2022). Moreover, the expected students' language use within the professionally related discussion forums needs to cover both the aspects of BICS, i.e., Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills, as well as CALP, i.e., Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins 2008). A significant contribution to establishing conditions for meaningful

implementation of ESP online discussion forums with regard to EMI purposes has been provided by recent attempts to establish the particular EMI typologies (e.g. Richards, Pun 2021) or by comprehensive studies focused on analyzing the potential of EMI in higher educational contexts (e.g. Lasagabaster 2022). The format of an integrated online discussion forum thus finds its proper justification at the level of formulating current educational policies in various contexts across the globe.

Another useful perspective outlining the potential future uses of ESP online discussion forums is the concept of linguistic mediation, as defined by the revised Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In mediation, “the focus is on the role of language in processes like creating the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning, collaborating to construct new meaning, encouraging others to construct or understand new meaning, and passing on new information in an appropriate form (Council of Europe 2020, p.90). Undoubtedly, this concept carries many implications in terms of its inevitable use in international professional communities, where one’s knowledge of discipline-specific content together with a sufficient foreign language competence can be seen as the basic pre-condition for achieving common communicative goals. In previous years, several highly inspiring analyses of mediation were conducted e.g., by Chovancova (2016) with a focus on Legal English, where the mediation of information plays a crucial role within professionally related communicative situations, or by Dendrinis (2013) with the aim of pointing out the existence of mediation as a skill that deserves deliberate teaching and testing. However, the current accents on mediation are mainly due to the recent studies carried out by North (e.g. North, Piccardo 2016; Piccardo, North, Goodier 2019) and the subsequent implementation of their outcomes in the updated version of CEFR. As a result, mediation is sometimes directly referred to as a skill belonging to 21st-century education (Díez 2019). Thus, it is highly desirable that the current ways of designing tasks such as ESP online discussion forums draw on the broadly accepted classification and definition of mediation activities and strategies, as presented in the revised CEFR (Council of Europe, p. 90).

Similarly to a recent study carried out by García-Sánchez (2022), which is based on applying the approach of collaborative computer-assisted language learning, the intention of the authors of this text is also to focus on the so-called “intralinguistic mediation” in an online environment. In our text, this concept is used in accordance with Chovancova’s definition of the so-called “intra-language mediation” in terms of processing and transmission of information “between different levels of expertise” (Chovancova 2016, p.23) and not only between “different language systems”, which is valid for the so-called interlanguage mediation (ibid). The following description and subsequent analysis are therefore based on the specific indicators of mediation activities and strategies as listed in the updated CEFR and demonstrated in the specific integrated online discussion forum task presented below.

2. Online discussion forum as a part of an integrated blended learning task

Teaching ESP as a second language makes demands on language teachers who face the challenge of not having the same level of expertise within the target area as the students. Teachers can no longer be the primary source of information. They become rather informed guides on the students’ way towards language skills improvement. Bearing in mind the generally accepted four Cs (critical thinking and problem-solving, communication, creativity & innovation, and collaboration) as 21st-century skills with the aim to bring more of the newest professional content and students’ involvement to the course, the authors introduced a special task called the discussion forum. The following description will be illustrated using the example of English for Health Sciences.

The LMS Moodle environment, with the module “forum”, proves to be the ideal tool for designing the task. The ESP courses have an online form that enables students to access it at any time and helps enhance their mutual communication outside the contact lessons. Before the course content had been made available for students, the authors designed a discussion forum to facilitate intralinguistic mediation among students. Students were expected to choose authentic material (document, video, link, etc.) relating to their field of study. The choice was not narrowed to their particular study field (for example, midwifery) but broadened to the whole area of expertise (for example, health sciences). This freedom to decide brought a colorful variety of topics ranging from general ones (for example, hand hygiene) to specific ones (for example, bone marrow transplant). At the same time, the students had to apply their critical thinking when deciding which source was reliable, trustworthy, and relevant to their audience. The students were also required to briefly explain their choice and post three open questions for their colleagues to start a discussion. The forum participants were given a month to prepare their discussion forums and the same amount of time to answer their colleagues’ discussion forum questions.

While working with the discussion forums took part outside the class, their presentations were an essential part of the contact lessons. The students were supposed to give presentations of their findings to the audience formed by their colleagues. The presentation had to consist of three essential parts, the

discussion forum introduction, the answers reflection, and the summary. This way, the students practiced their ability to communicate specific topics to the informed but not expert audience. At the same time, the audience was involved in the pre-presentation research, which made the content easier to follow and more attractive.

The authors have successfully used the discussion forums for several years. The freedom to choose the topics guarantees their relevance and reflects current trends in the field of study (for example, COVID-19, vaccination, and mental health issues). The task helps students to be inspirational to their peers. It improves not only their language skills but their collaboration, communication, critical thinking and intralinguistic mediation competencies.

3. Research

3.1. Research design

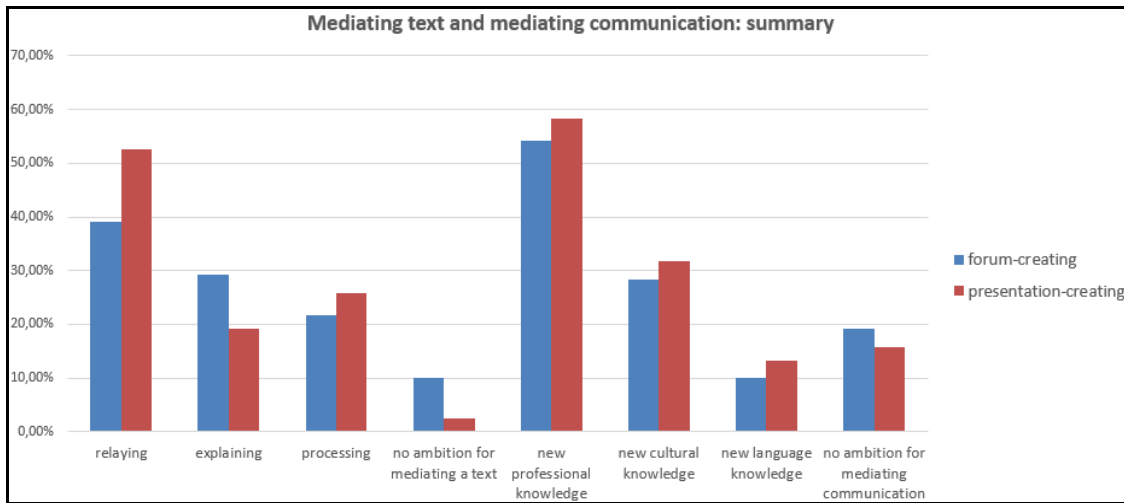
Based on the scales developed for the category of mediation in the updated CEFR, the authors of this text decided to operationalize the relevant concepts so that they might be used in a small-scale empirical pilot study focused on mediation within the previously described integrated blended learning assignment. The study was designed as a questionnaire survey of the students' subjective perceptions of individual components of the assignment, i.e., productive, and interactive parts of both online discussion forums and classroom presentations. The investigation was conducted from December 2022 to January 2023 within a group of 120 respondents, representing 3 university faculties, namely the Faculty of Health Studies (N=72), Faculty of Transport Engineering (N=33) and Faculty of Economics and Administration (N=15). The semi-structured questionnaire was primarily designed in order to generate quantitative data, but it also provided space for the respondents' longer answers for additional qualitative analysis.

The primary focus was on the students' mediation skills, especially in the category of mediation strategies to explain a new concept (linking to previous knowledge, adapting language, and breaking down complicated information) as well as strategies to simplify text (amplifying a dense text, streamlining a text). Within the category of mediation activities, the accent was on the selected ESP-relevant sub-categories of mediating the text, i.e., relaying specific information, explaining data and processing text. Besides, there was a minor attempt to operationalize the concepts of mediating communication in relation to the aspects of pluricultural space as well as the specifics of the discipline-specific professional culture. The data gathered within the category of mediating concepts (leading group work, collaborating in a group) are not considered to be relevant for this analysis as the response was pre-determined by the pre-defined characteristics of the student participation in the individual components of this integrated blended learning assignment, i.e. a leading role when formulating one's text into the forum and conducting presentation vs. a collaborative role when formulating written responses in other forums and expressing oral responses during the classroom presentation sessions.

3.2. Research results

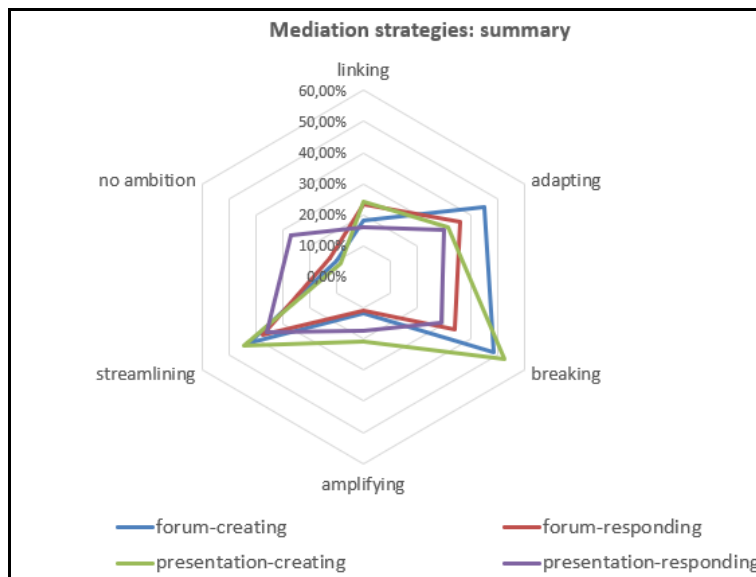
The results of this empirical study indicate some general trends in the students' perceived choices of specific mediation activities and strategies within the individual stages of integrated blended learning tasks containing an online discussion forum as its e-learning component. In terms of text mediation activities (see Figure 1), a stronger focus on relaying information was observed in the follow-up classroom presentation task rather than in the preceding online discussion forum. On the other hand, participation in the online discussion forum was more strongly based on the perceived need to explain one's own perspective clearly and properly. As regards the issues of mediating communication, there appeared a tendency of students to formulate both parts of this integrated blended learning task so that it would represent primarily discipline-specific enrichment for the members of the specific professional community in contrast to a minor focus on cultural or language learning issues.

Figure 1. Mediating a text /Mediating communication.



Also, the mediation strategies used both within the task of preparing the introductory discussion forum text as well as the classroom presentation (see Figure 2) are most strongly associated with the need to break down the complicated information while adapting the language seems to be prioritized more during the process of writing into an online discussion forum. On the other hand, amplifying a dense text seems to be associated more with the classroom presentation component than with the performance in the online discussion forum.

Figure 2. Mediation Strategies.



The results of the analysis, however, also imply the existence of some discipline-specific differences in using mediation activities and strategies as well as their dependence on the overall task design. For example, the lowest degree of the perceived need for adapting the language for the target audience of an online discussion forum (37.5%) as well as in a classroom presentation session (27.78%) was expressed within a relatively homogeneous community of bachelor’s degree students of health sciences. On the other hand, bachelor’s degree students of economics and administration expressed their primary interest in using the mediation strategy of adapting the language in all stages of this integrated blended learning task (e.g. 80% for forum creation, and 53.33% for creating a presentation). Compared to other researched groups, the community which placed the highest emphasis on pluricultural issues in terms of mediating communication was the “professionally mature” group of master’s degree students of transport engineering (41.67% for forum creation, and 50% for creating a presentation). As regards the specifics of the overall task design, the most general and personalized assignment based on sharing one’s

own work-related experience, which was used in the group of bachelor's degree students of transport engineering, demonstrated the highest degree of the perceived need to explain the content properly in the discussion forum (52.38%) and later also in the classroom presentation (57.19%). This group of students also manifested the highest focus on using the strategy of streamlining the text when creating the introductory forum text (52.38%) and also on linking the content to the previous knowledge of the target audience at the stage of preparing a classroom presentation (52.38%). The category with the fewest differences identified within the comparison of all 4 researched groups was the students' use of the mediation strategy of adapting the language when formulating responses to their colleagues' classroom presentations, oscillating between 25.5% and 33.3%.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the highly complex task of designing ESP courses with the aim of preparing students for EMI formats of education proved to be considerably facilitated by the implementation of online discussion forums and the related follow-up classroom presentation tasks. Besides, for the authors of this text, the findings of their small-scale investigation constitute a valuable starting point for further research and innovative efforts in the field of mediation in ESP. A planned validation of the empirical material presented above will concern especially the content analysis of the students' language input in all parts of this integrated blended learning task as well as the interaction analysis related to the specific topics representing various viewpoints within the respective professional communities. Thus, new insights might be gained into various types of mediation in ESP, including finding new effective ways of interconnecting written and spoken interaction modes used by university-educated professionals for genuinely communicative purposes.

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