Oral Mediation Strategies: An Analysis of the Interactional Monologues of a Comic-Based Task

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This article explores the design of a mediation task based on a comic strip and the response of a group of 30 teachers' trainees to it. To know the possible flaws and strengths in the productions, six criteria have been designed ad hoc based on current studies. First, in the theoretical framework the definition of mediation has been included, and the importance of comics as a source text for mediation tasks has been stressed. Then, the objectives and the method are explained. After that, section four shows and discusses the results of the analysis and, finally, in the last section the conclusion is presented. It should be noted that the analysis reveals numerous flaws in the participants' productions in aspects of interest to mediate successfully. Among them, meeting the necessities of the audience or checking the comprehension of the transmitted message are the most important issues. In contrast, the analysis shows some strengths related to the participants' ability to explain the information in a sequential way or to transmit it with an appropriate use of examples. The previous aspects can be highly valuable as mediation strategies.

Keywords: *comics, creative texts, linguistic mediation, mediation strategies, oral task.*

Estrategias de mediación oral: un análisis de los monólogos interactivos de una tarea basada en un cómic

Este artículo explora el diseño de una tarea de mediación basada en un cómic y la respuesta a esta de un grupo de 30 maestros en formación. Para conocer las posibles carencias y debilidades que los estudiantes presentan, se han diseñado seis criterios ad hoc basados en estudios actuales. En primer lugar, se incluye el marco teórico en el que se define la mediación y se incide en la importancia del cómic como recurso para el diseño de tareas de esta naturaleza. A continuación, se explican los objetivos y el método. La sección cuarta muestra y discute los resultados obtenidos en el análisis y, por último, en el apartado final se presenta la conclusión. Se puede señalar que el análisis revela numerosas carencias en las producciones de los participantes para mediar exitosamente. Entre ellas, la atención a las necesidades de la audiencia o la comprobación de la comprensión del mensaje resultan los aspectos más problemáticos. En cambio, el análisis devuelve algunas fortalezas relacionadas con la habilidad de los participantes para secuenciar la información o ejemplificar. Las anteriores pueden ser consideradas muy valiosas estrategias de mediación.

Palabras clave: *comics, estrategias de mediación, mediación lingüística, tarea oral, textos creativos.*

1. Introduction

Linguistic mediation has been introduced recently in primary and secondary school levels in Spain by the *Organic Law Amending the Organic Law of Education* (LOMLOE in Spanish, 2020), and by the subsequent regulations developing its curricular requirements. This linguistic activity is also deeply specified and exemplified by the descriptors included in the *Companion Volume* of the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) (COE, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to train future practitioners, so that they are able to introduce mediation tasks in their classrooms. These teacher trainees also need to acquire the appropriate strategies to develop the skill, so that they can transfer this strategical knowledge to their future language learners.

Furthermore, mediation as presented in the *Companion Volume* (COE, 2020), and as defined by experts working on the field of literature and its didactics (Colomer, 2012) can be understood from a literary angle. In fact, being a good mediator of literature in the foreign language will require similar strategies to the ones that the linguistic mediator displays. The main difference is that literature and other artistic works are usually hiding some implicit meanings which go beyond language expression, and, at some point, they need to be clarified or exemplified to the addressee. There are multiple literary sources that can be used as source texts for mediation (novels, tales, poems, picture books, etc.).

One of these source texts are comics. Defining comics is not an easy task since there have been multiple descriptions which go from sequential art (Versaci, 2008; Groensteen, 2021) to popular and non-canonical literature. However, there is no doubt that they are hybrid literary works, and, quite often, images predominantly govern the narrative meaning. It is also clear that the comics often present a compositional complexity, and consequently, a non-simplistic interpretation. Frequently, as in other types of literature and artistic works, access to comics may require the guidance of a mediator.

The descriptors included in the *Companion Volume* are undoubtedly the starting point to design and evaluate mediation tasks; however, the complexity and particularities that each mediation task may present requires further work. In this regard, several experts and foreign language professionals in Europe are now working towards the design of mediation tasks and assessment rubrics for this purpose (Trovato, 2020; Alcaraz Mármol, 2021; Sánchez Cuadrado, 2022; Martín-Macho Harrison & Guadamillas Gómez, 2022). Even though, some studies (see Piccardo & North, 2020; Eduscol, 2022) have already reached some valid conclusions, there is still a lot to discover in terms of the response to intermodal sources in mediation tasks.

Thus, this study tries to present both the design of a task based on a comic strip and the response of a group of upper-intermediate learners to it. The initial hypothesis is that comics can be an appropriate source for mediation tasks for this level, notwithstanding the fact that learners are not familiar yet with mediation strategies and, therefore, they require further training. In what follows, the theoretical framework is presented, exploring mediation, comics as a source text as well as the expected output of the task. Then, section 3 presents the objectives and the method, including the students' profiles, the procedure, and the

instrument of analysis for the students' productions. After that, section 4 shows and discusses the results of the analysis and, finally, in the last section some final considerations are presented as well as the limitations of the study together with future research possibilities in this area.

2. Linguistic mediation

In the Companion Volume (COE, 2020) mediation activities are presented together with some strategies to simplify complex information in a text or to explain new concepts. Thus, the activity of mediating has a wide range of applications in daily, school, and professional encounters. In these situations, it is not just seen as a combination of communicative strategies, but more importantly it focuses on the aid that a certain speaker gives to another one, who cannot access a particular message on his own. Thus, there are several factors related to the situation, the target audience, and its characteristics, which are indissoluble and intrinsically linked to the expected intervention of the mediator. These factors include the previous understanding and interpretation of the given message, the selection of the relevant and non-relevant information, as well as the emotional considerations to deal successfully with the communicative encounter which is presented (Trovato, 2020; Dendrinos, 2006). Besides, in the process of transmitting the message, an appropriate use of examples, an effective organization of the information, or a pertinent simplification of the original source text should be considered (Trovato, 2020).

In other words, general knowledge of the situation and specific knowledge of the target audience (e.g. profile, literacy and communicative competences in the target language, etc.) are required. Besides, Trovato (2020, p. 17-20) adds that the mediator should have some knowledge of intercultural pragmatics to solve possible issues which may emerge during the exchange of information. In the case of L2 learning, the type of audience or the context are aspects which are generally provided by the task description and the input which is given to the learners. Therefore, the *Task-Based Approach*, which is nowadays widely used in different language learning contexts, is appropriate to introduce mediation in the class, since it allows the instructor to provide communication-oriented situations, considering both the final purpose (meaning) and the form/s (Littlewood, 2004).

For the design of a mediation task, descriptors belonging to the three mediation activities (mediating a text, a concept and in communication) can be potentially used. The reason for that is that in mediation tasks as in real-life mediation, the speaker may need to display a wide repertoire of skills and strategies to fulfill the needs of the addressee and of the context. Besides, in the process of designing mediation tasks, the appropriate emphasis should be attached to the fact that mediation tries to overcome the traditional language skills' division (oral and written comprehension and production) by paying attention to the use and purpose of the foreign language/s in the real world and, more importantly, to the possible intermodal nature of the source text.

Among the scales introduced by the *Companion Volume* in the section of mediating texts, the activities of responding to a creative text and the analysis and criticism of it are included. According to the document,

these creative texts could be of different kinds (paintings, exhibitions, literature, etc.). The previous considerations confirm that literature is regarded as intrinsically linked to the language learning process. The connections between literature and language learning are not new, in fact, several studies have proven the importance of using literature in L2 teaching contexts (Pryce, 2021; Lazar, 1993). Mostly, these studies admit that literary texts of diverse kinds involve the learner in the interpretation process. Besides, a literary text presents numerous components such as the content structure, the characters, the themes, the style, or the meaning that can be the setting for developing the different language competences. Thus, *the Companion Volume* refers to poems, plays or graphic novels as suitable mediation sources.

2.1. The Input: Comics for mediation tasks' design

The relevance of images in teaching a foreign language is undeniable. Images can be beneficial to facilitate understanding in initial language learning contexts (Cameron, 2001), but also to involve upper-intermediate and advanced learners in more complex meaning making process (Kohnke, 2019; Tomlinson, 2019) or with the aim of increasing learners' motivation.

Comic strips and cartoons are frequently presenting a combination of images and texts whereas other times are just making meaning through images. They are deeply rooted in popular culture and deal with diverse themes. Sometimes, they deal with global themes (politics, ecology, human rights, gender issues, etc.) in a humorous or ludic manner, and tend to present more than one possible interpretation.

Groensteen (2021) understands that manga, comics or graphic novels can fit in the same type of category, which he names "bande dessinée". According to the author, the comics (*bande desinée*) are a combination of linguistic and visual codes as well as a mixture of two forms of expression, the images and the texts. However, the importance of images in most comics requires a deep interpretation and an analysis of visual codes, since very frequently these images do not fuse with the text in equal proportions, according to the author. The combination of the vignettes, their disposition, and other possible effects in the configuration of the frame and panels or other peritextual elements are also relevant to reassemble the linear narrative of this "sequential art". Thus, the reader cannot understand one vignette, but in relation with the other ones that surround it, working as a skilled architect who "flicks from picture to text and back again" (Versaci, 2008, p. 96).

Several authors (Barter-Storm & Wik, 2020; Ibarra-Rius & Ballester-Roca, 2022) have studied the possibilities of graphic novels and comic books in educational settings with literacy purposes. Mostly, the research confirms that this type of literature, if it is appropriately selected, has several benefits in native and non-native learners' reading skills because of its authenticity, its multimodality, its openness to diverse themes or its compositional complexity in linguistic and visual terms. Furthermore, the use of comics can facilitate critical literacy tasks, since learners can infer more than when they only read from a written text (Vie & Dieterle, 2016).

In contrast, the variety of lexicon, the sound effects, the use of humour or slang employed in comic strips make some of

them a more suitable resource for upper-intermediate and advance levels when they are used with L2 purposes. It must be also admitted that the visual characteristics of comic books make them a not appropriate resource for partially sighted or blind persons; however, they still offer multiple possibilities to design mediation tasks in which learners need to describe a vignette, a panel or a page to a person who is not able to understand it properly because diverse barriers, in this case a limited vision.

Social media sites such as Twitter frequently combine images and texts in the users' posts. Moreover, tags contribute to clarify the message or to attach it to a particular movement or trend. Thus, the interpretation of the message does not exclusively depend on the written post. In fact, the full meaning is created by the combination of the visual element (image, meme, etc.), the tag, the written message, and sometimes the sounds, which are also incorporated. The process of interpretation follows a similar process to the employed in a comic, it does not depend on just one element in isolation, but on the combination of several elements. In this article, the combination of a comic strip and a hashtag, understood as a multimodal form of making meaning, will be used for the task design.

2.2. The Output: The Voicemail as a genre

In the last few years, the forms of communication are more technologically advanced, presenting a wide variety of modes of transmission and several intermedial possibilities. In addition to this, linguistic mediation in real-life situations frequently overcomes the traditional language skills' division and so do the mediation tasks.

One of the formats which has gained more users lately is the voicemail. This might have to do with the search for immediacy or proximity in personal or professional contexts, and with an aim to humanize these different environments and the relationships occurring in them. The voicemail can be simply understood as a monologue. Particularly, it can be defined as a sustained monologue to give specific information or to clarify a message. In this type of monologue, the speaker has a message to deliver, with the formal and conceptual requirements defined, in this case, by the task's description. According to Paulíková (2019, p. 90), the introduction of monologues in a classroom task can have several benefits for speaking skills' development. Among them, monologues can help language learners to improve fluency and develop accuracy. Besides, they help learners to improve the complexity of their oral expression and enhance their confidence in the foreign language. Furthermore, monologues can be easier to evaluate than tasks which require interaction between two or more speakers.

In addition to this, the voicemail can have a more complex interpretation, which also makes it an appropriate "genre" in the design of mediation tasks. Specifically, Mishler (2008, p. 168) conceptualizes it as a "form of mediated interactional discourse". In this case, the speaker's production will go beyond the monologue understood in simple terms, since the addresser is attempting to communicate with the addressee, even if this communication does not happen in real time. Thus, the type of discourse that is produced should observe factors of mediation as the listener's needs, as well as his characteristics in linguistics

and intercultural terms. In mediation tasks, the task description must take all the previous elements into account.

3. Objectives and method

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To analyse the oral response of a group of upper-intermediate English learners to a creative text. In this case, a comic strip.
- To get to know the mediation strategies that this group of learners uses.

The study follows an experimental research design to get to know the impact of a mediation task based on a comic strip in a study group of 30 upper-intermediate English learners. Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 focus on the learners and the context, the task, and the instrument of analysis.

3.1. Learners' profile and context

There is a total of 30 participants in the study. All of them are in the 4th year of the bachelor's degree in Primary School Teaching. Their L1 is Spanish in all cases, and they have at least a B1 (CEFR) level of English. As for their gender, three of them are males and 27 are females. They are all enrolled in the course *English Phonetics* which has as one of its learning outcomes that the students can describe images from diverse sources orally or maintain a conversation about a variety of general topics, including themes connected with their field of expertise.

3.2. The task

The task requires that the learners produce a sustained monologue, specifically, a voicemail. The participants have to observe a Tweet with a Mafalda's comic strip (see Figure 1) for 2 minutes. Then, they have to

record a voice message, explaining it to his or her little sister, who is 11 years old, and does not fully understand it. According to the task description, they must not forget to connect the hashtag #EarthDay with the comic strip as well as to confirm that their explanation is understood.

Thus, the meaning is created by means of a social media tweet, which includes both a comic strip and a specific hashtag. Both social media messages and creative texts such as comics strips are mentioned in the *Companion Volume* as possible sources for the design of mediation tasks.

Figure 1. Task description. Source: Created by the author using a Quino's comic strip and a tweet from the Twitter Account @Mafaldadigital.

Ecology together with politics or gender issues are found in many of Quino's strips such as this one. As in every work with similar characteristics, there is at least an implicit meaning to decode, but several interpretations can be justified and supported with examples.

3.3. Instrument, criteria, and analysis procedure

To assess the response of the learners to the task, six criteria of analysis were designed

ad hoc. For their design, the descriptors included in the module of mediating a text of the *Companion Volume* were considered. More specifically, the sections "Relaying specific information in speech" (p. 198-199) and "Expressing a response to creative texts" (p. 221-222) were examined. Given the scarcity of mediation assessment scales, the categories recommended for designing a rubric (Sánchez Cuadrado, 2022) and the evaluation guidelines in the set of tasks by Martín-Macho Harrison & Guadamillas Gómez (2022) were also revised. The criteria included in the instrument of analysis were also sensitive to the task description and its requirements in terms of context, addressee, and the source text.

Thus, the first criterion is related to the sensitiveness towards the target audience, the second one assesses the ability of the speaker to present the information in a sequential way. The third one studies the participants' ability to select relevant and not relevant information, following the task description. Then, the fourth criterion evaluates the use of examples from the source text to support the speaker's viewpoints. Later, the fifth one explores the simplification of the message in language and content terms. Finally, the sixth one assesses the ability of the speaker to confirm that the addressee has understood the information.

As for the procedure, the monologue of each participant is recorded, and notes are taken during each oral presentation. After that, each recording is transcribed to text format and *Likert scale* values from 0 to 3 per criteria are given to each student's performance. 0 is given when the criterion is not fulfilled or not observed. In contrast, 3 is adopted if the criterion is successfully met. The criterion is assigned 1 or 2 points in the case of meeting some of the requirements. As an example of that, we can refer to the criterion number five (The speaker confirms the comprehension of the message); 0 is given when during the speech there is not any evidence of asking the proposed addressee about his understanding; 1 is given when the criterion is very poorly met, and 2 is given when there are at least some questions such as "Okay?" or question tags are introduced in the middle or at the end of the monologue; in contrast, 3 is conceded when the comprehension is successfully confirmed using more complex phrases such as "Should I repeat something?" or "Do you need additional information?". After the evaluation of all the participants' monologues, the global percentages of fulfilment reach by each criterion are presented. Then, the percentages of the participants' scores are explained by criterion.

4. Results and discussion

First, the results are organized attending to the total percentages obtained by each criterion.

Table 1. Total scores of the mediation criteria.

	Total
C1 Target audience	44.4%
C2 Sequencing	54.4%
C3 Selecting information	60%
C4 Exemplifying	77.7%
C5 Simplifying	65.5%
C6 Checking comprehension	16.6%

As it is observed in Table 1, the criterion number 6 obtains the worst percentage, since most of the participants did

not follow the task description. In it, it was clearly stated that the comprehension of the transmitted message should be checked. The criterion 1 is also below the expected, even though the task description underlines that the voicemail should be addressed to a specific person. This is poorly observed in the productions or fully included in a short number of them. On the other hand, criteria number 4 and 5 reach the highest scores. As far as the use of examples is concerned (criterion 4), most participants explain the meaning of the comic strip and its connection with the hashtag using examples from the images. For instance, "as you can see in the first image, Mafalda is…". According to the task description, a simplification in language and content terms (criterion 5) is also expected because of the situation that is described – a little sister who does not understand. Furthermore, simplifying is one of the key strategies in linguistic mediation (COE, 2020). In this case, it should be highlighted that the productions frequently simplified the meaning of the comic strip in language and content terms. Finally, criterion number 2 (presenting the information in and ordered and sequential way) and criterion number 3 (selecting the relevant and non-relevant information) have obtained similar scores, which are above the 50%. After giving the total scores, the percentages of the participants' scores are presented by criterion in Figure 2.
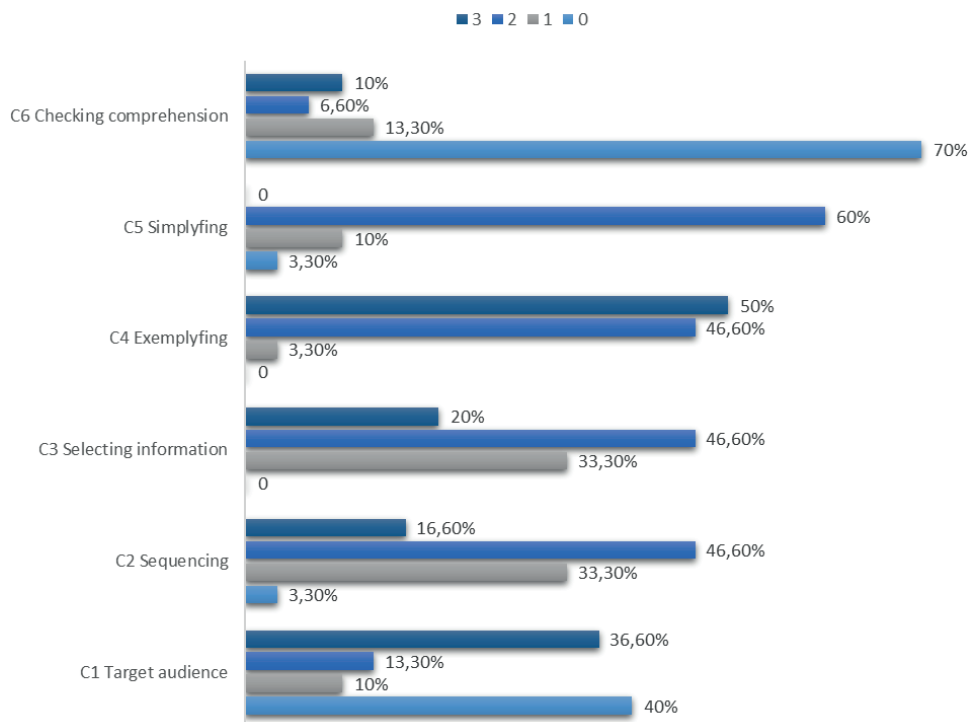
Figure 2. Scores by participants and criterion.

The results show that 40% of the productions do not consider the recipient at all (criterion number 1). In contrast, 36.6% of the voice messages have the fictional addressee into account. 10% and 13.30% of productions have got one or two points, respectively. Regarding the second criterion, the predominant scores are one (33.3%) and two (46.6%), followed by three (16.6%), when the candidates have enriched their productions with a considerable amount of sequence connectors and respect the logical order of the task. In contrast, there is just a 3.3% of the participants who did not present the information in a sequential way.

The third criterion has studied the selection of relevant and not relevant information according to the task description. In this case, very similar percentages of participants, 33.3% and 46.6%, have reached two or three points. This is followed by a 20% of the participants who obtained the maximum punctuation in this criterion. It means that most learners were able to transmit this information, underlining the most important points and avoiding irrelevant details. Then, the fourth criterion has explored the use of examples from the source text/images to support the speakers' viewpoints. Again, the results show that almost half of the participants' productions analyzed have obtained 2 points (46.6%) and half of them reach the maximum score. The previous results mean that most students have explained the meaning of the comic strip and the connection with the hashtag by examples, adding specific language expressions to exemplify their viewpoints.

As far as the fifth and the sixth criteria are concerned, very different results have been obtained. In the case of fifth one, the lowest score is obtained by a 3.3%, who do not simplify. This group includes in their productions a wide list of complex terms, which are not clarified, to refer to the issue in the comic strip (e.g. greenhouse effect, desertification, etc.). Then, 10% of the productions have got one point because they included some isolated complex terms, followed by 60% of them who have got two points, since they have included some complex terms. The percentage of learners who transmit the message using an extensive number or complex terms and expressions is null. The results are probably related to the level of English of the group, which is upper-intermediate, and thus, their knowledge of specific and complex vocabulary may be limited. Regarding the sixth criterion, there is a high percentage of participants, 70%, who do not include in their voice message comprehension checking questions or expressions, followed by 13.3% and 6.6%, who very rarely or just occasionally include some of these questions. There is only a 10% of the participants who obtained the maximum score in this criterion.

In addition to this, it is noticeable that the score of two points is more frequently observed in the case of the criteria two, three, four and five. In contrast, the lowest score (zero points) is more frequent in the case of the first criterion (40%) and the sixth criterion (70%). These results may be because the candidates have not read the task description carefully, so they have not followed the instructions. Besides, it can be in relation with the lack of previous training on mediation, since attitudes such as empathy, awareness of the target audience and its needs are fundamental. In contrast, the low percentage of participants who do not sequence the information (second

criterion) may be in relation to the source of mediation, since comic strip do often sequence the narration through the disposition of the images (Versaci, 2008; Groensteen, 2021). This characteristic could have contributed to the learners' ability to do so. Similarly, the results obtained in the fourth criterion are very positive, since almost the whole group of participants uses examples to explain the message and thus, obtains two or three points in this criterion. The main reason for these results could be in relation with the use of images as a source text and with the narrative mode of comics, which could have contributed to this use of examples.

In general terms, it can be affirmed that the students understood the task and completed it successfully, with some troubles to follow the task description and therefore, to achieve the mediation purpose. Furthermore, it is noted that most productions could improve in the future if specific training on mediation strategies and on language for exemplifying or sequencing is provided. Some more knowledge of comics and their narrative mode and practice with similar tasks can be also needed to help learners to select relevant information. Even though it has not been commonly observed, there have been some examples (33.3%) of poorly selecting the information. This can be connected with the lack of understanding of the visual narrative mode, with the candidates' cognitive skills or, even, with their language repertoire.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that the mediation task designed using a comic strip is suitable for upper-intermediate English learners, since the performance of the group of students was appropriate in general terms (e.g. timing, theme, comprehension, transmission, etc.). However, some flaws were noted in terms of the participants' ability to be aware of the necessities of the audience or to check the comprehension of the transmitted message. The main reasons for these flaws are probably the lack of training with similar tasks, as well as the lack of attention to the task description. In this regard, it should be highlighted that reading the task, including the formal aspects (e.g. duration, format, etc.), and the conceptual ones (e.g. information which needs to be transmitted, context, participants, etc.), is essential for a successful mediation process.

In contrast, the participants showed their ability to sequence the information and to transmit it using examples. Furthermore, most of them were able to appropriately differentiate between relevant and secondary information according to the task description. The previous aspects can be highly valuable as mediation strategies, according to the main literature in the field (Sánchez Cuadrado, 2022; COE, 2020; Trovato, 2020). It should be underlined that the images and the way in which they are presented in a comic strip may have favoured students' ability to sequence the information and to give examples (Versaci, 2008). This format could have also contributed to the selection of the relevant and non-relevant information, challenging participants' critical thinking skills (Vie & Dieterle, 2016).

The main limitation of the study is that the number of participants is relatively low. In contrast, they represent a homogeneous group in terms of previous training experiences, not just in the foreign language, but also regarding their earlier general

knowledge. An additional limitation of this study is that the scores of the participants' productions are obtained from one evaluator, and the productions are not compared with the ones of a second group of analysis. Despite this, the results can contribute to shape future mediation teaching practices.

This study can be expanded to larger groups of the same level or, with some modifications, for lower and higher levels of language learners. Corpus analysis can be applied as a suitable tool to assess some of the criteria of study.

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