

Chapter 21

Improving Students' Writing and Mediation Skills in English in a Professional Context: Guiding Student Writers Through the Transformation of Specialist Legal Texts into Texts for Non-Specialists



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21.1 Contextualization

English in a Professional Context 2 (EPCO 2) is offered in the master's programs (Master of Arts in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures; Master of Arts in English Language and Linguistics) at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna. Building on a foundation of awareness and skills acquired in EPCO 1, EPCO 2 aims to help students to further develop their ability to cope with specialist texts and to work with new genres (see Bruno-Lindner, "English in a Professional Context," [this volume](#)). The overarching goal is to enable students to function as text mediators; they learn to transform highly specialized texts from a specific professional domain (either law, medicine, or technology) into texts suitable for different non-specialist target groups and purposes. The present chapter introduces a set of analysis and transformation tasks from the EPCO 2 course focusing on texts from the professional domain of the law.

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Taking into account the fact that not all EPCO 2 students will have completed EPCO 1, Part 1 of the course deals with *Basic Terms and Concepts*. Students review a “toolkit” of concepts related to the genre-analytic approach, which include text type, audience, purpose, and moves (Swales, 1990, p. 58), learn to identify semi-technical and technical vocabulary (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 83) and to distinguish specialist from non-specialist texts. Moreover, students are introduced to specialist legal texts with a prescriptive purpose (Sarcevic, 1997, p. 11) as well as to the specific language features that contribute to realizing this purpose (e.g., intertextuality, modality, performative verbs) (Fiorito, 2006, p. 108).

Part 2 of the course, which deals with *Legal English and the Law*, lays the necessary groundwork for the analysis and transformation of specialist legal texts. Students gain a basic familiarity with the domain of the law by reading the text “Introduction to Law” (Riches & Allen, 2013, pp. 3–11) and by engaging with a selection of language exercises and tasks based on authentic texts (Bruno-Lindner & TransLegal, 2011). They also acquire a framework in which to place legal texts as they learn to ask a set of fundamental questions: for example, whether the text is prescriptive or not; whether the text has been written for specialists (e.g., lawyers, lawmakers, the courts) or non-specialists; whether the text has a single audience or a dual audience (e.g., a statute written both for legal specialists and for layperson citizens); whether the text is a template, or contains boilerplate language; what the text is about, what technical terms are used and what they mean. As students carry out the analysis of selected prescriptive texts in class, they learn to identify salient linguistic features of legal English texts, which, in addition to prescriptive language features, can include, for example, archaic language, pronominal adverbs, whiz-deletion, pro-forms, Latin terms, binomials and trinomials, doublets and triplets, catenative verbs, passive voice, and impersonal reference to agents.

Part 3 of the course concerns *text transformation*, and covers three sessions. Working in small groups, students move from the guided analysis of specialist prescriptive legal texts to the direct comparison of these texts with non-specialist texts that have been written on the basis of them (e.g., a blog, a newspaper article). In the process, students are encouraged to collect transformation strategies that they can use in their own writing. After analyzing the structural and linguistic features of non-specialist target texts (e.g., the informative public-service website), students independently transform specialist legal texts into the target non-specialist text type.

In Part 4 of the course, students carry out *independent project work* in pairs, working independently on the analysis of six text samples from one legal specialist genre. The project teams meet for private conferences with the instructor and discuss their work in progress. Subsequently, each project group writes an analytical essay about their selected genre, carries out the transformation of a text from this genre into a non-specialist text of another genre, writes a justification essay about the transformation process, and finally presents their project to the class.

The tasks described below are set in Part 3 of the EPCO 2 course and take two 90-minute sessions to complete.

21.2 Objectives

The general objective of the tasks described below is to lead students to engage receptively and productively with a specialist and a non-specialist text and learn how the former has been adapted for a non-specialist reader. More specifically, the objective is to enable students to acquire a set of mediation strategies. These include “strategies to explain a new concept for a new audience” and “strategies to simplify a text” (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 118–122). When explaining a new concept, text mediators can establish links to previous knowledge, adapt language, and break down complicated information (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 118); simplifying a text can involve amplifying a dense text and streamlining a text (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 121).

Students are led to observe the specific ways language is used to realize these mediation strategies. For example, in the tasks at hand, students work with a transformed text about the UK Equality Act (“Equality Act 2010,” n.d.) written for an audience of older laypersons (“Age UK,” 2019) and look at the ways language is used to explain new concepts. When students ask which linguistic structures are used to define a technical term, they observe that colloquial functional language of defining is employed: for example, “This is when you experience behaviour that makes you feel intimidated, humiliated, or degraded, or that creates a hostile environment” (“Age UK,” 2019). When students ask how links to previous knowledge are created to illustrate a technical term, they observe that the writer employs comparisons to everyday situations: for instance, “For example, if a nurse repeatedly made jokes about your age” (“Age UK,” 2019). Additionally, students focus on characteristic features of legal texts such as prescriptive language and impersonality, and identify how the author of the target text transforms these. The main objective of the subsequent follow-up task is to encourage students to reflect on and implement these and other strategies in their own transformations of specialist texts.

21.3 Procedure

21.3.1 *Warm-Up: Gathering Useful Techniques*

The lesson begins with brainstorming, and students form small groups. They are asked to list different ways of structuring information in a non-specialist text in order to make the information easier to grasp, to remember, and to act upon. The responses elicited are written on the board for all to see and to refer back to during the lesson.

Possible answers include the use of the following: bullet points; headings (e.g., question headings, statement headings, topic headings); an FAQ section; numbering of sections or steps; info boxes; checklists; diagrams and tables and other visual representations, such as photos; typographical features such as bold text,

underlining, font type and size; layout and visual features such as use of color, use of space; links to further information.

21.3.2 Introduction to the Topic of the Texts and to the Activity

Students are asked to respond spontaneously to the following questions:

- What do these words (written on the board) mean to you? *Harassment, discrimination, ageism*. How would you define them?
- What can people do when they experience these behaviors in public?

Students are told that they will be analyzing two texts, and that the outcomes of this lesson will serve as preparation for the next lesson, which will be a writing workshop.

21.3.3 Activity

Step 1: Getting oriented with the GAP (i.e., Genre, Audience, Purpose)

Students are given two texts:

1. an excerpt from the Equality Act (“Equality Act,” 2010) and
2. a section of a website produced by Age UK about the Equality Act (“Age UK,” 2019).

Working in small groups, students answer the GAP questions about each text and then share their answers with the class.

Step 2: Analyzing the language features of the specialist text

Students are asked to identify salient linguistic and textual features of the specialist text with examples of each feature. Students’ findings are shared with the whole group.

Step 3: “Unpacking” the mediation strategies used in the transformation text

Students are given a list of questions and are asked to answer these with regard to the transformed text and to provide examples of language use to illustrate their answers.

- Which linguistic features does the writer use to establish a relationship to the target audience? Characterize the writer-reader relationship.
- Which register features can be identified?
- Does the writer make use of common core vocabulary, semi-technical vocabulary and technical vocabulary? To what extent? How does the writer deal with technical terms?

- How does the writer transform the prescriptive language of the original text to suit the informative purpose of the new text?
- Does the writer amplify or streamline content from the original text?
- How is the text structured, and what layout-related and visual elements are used to make it accessible for the reader?

Step 4: Sharing findings and reflecting

The individual working groups report their answers to the class and students reflect on the mediation strategies they have identified. In addition to those mentioned above, some examples of possible findings include the following: use of an FAQ section at the beginning of the text as a kind of table of contents; definitions given as explanations followed by “This is called ...;” use of table format for technical terms and their definitions; use of semi-technical language in quotation marks followed by explanation: “when it can be ‘objectively justified’. This is when ...;” use of bullet points; list of items inserted in table for clarity; use of you-orientation to establish a close relationship to the reader: “You are protected;” use of question headings; use of questions containing “me” to draw in reader; use of informal/spoken language features to establish friendly rapport: contractions, “a lot of,” “to get;” prescriptiveness rendered with modals and prepositional phrases: “This means they must,” “employer could put,” “under the Equality Act,” “due to the Equality Act” (“Age UK,” 2019).

21.3.4 Follow-Up Work

21.3.4.1 Homework Assignment

An essay writing assignment gives students the opportunity to deepen their understanding of what they have learned in the lesson. They are tasked with writing an analytical essay comparing two texts, one being a prescriptive text for legal specialists, the other a text about the same subject matter written for non-specialists. Both of these texts, which are either provided by the instructor or found by the student, can be of the same genres as those already analyzed in class, but need not be. The focus of the essay should lie on the transformation techniques employed by the writer of the transformed text; this focus should be reflected in the thesis statement of the essay.

21.3.4.2 Workshop Session

In the following 90-minute workshop lesson, students are told they will be transforming a prescriptive legal text into a text for non-specialists. They are introduced to the specialist text through questions that elicit previous knowledge of the subject matter and probe students' understanding of selected technical terms in the text (see

description of previous lesson). Students form groups of three and are asked to read the text and briefly discuss its contents with their fellow group members. Once they are sure they have a working understanding of the text's contents, they are given the task of transforming it; the target text will be of the genre that was analyzed in the previous session (i.e., an informative public-service website explaining what a law means for a specific audience). Each group is to produce one text together. While the groups are writing their texts, the instructor is available for questions; issues of relevance to all are addressed and discussed with the class as a whole. At the end of the session, students are requested to upload their texts to Moodle into a folder accessible to all. As a follow-up, students can be asked to assess or edit the text of another group; to rank the texts produced; or to re-work their own text, incorporating elements from the texts of other groups.

21.4 Evaluation

The analysis and writing tasks described above result in a variety of outcomes: a body of student-produced texts (which can be discussed, reworked, and showcased); student essays in which the emphasis lies on comparative linguistic analysis; and the acquisition of a repertoire of text mediation strategies. As such, the tasks play a central role in achieving the objectives of EPCO 2 as a whole. While the carrier content (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) of the activities described above is English for Law, EPCO 2 courses focusing on English for Medicine or English for Technology can make use of the same task format.

In closing, the student perspective on EPCO 2 is worth relating. At the outset of the course, students commonly express apprehension about working with specialist text types from an unfamiliar field. In comments shared in end-of-semester course evaluation questionnaires, students sometimes mention the initial uneasiness they feel due to their lack of familiarity with legal texts or a sense of inadequacy at the prospect of working with laws, contracts, and other legal documents, texts which students may even find inscrutable and inaccessible in their first language. However, this initial response constitutes a rationale for the focus on specialist texts; the course aims to reduce students' fear of working with unfamiliar genres and to empower students for their future work with texts. The gradual, step-by-step analytical approach employed in the course helps students learn how to unlock specialist texts and gain access to what was previously inaccessible to them. After completing EPCO 2, students often report a satisfying and rewarding learning experience: "The course enriches linguistic skills and provides insights into legal English, which is very interesting!" (Student evaluation, WS 2018, EPCO 2). Thus, a further outcome of EPCO 2 can be highlighted: greater student confidence in their ability to cope with specialist texts.

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