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### MEDIATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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The present paper approaches the concept of mediation in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. Drawing on the analysis of this language activity treated by notorious authors, such as Maria Stathopoulou, Brian North, and Enrica Piccardo, it focuses on a broader view of mediation presented in *CEFR* (2001) and subsequently developed in *CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors* (2018). The article pursues to determine the improvements brought to this concept, the new illustrative descriptor scales alongside the mediation strategies with a view to devising specific mediation tasks correlated with the three macro-groups of mediation activities: mediating texts, mediating concepts, and mediating communication aimed at developing learners' mediation skills.

**Keywords:** mediation activities, mediation strategies, illustrative descriptors, mediating a text, mediating concepts, mediating communication.

# MEDIEREA ÎN CONTEXTUL PREDĂRII LIMBII ENGLEZE DREPT LIMBĂ STRĂINĂ

Articolul de față este dedicat conceptului de mediere în cadrul predării limbii engleze ca limbă străină. Pornind de la analiza acestui tip de activitate comunicativă tratată de autori notorii precum Maria Stathopoulou, Brian North și Enrica Piccardo, studiul se axează pe o abordare mai amplă a medierii prezentată în *Cadrul european comun de referință pentru limbi* (2001) și ulterior dezvoltată în Volumul complementar al respectivului Cadru publicat în anul 2018. În articol se urmărește inventarierea completărilor introduse cu referință la activitatea lingvistică de mediere, și anume – noile scale de descriptori ilustrativi și strategiile de mediere cu scopul de a elabora sarcini pedagogice de mediere corelate cu cele trei macrogrupuri de activități comunicative de mediere: *medierea textului, medierea conceptelor* și *medierea comunicării*.

Cuvinte-cheie: activități de mediere, strategii de mediere, descriptori ilustrativi, medierea textului, medierea conceptelor, medierea comunicării.

# **Introduction: Mediation as a Language Activity**

The notion of mediation was introduced in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) published in 2001, together with other three language activities, i.e. reception, production and interaction, and subsequently developed in the 2018 edition of CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors. Mediation is defined as a language activity in which "the user/learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes from one language to another (cross-linguistic mediation)" [1, p.103]. It emphasizes the role of language in the process of ensuring "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" [Ibidem]. The limited attention given to the concept under consideration in the first edition of the CEFR resulted in the underrepresentation of mediation tasks and activities in textbooks of EFL as well as in teachers' classroom activities. This disregard towards the mediation activity is not characteristic only of the English language, but of other languages as well. For instance, Monica Hutanu and Ioana Jieanu claim in "Mediation Activities for Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language" that the fact of not fully developing mediation in the first edition of the CEFR led to the result that mediation "...has been disregarded by most textbooks and teacher of Romanian as a Foreign Language" [2, p.173]. Hence, devising practical guidelines for EFL teachers and material writers on creating mediation tasks is imperative in order to raise their interest in this language activity and assist them in creating effective and engaging activities for the foreign language classroom.

### **Literature Review**

It is noteworthy that mediation is not limited to language education. It is used in various fields of knowledge, among which the most representative is psychology, social studies, and philosophy. B. North and E. Piccardo highlight that, "In professional circles, mediation describes arbitration in disputes and counseling activities. In child development the notion is core both in child/adult interaction and in the way children employ tools and symbols creatively to make sense of their environment." [3, p.87-88]. In Aden's view, mediation is "an

emergent dynamic process of shared meaning, which creates and transforms itself through interactions of individuals with their environment." [4, p.275]. Engestrom defines mediation as a process that allows overcoming separation between individuals and culture/society [5]. In philosophy, mediation is conceptualized as an abstract operation through which knowledge is acquired. The greatest role in transferring this notion from philosophy to education is attributed to L.S. Vygotsky who considers that social interaction, i.e. mediation, plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition [6].

Brian North and Enrica Piccardo, the authors of the illustrative descriptors developed for the CEFR aspects of mediation, distinguish four types of the notion under consideration [7, p.85]:

*Linguistic mediation* includes both the interlinguistic and intralinguistic areas. For example, the activity of summarizing an L2 text could be performed in the target language or in the source language, including the mother tongue. The flexible use of different languages in the classrooms or professional life is considered as an additional form of linguistic mediation.

*Cultural mediation* occurs in any linguistic mediation that tries to facilitate understanding. Mediation is inherent in cultural awareness that applies both within a language and across languages and cultures.

Social mediation refers to the situation when the language user acts as an intermediary, helping interlocutors to communicate who are unable to communicate with each other. In this context, North and Piccardo state that, "Mediation concerns the facilitation of the communication itself and /or the (re)formulation of a text, the (re)construction of the meaning of a message" [8, p.9]. Besides language misunderstandings, the mediator may help bridge the gaps that stem from divergent perspectives or expectations, different interpretation of behavior, etc.

**Pedagogic mediation** comprises the following actions in North and Piccardo's approach [*Ibidem*, p.10]:

- Facilitating access to knowledge, encouraging other people to develop their thinking (**cognitive mediation: scaffolding**);
- Cooperatively creating meaning as a member of a group in different learning environments (**cognitive mediation: collaborative**);
- Ensuring the conditions for the above by creating, organizing, and controlling space for creativity (**relational mediation**). As North and Piccardo specify, it refers to "the time spent on establishing relationships and rapport, organizing work, integrating certain individuals, keeping people on tasks, preventing trouble, resolving problems, etc." [*Ibidem*].

In the CEFR edition of 2001 the notion of mediation was introduced, but not developed, as one of the four language modes, i.e. *reception, production, interaction*, and *mediation*, that activate the language learner/user's communicative language competence. Unlike reception and production that are familiar processes to language teaching and learning through the four skills, mediation is a new notion referred to in the CEFR as language activity that "makes communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly." [9, p.14]. The following mediating activities that "provides for a third party a (re)formulation of a source text to which this third party does not have direct access" are considered significant in "the normal linguistic functioning of our societies": translation, interpretation, paraphrase, summary or record [*Ibidem*]. Section 4.4. of the CEFR extends the notion under consideration stating that "In *mediating activities*, the language user is not concerned to express his/her own meanings, but simply to act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly – normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages" and details the following forms of mediation [Ibidem, p.78]:

# 4.4.4.1 oral mediation:

- simultaneous interpretation (conferences, meetings, formal speeches, etc.);
- consecutive interpretation (speeches of welcome, guided tours, etc.);
- informal interpretation:
  - of foreign visitors in own country
  - of native speakers when abroad
  - in social and transactional situations for friends, family, clients, foreign guests, etc.
  - of signs, menus, notices, etc.

### 4.4.4.2 written mediation:

- exact translation (e.g. of contracts, legal and scientific texts, etc.);
- literary translation (novels, drama, poetry, libretti, etc.);

- summarizing gist (newspaper and magazine articles, etc.) within L2 or between L1 and L2;
- paraphrasing (specialized texts for lay persons, etc.).

Besides, mediation strategies are developed which include four basic stages: planning, execution, evaluation, and repair [*Ibidem*].

The treatment of mediation in the 2001 CEFR offers a promising view of the concept and a sound basis for subsequent enrichment. The two key notions emphasized in this edition are the "co-construction of meaning in interaction and constant movement between the individual and social level in language learning, mainly through its vision of the user/learner as a social agent" [10, p.33]. Thus, the approach to mediation adopted in the CEFR comprises, alongside the cross-linguistic domain, mediation related to communication and learning as well as social and cultural mediation.

The new version of the document, *CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors* (2018) offers a broader view and brings significant improvements to the notion of mediation. One can acknowledge a move from the conceptualization of the notion to putting it into practice through the presentation of types of mediation teachers can work with and the creation of 19 scales for mediation activities with specific focus on activities to mediate a text:

- 1. *Mediating a text* presupposes reformulating and relaying to another person the content of a text to which they do not have access, often because of linguistic, cultural, semantic or technical barriers. The notion has been further expanded to include mediating a text for oneself through such activities as taking notes or expressing responses to creative and literary texts [Ibidem, p.106].
- 2. *Mediating concepts* refers to the process of constructing and elaborating meaning, knowledge both individually (for oneself) and socially, i.e. facilitating understanding for others [Ibidem].
- 3. *Mediating communication* involves creating space, managing tensions aimed at facilitating understanding and ensuring "successful communication between users/learners who may have individual, sociocultural, sociolinguistic or intellectual differences in standpoint" [*Ibidem*]. The scales for mediation are presented in three groups, reflecting the way in which mediation occurs:

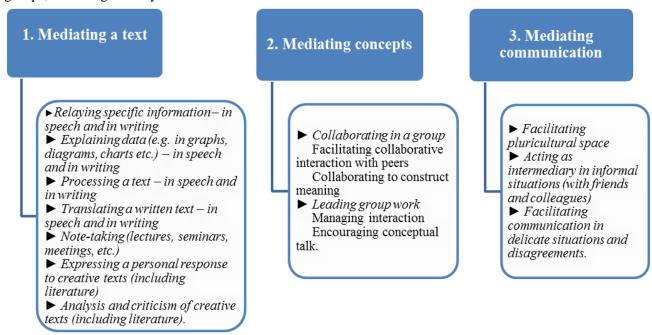


Fig.1. Overview of Mediation Activities.

*Mediating strategies* have also been broadened to cover the above-mentioned activities. Improvements generally concern strategies to explain a new concept (1. linking to previous knowledge, 2. breaking down complicated information, and 3. adapting language) and strategies to simplify a text (1. amplifying a dense text and 2. Streamlining a text).

From what has been analyzed previously, it follows that mediation is a ubiquitous notion present in all contexts of language learning and use, not covered strictly in descriptors of mediation, but in other three areas

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of the CEFR conceptual model as well: mediation occurs across languages/cultures; mediation happens across media in *online interaction* and across *worlds* in *literature*.

# Methodology: Designing Pedagogical Tasks Correlated with CEFR Companion Volume Mediation Activities

In mediation activities learners are less concerned with their own needs, ideas or ways of expression, and more with those of the party or parties for whom one is mediating. Well-developed emotional intelligence is a necessary asset for a person involved in mediation activities, as they need sufficient empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation. Moreover, in order to carry out a mediation activity, participants need to possess a range of related competences, such as social, cultural and plurilingual competences. Thus, practising completely separate types of mediation is merely impossible. The authors of the CEFR *Companion Volume* suggest mixing and matching mediation categories while adapting descriptors to specific contexts.

Maria Stathopoulou defines mediation tasks as "tasks which require learners to relay information from one language to another for a given communicative purpose" [11, p.61-62]. Since mediation occurs not only across languages, but within the same language, the quoted definition can be extended to include the latter aspect as well. Hence, mediation tasks require learners to relay information from one language to another, or within the same language to achieve the communicative purpose. Stathopoulou distinguishes between *interlingual* mediation tasks (i.e. learners of a target language communicate meanings to someone who possesses a different ethnic/linguistic/cultural background) and *intralingual* mediation texts (i.e. relaying information within the same language through genre transfer, for instance). As Stathopoulou puts it, the text resulting from the mediation process may be in a different mode, genre, register or style than the source text [Ibidem, p.62]. In the same publication, she lists another classification of mediation tasks, namely *verbal mediation*, where the source text is a verbal one, and *visual mediation*, where the source text is a visual one, i.e. a pie chart or graph [*Ibidem*, p.62-63], subsequently supplemented with a classification of tasks based on the criterion of mandatory requirement:

- Summarizing tasks involve the production of a summary in the target language through the condensation of information that reflects the gist of the source text.
- *Picking-up-information* presupposes the selection of information found in different parts of the source text which may then be reorganized into the target text, depending in the communicative goal set by the task
- *Transferring numerical information into verbal information* requires the transformation of tabular, numerical, or graphical information into verbal description.

Mediation activities generally involve an integration of two or more of the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Tim Goodier considers that mediation activities contribute to meaningful collaborative tasks as they involve personalization, working towards a particular goal, authenticity, building empathy and mutual respect, and creativity [12, p.2]. For example, while mediating texts, learners formulate in their own words the gist of what they have read, listened to or seen, thus adapting and personalizing the message in order to make it more relevant for their interlocutor. Mediating concepts involve explaining in detail ideas and developing them further, reaching new shared conclusions. Tasks that require a solution, agreement, or finalized proposal offer more opportunities for working together towards a common goal. Authenticity is made use of in tasks aimed at making meanings accessible to others, and can take place within the same language or across languages, particularly in summarizing information in English for other international speakers, which they first understood in their own language. Descriptors for Facilitating pluricultural space rely on learners' sensitivity to cultural perspectives of the people they communicate with, thus cultivating their empathy and reciprocal respect. Finally, setting clear goals to students to devise something new, solve a problem, research a topic, or reach unanimity often within mini projects and team-oriented tasks requires plenty of creativity [Ibidem]. Tim Goodier suggests the following opportunities that teachers can take advantage of in order to implement mediation in their EFL classrooms [*Ibidem*, p.3]:

1. Adapting existing tasks. Different types of speaking and writing tasks that involve learners reformulating information from something they have understood, or involve teamwork in which learners develop each other's ideas towards a shared outcome can be further developed, altered to meet the conditions for mediation.

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- 2. Adapting CEFR descriptors. The CEFR descriptors can be freely adapted to devise mediation activities provided the teacher selects just one mediation descriptor for the target level and brainstorms tasks that would materialize them in their classroom.
- 3. *Making use of learners' interests*. Learners' own interests can be a rich source of mediation activities. If students have the possibility to explore topics online, then this can be a very motivating way of mediating information and ideas between classmates (for example, in peer presentations).
- 4. *Embracing project-based learning*. Projects are good opportunities for mediation as their key feature is that learners work towards producing something meaningful and for which they feel ownership, for example devising a plan for a class excursion.

Riccardo Chiappini and Ethan Mansur consider that in selecting source texts for mediating activities, teachers should maintain a balance between the students' interests or needs and syllabus specifications [13]. According to the quoted authors, the selection of input texts is determined by two factors: students' interests and the situations the students might find themselves in outside the classroom requiring mediation. These situations cover the following domains: personal, public, occupational, and educational.

In what follows, the most relevant mediation activities to EFL instruction are explained in detail and supplemented with respective teaching tasks.

Relaying specific information denotes the activity of extracting some relevant piece(s) of information from the target text and conveying it to someone else. The activity is connected with *Reading* for orientation as the learner scans the text for the necessary information and then relays this to a recipient. Key concepts operationalized in the two scales (relaying in speech and in writing) include the following: relaying information on times, places, prices, etc. from announcements or written artefacts; relaying sets of directions or instructions; relaying specific, relevant information from informational texts like guides and brochures, from corresponddence, or from longer, complex texts like articles, reports etc. [14, p.107].

Explaining data refers to the transference into a verbal text of information found in diagrams, charts, figures, and other images. Typical source texts for such activities include: PowerPoint presentations, articles which include graphics, a weather forecast, or financial information. Key concepts operationalized in the two scales (explaining data in speech and in writing) include the following: describing graphic material on familiar topics (e.g. flow charts weather charts); presenting trends in graphs; commenting on bar charts; selecting and interpreting the salient relevant points of empirical data presented graphically [Ibidem, p.109]. A sample task that involves the types of mediation presented afore can be formulated as follows: create a list of local traveling destinations for a foreign visitor following the steps below:

- Study in groups a number of travelling brochures, in either your first language or English *that* present various local traveling destinations.
- Choose five best places and provide for each the following details: brief summary of the setting that highlights the geographic, historic or cultural importance of the place, location, including a map, distance from the airport, and types of accommodation available.
- Subsequently, representatives from each group briefly summarize their presentation in open class while their colleagues take notes.

The detailed task combines descriptors from several mediation actives: relaying specific information, explaining data, translating, and note-taking. Moreover, it involves collaboration on simple shared tasks and work towards a common goal in a group.

Processing text "involves understanding the information and/or arguments included in the source text and then transferring these to another text, usually in a more condensed form, in a way that is appropriate to the context of situation [*Ibidem*, p.110]. This mediation activity is connected with *Reading for information and argument* (i.e. reading for detail), although the information concerned may have been delivered orally in a presentation or lecture. The learner is free to present the information to the recipient in a completely different order, depending on the communicative goal. Key concepts operationalised in the two scales include the following: summarising main points in a source text; organizing such information and arguments from different sources; recognising and clarifying to the recipient the intended audience, the purpose and viewpoint of the original [Ibidem].

Translating, as a mediation activity, is of two types, i.e. translating a written text in speech and translating a written text in writing. The former is regarded as a process of spontaneously giving a spoken translation of a

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written text, a notice, letter, email or other communication. Key concepts operationalised in the scale include the following: providing a rough, approximate translation; capturing the essential information; capturing nuances (higher levels) [*Ibidem*, p.113].

Translating a written text in writing is a more formal process than providing a spoken translation. The respective scale does not address the translating competences but provides a functional description of the language ability necessary to reproduce a source text in another language. Key concepts operationalised in the scale include the following: comprehensibility of the translation; the extent to which the original formulations and structure (over)influence the translation, as opposed to the text following relevant conventions in the target language; capturing nuances in the original [Ibidem].

A task connected with this activity can be devised using an excerpt of a legal text aimed primarily at teaching topical vocabulary or familiarizing learners with key notions related to the legal system of an English-speaking country. After carrying out a number of vocabulary-related activities, learners may continue with some mediating tasks, such as:

- Learners are asked to rewrite the passage in "plain English", i.e. using neutral vocabulary as if they were explaining it to a friend. Alternatively, they are asked to translate it into their own language.
- Learners then use the rewritten or translated passage as a basis for reconstructing the original text from memory. They then compare the reconstruction with the original.
- As a follow-up activity might be to ask learners to research and summarize in English the given aspect of legal system in their own country. Besides translation, the latter task contains processing text operations [15, p.111].

Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature) focuses on expression of the effect a work of literature has on the learner as an individual. Key concepts operationalized in this scale include the following: explaining their preferences and interest about the work; describing characters, saying which they identified with; relating aspects of the work to own experience; relating feelings and emotions; personal interpretation of the work as a whole or of aspects of it [16, p.116]. Riccardo Chiappini and Ethan Mansur suggest the following task correlated with this activity that can be implemented for class book club [17]:

- At the beginning of the year, students chose a book they will read throughout the course.
- Periodically the teacher sets aside class time to discuss plot, characters and themes.
- At the end of each session students are asked to write a summary of what they discussed.
- The teacher gathers their summaries in a class logbook, which at the end of the course the students can look back at to write reviews. This can subsequently be compiled together in a class magazine.

In mediating concepts, the most pertinent activity for secondary school environment is collaborating in a group. The learning context in which this activity occurs is collaborative work aimed at facilitating access to knowledge and concepts through language. The role of the learner in this activity is twofold, i.e. to facilitate collaborative interaction with peers and to collaborate in order to construct meaning. The former is concerned with the learner's activity of making conscious interventions to orient the discussion, balance contributions, and help to overcome communication difficulties within the group whilst having a specific common objective or communicative task as a target. The following task targeted at presenting vocabulary in a peer teaching framework illustrates the activity of mediating concepts:

- Each student in a group is given a card (or cards) with a different word on it, the meaning being provided in the form of explanation, synonym or picture. Students have to study their card(s) silently and learn their words
- Then the group is given a task which involves using the words, such as building a story in which students have to order sentences, each of which contains one of the targeted words. To complete the task, each student would have to explain to the other members of the group the words they have just studied [18, p.91].

A similar mediation activity is performed in the *cooperative dictionary* search task. It is a jigsaw type of task in which a person or a group in the class has some information that the other students do not have but need. In order to complete the task, they have to put the information together. It focuses on the meaning of the words by looking them up in the dictionary and providing a simpler description of the word that can offer to other students of the group more details about the words and recognize some of their features even without a picture:

- Each student is given a word from a list and asked to look its definition up in the dictionary. After having the meaning, the student has to illustrate it by means of a simple sentence written next to the word and share it with the rest of the group or class. The goal is to complete a chart of words by collecting all the information from the rest of the class.
- As a follow-up activity, students, as a group, may be asked to rank the studied words according to preference. This activity also involves *mediating communication* as students have come to a consensus and devise one list of items that would reflect their preferences.

Pyramid discussions is another task that involves collaborative interaction with peers in order to construct meaning. It is an organizational technique effective for simple problem-based discussions, especially with item selection tasks, e.g. What are the most useful things if you are shipwrecked on a desert Island? or list sequencing tasks, e.g. Put these items in order of importance [19, p.218].

- The teacher introduces the problem using a list on the board or on handouts.
- Students start with individual reflection on a possible solution.
- Students are then paired off to discuss and come to a compromise/solution. They should reach this solution before they move to the next stage.
- The teacher combines the pairs to make fours, again they need to reach an agreement/solution.
- Each four is joined with other four, or in a smaller class, with all the others. When the whole class comes together, the teacher sees if they can reach one class solution.

In carrying out this activity, the following mediation descriptors are concerned: collaborating in simple, practical tasks, asking what others think, making suggestions and understanding responses.

In the third broad type of mediation, mediating communication, the most relevant activity for the educational domain is *facilitating pluricultural space*. It denotes the process of creating a shared space between and among the representatives of different languages and cultures, i.e. "the capacity of dealing with 'otherness' to identify similarities and differences to build on known and unknown cultural features, etc. in order to enable communication and collaboration" [20, p.122]. Key concepts operationalized in the scale include the following: using questions and showing interest to promote understanding of cultural norms and perspectives between speakers; expressing sensitivity to and respect for different sociocultural and sociolinguistic viewpoints and norms; anticipating, dealing with and/or repairing misunderstandings resulting from sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences. A simple task, based on this activity, might be for students to each write the name of a country or culture they know about or want to know about on a sheet of paper, then circulate and write questions about it on each other's sheets. Students can then have a group discussion about the questions on their sheets or conduct some follow-up research for homework.

### Conclusions

- 1. Mediation is a pervasive language activity, therefore its presence in all contexts of language teaching and learning, such as mediation across languages/cultures, mediation in online interaction, and mediation in literature urges teachers of foreign languages, materials developers, and curriculum and syllabus designers to review the place of mediation and the role of mediation tasks in the foreign language classroom.
- 2. Mediation activities involve an integration of two or more of the language activities (reception, production, and interaction) and, besides approaching texts of different genres, it can be employed in teaching language forms too, i.e. grammar and vocabulary. What is more, mediation tasks often incorporate descriptors from several communication activities.
- 3. The CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors is a rich resource for devising mediation tasks as it provides teachers and materials writers with detailed descriptors for each of the activity types and for each level of language proficiency. Practical ideas include: the types of source texts students can be exposed to, the types of skills required to approach the text in each activity, the type of output students should be able to produce, and the mediation strategies students have to employ in order to complete the task.
- 4. Although mediation is a relatively new term in language teaching, it has long played a part in many of EFL classroom practices as it shares common principles with cooperative learning and peer teaching in which language acquisition is enhanced by students' interaction in the target language and the development of social skills, such as acknowledging another's contribution, inviting others to contribute and keeping the interaction calm and effective.

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