

IMPLEMENTING MEDIATION EXERCISES IN TEFL

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Abstract: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2020) outlines mediation as one of the four major language skills alongside listening, speaking, and writing. It is a structured process of communication that involves the ability to act as an intermediary or facilitator in various contexts between speakers of different languages or of one and the same language, aiming at finding common ground and resolving disputes. The purpose of the article is to discuss the benefits of implementing various mediation exercises at different levels in TEFL. Mediation uses an action-oriented approach to language education and is applicable to a variety of academic, linguistic, cultural, social, political and professional settings.

Keywords: mediation, linguistic mediation, modality, facilitator, communication skills, action-oriented approach, mediation descriptors.

Introduction

The evolution of language education in the 21st century has redefined approaches to successful communication, which is a core element among the 4 Cs. This change led to the integration of the concept of mediation within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Companion Volume (2018/2020), outlining the actions EFL learners can undertake to accomplish their communicative goals.

Mediation in language instruction emerged notably in the 1990s, as communication researchers recognized the importance of developing skills to address issues arising in communication between speakers of different languages (Byram, 2013). However, it was given more consideration at the beginning of the 21st century.

Traditionally, mediation is defined as “a process in which an impartial third person assists those involved in conflict to communicate effectively with one another and to reach their own agreed and informed decisions concerning some, or all, of the issues in dispute” (Whatling, 2012, p. 22). The key phrases in Whatling’s definition, specifically “communicating effectively” and “reaching agreed and informed decisions,” underline the main concepts that explain the essence of the mediation process and the interdependence between communication and mediation.

Discussion

In language education, it is important to understand that mediation and communication are distinct, yet closely interlinked concepts essential for promoting constructive interac-

tions and dialogues. Communication, defined as “a process of transmitting ideas, information, attitudes by the use of symbols, words, pictures, figures from the source to a receiver, for the purpose of influencing with intent” (Inas, 2005, p. 2), constitutes a fundamental component of mediation. Effective communication necessitates two participants – a sender and a receiver – who engage within a shared frame of linguistic, cognitive and cultural reference using symbols known to both of them. Beyond this shared understanding, cooperation and willingness to speak and listen between the sender and receiver are essential.

Mediation is a process in which the mediator helps to render a similar meaning from one modality of communication into another, facilitating, thus, the interpretation of a text/discourse or assisting learners in effective communication. According to Dendrinos, mediation is defined as “the act of extracting meaning from visual or verbal texts in one language, code, dialect, or idiom and relaying it in another, so as to facilitate communication” (as cited in Kohler, 2015). Similarly, Michelle Kohler (2015) associates mediation with skills necessary for transferring meaning, such as translating, interpreting, summarizing, and paraphrasing, applicable across different languages or within the same language. Therefore, linguistic mediation serves as a bridge fostering effective communication among individuals with language and cultural differences, ensuring accurate message transmission, minimizing misunderstandings, and facilitating successful interaction and collaboration among learners. The mediator acts as a facilitator or intermediary who guides communication between learners, using communication skills and techniques to promote open and constructive dialogue.

According to Goodier (2020), effective communication within mediation allows learners to convey viewpoints, needs, and concerns while helping to interpret meaning across multiple languages or communication modes. Mediation is intrinsic to learners’ comprehension as they consider others’ needs and adapt their expression to the given speech situation, providing new meanings, looking for synonyms or suitable communication approaches, displaying high linguistic competence. Thus, mediators create their own texts that differ in length, form and expression from the original one, incorporating their own perspective into the final product. Dendrinos claims that “mediators bring into the end product their own “voice,” often expressing their take on an issue. They select which meanings or messages to extract from a source text and then decide how to convey them” (Dendrinos, as cited in Macmillan Education, 2019).

The body of research carried out by Macmillan Education (2019) claims that mediation involves social, cultural, and linguistic facets, aiming to ease communication among speakers or groups unable to directly interact. The main aim of linguistic mediation is to help people to communicate well and solve a problem.

CEFR Companion Volume (2020) regards mediation in conjunction with production, receptive and interaction skills, highlighting that “mediation is often about taking the *same* content and rephrasing it to suit a different *context*” (CEFR, 2020, p. 3, original emphasis). Thus, mediation is applied when there is a communication breakdown that can be solved by rendering similar meanings to suit varied contexts, bridging communication gaps through different languages, varieties, or registers.

Generally, mediation is categorized into interlingual, intralingual and extralingual types. Interlingual mediation involves translating, paraphrasing, or finding equivalent expressions in both source and target languages. Intralingual mediation requires learners to work within the same language, paraphrasing complex sentences, explaining words, cultural idioms, and realia in simpler terms to enhance language comprehension by avoiding ambiguities and vague language. Extralingual mediation relies on non-verbal communication, using paralanguage, gestures, visuals, or real-life objects to convey meaning, especially when trying to bridge language proficiency gaps between speakers.

The best way for EFL teachers to introduce and develop mediation skills into their teaching practice is through action-oriented approach. This approach, closely linked with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) established by the Council of Europe, prioritizes practical language use in various authentic settings, emphasizing task-based and action-oriented language learning (CEFR, 2020).

“The CEFR’s action-oriented approach represents a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures, or a pre-determined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions. This promotes a “proficiency” perspective guided by “can do” descriptors rather than a “deficiency” perspective focusing on what the learners have not yet acquired” (p. 28).

Thus, the action-oriented approach comes handy during the English lessons because it encourages learners, seen as “social agents and language users” (CEFR, 2020, p. 29) to apply language in meaningful ways to achieve specific communication goals.

The most common types of exercises that can help develop mediation skills in EFL classes run as follows: role-plays, interpreting exercises, telephone conversations, group discussions, listening comprehension tasks, cross-cultural negotiations, news reporting, translation tasks, simultaneous interpretation, etc. These exercises rely on interpersonal, textual and audiovisual mediation and facilitators have to make complex choices regarding the data to be extracted from one language or register or text to be rendered into another one. In time, learners develop a variety of skills like: prediction, guessing, reading in-between lines, choosing key points, making assumptions, drawing conclusions. These cognitive attributes enable EFL learners to facilitate communication and negotiation effectively.

Mediation skills are important in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because they enable learners to act as intermediaries between two parties who do not share either a common language or a repertoire in the same language. They require collaborative work which increases EFL learners’ chances of speaking, working in teams, asking for help, reinforcing in such a way the learner’s knowledge of English. CEFR Companion Volume (2020) states that “the mediation descriptors are particularly relevant for the classroom in connection with small groups, collaborative tasks. The tasks can be organized in such a way that learners have to share different inputs, explaining their information and working together in order to achieve a goal” (CEFR, 2020, p. 4).

Working with the second-year students from the English and German Philology Department, the Faculty of Philology of Alecu Russo Balti State University on the topic of “Fashion in Modern Society”, I have introduced a jigsaw reading activity focusing on developing mediation skills. It was based on the article “Are you a “brand slave”?” (Linguapress, 2022). Thus, the objective of this reading activity was to boost learners’ reading comprehension, collaboration, and speaking skills and enlarge their English vocabulary on the topic of the unit. This activity required 35-40 minutes to prepare, 10 minutes to present and 7 minutes to reflect on the final outcomes.

During the preparation stage it was necessary to cut the article into sections, where each section contained distinct information or ideas. Then, students were divided into small groups with an equal number of members (Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, etc.). The number of groups and passages had to coincide. Each group was assigned a different section of the text to work with. The given passages were distributed in a random order. It involved reading the passage from the article, picking up the new words, comprehending it and summarize the main points in such a way as to be able to explain it to other members of the group. Within their respective groups, they discussed the reading section to clarify the new vocabulary;

they looked for additional information if necessary and analyzed their assigned section deeply.

In Stage 2, the original groups were reorganized and new ones were created with at least one member from each former group. Each new group had experts from different original groups. In these new groups, learners took turns to share their reading passages by summarizing their section to their peers and recreating the original order of the text.

The next stage focused on collaboration and discussion because learners were encouraged to talk and share the information with other members of the group. They pieced together the different sections of the text to create a comprehensive understanding of the entire article. In the process, learners asked some questions, sought clarification and made connections between different sections.

In the last stage of the activity, learners were supposed to present the article collectively in an oral form, discussing the main points from each section. This activity can also be performed in written form by providing a summary of the article.

Last but not least, during the last stage, learners went through a reflection session on teacher's request, where they discussed what they had learned from their peers and most importantly, how their understanding evolved through collaboration.

This activity emphasizes three types of mediation. First and foremost, it was based on linguistic mediation, because learners translated and explained new concepts to their peers, helping them with language comprehension. Secondly, they dealt with cultural mediation. They discussed cultural concepts and perspectives embedded in the text, enhancing cultural understanding. Finally, metacognitive mediation was also triggered through peer reviewing or the reflection session, enabling learners to think about their learning processes, thus, improving their metacognitive skills.

Observation has shown that this activity encourages learners' active participation, collaboration, and the use of various mediation skills. Learners do not only improve their language abilities but also develop their social and cognitive skills through interaction and cooperation which involves group activity. They also enjoyed working collaboratively and asked for more activities of the kind.

Focusing on the difficulties that learners may encounter, I should mention the organizational process only, because while doing the assigned exercise, learners may resort to different languages while discussing their parts with the group; however, this should not be taken as a risk as they still have to present the information in English and this temporary difficulty allows them to mediate text-specific terminology/vocabulary in English and reach some common ground.

Another example of a mediation exercise can be carried out at an elementary level, where learners are actively engaged in studying the English vocabulary, the structure of the English sentences together with creativity skills. This activity might be referred to as "an escape to a paradise garden" and it aims at developing active listening skills, encouraging speaking mindfully in English, paying attention to the slightest details. Overall, it takes 20 minutes to complete the activity.

The activity begins by reinforcing garden and meditation vocabulary, introducing or reviewing such related items as "flowers", "trees", "relax", "peaceful", "imagine", etc. through simple exercises or discussions.

Next, the teacher explains the concept of meditation in simple terms. It involves learners picturing an adventure in their minds. The teacher gives a brief outline of the instructions that learners should follow in order to imagine a beautiful garden. Also, during this stage, the teacher provides a guided visualization for about 10 minutes, asking learners

to sit comfortably in their chairs, close their eyes, and take slow, deep breaths. Next, the teacher describes the paradise garden in vivid detail using simple English, encouraging them to imagine along with their words. For example, “imagine a large gate covered in colorful flowers. It is opening slowly, and as you walk through, you see tall trees, butterflies flying around, and a gentle stream flowing nearby.” In such a way, the teacher describes various elements they might encounter in the garden, such as: blooming bright flowers, friendly animals, singing birds or a peaceful pond. Learners are supposed to engage their senses and think about what they see, hear, smell, and feel in this garden. It is also important to guide learners through a peaceful exploration, encouraging relaxation and calmness throughout.

After the visualization, during the reflection stage, the teacher asks learners to slowly open their eyes. They should be engaged in a discussion about what they imagined, what they liked most about the garden, and how they felt during the exercise. By using simple questions in English like, “What did you see in the garden?” or “How did you feel when you were imagining the flowers and trees?”, the teacher will be able to elicit answers that will be transformed from a mental mode of picturing things into a linguistic one.

Implementing this activity requires to have simple and clear instructions suitable for an elementary level. Besides focused attention and active listening, this activity helps to generate mental images fostering creativity. It also develops learners’ sensory awareness as they have to describe what they heard, smelled or saw during their escape in the paradise garden. Moreover, discussing their experiences in the classroom encourages self-reflection and reflective thinking. Thus, learners become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and sensations, enhancing introspection and mindfulness. Additionally, they learn how to think about their experiences and analyze the given situations.

Language educators should focus on developing mediation skills in EFL classes, engaging learners in various communication activities to enhance comprehension of complex texts and conversations. Moreover, mediation improves oral and written expression in terms of style, form, and vocabulary, enabling learners to adapt linguistic resources according to context and communication needs. Furthermore, mediation cultivates cultural competence and awareness, contributing significantly to EFL teaching and learning. As a result, EFL learners become more independent, that is, they take more responsibility for their own learning and become more proactive in their L2 language acquisition. They learn how to tackle language challenges on their own rather than constantly relying on a teacher, a translator or a translation app.

Overall, mediation includes activities that:

- promote understanding between people;
- make things more comprehensible;
- make connections between ideas and information;
- discuss or debate some issues to reach new conclusions.

Developing mediation skills through exercises has a multi-fold positive effect on EFL learners’ linguistic education and foreign language repertoire. Applying mediation in the classroom fosters creative thinking, another core component of the 4Cs. Thus, such action-oriented and, at the same time, task-based learning can lead to innovative and out-of-the-box solutions that may be less available through traditional formal instruction.

Mediation exercises familiarize learners with multimodality (Gunther Kress, 2010, p. 5), which embeds a diversity of modes of communication ranging from spoken and sign languages to written texts or images/visuals, where meaning is interpreted by rendering it from one communication system into another one. Multimodal mediation is especially relevant in multimedia and the digitally connected world.

Mediating exercises also enhance learners' active listening skills that are relevant for mediating information in the process of interpretation. Learners should be very attentive to inflections in tone, intonation, and context while listening to how others speak, to be able to detect the speaker's emotional intelligence, helping to display such soft skills as empathy and support.

Mediating exercises, raise learners' contextual awareness, distinguishing between formal or informal contexts, different registers, and sensitive content, establishing the needs of the audience, and the purpose of the communication.

Using mediation exercises on a regular basis, leads to increasing language proficiency in TEFL. The ability to rephrase and summarize information in a precise and concise manner is important, making it easier for others to understand, particularly, when working with difficult content.

Limitations

Despite all the advantages of introducing mediation exercises, there are a number of limitations to be pointed out.

First, it is a skill that requires a lot of time and effort. You cannot teach and learn mediation at one go. It is a long and time-consuming process that should be done repetitively and at well-established time intervals.

Second, most of the textbooks that are used in teaching English either at the university level do not consistently provide exercises or activities meant to develop mediation skills. Some of the translation exercises given in the textbooks are not enough to develop these skills as they focus on solving only some local linguistic issues. Learners are not involved in real-life situations and they are not perceived as social agents trying to solve real problems.

Third, it is often the teacher's responsibility to create additional mediation tasks to fit the topic under discussion, the learners' language level and to apply them in the classroom environment. Most EFL teachers are reluctant to create additional exercises for different reasons.

Conclusion

Summing up, mediation skills refer to the ability to interpret and transfer meaning between different languages or modes of communication. It is a complex skill developed through training and persistence, through various activities and exercises at different language levels, ranging from the simplest ones to the most difficult ones.

Incorporating mediation exercises in EFL instruction is essential as it assists learners to develop a deeper understanding of the language and culture, and it improves their overall language proficiency reinforcing their cognitive skills. EFL teachers should prioritize developing mediation skills and involve learners in authentic scenarios where they can serve as intercultural facilitators. Applying mediation exercises in language education can be a powerful way to improve EFL learning experiences and create a safe and conformable educational environment.

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