



## Educating the Language Learner as a Cultural Mediator in the English Classroom

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### Abstract

*Developing mediation education though a FL is a new challenge facing ELT methodology and to meet this challenge we need to have a clear methodological vision of how the learner becomes able to act as a mediator in the world where English is a lingua franca. This paper looks at different types of mediation in English from the perspectives of the globalized cooperation and communication in our culturally diverse world, it gives an insight into major sociocultural roles that the learner is expected to act out in real life with the view to the level of his language command. Among these roles are: a) a cultural casual observer (A1+), b) a communicative ethnographer (A2), c) a cross-cultural collaborator (B1), d) a cross-cultural mediator (B2), e) an intercultural mediator (C1) and f) a pluricultural mediator (C2). The paper gives a methodological vision of mediation in English as a communication mode in the context of the dialogue of cultures and civilizations, specifies methodological parameters for describing each of the sociocultural roles that the learner should be able to fulfill in academic intercultural communication. The paper ends by listing graded problem-solving activities for developing the English learner as a pluricultural mediator.*

**Keywords:** *mediation education, sociocultural roles, ELT, CEFR;*

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays modern issues relating to mediation education, training and evaluation have become widely discussed in the fields of law, business, education, social workers and medicine education, linguistics & literature and many contributions to the development of general theory of mediation methodology and innovative practices through a mother tongue [Honeyman, 2007; Pel, 2008; Shapira, 2016; Waldman, 2011]. As far as the FLT field is concerned, it was only in "The Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, teaching, assessment" that language educators' attention was drawn to the concept of mediation as a mode communication to be taught and assessed in the FL classroom [2001: 87-88]. Much later the "CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors" has introduced 15 multi-level scales for mediation, including scales for measuring the learner's skills in mediating a text, mediating concepts and mediating communication [Council of Europe, 2018]. Though these scales give us some teaching ideas about what mediation activities are to be taught and assessed, the methodology of teaching mediation through a foreign language /FL/ is far from having been developed, especially with reference to the three-cycle system of higher education. In other words, developing mediation education though a FL is a new challenge facing ELT methodology. But can we respond to this challenge without specifying mediation objectives for each cycle of higher education? What may be the learner's way to becoming an efficient mediator in a FL in his/her professional/academic communication? This paper looks at different types of mediation in English from the perspectives of the globalized cooperation and communication in our culturally diverse world, sociocultural context of FLT & FLL, and the major sociocultural roles that can be introduced in the process of developing language learners' powers in English language teaching with a view to their level of communicative language competence.

### 2. Literature Review of the works on mediation education

In FLT methodology mediation has been conceptualized in terms of one of (communicative) language activities added to perception, interaction and production [Council of Europe, 2001]. Mediation activities through a foreign language may be bilingual (involving translation or interpretation), or they may be monolingual (if a mediator uses his foreign language repertoire, sociocultural knowledge and skills to help other participants of intercultural communication understand each other better and cooperate more efficiently, being involved in their team work. In Europe it has been already reached a consensus on the following: "In mediation, 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). The focus is on the role of language in processes like

creating the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning, collaborating to construct new meaning, encouraging others to construct or understand new meaning, and passing on new information in an appropriate form. The context can be social, pedagogic, cultural, linguistic or professional" [Council of Europe, 2018:103].

The 2001 CEFR Publication mentioned above has given rise to a number of researches relating to mediation in FLT and among the most important research results were such as: a) the conceptualization of the notions of cultural mediation (Zarate, 2004), cross-cultural mediation (Stathopoulou, 2015); b) the definition of cultural mediator as a social agent (Zarate, 2004) c) approaches to the design of mediation tasks answering the needs of intercultural education through FLT & ELL (Zarate, 2004); d) mediation assessment tools (Dendrinis, 2014; Stathopoulou, 2015). Nonetheless, the results of the gap analysis of these works have clearly demonstrated that:

- 1) Most of the FLT researches are mostly related to secondary school education (see, e.g., Coste & Cavalli, 2015; Zarate, et, al. 2004; Gómez Parra, 2009; Cheng, 2011) and much less attention is given to teaching mediation in tertiary language education.
- 2) There has been an evident gap between what has been done in the FLT field of mediation assessment & the lack of *multi-level* syllabuses & teaching materials specifically designed for developing the university learner as a cultural mediator.
- 3) Rather often, the theoretical framework for teaching mediation neglects the sociocultural context of contemporary language education and the specific characteristics of learning environments in which a particular FL is studied.

In order to bridge some of these FLT gaps in the field of ELT, it seems reasonable to give an additional clarification of the notions of mediation and mediator, taking into consideration today's social status of English and its didactic potential as a university subject to develop step-by-step university FL students' mediation powers.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Mediation & Cultural Mediators as ELT Didactic Concepts

The definition given in the "CEFR/CV" [2018] is purposefully a language neutral and that is why it needs a further clarification with the view to the social status of a FL, its functions & values as a means of modern intercultural communication. The fact that English, being nowadays a lingua franca, is more used in intercultural communication as a means of communicating with non-native speakers (pluricultural settings) than with native speakers (in cross-cultural settings) speaks for the necessity of educating English learners to act out not only as cross-cultural, but pluricultural mediators as well.

With English as a lingua franca in mind, and on the basis of interlinking such concepts as *mediation* [Council of Europe, 2018], *dialogue of cultures* [Kagan,1988: 213-215] and *intercultural dialogue* [White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living Together As Equals in Dignity", 2009:17], communicative & cognitive activities performed by a pluricultural mediator in English should aim at creating intercultural communicative space for: a) an open and respectful exchange of views in English between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, geopolitical views; b) developing the-dialogue-of-cultures model of perception, production and interaction in pluricultural settings of communication by promoting respect to different cultural and language communities & fostering equality, human dignity and a sense of common purpose between intercultural speakers/writers; c) helping people feel comfortable, free and willing to express themselves in a FL and to demonstrate their art of listening to others, d) developing a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and cultural practices, e) making international co-operation between intercultural speakers mutually beneficial, clear and purposeful.

An effective pluricultural mediator is thought to be able to: a) act as pluricultural intermediary between culturally different interlocutors, helping them to overcome sociocultural barriers & cultural prejudices and to destroy cultural stereotypes; b) create comfortable pluricultural space for interlocutors from different ethnic / national, regional, religious, geopolitical communities and social subcultures in order to let them interact & cooperate fully; c) use communicatively appropriate pluricultural repertoire [Council of Europe, 2018] and exploit it with ease in pluricultural situations of academic, business, professional and science communication.

It seems that this rather a sophisticated and complicated social role of the pluricultural mediator can hardly be acted properly if s/he has not deliberately chosen intercultural dialogue as his/her own life style and the language level is lower than C1. But does it mean that university language learners'

mediation skills are to be developed only when they have already reached B2 level in English? I am afraid, there is no simple answer to the question.

### 3.2. Developing university students' mediation powers in English

The 2013-2015 interdisciplinary analysis of data on sociocultural roles that 100 Russian learners from Lomosov Moscow State University with different language levels of English were able to fulfill in intercultural environments cast a new light on the didactic hierarchy of sociocultural roles that may be introduced into language courses in order to develop language learners' mediation powers. It includes:

- a) a casual cultural observer at A1+ level,
- b) a communicative ethnographer at A2 level,
- c) a cross-cultural collaborator at B1 level,
- d) a cross-cultural mediator at B2 level.
- e) an intercultural mediator at C1 level
- f) a pluricultural mediator at C2 level.

There are three stages in introducing these roles for the didactic purposes in ELT. Firstly, each of the sociocultural roles is didactically characterized in terms of:

- spheres of intercultural communication (everyday communication at A1-A2 levels, academic or business communication at B1-C1 levels and science communication at C1-C2 levels) and communicative events typical of them;
- the world of Englishes involved in communication events (Standard BE or Standard AE for Elementary Language User, European English for Basic User, the Outer circle of English for C1 language User and the Expanding circle of English for C2 language User);
- learning activities (pre-mediating or mediating communicative and cognitive activities).

Second, these sociocultural roles are didactically described in terms of mediating knowledge and skills (such as information skills, interpreting skills, behavioral verbal and nonverbal skills, relational and reflective skills) relating to a particular sphere of intercultural communication that is of a special educational focus in a particular learning environment. And, finally, a series of tasks have been designed, starting with ICT cross-cultural or pluricultural tests and quizzes, profile-oriented problem solving tasks based on the YouTube materials, cross-cultural / pluricultural communicative & cognitive reflexive tasks, cross-cultural / pluricultural simulations and case-studies, intercultural discussions and debates.

## 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that a sociocultural approach to developing the mediation powers of FL learners through graded tasks that involve them into practicing different sociocultural roles (typical of academic and/or professional intercultural communication) is an attempt to establish a theoretical framework for teaching mediation in Russian universities and not only. And It provides a basis for designing graded tests for measuring university students' macro- & micro skills (needed to mediators) within the international project "Developing a Multicultural Pedagogical Package of Evaluation Materials for Assessing University Students' Academic Mediation Skills", that has started in June 2018.

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