

Focus on

MEDIATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

1. What is it?

How we define mediation

People mediate in various ways in successful communication, within the same language and across languages. Mediation activities aim to enhance understanding and negotiation of meaning between people, for example in facilitating teamwork, relaying/reformulating ideas and information in new ways, and developing new concepts and solutions. Therefore, mediation is nothing new, but the recently updated concept of mediation in a second language defines these skills more clearly and in more detail for different levels of language ability.

Mediation in the CEFR

The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is an international framework for language learning, teaching, and assessment, which provides detailed descriptions of what people can do in a language, at different levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2, including half-way 'plus' levels A2+, B1+, and B2+). These levels are widely used to organize English language courses and benchmark examinations. The CEFR now provides can-do statements (or 'descriptors') for mediation that can be adapted as learning aims for communicative activities in the classroom.

Mediation activities

Mediation activities often involve an integration of two or more of the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing), for example:

B1+ (Adapting language)

Can paraphrase more simply the main points made in short, straightforward texts on familiar subjects (e.g. short magazine articles, interviews) to make the contents accessible for others.

Here, students might simplify a text (oral or written) in order to provide their peers with easier access to knowledge and/or concepts. For instance, before a role-play in which students try to sell products to one another, they could extract key selling points by exploring product pages and customer reviews on an online store.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Goodier is a member of the core authoring group of the CEFR Companion Volume. He has worked in ELT for over 20 years as a language teacher, teacher trainer, course and materials developer, examiner, inspector, and head of curriculum.

2. What does it mean for the ELT classroom?

A shift of emphasis

Three fundamental questions for learners in the ELT classroom are:

- Why are we doing this?
- How can I/we do it better?
- How well am I doing?

Learning aims for mediation can inspire meaningful collaborative tasks. These can be shared with learners to evaluate their success, as a feature of assessment for learning. They complement learning aims for individual skills, grammar, and vocabulary, whilst shifting the focus onto activities that help learners consciously develop their role as communicators.

Personalization

When learners mediate 'texts', they put into their own words the main ideas of things they have read, heard, discussed, or seen. In this way, they adapt and personalize the message, making it more relevant to their listeners/readers. Descriptors for *Processing text* or *Relaying specific information* can inspire activities where learners summarize and explain things they have researched and are interested in. This gives clear purpose to learners' use of the target language, consolidating learning and increasing motivation.

Not just interaction, but working towards a common goal

Learners can also 'mediate concepts' together by talking through ideas and developing them further, leading to new, shared conclusions. There are more opportunities for this when the task requires a solution, agreement, or finalized proposal, for example in tasks that involve problem-solving or design. Descriptors for *Facilitating collaborative interaction with peers* can be simplified so learners can think about how they work together, taking other people's views into account.

Authenticity

Mediation activities focus on making meanings accessible to others, and can take place within the same language or across languages. An example of this is when learners summarize information in English for other international speakers, which they first understood in their own language. A classroom example might be a task where students write online articles for an international audience, on topics they have researched in their first language. This is different to standard translation, and can include making the message more formal/informal, depending on the context.

Thinking about strategies

The CEFR also defines mediation strategies (especially for levels above B1) as ways of helping your audience understand you better. Students can improve their presentation skills using strategies such as *Linking to previous knowledge* or *Breaking down complicated information*. For example, in a simulation of a meeting involving figures and/or graphic data, they can prepare by brainstorming what the class may already know about the topic, or use metaphors to make the information more accessible. Good teachers are very familiar with these strategies as they use them every day!

Building empathy and mutual respect

Learners of English will often find themselves in situations of intercultural communication, and a key aspect of mediation is being sensitive to the cultural perspectives of the people you communicate with. Descriptors for *Facilitating pluricultural space* can help learners reflect on how to use the knowledge they have. A simple task 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 do some follow-up research for homework.

Being creative

Mediation activities work best when learners have a clear goal to produce something, solve a problem, present ideas, explore a topic, or reach a consensus. Therefore, a focus on mediation can generate plenty of creativity as learners engage in mini projects and team-oriented tasks.

3. What are the challenges?

Individual differences

Mediation makes use of interpersonal and cognitive skills. Therefore, some learners mediate more naturally than others in their first language, and some learners will need extra support to engage in mediation activities in English. More able learners can be encouraged to provide peer support, as this is a key aspect of mediation itself.

Integrating skills

Mediation activities often focus on integrating receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) because learners relay ideas and information from things they have understood. Such activities have different phases and teachers need to decide where the emphasis lies in each phase; for example, in a classroom presentation task there may be a listening or reading aim for the research phase, and a mediation aim for preparing/delivering the presentation.

Preparing mediation activities

The concept of mediation in English language teaching is relatively new and teachers need to identify existing activities that provide opportunities for it; or they may need to design new activities relevant to learners' needs. Remember that mediation may already play a part in many of your classroom activities. Remember also that learners themselves can contribute ideas for mini projects and collaborative tasks.



4. How can this be implemented?

Think around existing tasks

Think about different types of speaking and writing tasks you already use. Do they involve learners reformulating information from something they have understood? Do they involve teamwork in which learners develop each other's ideas towards a shared outcome? You may be able to identify a range of activities you already use that create opportunities for mediation, and from there identify areas for new tasks.

Adapt CEFR descriptors freely

The CEFR invites us to adapt descriptors to context. Try selecting just one mediation descriptor for the target level and brainstorm tasks that would bring it to life in your classroom. Here is an example:

A2+ (Processing text)

Can summarize (in Language B) the main point(s) in simple, short informational texts (in Language A) on familiar topics.

This descriptor could be adapted for learners in an activity like 'Find and watch an online video of your favourite recipe and explain the main points to a group of your classmates'. The online video could be in either their first language or English, as the output of the task will be in English.

Make use of learners' interests

Learners' own interests can be a rich source of mediation activities. If your school allows the use of mobile devices to research topics online, then this can be a very motivating way of mediating information and ideas between classmates (for example, in peer presentations).

Identify useful language for the task

Although mediation focuses on the overall handling of communication, learners can better engage with aspects of turn-taking and collaborative discussion if they prepare with models of relevant functional language. However, be selective and avoid making controlled language practice the focus of the activity.

Embrace project-based learning

Projects can range from something that lasts a single lesson to something spanning the whole course, but a key feature of project-based learning is that learners work towards producing something meaningful and for which they feel ownership. A straightforward example could be developing a plan for a class excursion, for example attending a one-day festival and selecting from events and activities in the festival programme.

Think about roles

Mediation is often about managing communication, and is something that teachers typically do. Think about what is happening in your classroom at different times to create opportunities for learner mediation. What are you, as the teacher, doing in each case? There may be opportunities to hand over leadership to students, or give them space to work together. Do they all have identical roles in group work? There may be ways of assigning differentiated roles that create information gaps and circulate opportunities for leadership.

Encourage reflection

When learners reflect on their performance in communicative tasks, they tend to think about accuracy, and most delayed feedback on speaking and writing focuses on error correction. Make space (before or after error correction) for learners to think about their communicative success in the activity. This can be a good time to show them a (simplified) mediation aim. As a next step, mediation aims can be made a key feature of teacher feedback on learners' performances in tasks.

Assessment

Because mediation integrates skills in a range of ways, there is no standard 'mediation test' to use in the classroom. The best way to start measuring success in mediation is by sharing lesson objectives with learners and helping them to self-assess how well they achieved their mediation aims; these can also be made a key feature of teacher feedback. Learners can be guided to think about how mediation skills will help them be more successful in their exams, studies, and careers.

Collaborate!

Remember that teachers themselves are experienced mediators, so your colleagues can be a rich source of ideas for activities; try to make space in your schedule to discuss what works and what doesn't, and share practical ideas for incorporating mediation into teaching and learning.



5. Over to you

'Mediation' might sound technical, but it is in fact a very practical concept that describes what already happens in good communicative language teaching. Think about how you already use mediation in your classes, and how you could extend this. How could you select and adapt mediation descriptors to improve your students' learning outcomes? Consider how goal-oriented tasks and mini projects can encourage them to process information, explain things to others in their own words, and build new ideas together.

Talking points

- 🗨️ Look at the mediation scale titles in the CEFR. In what ways do you mediate as a teacher day to day?
- 🗨️ To what extent do your students already have opportunities to mediate in your classroom? How could you create more?
- 🗨️ What challenges do you think you would face in focusing on mediation activities with a mixed-ability class? How could you deal with them?
- 🗨️ How could you develop new tasks that focus on mediation outcomes?
- 🗨️ How do you think your students would respond to these types of task?
- 🗨️ How could you measure the impact of new mediation activities on your students' learning?

6. Further reading

CEFR – Companion Volume with new descriptors

👉 <https://www.coe.int/lang-cefr>

CEFR 101

👉 <https://blog.elt.training/>

CEFR-QualiMatrix

👉 <https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2016-2019/QualityassuranceandimplementationoftheCEFR/tabid/1870/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

CEFR Journal

👉 <https://cefrjapan.net/journal>

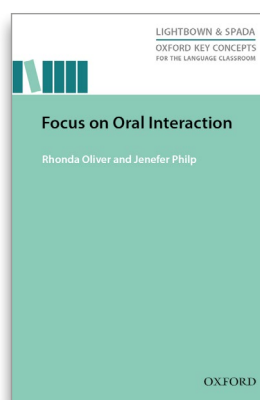
Language mediation: More than conventional translation and interpreting

👉 <https://www.goethe.de/en/spr/mag/21261529.html>

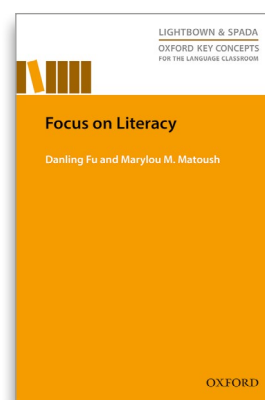
Developing illustrative descriptors of aspects of mediation for the CEFR

North, B., & Piccardo, E. (2016). *Developing illustrative descriptors of aspects of mediation for the CEFR*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. Available to download at:

👉 <https://www.coe.int/lang-cefr>



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