

Mediation¹

Mediation is one of the four modes in which the CEFR model organizes communication. Learners seen as social agents engage in receptive, productive, interactive or mediation activities or, more frequently, in a combination of two or more of them. While interaction stresses the social use of language, mediation encompasses and goes beyond interaction by focusing on meaning-making and/or facilitating communication across linguistic and cultural barriers, which both rely on collaborative processes. The Companion Volume introduces its model of mediation as follows.

“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 across modalities (e.g. from spoken to signed or vice versa, in cross-modal communication) and 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 2020: 90)

Mediation activities are then presented in three macro-categories: *mediating a text*, *mediating concepts*, and *mediating communication* for each of which a number of scales of descriptors are provided. Mediation happens across languages or varieties (cross-linguistic mediation) or within the same language or variety. The descriptors for mediating a text talk of moving from Language A to Language B, with it being made clear that “these: may be different languages, varieties or modalities of the same language, different registers of the same variety, or any combination of the above. However, they may also be identical” (Council of Europe 2020: 92) and that “there may be a Language C and even conceivably a Language D in the communicative situation concerned” (ibid).

As the report on the conceptualisation, development and validation of the new scales of descriptors for the Companion Volume (North and Piccardo 2016) explains, the approach to mediation taken in 2020 is broader than that adopted in 2001, which was confined to *mediating a text* and one aspect of *mediating communication* (acting as an intermediary between people who, for one reason or another are unable to understand each other (Council of Europe 2001, Section 4.4.4). The Companion Volume relates this broader concept of mediation to the social agent and the action-oriented approach, as follows:

“Although the CEFR 2001 does not develop the concept of mediation to its full potential, it emphasises the two key notions of 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. In addition, an emphasis on the mediator as an intermediary between interlocutors underlines the social vision of the CEFR. In this way, although it is not stated explicitly in the 2001 text, the CEFR descriptive scheme de facto gives mediation a key position in the action-oriented approach, similar to the role that a number of scholars now give it when they discuss the language learning process”. (Council of Europe 2020: 30)

¹ This text is an extract from Piccardo, E. and North, B. (in press), “Enriching the scope of language education: The CEFR Companion Volume”, Chapter 1 in North B., Piccardo E., Goodier T., Fasoglio D., Margonis R. and Rüschoff B. (eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume in practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

Language itself emerges from complex webs of actions, which all require some form of mediation. Mediation as understood in socio-constructivist approaches and the sociocultural theory (Lantolf and Poehner 2014), is at the centre of understanding, thinking, meaning-making, and collaborating – all crucial to acting as a social agent. As suggested in the citation above, mediation emphasises the interdependence of the individual and the collective, the cognitive and the social. Following Vygotsky, it is increasingly recognised that learning occurs in a social context: “The true development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual” (Vygotsky, 1986: 36). In learning, the individual reconstructs the mediated social interactions experienced. In this way, we exploit the environment surrounding us by acting as “agents-operating-with-mediational-means” (Wertsch, 1998: 24). The development of higher mental functions is mediated by psychological and cultural tools, especially language. Language is thus simultaneously a working tool to make sense of our surroundings, a vehicle for acquiring new knowledge through the construction of meaning, an object of learning in the language classroom, and a support for the process of reflection. It is thus helpful to think of language as an activity, as something that we do together, as *linguaging*.

Linguaging has been described as “a dynamic, never-ending process of using language to make meaning” (Swain, 2006: 96). The term ‘linguaging’ has been used in philosophy (Maturana, 1988, 2000) linguistics (Halliday, 1985; Jørgensen, 2010; Mignolo 1996, Raimondi, 2014) cognitive sciences (Cowley and Gahrn-Andersen, 2018; Cuffari, Di Paolo and De Jaegher, 2014) and language education (Swain, 2006; Swain and Lapkin, 2011). Linguaging is very relevant to all three of the macro-categories of mediation activities:

- in *mediating concepts*, social agents are linguaging as they think things through together;
- in *mediating a text* they are linguaging to find formulations that enable understanding of the text itself for themselves, and for or with others; and
- in *mediating communication* they are linguaging in the process of self-other regulation.

a) *Mediating concepts* in the Companion Volume has two pairs of descriptor scales, one pair for collaborating in a small group (Barnes and Todd, 1977) and the other pair for mediating while leading a group (Feuerstein and Rand, 1974; Feuerstein et al, 1991). The first of each pair concerns the interpersonal or relational aspect: ‘Facilitating collaboration interaction with peers’ (as a group member) and ‘Managing interaction’ (leading the group). The second of each pair involves constructing new meaning and concepts (linguaging): by ‘Collaborating to construct meaning’ (as a group member) and by ‘Encouraging conceptual talk’ (leading the group in what Alexander, 2008, calls ‘dialogic talk’). Webb (2009) reports that there is a direct connection between teachers encouraging conceptual/dialogic talk and learners in small groups co-constructing meaning. This effect was also seen during piloting the mediation descriptors, as one teacher saying: *We saw how the participants moved from needing to clarify and confirm mutual understanding to interacting more effortlessly by building upon each other’s ideas and presenting one’s own ideas to invoke discussion.*

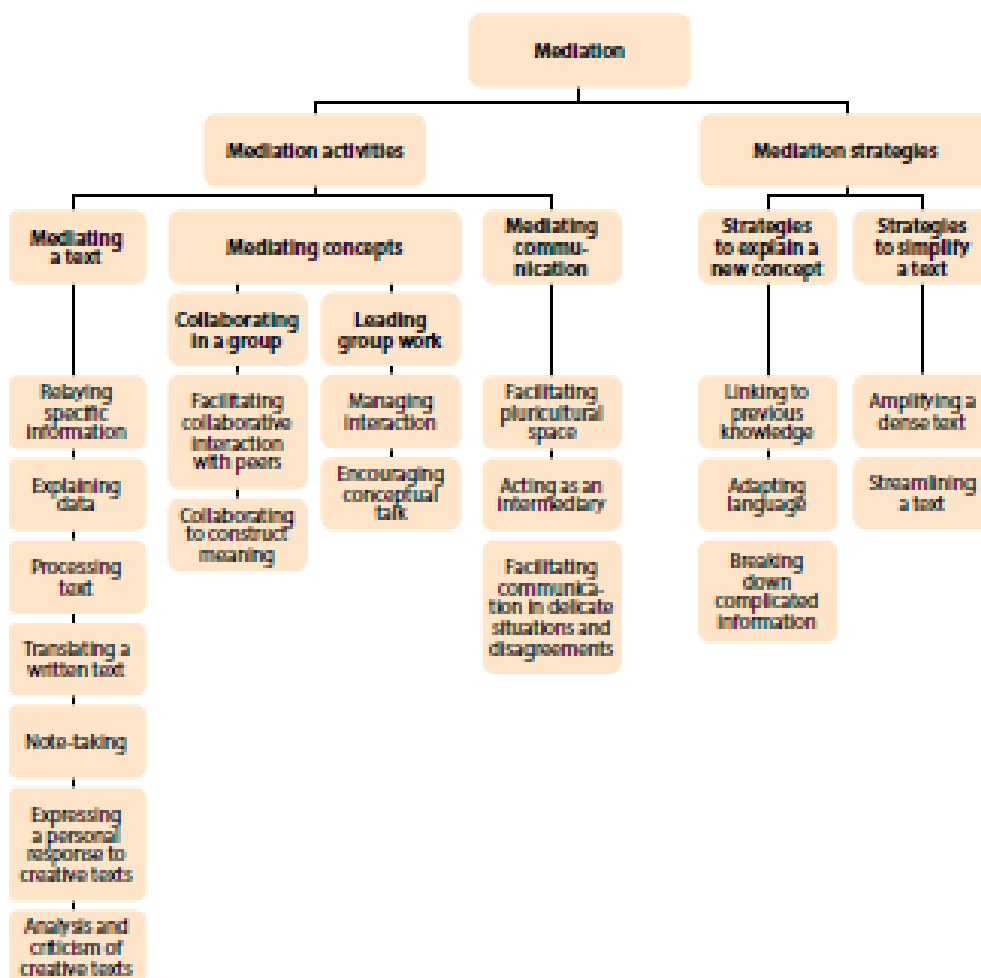
b) *Mediating a text* is the most familiar of the three macro-categories, being included since the 2000s in curricula and examinations in Germany (Kolb 2016; Reimann and Rössler 2013) and Greece (Dendrinou 2006; Stathopoulou 2015). Here, text is taken to include video and graphic data as well as spoken, written and signed texts. There are first four categories, each with a scale for oral and written mediation, covering ‘Relaying specific information’; ‘Explaining data’; ‘Processing text’; and ‘Translating a written text’. The set of scales is completed with ‘Notetaking’ (a 2001 scale) and two scales for reacting to creative text (including literature): ‘Expressing a personal response to creative texts’ and ‘Analysis and criticism of creative texts.’ The last two scales reflect the fact that, with literature, one is firstly mediating for oneself, and then in an educational context, often mediating the text for others, either from a personal, informal point of view – more at lower secondary - or from a more academic point of view – more associated with upper secondary.



c) *Mediating communication* includes a scale for the 'Acting as an intermediary in informal situations', familiar from the CEFR 2001, with a cultural element added to the purely linguistic role of informal interpreting, plus two other scales with an explicit focus on the cultural/intercultural dimension that calls for developing critical-cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2008) and symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2002). First there is 'Facilitating pluricultural space,' which concerns the creation of shared 'third space' (Kramsch 1993) that provides security and helps enable openness and mutual understanding, and 'Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disputes,' which involves helping to resolve critical situations by showing understanding of different perspectives and helping to discover common ground. The three scales in this group are very relevant to the kind of action-oriented approach to intercultural communicative competence adopted by, for example, Auger and Louis (2009), and to the development of the pluricultural competence behind them; as such they are very relevant to our increasingly diverse classrooms.

Mediation is a strategic process which requires agency at every stage, develops linguistic and cultural awareness, and highlights the developmental nature of linguistic repertoires. Mediation also plays a crucial role in successful plurilingual/pluricultural encounters and in online, distance communication.

The categories of the CEFR scales of descriptors for mediation are shown in the following diagram (Council of Europe, 2020: 90).



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