

MEDIATION AS A SKILL IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Abstract. *Although the importance of mediation tasks was introduced in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) in 2001, the development of mediation skills was finally legitimized in the recent edition of CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020). However, the development of this “fifth” language skill during the language classes remains a problematic issue: contrary to the other four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), teachers often face the dilemma of how and when to introduce mediation activities and to what extent mediation should be applied in the process of foreign language teaching and learning. The aim of the research is to survey language teaching policies in Lithuania, Latvia and other EU countries from the aspect of the development of mediation skills in language classes in secondary education. Teaching programs of the English language in senior classes of the secondary school are surveyed from the aspect of mediation skills as defined in the newest edition of CEFR. The research results show that mediation activities are still not adequately included in foreign language classes: first of all, language syllabuses must be adjusted to the revised edition of CEFR. The research has proved the necessity of mediation skills to be included in the secondary education programs of foreign languages. Therefore, the selection of textbooks used in senior classes of foreign languages in secondary education must follow the recommendations outlined in CEFR, where the development of mediation skills is especially emphasized due to the present needs. It has been determined that mediation activities can develop students’ multilingual and plurilingual skills and raise students’ awareness of the peculiarities of both the native language and the foreign one.*

Keywords: *language interaction; language teaching programs; mediation; multilingual and plurilingual skills; secondary education.*

Introduction

The research into mediation as a skill to be developed in foreign language classroom has been inspired by a new emphasis on mediation in the updated edition (Council of Europe, 2020) of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)*. The set guidelines determine a significant role of mediation activities in foreign language classrooms. A variety of suggested activities concerns the problems related to transfer of oral/written message and its meaning from one language/culture to another. Translation and/or interpretation belong to a variety

of mediation practices. With on-going market demands and increasing needs for translators/interpreters, major problems appeared in many European countries: despite the declared focus on the development of socio-cultural competence, many documents regulating secondary education still disregard the importance of mediation in foreign language classes. Most national documents regulating teaching and learning of foreign languages (for example, *General Curriculum for General Education School in Lithuania and General Education Standards for Grades XI-XII: The Syllabus for Foreign Languages* (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011) (further referred to as “GC”) of English as a foreign language (further “EFL”)) were prepared in accordance with the previous edition (Council of Europe, 2001) of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (further “CEFR”). As the curriculum of Lithuanian schools for teaching languages suggests, “the main competence to be developed is the communicative one” (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 84; here and further the author’s translation from Lithuanian). Following the national document, the communicative language competence “consists of other three competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic,” (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 84) activated in the performance of the various language activities, as defined in *CEFR* - reception, production, interaction or mediation (in particular interpreting or translating)” (Council of Europe, 2001, 14). The document *Languages in Secondary Education: An Overview of National Tests in Europe – 2014/15* (European Commission, 2015) provides significant results of foreign language assessment methods and techniques in many EU countries. Apart from statistics of foreign language testing, this document demonstrates the fact that the on-going testing usually involves only the usual four main language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). The latter situation also explains the rising need for renewed detailed research into mediation practice in secondary education.

At present, discrepancy between the national curriculum and the new directions set in the recent edition of *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020) can be noticed. Moreover, the updated European guidelines for teaching and learning languages open the gaps between the on-going teaching process and market needs. The latter aspect leads to the problem of this research: in many cases, the rigid systems of national education programs need to be adjusted to the updated European guidelines. During the process of learning foreign languages students acquire knowledge about the world, other cultures, share information and cultural values and develop as personalities. However, very often the teaching aims (especially, during the last two years of secondary education) are mostly directed towards *The State Examination of English*, without much reference to the market needs. Such situation can be noticed in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, although in the case of the latter country, definite progress in this aspect has been noticed in the period of the last decade (Kemere & Samuseviča, 2013;

Žindžiuvienė & Slauzys, 2015). In many EU countries, teaching/learning activities during the last two years of secondary education become the replica of examination tasks; however, significant communicative activities, which build up the overall language competence, are disregarded (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2022). One of these, very often dismissed as supplementary or secondary, activities happen to be mediation: mediation activities are either seldom organized in EFL classes or are not clearly defined and outlined in the language syllabus.

The aim of the research is to examine the suggested range of mediation activities in the updated edition of *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020) and to determine the scope of mediation activities in EFL classes (Grades 11-12) in Lithuanian secondary schools. The following research objectives were set: (1) To analyze the description of mediation practices as outlined in *General Curriculum for General Education School in Lithuania and General Education Standards for Grades XI-XII: the Syllabus for Foreign Language* (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011); (2) To define and discuss the meaning of mediation activities as described in the updated edition of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Council of Europe, 2020); (3) To compare description of mediation in both editions of *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001, and Council of Europe, 2020); (4) To examine the use of mediation activities in EFL classes (Grades 11-12) in Lithuanian secondary schools; (5) To suggest recommendations for possible mediation activities in EFL classes.

The research was carried out in order to reveal the types and frequency of teaching/learning mediation in EFL classes in Lithuanian secondary schools. First, the theoretical fundamentals of teaching mediation will be analyzed and descriptive research into the updated edition of *CEFR* will be carried out by outlining major changes of the role of mediation in the process of teaching and learning languages; then, qualitative and quantitative research into mediation practices at Lithuanian secondary schools will be discussed. Presentation, explanation, description and use of mediation activities in foreign language classes in Lithuanian secondary schools will be surveyed.

Description of Mediation in National and EU Documents and Sources

The importance of foreign language learning and teaching has increased largely: languages have been understood as a means of communication between different countries, cultures and people. According to *General Curriculum for General Education School in Lithuania and General Education Standards for Grades XI-XII: the Syllabus for Foreign Language* (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011), the knowledge of foreign languages develop students as personalities, helps them to communicate with the world, to know other cultures,

to share information and social-cultural values with other nations, to build up linguistic competence and to form a general culture of language (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 84). Foreign language studies widen student's knowledge about diverse cultures and help them develop as personalities: foreign language studies help to represent culture, build up one's knowledge of different lifestyles, ways of thinking and feelings, which will help to overcome self-absorption and ethnocentrism (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 85). The knowledge of other cultures and comparison with the native one allows the development of cultural awareness. Nowadays, the world market requires independent, versatile and creative people; thus, when people choose a professional career, foreign language skills become a significant factor that may determine or influence their choice.

General Curriculum for General Education School in Lithuania and General Education Standards for Grades XI-XII: the Syllabus for Foreign Language (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011) describes the student's essential abilities and skills with a special emphasis on communicative language competence, which includes several types: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 84). These types consist of different components (*subcompetences*), such as sociocultural and cross-cultural, strategic, and others (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 84-85). *Sociocultural* subcompetence acts in understanding the socio-cultural context of a given language and regulates the acquisition of cultural knowledge and understanding the target culture: "ordinary life, habits, traditions, ethnical culture, art (music, architecture, art etc.), technology, history, religion, geography, economy, politics and many other features" (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 84). The most important issue related to the latter subcompetence is to present the basic features of the target culture and to show its relationship to the mother-tongue (L1). Following *General Curriculum for General Education School in Lithuania and General Education Standards for Grades XI-XII: the Syllabus for Foreign Language* (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011), cultural subcompetence functions in the process of building up self-confidence and inspires the wish to communicate in different social situations (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 85). In other words, diverse social situations may appear all the time in real-life; thus, students must be taught life-skills that will help them later integrate successfully into the world market.

The relationship between a foreign language and L1 is equally significant: "for foreign language teachers it is not only important that student's foreign language skills would improve but also that general linguistic competences will be developed together with a better understanding and appreciation of the mother-tongue language" (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011, 3). Students can transfer their knowledge and experience from one language to another.

Thus, previously acquired knowledge and experiences in their mother-tongue are most important and useful for learning other languages and other communicative abilities. Moreover, foreign language as a subject should be related to other school subjects, such as history, geography, ethics, religious studies, the basis of civil society, art and many others, which can be similarly integrated into foreign language teaching and learning.

The first edition of *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001) explains that “the language learner/user’s communicative language competence is activated in the performance of the various language activities, involving reception, production, interaction or mediation (in particular interpreting or translating)” (Council of Europe, 2001, 14). Thus, the first edition of *CEFR* defined mediation as possible communicative practice in foreign language classes. The goal of teaching mediation was seen as preparation of the students for cross-cultural communication. As *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001) suggests, “in both the receptive and productive modes, the written and/or oral activities of mediation make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly” (Council of Europe, 2001, 14). As it was mentioned earlier, people need to translate or mediate in real-life while they are communicating (in written and/or spoken form): for example, writing a letter of application for a job, constructing a CV (*curriculum vitae*) in the target language, etc. Thus, mediation (translation or interpretation) is an important part of communication in real-life: a mediator acts as a channel of communication between two or more persons who, for some reasons, cannot communicate directly. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001) suggests that “the language user is not concerned to express his/her own meanings, but simply acts as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly – normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages” (Council of Europe, 2001, 87). Mediating activities include spoken (oral) and written mediation. Oral mediation activities include simultaneous interpretation (conferences, meetings, formal speeches, etc.); consecutive interpretation (speeches of welcome, guided tours, etc.); informal interpretations (for example, of foreign visitors in own country or of native speakers when abroad; in social and transactional situations for friends, family, clients, foreign guests, etc.; of signs, menus, notices, etc.) (Council of Europe, 2001, 87). Written mediation activities include exact translation (of contracts, legal and scientific texts, etc.); literary translation (novels, drama, poetry, libretti, etc.); summarizing gist (newspaper and magazine articles, etc.) in a foreign language or in L1; paraphrasing (specialized texts for lay persons, etc.) (Council of Europe, 2001, 87). In brief, examples of mediating activities include spoken (oral) interpretation and written translation; it may also be

summarizing and paraphrasing texts in the source and target languages, when the language of the original text is not understandable to the intended recipient.

CEFR states that “mediation strategies reflect ways of coping with the demands of using finite resources to process information and establish equivalent meaning” (Council of Europe, 2001, 87). These strategies are planning, execution, evaluation, and repair (Council of Europe, 2001, 87). Following *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001, 88), the process of teaching and learning mediation may include some pre-planning to arrange and maximize resources (developing background knowledge; locating supports; preparing glossary) as well as consideration of how to deal with the task (considering the interlocutors’ needs; selecting the size of interpretation unit). During the process of interpretation, glossing, or translation, the mediator needs to take into consideration what has just been said and what is coming next, to deal with both of them at once because it is important in order to translate correctly (previewing).

As it has been already noticed, the updated edition of *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020) places much emphasis on mediation activities during foreign language classes. It is stated that “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” (Council of Europe, 2020, 90). Therefore, in mediation activities special skills are promoted: for example, constructing new meanings and forms, passing on new information, etc. (Council of Europe, 2020, 90). In the document, mediation is explained by separating mediation activities and mediation strategies, both of these spheres being equally significant. Mediation activities involve relaying specific information, explaining data, processing texts, translating a written text, note-taking, expressing a personal response to creative texts, facilitating collaborative interaction, managing and encouraging interaction, facilitating pluricultural space, acting as an intermediary, etc. (Council of Europe, 2020, 90). Mediation strategies include such activities as adapting language, breaking down complicated information, amplifying a dense text or streamlining a text (Council of Europe, 2020, 90). The description of mediation activities as outlined in *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020) suggests a new shift from a student-focused activities to the development of overall intelligence, or “empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation” (Council of Europe, 2020, 91).

Apart from the guidance through mediation scales, the section on mediation raises new teaching aims for contemporary language classes and offers new possibilities for cooperative teaching and learning. Moreover, the edition of 2020 presents an in-depth discussion of all the possible mediation activities, describes the scales, outlines characteristics of mediation skills in these activities and outlines key concepts included in each type of mediation activities.

Although the document contains a prescriptive aspect, the section on mediation can be viewed as an aid for language teachers: this section provides guidelines on planning mediation activities in language classes. In addition, the descriptors may help to better understand and foresee the expected teaching and learning outcomes.

In comparison to the first edition of *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001), the new edition (Council of Europe, 2020) places emphasis on cognitive mediation and collaboration during mediation activities. Some of newly introduced scales reflect “the notion of creating a shared space between linguistically and culturally different interlocutors” (Council of Europe, 2020, 114). In this way, the students are “engaged as a cultural mediator: creating a neutral, trusted, shared “space” in order to enhance communication between others” (Council of Europe, 2020, 114). Such activities “expand and deepen intercultural understanding between participants” and help to “avoid and/or overcome any potential communication difficulties arising from contrasting cultural viewpoints” (Council of Europe, 2020, 114). The above aspects disclose a more profound meaning of mediation skills and signal the reference of these skills to the needs of the society.

To sum up, mediation is a significant real-life skill which needs to be developed at different age and on different language proficiency levels. As it has been already mentioned, people need to translate or mediate in real-life while they are communicating (in written and/or spoken form) in various real-life situations. The latter fact best describes the new role of mediation activities in language classes. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001, and Council of Europe, 2020) and *General Curriculum for General Education School in Lithuania and General Education Standards for Grades XI-XII: the Syllabus for Foreign Language* (Nacionalinė švietimo agentūra, 2011) demonstrate a need for a more profound implementation of mediation activities in language syllabuses.

Methodology and Research Results

Research was carried out in order to reveal the types and frequency of teaching/learning mediation in EFL classes in Lithuanian secondary schools. The research continues the study into mediation, carried out by Žindžiuvienė and Slauzys in 2014-2015 which focused on mediation practices in Lithuania and Poland (Žindžiuvienė & Slauzys, 2015, 51-75). One of the aims of the present research (2020-2022) was a follow-up to the previous study. Due to the circumstances, the research started in 2020 and continued until March 2022. The research was interrupted several times because of acute pandemic situation of Covid-19. Online interviews with language teachers and a questionnaire for the

students in senior classes of secondary schools needed more time and effort than expected. Both semi-structured interviews with teachers and the questionnaire aimed at the practice of mediation in secondary education. However, the main aim was to trace any possible changes in teaching and learning mediation in a contemporary language classroom, especially following the updated edition of *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020). A specially designed questionnaire for foreign language students in Lithuanian secondary schools was used to achieve the aim of the empirical research. The questionnaire was intended to rate whether mediation activities and which of them are used in EFL classes (Grades 11-12) in Lithuanian secondary schools. Moreover, the textbooks for Grades 11-12 in Lithuanian secondary schools were analyzed. The content of activities in these textbooks was presented and grouped. In addition, mediation activities were also grouped according to the results of the survey data. The research was carried out with 140 foreign language students of Grades 11-12 in 9 Lithuanian secondary schools. The questionnaires were completed and returned representing 92% response rate. However, the intended scope of the research was minimized due to the social situation. In this aspect, a further insight into the researched area will be necessary in the nearest future.

The majority of students (74%) have 5 classes per week, while 22% of them have 4 and only about 4% have only 3 EFL weekly classes. Following the descriptions of mediation activities, spoken mediation activities include formal speeches, conferences, debates, discussions, simulation activities, role plays of translation/interpretation, etc. The research showed that spoken mediation activities are sometimes practiced in language classes, although most teachers (44) who participated in semi-structured interviews were not able to define exact types of mediation activities or even mediation practice. Similarly, some students may have misunderstood the question and/or the concept of mediation in general: for example, not all of the students were able to define activities representing oral or written mediation. Moreover, the research results show that written mediation activities are more seldom used than the spoken ones: 68% of participants declared that they very rarely participated in written mediation activities and even 32% of respondents stated that they never practiced written mediation activities in their EFL classes. The latter results must have been influenced by a blurred understanding of mediation. As it was stated earlier, written mediation activities may include translation of poetry or fiction, extracts from newspapers, contracts etc. They are more precisely defined than spoken mediation activities, so it might have been easier for students to respond to the questions on oral mediation activities. Written mediation activities, the same as spoken ones, were divided into two types: written mediation activities included in the textbooks and written mediation (additional) activities presented by the teacher and carried out in class. However, the majority of the respondents (89%) stated that they did not practice or very rarely practiced written mediation

activities in their EFL classes. Written mediation activities that are presented by the teacher are still not very frequent. However, some discrepancies between the syllabus and the students' responses were noticed. One type of mediation activity "Explaining data (in graphs, diagrams, etc.)" (Council of Europe, 2020, 97) is a recurrent activity in some textbooks; however, possibly, not adequately labelled/introduced in language syllabuses.

Qualitative and quantitative analysis of eight EFL textbooks helped to determine the most popular mediation activities. Due to ethical reasons and taking into consideration the shortcomings of the previous research (2014-2015) into mediation, the titles of the textbooks are not named in the research of 2020/2022. The textbooks were analyzed according to the number of mediation activities in these books. Mediation activities were grouped, according to the types of the activities as outlined in *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001) and secondly, according to the types of the activities outlined in *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020). The content analysis demonstrates a need for a better formulation of mediation tasks both in national programs of foreign languages and in EFL textbooks. Only 34 % of the obvious mediation tasks include the exact type of mediation activities (outlined in *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2001) or *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020)). The following reasons must have influenced this result: (1) the formulation of the mediation tasks (as outlined in both editions of *CEFR*) was disregarded by the authors of the EFL textbooks; (2) the updated edition (Council of Europe, 2020) of *CEFR* has been undergoing the implementation processes; therefore, language educators, program designers and textbook publishers need more time to adjust syllabuses to the updated recommendations; (3) continuously altering social demands and corresponding teaching and learning aims.

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper presented a significant problem in secondary schools: more emphasis on mediation skills is still needed in secondary education. Moreover, coordination between the updated edition of *CEFR* (Council of Europe, 2020) and national programs and syllabuses of foreign languages must be taken into consideration. The existing discrepancy between the EU document (Council of Europe, 2020) and national syllabuses may hinder the general layout of language activities. Mediation tasks are seen as useful activities in the development of other language skills such as expanding students' vocabulary and speaking skills, applying their grammar knowledge in practice, developing students' cognitive skills or promoting collaboration. The research results show that a majority of the respondents are unsure whether mediation activities exist in their language classes, which may lead to the understanding that mediation practices are not clearly defined and/or not promoted in language classes. Apart from the

fact that mediation task is included in the State Examination of English, most students are still unable to name types of mediation activities. The latter issues prove the fact that mediation activities have not been properly defined in syllabuses. In addition, foreign EFL textbooks do not initiate or emphasize mediation practice, which partly results in students' ignorance of types of mediation activities. Very often mediation is used synonymously to translation; however, according to the variety of mediation tasks as outlined in both editions of *CEFR*, such concept is not always adequate.

Considering the processes of globalization, mediation activities have become important in the overall structure of teaching/learning English as a foreign language in secondary education. Thus, more investigation has to be carried out to prove the necessity and ways of application of this language skill. Teachers in language classes could easily incorporate various types of spoken mediation activities (conferences, debates, discussions, etc.). EFL teachers can also use simulation activities or role plays of mediation (for example, processing a text, mediation concepts, facilitating collaborative interaction with peers, collaborating to construct meaning, managing interaction, mediating communication, facilitating pluricultural space, adapting language, amplifying a dense text, mediating a text, etc. (Council of Europe, 2020, 91-121). Mediation tasks can be useful activities in language classes and can strengthen the cross-disciplinary approach in teaching/learning process. Types of mediation strategies and/or mediation activities might be displayed on the wall of the classroom or on different Internet platforms for students to facilitate reference to the types and methods of activities. Special modules of mediation as part of language education can enhance mediation skills.

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