

## Activities for Mediation – Contents

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## 0 Introduction

### Introduction to mediation

When you hear the word “mediation,” what probably comes to mind is the resolution of commercial, international and personal disputes. However, this term has recently become a buzzword in the world of ELI with the release of the Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CEFRV). In this document, mediation is defined in the following way:

“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).”  
Council of Europe (2020, p.90)

Despite the recent interest in mediation, it still doesn’t appear by name in most coursebooks and many teachers may be unfamiliar with the concept. The aim of this book is to fill that gap by familiarising teachers with mediation and providing them with a wide variety of mediation tasks for them to use in their classrooms, whether they are teaching in secondary schools, universities or private language schools. We will also provide practical tips on how to teach and assess mediation.

### 1 A brief history of mediation

Mediation was introduced into mainstream language teaching and learning when it was included in the first version of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). Before this, the term “mediation” was already in use in the field of education, most notably in the works of L. S. Vygotsky, 1978, and later on by the proponents of sociocultural theories of learning (Lantolf, 2000). In the CEFR 2001, however, mediation was given a new, more specific definition in the context of language teaching and learning, which consisted of the everyday activity of making “communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly” (Council of Europe, 2001, pp 87-88). Unfortunately, though, mediation was not developed to its full potential in the CEFR 2001. For example, there were no “can do” descriptors for this particular ability explaining what students could be expected to do at different proficiency levels. For this reason, mediation didn’t have the same dramatic influence on the field of language teaching and learning as other parts of the CEFR 2001.

However, mediation did catch the eye of a small number of practitioners, who – perhaps not surprisingly given the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in their society – found the potential of training students in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural mediation particularly exciting. Mediation quickly began to find its way into language classrooms throughout Europe. In Germany, for example, it started to appear in school curricula in the early 2000s. In Greece, on the other hand, mediation became a basic component of the KPG exam in 2003.

In 2014, the Council of Europe began developing a new set of “can do” descriptors for mediation. A provisional copy of the updated CEFR was released in 2018, the final version, in 2020. In addition to “can do” descriptors, this new Companion Volume to the CEFR offers a broader, richer conceptualisation of mediation. It moves beyond the focus on linguistic and cultural mediation in the CEFR 2001 to include mediation related to communication and learning. The authors of the CEFRV state that this “wider

approach has been taken because of its relevance in increasingly diverse classrooms [...] and because mediation is increasingly seen as a part of all learning, but especially of all language learning" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.36).

## 2 The CEFR

Before looking more carefully at how mediation is defined in the CEFR it would be useful to give a brief overview of the framework itself. The CEFR is a Council of Europe project whose aims are the following:

- promote and facilitate co-operation among educational institutions in different countries
- provide a sound basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications
- assist learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators to situate and co-operate their efforts

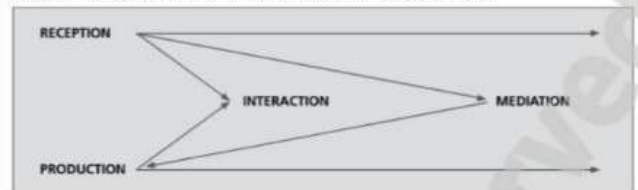
(Council of Europe, 2001, p.25).

With the goal of reaching these aims, the CEFR provides common reference levels for language competence from A1 (lowest) to C2 (highest), which are defined by illustrative descriptors provided in the form of "can do" statements. These are intended to promote a "proficiency perspective" rather than a "deficiency" one (2001, p.26), focusing on what learners can do, not what they can't do. Since the publication of the CEFR 2001, these common reference levels have permeated language learning and teaching in Europe and beyond, influencing the creation of countless objectives, targets and outcomes in this context (Figueras, 2012). In fact, it is common nowadays to refer to students as A1 or B2 instead of "beginner" or "upper intermediate."

One key concept of the CEFR is its vision of the user/learner as a *social agent* – that is, someone "acting in the social world and exerting agency in the learning process" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.22). For its authors, therefore, learning a language is not a passive experience but rather one involving personal engagement and active participation. This is particularly relevant to mediation, because, as a mediator, you are in a helping role. You are less concerned with your own opinions than with the communicative needs of the people around you. The mediator can provide this help in a variety of ways: "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" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.90).

With this idea of language learners as social agents at its core, the CEFR takes an "action-oriented approach" towards language learning and teaching. It does this by attempting to define an exhaustive list of all the possible kinds of actions, i.e. real-life tasks, language learners might perform with their languages, which are called *language activities* in the CEFR. These language activities are organised according to four *modes of communication* (production, reception, interaction and mediation), instead of the traditional four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), because, as the authors of the CEFR argue, this better captures the full nature of successful communication in the real world. Production, of course, includes speaking and writing, reception, listening and reading. Interaction, on the other hand, is a bit more complex: it involves both reception and production in a spoken or written dialogue—but, as we know, it is also more than a sum of those parts. Mediation goes one step further. Since it includes the process of developing and co-constructing new meanings, perspectives and ideas, this fourth mode involves reception, production and frequently even interaction. The chart below illustrates the relationship between the four modes.

Figure 1: The four modes of communication (Council of Europe, 2020, p.34)



In a podcast interview, Tim Goodies, one of the co-authors of the CEFRCV, explained the difference between interaction and mediation using the following metaphor:

“If we see interaction like a game of tennis or ballroom dancing, then mediation is more like playing jazz: it's where you are doing two main things: interpreting the source of a text or something you've read or listened to and expressing it in your own way, and another is that the way you interact and collaborate with others creates something new.” (Wesman, 2020, 1:58)

## 3 Types of mediation activities

As we have seen, the CEFRCV provides a compendium of language activities – that is, the real-life tasks language learners may need to perform using their languages. For mediation, these language activities are split into the following three macro groups: *Mediating a text*, *Mediating concepts* and *Mediating communication*. “We’ll start by discussing each of these macro groups individually and then we’ll look at what they all have in common.”

### Mediating a text

This type of mediation “involves passing on to another person the content of a text to which they do not have access, often because of linguistic, cultural, semantic or technical barriers” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 91). Note that a *text* in this context could refer to a written, spoken, visual or multimodal text that contains some type of information or message, such as a magazine article, an oral presentation or conversation, a graph or infographic, or even a picture book. In this type of mediation, there is always both a *source text* – a text containing source information – and a *target text* – a new text created by the mediator through which they can pass on the source information to their target audience.

For *Mediating a text*, the CEFRCV (2020, pp. 92–108) defines the following language activities:

- **Relaying specific information** refers to the way some particular piece of information of immediate relevance is extracted from the source text and relayed to someone else.
- **Explaining data** refers to the transformation of visual information into a verbal text, such as figures found in graphs, diagrams, etc.
- **Processing text** involves understanding the information and/or arguments included in the source text and then transferring these to another text, usually in a more condensed form, in a way that is appropriate to the context.

- **Translating a written text<sup>1</sup>** is the informal process of spontaneously giving a translation, in speech or in writing, of a written text, such as a notice, letter, e-mail or other communication.
- **Note-taking** concerns the ability to grasp key information and write coherent notes.
- **Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature)** focuses on expression of the effect that a work has on the user/learner as an individual.
- **Analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature)** concerns more formal, intellectual reactions to creative texts.

Common activities that involve a degree of *Mediating a text* are information gap or jigsaw activities, peer or open class presentations involving a research phase, a film or book review, a report based on data, to name just a few.



#### Mediating concepts

*Mediating concepts*, on the other hand, “refers to the process of facilitating access to knowledge and concepts for others, particularly if they may be unable to access this directly on their own” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 91). Parents, mentors and teachers will often find themselves in situations where they have to mediate concepts. However, the CEFR highlights that this type of mediation is also a key aspect of collaborative learning and work that produces new ideas and conclusions. In this context, everybody in the group may be acting as a mediator at some point during the task. In practice, this type of mediation overlaps to a degree with the principles behind the **Cooperative Learning** movement, which stresses the importance of positive interdependence and individual accountability in collaborative activities (Anderson, 2019).

For *Mediating concepts*, the CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 108–113) breaks the types of mediation into two groups: collaborating in a group (constructing and elaborating meaning with others) and leading group work (creating the conditions for the exchange and development of new concepts):

- **Collaborating in a group**
  - **Facilitating collaborative interaction with peers** refers to when users/learners contribute to successful collaboration in a group that they belong to, usually with a specific shared objective or communicative task in mind. They are concerned with making conscious interventions where appropriate to orient the discussion, balance contributions and help to overcome communication difficulties within the group.
  - **Collaborating to construct meaning** is concerned with stimulating and developing ideas as a member of a group. It is particularly relevant to collaborative work in problem solving, brainstorming, concept development and project work.
- **Leading group work**
  - **Managing interaction** is intended for situations in which the user/learner has a designated lead role to organise communicative activity between members of a group or several groups, for example as a teacher, workshop facilitator, trainer or meeting chair. They have a conscious approach to managing phases of communication that may include both plenary communication with the whole group, and/or management of communication within and between sub-groups.

<sup>1</sup> The CEFR CV only mentions written texts as source texts for this language activity. In this book, however, we’ve also included mediating tasks with spoken and visual source texts. In our experience, there are times where you informally translate a spoken or visual text in much the same way you would a written one.

- **Encouraging conceptual talk** involves providing scaffolding to enable another person or persons to themselves construct a new concept, rather than passively following a lead. The user/learner may do this as a member of a group, taking temporarily the role of facilitator, or they may have the designated role of an expert (for example, an animator, teacher, trainer or manager) who is leading the group in order to help them understand concepts.

Typical classroom activities involving mediating concepts are those in which students are engaged in group work (for example to produce a poster or write a report), problem-solving tasks or group discussions with specific success criteria. However, the focus of the activity would be on the process of the group work rather than the product. To emphasise the mediation of concepts in groupwork, it helps if we assign specific roles or responsibilities to different members of the group (Goodier, 2020). If we put students (particularly younger learners) in a leading role during this sort of collaborative group work, we can help them develop leadership and other valuable life skills (Chiappini, 2020).



#### Mediating communication

The third type of mediation, *Mediating communication*, “aims to facilitate understanding and shape successful communication between users/learners who may have individual, sociocultural, sociolinguistic or intellectual differences in standpoint” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 91). A successful mediator in this context positively influences the interaction among all the participants. This is the type of mediation that is closest to people’s traditional idea of mediation in the context of diplomacy or dispute resolution. However, the CEFR CV mainly focuses on how this type of mediation is used in everyday personal encounters, either social or professional. The CEFR CV (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 114–117) defines the following type of *Mediating communication*:

- **Facilitating pluricultural space** refers to the user/learner facilitating a positive interactive environment for successful communication between participants of different cultural backgrounds, including in multicultural contexts. It involves creating a shared space between linguistically and culturally different interlocutors (that is, the capacity to deal with “otherness”, to identify similarities and differences, to build on known and unknown cultural features, and so on) in order to enable communication and collaboration.
- **Acting as an intermediary in informal situations (with friends and colleagues)** refers to situations where the user/learner acts as a bilingual individual who mediates across languages and cultures to the best of their ability in an informal situation.
- **Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements** involves the user/learner in a formal role to mediate in a disagreement between third parties, or in an informal one trying to resolve a misunderstanding, delicate situation or disagreement. The user/learner is primarily concerned with clarifying what the problem is and what the parties want, helping them understand each other’s positions.

In the context of the classroom, it is interesting to note that the activities described above for *Mediating communication* are actually quite common but usually unplanned – that is, they are the result of inevitable conflict, disagreement or misunderstandings that occur while using a second language. To help students better cope with these situations, we can use roleplay or drama activities to give students low-stakes practice with the sort of high-stakes situations that await them outside of class (Chiappini & Mansur, 2020).

In the diagram below from the CEFR CV, you can see the complete list of the mediation activities described above. Note that in addition to mediation activities there are also mediation strategies, which will be discussed further in the micro-skills section.