

The Mediated Learning Experience and the Mediator's Implications

La experiencia de aprendizaje mediado y las implicaciones del mediador

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It is clear that educators can affect learning positively or negatively, that a personal or professional attitude will immediately change the awareness pupils have toward our classes. Furthermore, as educators, we can not encourage in our pupils the development of good cognitive and socioemotional strategies if we do not constitute ourselves as a model to be followed. On account of these considerations, this article focuses on what Feuerstein (1986) has termed "mediation", its conditions and the mediator's profile. Thus, as language teachers, we have to think about the way we could improve and enrich the experience we are offering our pupils in order to make them feel and be intelligent cognitively and emotionally.

Key words: Mediation, mediator, cognitive development, socioemotional development, intention, reciprocity, transcendence, meaning, competence, complexity, shared conduct, individuality, psychological difference, belonging, awareness

Es claro que como educadores podemos afectar el aprendizaje de manera positiva o negativa y que una actitud personal o profesional podría cambiar de manera inmediata la disposición que tienen nuestros estudiantes hacia nuestra clase. Además, como educadores no podemos promover en nuestros educandos el desarrollo de estrategias cognitivas y socio-emocionales positivas si nosotros mismos no nos constituimos en un modelo digno de ser seguido. Teniendo en cuenta estas consideraciones, este artículo se enfoca en lo que Feuerstein (1986) llama "mediación", sus condiciones y el perfil del mediador. Como profesores de idiomas debemos reflexionar acerca de las maneras como podríamos mejorar y enriquecer la experiencia que le estamos ofreciendo a nuestros estudiantes para que ellos se sientan y se hagan inteligentes tanto cognitiva como emocionalmente.

Palabras claves: Mediación, mediador, desarrollo cognitivo, desarrollo socio-emocional, intencionalidad, reciprocidad, trascendencia, significado, competencia, complejidad, conducta compartida, individualidad, diferencia psicológica, pertenencia, disposición

INTRODUCTION

From the time a child is born, his learning processes are guided and shaped through the intervention of adults who are significant in the newborn's life. These important people in the child's development are known as mediators. They are the people who select, organise and present stimuli they consider most appropriate for the child. They also decide on the most convenient ways to use them in the cognitive, social and emotional development of the infant. Moreover, these mediators, at the beginning parents, but later educators, take part in the first attempts children make to respond to a stimulus. They lead and motivate the corresponding answers while explaining why one answer is more useful and effective than others. In this way, it is evident how the interaction among these meaningful adults and the child allows the latter to shape his world progressively and comprehend his place within it and its wide variety of contexts.

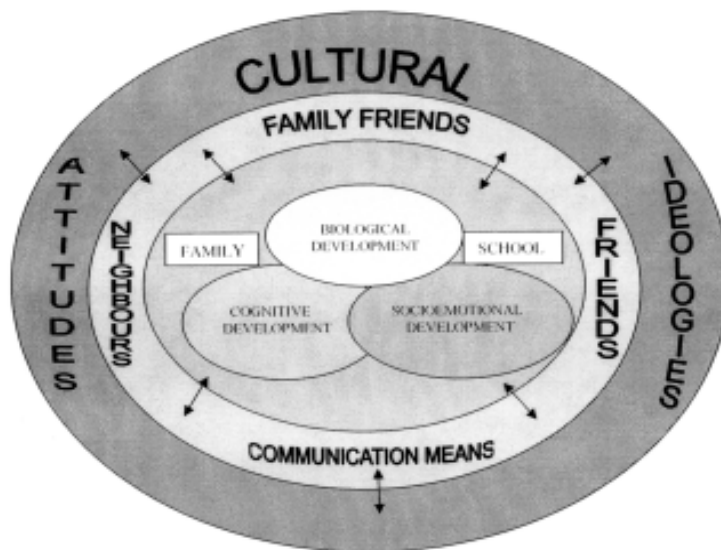
At first, the infant has direct interaction with just his parents, siblings and relatives, but later his context is widened and enriched in the educational

environment, the community and neighbourhood, peers and friends, the media and culture. It is here where the child starts establishing connections between his family experiences and those he is already acquiring at school and some other contexts that allow him to continue adding more elements to his life and knowledge, from birth to maturity. (See Figure 1)

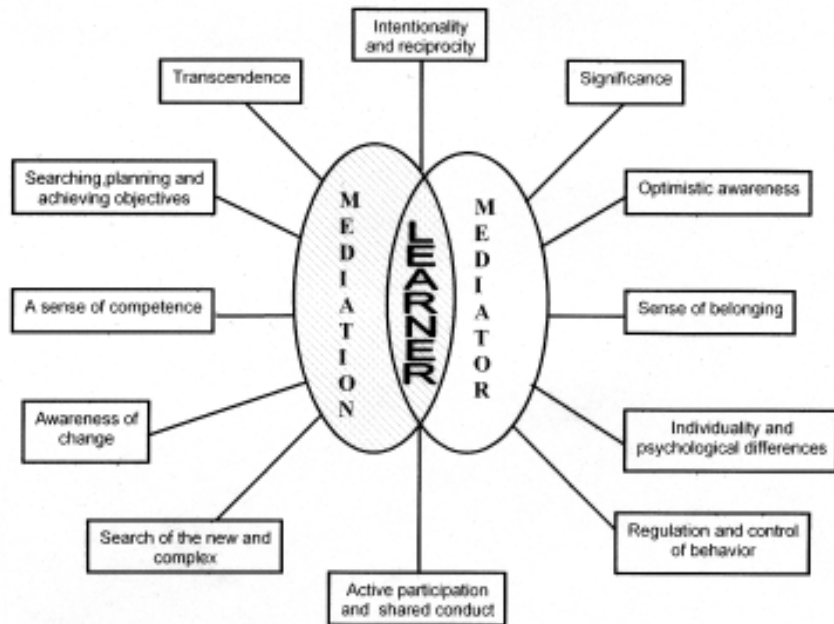
It is undeniable the impact these family and scholastic experiences have on the kids' attitudes, and, consequently, on the achievement of their short and long-term learning goals. That is why it is so important that the experiences offered in one field or the other be the most meaningful, positive and formative.

Regarding this, Reuven Feuerstein (1986), proposes a *mediation* process, in which teachers, more than going beyond the transfer of knowledge, *set up an action plan to encourage pupils learn to learn*. In order to do so, it is essential that pupils learn to think by solving problems and doing research, gain knowledge by using strategies that permit them to learn using well-defined purposes

Figure 1. Children and their mediators.



Every child develops, in part, as all children; in part, as some other children; and in part, as any other child!

Diagram I. Actions of mediation (Based on Martínez, 1991; Prieto, 1992; Williams & Burden, 1997).

by them and for them, know their cognitive styles and develop all the potential they have for increasingly complex and abstraction levels of knowledge, have the leading role in their own personal and academic growth and, lastly, to be more effective, independent and critical people.

In connection with Feuerstein's characterisation of mediation, Williams and Burden (1997) state that "mediation is to find ways of helping the other to learn. Particularly, this involves helping learners to move through the next layer of knowledge or understanding".

MEDIATION CRITERIA AND THE MEDIATOR'S IMPLICATIONS

Before going specifically into the issue of mediation criteria, I wish first to state that the purpose here is not to draw "an ideal teacher profile", but to consider some aspects which would help us qualify our teaching practice. Martínez (1991), Prieto (1992), and Williams & Burden (1997) discuss Feuerstein's mediation criteria which are fundamental to carry out any teaching-learning activity. Integrating the criteria proposed by these authors, in Diagram I, I present the twelve main actions of mediation a mediator is recognised for. It means that by taking

all these elements into practice, mediators would dare to say that their teaching is as effective and efficient as their pupils' learning is.

Intentionality and Reciprocity

This first criterion has to do with establishing the mediation experience purposes within the teaching-learning process. The mediator shares his intentions with the learner to involve him in a mutual process of enrichment and development. At the same time, it is vital to ensure and verify that our students have understood what is required and what is expected of them, and that both parts are capable and well-disposed to achieve the intended goals.

Transcendence

Objectives and goals, apart from being clear, reachable and meaningful, should guarantee that the mediator is confronting his learners with learning experiences and proposed academic tasks that are not only useful to carry out, but to confront efficiently a wide variety of real and authentic situations in any other context. The fact is that the pupils should learn, internalise and use something of a more general value than what is being taught by the task, the project or the class.

Significance

Learning situations need to be presented in an organised, sequenced, interesting and relevant way, encouraging learners' active and emotional involvement in the processes. Therefore, the mediator has to explain the intention of the activities in order to give them sense. He/she should discuss the importance tasks have, and look for mechanisms that raise interest in the task itself.

Searching, Planning and Achieving Objectives

This criterion implies guiding pupils to achieve their individual and group goals in the short, medium or long term by setting real work plans. To make this process easier, the mediator helps children to set their objectives and the way they will approach them with perseverance, patience and hard work. At the same time, it is the mediator's duty to keep pupils' attention focused on the stated teaching-learning goals.

Sense of Competence

This mediation characteristic is related to the effectiveness and efficacy an educational process should have when learners feel competent and capable of learning. It is the mediator's responsibility to create an environment where learners can develop a positive self-image, high self-esteem and self-confidence. We need to motivate in our pupils the feeling of "I can" or "I'm capable of doing this..." We facilitate the acquisition of competencies through adapting learning according to our pupils' interests and ages, selecting the right material, presenting and sequencing the information and providing relevant teaching-learning strategies that allow the development and reinforcement of the students' capabilities. It is necessary to say that it is not enough for our pupils to feel competent, they have to become competent by acquiring the necessary abilities and strategies to take control of their own learning process.

Awareness of Change

Modification implies that through the experience of mediation, learners should be conscious that they can change, improve and strengthen not only their cognitive functions but also their behaviours and strategies in order to achieve their objectives. In this way, the mediator is s/he who encourages pupils to have an objective knowledge of themselves and their learning processes. At the beginning, it is the mediator who guides, controls and evaluates the way pupils internalise information, but students must gradually transform themselves into active, dynamic and autonomous individuals, able to generate self-evaluation mechanisms that will allow them to take the initiative to direct their own learning processes.

Novelty and Complexity

This is characteristic of mediation to promote intellectual curiosity, originality, innovation and creativity or divergent thought. The mediator encourages challenge and hard work through the selection and assignment of activities that are sufficiently difficult to provide a challenge, but are achievable. Apart from that, the mediator should propose a wide range of interactions and confrontations of diverse points of view that invite his/her children to participate actively. The mediator might use methodological, didactic and pedagogic strategies that form students willing to learn.

Active Participation and Shared Conduct

Sharing and working in a co-operative way are part of our social existence; that is why we are encouraged to share not only behaviours and attitudes but also knowledge. The educator-mediator promotes collaborative work, self-confidence, and active participation among pupils in order to make them socialise, negotiate, agree, respect differences and achieve working in harmony. The teacher must be part of the group in order to increase the opportunities of reflective discussions and to tighten the empathetic relationships necessary to increase motivation. All this contributes to the learners'

cognitive and socio-emotional growth. When learners develop their abilities in the acquisition and development of concepts and cognitive operations, they also learn social strategies for the development of competencies that permit them to establish, coordinate and cultivate good personal and work relationships.

Regulation and Control of Conduct

The mediation experience provides alternatives that allow pupils to consider possibilities before making any decision. It means that through appropriate mediation, children also learn to have logical and systematic processes to solve problems by making use of previously acquired knowledge, by using it with form and coherence, and by expressing it through reasoning procedures. The mediator's contribution is to provide pupils with all the necessary tools for them to take control of their own learning and behaviour in such a way that, besides being "effective learners", they also become more independent to decide what to do, how, when and why.

Individuality and Psychological Difference

Mediation is based on learning models that are based on individual differences, cognitive functions and styles, which characterise pupils according to their age and developmental stage. The mediator accepts, helps and motivates his children as unique beings with independent and divergent thought processes with regard to other pupils and even the teacher. At the same time kids learn to co-operate, their individuality may emerge and it should be accepted and supported as they need to assert the fact that they think and feel differently from others.

Sense of Belonging

While pupils feel unique and different, they also need to feel they are a recognised part of a work team, a group, an educational institution, a society, and a culture. What the mediator can do at this point is to promote team work (more than group work) with specific and meaningful purposes for

the students; to propose activities in which they interchange and reinforce not only academic knowledge but also social and cultural knowledge. In order to achieve these goals, it is, first of all, necessary that the teaching-learning process occur in a positive climate created by reciprocal support, tolerance, respect, confidence, empathy and productive work. The atmosphere in which a learning process takes place and the nature of the personal and group interactions through which it is carried out, have a powerful influence on what, how and why a child learns.

Optimistic Awareness

Although the learning process starts with the conviction that any individual is able to become a highly effective learner regardless of his age and possible difficulties, we are always raising artificial barriers in the way of the learning processes. We always tend to make it more difficult than it really is. The mediation experience espouses that is not important how difficult an activity or task seems to be to some pupils, all of them are capable of doing it. Williams & Burden (1997) state the importance of encouraging a strong belief in learners that there is always a solution to any problem so that they learn to be persistent rather than giving up. As long as the educator believes that his pupils are capable of accomplishing any task, he will continue to seek effective and efficient ways and actions of helping them to achieve the learning goals.

MEDIATION THROUGH THE EYES OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING PRACTICE

At this point, it is necessary to state that teachers do not need to consider how to include the twelve aspects of mediation in each proposed activity. They have to contemplate the particular characteristics of their pupils to decide which areas of mediation to involve. The following two examples of mediation applied to language teaching activities are not intended to give a teaching formula but to illustrate some of the different ways in which educators might mediate.

Activity 1 (see Figure 2) is a role-play for groups of four students. It is based on talking about a recent holiday. Each pupil in the group is given a handout (figure 2); they have seven minutes to read and to work out where he/she went on holiday. Before starting, chairs are arranged to resemble a train compartment, with pairs of students facing each other.

Sense of Competence

Teachers present all their students the same material, the same information and the same teaching strategies. In spite of that, it is quite rare to find cognitive homogeneity in the learning groups. Not all pupils have the same knowledge and level of understanding, but all of them can do what is proposed. Thus, the mediator needs to

Figure 2. Sample of mediation applied to a language teaching activity (Taken from Watcyn-Jones, 2000, p.20).

HOLIDAY TALK

You are in a train compartment with three other people. You have just been on holiday and are on your way home. You get into conversation with your fellow-passengers and find out that they, too, have just been on holiday.

Before you start, think about the following:

- where you went and for how long
- what the weather/food was like
- where you stayed
- the best thing about the holiday
- what you did in the day/evenings
- one bad thing that happened
- any interesting people you met
- anything else you can think of
- any interesting excursions you went on

When someone talks about his/her holiday, encourage him/her by asking questions, e.g. Was the hotel very modern? Was anything there worth buying? What were the local people like?

Intentionality and Reciprocity

The teacher explains the purpose of the activity in order to help learners to see the value at a learning level. So, the mediator tells pupils that the intention of this simulation is to reinforce and internalise past tenses, to talk as fluently and accurately as possible without writing a word but practising the mental organisation of the ideas. At the same time, the mediator checks if the instructions are clear enough to start.

Transcendence

The activity itself makes pupils use English in a different setting. They will feel they are speaking for different purposes, not only to accomplish an academic task. Although it is a semi-controlled activity, pupils might feel free to talk about the different given items and come up with their own ideas.

deal with the situation by adapting and creating activities according to her/his students' cognitive level. The mediator has to pre-teach what is necessary to carry out this activity and guide, support his/her pupils (mostly those with learning difficulties). Through this exercise, teachers can benefit their teaching-learning practise by paying attention to the co-operation of "more advanced" peers in the group.

Novelty and Complexity

This activity provides certain guidelines the pupil needs to consider in order to use specific knowledge in terms of verb tenses and vocabulary, but they do not limit students' oral production. Through this activity, the mediator is encouraging a wide range of interactions and confrontations that invite pupils to be creative and inventive.

Active Participation and Shared Conduct

Group work activities are one of the most effective strategies mediators have to develop and encourage a sense of self-confidence, co-operation and participation in their pupils. Through an activity like this, students are not only socialising but negotiating, sharing knowledge, attitudes, and are learning to respect what the others say. They are guided to talk but to let their classmates talk too. Mediators need to control the activity by guiding pupils (directly or indirectly) to listen attentively, to take turns, to avoid aggressive or disrespectful attitudes.

Regulation and Control of Conduct

This criterion is closely related to the previous one; the success of the activity depends on the self-control pupils have. Mediators might help by discouraging impulsive behaviour in their students. Thus, it is important that mediators provide time and strategies to approach this activity in an organised way. It means that students must have time to understand the activity and its purpose, to organise their ideas before starting the activity, to organise information in a logical and coherent way and to choose the best moment to start.

Activity 2 (see Figure 3) is a guessing activity whose function is to describe objects. It is to be done individually. The teacher cuts up pictures so that there is a different one for each student in the class (see some examples given in Figure 3, but if the mediator prefers, he/she can make his/her own collection, using magazine pictures). The teacher gives the pictures out, and tells students not to show their picture to any one else. They should write a descriptive paragraph about the object in the picture

(without naming it). They should use *have got*, *looks like*, adjectives for physical description (colour, texture, shape, size, breadth, length, weight, materials, pattern, etc), in the present simple. When they have finished, the mediator collects the descriptions, pins them up around the classroom and asks students to walk around, reading the descriptions and making a list of (at least) ten described objects.

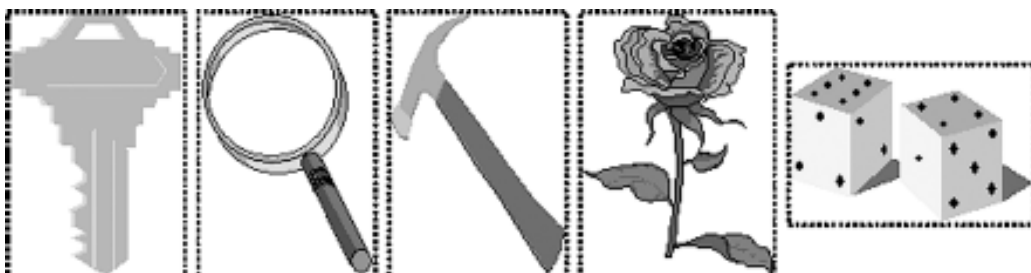
Significance

Mediators need to be careful to choose the activities for their pupils. They should not only be meaningful for the mediators' teaching purposes but for the learners' motivation and interests. In this activity, the mediator might choose objects that mean something to their pupils (for instance, part of their surroundings and things that may touch their feelings). Additionally, teachers need to organise the activity from the beginning to the end. To do that, they should consider the number of pupils in the class, the objects to be described, what to include in the description in terms of grammar items and functions, the length of time pupils need to write the paragraph, the time pupils need to read some descriptions in order to make their lists, and the time teachers need to check the answers.

Searching, Planning and Achieving Objectives

As this criterion implies guiding students to achieve their individual and group goals (In the given activity, the individual goal is to write a descriptive paragraph. The group aim is to provide information that allows others to make their lists.), mediators have to provide all the information and strategies

Figure 2. Sample of mediation applied in a language teaching activity.



for them to do so by pre-teaching vocabulary and guiding pupils in how to write descriptive paragraphs. It is easier for pupils to plan how to accomplish the objectives if they have all the elements (or at least most of them) required for carrying out the activity beforehand.

Awareness of Change

The teaching-learning process makes evident the weaknesses and strengths our pupils have. It is the mediator's duty to let them know about their potentials as well as their difficulties, and to encourage them to reflect on the way they are learning in order to improve their processes. Through this activity mediators have the opportunity to see how their pupils are "tackling the activity"; how they are using the vocabulary; how they are organising sentences and ideas; how they are using punctuation; and how they are reading and understanding their classmates' texts. It is a chance pupils have to become aware of their reading and writing processes and strategies, and to establish an action plan for changing or improving what they are doing wrong by practicing self-evaluation.

Individuality and Psychological Difference

It is an individual activity and it may reflect a particular style, way of thinking and feeling. All the pupils know the objectives of the activity and everyone will accomplish them by using different learning strategies and mental operations. Mediators have to accept and encourage their pupils' individuality and let them express their thoughts and feelings freely. Teachers need to make it clear to the students that they have a right to their own uniqueness.

Sense of Belonging

Although the proposed activity implies an individual task at the beginning, later it is promoting

the interchange of ideas, thoughts and feelings among the group. This activity implies that every piece of information given by each member in the group is important and necessary to bring the activity to its end. Mediators promote the active participation of their pupils in an atmosphere of respect, tolerance, reciprocal support and confidence.

Optimistic Awareness

During the activity, mediators are encouraging the strong belief in their students that they can do what they need to, that the objectives of the activity are achievable. Furthermore, students might feel especially optimistic when they know they have all the capabilities and skills to participate effectively and efficiently. Mediators could facilitate the performance of the activity by giving one or two examples of paragraphs describing objects. In this way, pupils may realise that it is not as difficult as it seems to be.

CONCLUSION

Given the necessary and sufficient conditions (criteria) to carry out a mediation process, it seems to be the characterisation of what is and has been a good teacher's work. Furthermore, it is the mediator who is and should be the main stimulus that propels his learners towards learning, being whole people and knowing how to exist side by side with others. It is the teacher who is in charge of giving validity to the mediation experience purpose that is none other than to provide the learners with a wide range of stimuli, strategies and processes that lead them towards the development of intelligent behaviour, which is a prerequisite for effective cognitive functioning. As language teachers we can enrich and qualify our teaching process by facilitating the learning processes of our pupils with all the tools and strategies provided by the mediation.

"As potential educators-mediators we should ensure ourselves of being a stimulus of high human and professional quality to our pupils."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fanny Stella Torres studied Philology and Languages at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Then, she got her specialization in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English. She also received her AS/A diploma in English Language and Literature in England. Her professional life has been developing in the teaching field at the Universidad Nacional, where she has worked in the Extension Programme for seven years, but also in the field of training and guiding pedagogic, methodological and didactic trends at Gimnasio Los Andes School.

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