

Mediation as One of the Communication Modes in Theory and Practice

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Abstract: The paper explores mediation as one of the modes of communication. In general, it demonstrates how mediation is perceived in relevant scholarly sources, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and to what extent theoretical descriptors correspond to the actual communication needs of everyday life. Furthermore, the article examines whether and how selected teaching materials support the development of mediation skills. The paper presents the results of research that investigated how speakers acquiring Czech as a foreign language perceive their needs within this communicative mode, their experience with mediation, and their competences in this mode of communication. The outcomes of the conducted research indicate that students possess only average mediation skills and consider only certain specific mediation activities to be purposeful. These activities should therefore be the focus of instruction, enabling students to consciously and competently apply mediation as a communicative mode.

Keywords: Czech as a foreign language, mediation, communication mode, mediation of information, summarization



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Introduction

It is undisputed that linguistic communication is one of the fundamental aspects of human society, as well as its importance for interpersonal understanding and cooperation. However, in attempting verbal communication, obstacles may arise that hinder the successful achievement of communicative goals. This paper primarily considers the lack of language proficiency of speakers for whom Czech is a foreign/second language to be such a barrier. Mediation is a way of overcoming this obstacle: learners of Czech as a foreign language can benefit from mediation themselves, but they can also act as mediators.

Although mediation, as one of the communicative modes, is given considerable attention in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2002)¹, or in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Companion Volume with New Descriptors* (2018),² general knowledge about mediation in language acquisition, its teaching, and its application in communication remains relatively limited. The term ‘mediation’ is thus more often associated with situations mentioned in the definitions provided by the *Akademický slovník cizích slov* (1995) and the *Slovník spisovného jazyka českého* (1989) (cf. Fig. 1), which corresponds with how the *Český národní korpus*³ characterises the term based on the collected evidence. Collocations documented in the ČNK point to legal discourse, and the synonyms identified also refer to the same field (cf. Fig. 2). However, among these, we find one word that points to the context of foreign language teaching, namely *nápomoc* ‘assistance’, or ‘help’.

¹ Hereinafter referred to as SERR (Společný evropský referenční rámec pro jazyky; the first edition was published in English in 2001, the Czech translation in 2002).

² Hereinafter referred to as CEFR CV (this edition was published only in English).

³ Hereinafter referred to as ČNK.

ASCS
mediace [-dy-], -e ¹
1. mezinád. práv. způsob pokojného řešení mezinárodních sporů, při čemž ve sporu dvou států vystupuje další jako zprostředkovatel
2. psych. procesy komunikace médií s paranormálním světem
3. práv. vyjednávání pomocí prostředníka při řešení sporů bez účasti soudu, popř. při soudním řešení určitých sporů;
mediátor příd.: m. postup

SSJČ
mediace [-dy-], -e ² (z lat.) práv. způsob pokojného řešení mezinárodních sporů, při němž ve sporu dvou n. několika států vystupuje stát další jako zprostředkovatel; zprostředkování;
mediátor příd.: m. postup

Figure 1: Definitions of the word *mediace* provided by the *Akademický slovník cizích slov* and by the *Slovník spisovného jazyka českého*



Figure 2: The word *mediace* in a cube provided by *Český národní korpus*

SERR understands mediation as assistance, or the facilitation of communication, where it would otherwise be impossible. If we were to identify a common point between the dictionary definitions of the term and its use in language didactics, it would likely be ‘assistance in overcoming barriers, in this case, linguistic or cultural’, which are usually caused by insufficient knowledge of the language, its appropriate usage, and the various contexts of its use (given historically, culturally, etc.).

The aim of this article is to highlight the specific features of mediation that explain its unique position within the system of speech skills, or communicative modes. The paper will present the results of field research which has verified the practical experiences and needs of non-native speakers acquiring Czech in the context of mediation, and will confront these results with how mediation is understood in key

documents for foreign language teaching and in teaching materials. Finally, the paper will suggest how this mode of communication could be effectively promoted in the teaching of Czech as a foreign language.

1. Perspectives on Mediation in Relevant Sources

Assistance as a fundamental feature of mediation was already defined in the first edition of the SERR (2001/2002), where so-called *mediation activities* are described as facilitating communication or information exchange between communication partners who are unable to understand each other directly. It is stated here that mediation may involve cross-linguistic facilitation, as well as activities within a single language. The cross-linguistic context primarily refers to interpreting and translation, including simultaneous, consecutive, and informal interpreting, as well as precise and literary translation. As an example of summarizing within the same language, the summarization of key ideas from, for instance, newspaper or magazine articles, or the paraphrasing of specialized texts for lay audiences is given (SERR 2001, 87 /1). However, evaluation scales are not available in this volume.

/1/ „In mediating activities, the language user is not concerned to express his/her own meanings, but simply to act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly – normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages. Examples of mediating activities include spoken interpretation and written translation as well as summarising and paraphrasing texts in the same language, when the language of the original text is not understandable to the intended recipient.“ (SERR, 2001, 87)

In the updated edition – in the CEFR CV (2018), much greater attention is given to mediation, and it is explicitly stated that conceptually, the emphasis has shifted from speech skills to so-called communicative modes, defined as reception, production, interaction, and mediation. Mediation is elaborated into specific communicative activities, such as facilitating text, concepts, and communication (cf. Fig. 3). Descriptors are provided, offering both an overview evaluation

scale (cf. below for A2-level requirements /2/) and scales for individual mediation activities (cf. below for converting written text into spoken form at the A2 level /3/).

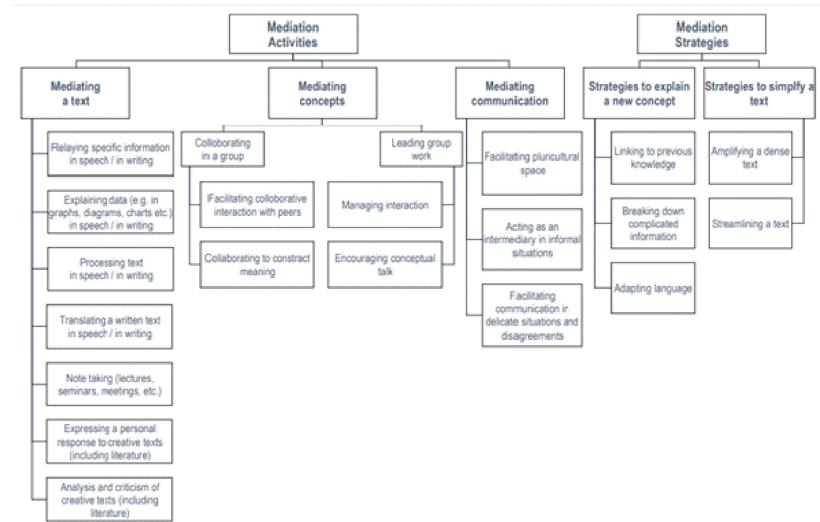


Figure 3: Mediation activities and strategies (CEFR CV 2018, 104)

/2/ „Can play a supportive role in interaction, provided that other participants speak slowly and that one or more of them helps him/her to contribute and to express his/her suggestions. Can convey relevant information contained in clearly structured short, simple, informational texts, provided that the texts concern concrete, familiar subjects and are formulated in simple everyday language.“

„Can use simple words to ask someone to explain something. Can recognise when difficulties occur and indicate in simple language the apparent nature of a problem. Can convey the main point(s) involved in short, simple conversation or texts on everyday subjects of immediate interest provided these are expressed clearly in simple language.“ (CEFR CV, 2018, 105)

/3/ „Can provide a simple, rough spoken translation into (language B) of short, simple texts (e.g. notices on familiar subjects) written (in language A), capturing the most essential point.“

„Can provide a simple, rough spoken translation into (language B) of routine info-

rmation on familiar everyday subjects that is written in simple sentences in (language A) (e.g. personal news, short narratives, directions, notices or instructions).“ (CEFR CV, 2018, 114)

On the one hand, the importance attributed to mediation is undeniably increasing,⁴ yet on the other hand, a cursory glance at practice reveals that in language learning, teaching, testing, and assessment, entire sections are often dedicated to reception, production, and interaction, or at least activities belonging to these domains, while mediation is notably absent. In line with the aims of this article, the question arises as to what is, or may be, the cause of this phenomenon and whether teachers are adequately preparing their students to communicate in this mode.

2. The Position of Mediation in the System of Communication Modes

A cursory glance at the system of communication modes might suggest that the sub-actions on which mediation is based can be developed within the other communication modes, as mediation represents the intersection of these (cf. Fig. 4).

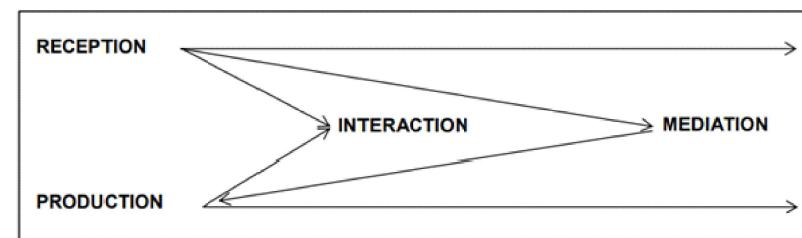


Figure 4: The relationship between reception, production, interaction and mediation (CEFR CV 2018, 32)

⁴ The growing importance of mediation in today's multi- and plurilingual society is highlighted, for example, by the authors of the METLA project (= Mediation in Teaching, Learning and Assessment published by M. Stathopoulou et al. in 2023).

Mediation relies in reception (of spoken and written communication) on acts that can be drawn from the development of reading and listening comprehension, or from the reception necessary for written and spoken interaction. Similarly, productive tasks are supported by written and spoken production, or by the productive segment of interaction. These similarities become particularly clear when comparing the descriptors for specific activities. For instance, consider the descriptors for conveying specific information within mediation activities (CEFR CV, 2018, 108 /4/) and exchanging information within spoken interaction (CEFR CV, 2018, 90 /5/). Similar overlaps can also be found between mediation and listening comprehension, as well as spoken and written interaction. Such an approach could explain the marginalization of mediation compared to other modes, as it would effectively draw upon skills developed in other communicative modes.

/4/ „Can relay (in Language B) simple, predictable information about times and places given in short, simple statements (spoken in Language A).“ (CEFR CV, 2018, 108)

/5/ „Can express numbers, quantities and cost in a limited way. Can name the colour of clothes or other familiar objects and can ask the colour of such objects.“ (CEFR CV, 2018, 90)

However, the status of mediation as a distinct communicative mode is rooted in its uniqueness, defined by the social dimension of this mode. In mediation, the communicative goal is not focused on the speaker, but is instead oriented toward the other participants in the communicative act. The aim of mediation is not to acquire information for the speaker’s needs, nor to verbally convey information solely to fulfill the speaker’s communicative objectives. While the communicative goal remains the transmission of information, carried out to meet the communicative needs of third-party participants or to create a communicative situation that enables the fulfillment of these participants’ needs. This social dimension of mediation is exactly the element that distinguishes it from the traditional system of communicative modes /6/.

/6/ „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 from one language to another (cross-linguistic mediation).“ (CEFR CV, 2018, 103)

The graphical representation in the CEFR CV (cf. Fig. 4) may imply that the mediator receives information in the reception segment and then transmits it to another communicant in the production segment. However, the entire process is more complex. After the language decoding of the received message, the mediator must evaluate which information should be conveyed and in what form. By the form, not only writing or speaking are meant, but the overall formal adaptation to the other communicants’ needs: length, which is related to information content and its accuracy, formality, linguistic appropriateness, etc. This is therefore a complex task, in which the mediator utilizes a wide range of competencies (not only communicative ones).

Other important aspect that differentiates mediation from the traditional understanding of translation and interpreting is the need to modify the properties of the initial message to make it comprehensible to the recipient (cf. /7/).

/7/ „Mediators have the right to change the discourse, genre, or register of their text, and having the prerogative to do so is not an issue because it is an inherent component of their role as mediators.“ (Dendrinos, 2013, 1)

Another aspect that distinctly sets mediation apart from other communicative modes is its variability in terms of monolingualism and multilingualism. While activities within other communicative modes always reflect the target language, mediation activities may involve translation from one language to another,⁵ but they can also be conducted within a single language, either in the same mode (i.e., only spoken or only written) or across different modes (e.g., a written text may be summarized in spoken form, notes can be written based on

⁵ SERR and CEFR CV use the terms language A and language B.

spoken discourse, or explanations of data from graphs or tables may be provided in either spoken or written form).

3. Mediation and its Didactic Presentation

As shown above, mediation is a highly specific communicative mode, and the question is whether its specificities are sufficiently taken into account in the teaching. A fundamental indicator of this can be the extent to which this skill is reflected in teaching materials, which typically form the backbone of instruction, as evidenced by function of textbooks.

Before analyzing text books for teaching Czech as a foreign language, or Czech as a second language, it is important to clarify that the following chapter is not an evaluation of any specific textbook. The CEFR CV with its expanded concept of mediation was published, as mentioned earlier, in 2018, so a systematic integration of this communicative mode could only be reasonably assessed in materials published or prepared after the authors/teachers had an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the updated framework. Such textbooks for Czech as a foreign language are extremely rare. Therefore, the analysis focused on textbooks that offer comprehensive series from beginner to advanced levels, as they have greater potential for use in teaching. The following textbooks have been analysed: *Česky krok za krokem* by L. Holá (2016), *Čeština pro cizince: úroveň A1 a A2* (Boccou Kestřánková, 2013–2017) and *Czech it UP* published by *Univerzita Palackého* (2019–2021).

Activities aimed at developing mediation skills are generally represented in textbooks through tasks that mediation shares with other communicative modes. These are typically (and predominantly) tasks such as *vysvětlete slovo nebo frazém* ‘explain the word or idiom’ or *odpovězte na základě (textu/poslechu)* ‘respond based on reading/listening’.

In general, activities aimed at developing receptive skills are designed as comprehension checks rather than as tools for building strate-

gies leading to understanding. The development of productive skills, on the other hand, is based on the automation of specific linguistic resources with a view to a specific communicative goal, and then directed towards self-production rather than reproduction of previously given content.

Integrated tasks with an intermodal however, could, however, serve to train (and potentially assess) mediation skills. This point has been previously highlighted by Vl. Pechová (2023, 122–145), who, drawing on foreign sources, noted that in everyday communication, situations involving the alternation of communicative modes, and the simultaneous engagement of various linguistic skills, are quite common. She specifically mentions situations that closely align with mediation activities, such as summarizing the content of what has been heard or read, either in written or oral form. In mediation, it is crucial to evaluate which pieces of information from the reading or listening are important for the target recipient and how to convey them for maximum benefit. No textbook worked with cross-language mediation and did not guide students to develop this skill.

4. Mediation in the Communicative Practice of Students Learning Czech as a Foreign Language

Design of the research

The research involved students attending Czech language courses for foreigners at the Faculty of Arts, Palacký University. These included both academic courses and public courses. Academic courses are distinct due to the composition of their participants, who often possess above-average cognitive abilities. Moreover, many of these participants are students from philological fields, including Czech studies, where professional or professionally-related experience with mediation activities could be expected. Public courses, on the other hand, feature a more diverse student body in terms of their psychosocial profiles, including varying personality traits, levels of motivation, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences.

The groups of students who participated in the research were both homogeneous and heterogeneous in terms of their first language. The research respondents were students who had a Slavic native language (or spoke a Slavic language) as well as students from non-Slavic backgrounds.

The respondents attended courses at A2 and B2 level. These levels were selected primarily because lower levels often lack descriptors for mediation activities, while higher proficiency levels generally have fewer respondents. Additionally, these two levels are sufficiently distinct to observe differences in language behavior.

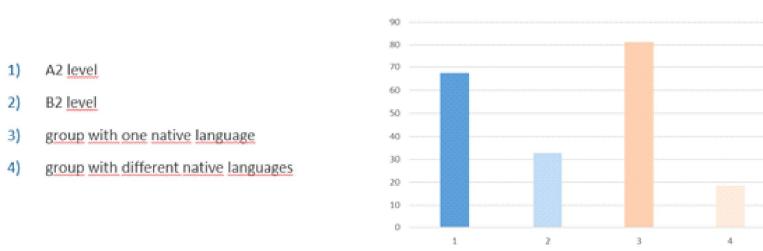
In the first part of the research, pre-defined and consistent communicative situations that prompted the use of the mediation communicative mode were deliberately introduced by instructors over a one-month period. Based on the scheme of mediation activities (CEFR CV, 2018, 104), a general task structure was created and filled with varying content for individual lessons to align with the course's progression (e.g., thematic content). According to the research protocol, responses were examined in the following situations: 1) explaining the meaning of an unknown word; 2) mediating work instructions; 3) conveying the main idea of a written message in both written and spoken forms; 4) conveying the main idea of a spoken message in both written and spoken forms; and 5) mediating a culturally conditioned phenomenon. All model situations reflected the types of activities mentioned by CEFR CV (2018, 104) and at the same time were based on the students' needs in the classroom: explaining the meaning of an unknown word (its form or idiom) as well as assisting with the explanation of work instructions to peers in the study group is a natural communicative action in classroom settings. Conveying the main idea of a spoken or written message is not typically requested spontaneously by peers but is an action students are guided to perform by the instructor. Finally, mediating a culturally conditioned phenomenon is an integral part of communication in heterogeneous groups when students present aspects of their cultural background.

It should be noted that in addition to the research protocol-defined situations, other moments arose in class that required mediation, though these were only recorded and not assessed in terms of their process or outcome.

A structured diagnostic interview primarily aimed to gather information on factors influencing respondents' communicative competence, including their language knowledge (in terms of first, second, etc., language, as well as knowledge of inflectional languages), their field(s) of study, age, and other factors. Additionally, the interview sought information related to individual communicative needs in the realm of mediation, as well as experiences with providing and receiving mediation activities.

Research Results

When evaluating deliberately induced situations requiring mediation activities, it was observed how students approached mediation when they could spontaneously choose between cross-linguistic mediation and an explanation in the target language. In situations where spontaneous choice was possible, students more frequently opted for cross-linguistic mediation at lower proficiency levels and more often (regardless of proficiency level) in language homogeneous groups, where they could rely on a secure knowledge of their first language (cf. Graph. 1). In cases of spontaneous choice, one or two individuals typically emerged as "consistent mediators" within the group. These were not necessarily the individuals with the highest proficiency in Czech but rather those who were communicative, willing to help others, and often repeated their explanations. To maintain objectivity in the study, students were encouraged to rotate in the mediator role, which was reflected in the evaluation of the success of mediation. The decision to rotate was also influenced by the insight that, in real-life communication, anyone may take on the role of mediator depending on the circumstances.



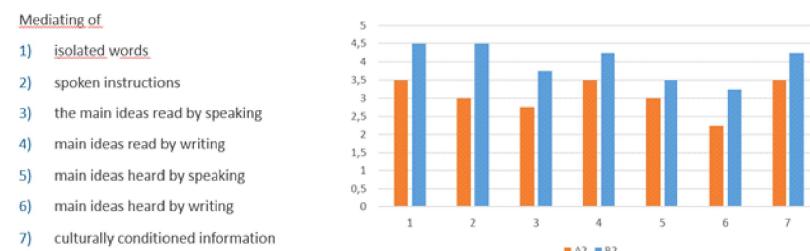
Graph 1: Preferences by choosing simple or cross-language mediation

In our practical investigation, we did not test the full range of mediation activities as defined by the CEFR CV. Instead, we selected selected activities that were appropriate to the teaching practice and included in the research protocol (as described above). The success of each activity was assessed on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest rating. The evaluation was conducted by the instructors, based on how effectively the mediator conveyed the necessary information (see Graph. 2). Failures typically occurred when the information was only partially conveyed, either because it was not comprehensively captured from the original communication or because it was not accurately/formally expressed to be understood.

The most problematic activity was transferring of information from spoken communication into writing. This difficulty seems to arise from a combination of two factors: listening comprehension, the first phase of this task, is challenging due to the heavy demands it places on short-term memory. The communicator must process both the flow of information and the decoding of linguistic structures. A common strategic error is then the so-called fixation, when the recipient devotes his or her attention to trying to decode a particular (usually problematic from his or her point of view) section and misses subsequent information. This type of transfer was further complicated by the need to write, as writing is traditionally considered by learners to be a dreaded skill because what can be neglected in speaking is not lost in writing.

In contrast, very good results were achieved with written summaries of read texts, where the mediator could refer back to the information in the text or directly use portions of the source material. In mediating culturally specific information, difficulties usually arose from insufficient vocabulary – not due to lack of knowledge, but because of the absence of an equivalent term to directly name the foreign cultural concept.

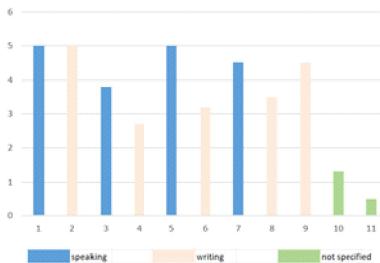
At the B2 level, better results were achieved. This can likely be attributed to the fact that speakers at higher levels of language proficiency generally possess stronger cognitive skills, such as text processing and information handling.



Graph 2: Success in mediation activities

A part of the diagnostic interview involved a question about how students themselves assess the usefulness of mediation activities, as described in CEFR CV (2018), for which evaluation scales are available. Respondents identified the greatest potential in the mediation of specific information and in spoken summarizing of a text. In contrast, there was minimal interest in mediation of creative texts, particularly literary texts. During the diagnostic interviews, it was repeatedly mentioned that such communicative activity is not typically expected in everyday communication. Only a small number of respondents were willing to consider mediating the content of a book or film (cf. Graph 3).

- 1, 2) conveying specific information
- 3, 4) data interpretation
- 5, 6) summarizing text
- 7, 8) translation of text
- 9) recording of spoken communication (lecture notes, meeting notes, etc.)
- 10) personal commentary on the text of a creative nature
- 11) critical analysis of the creative text

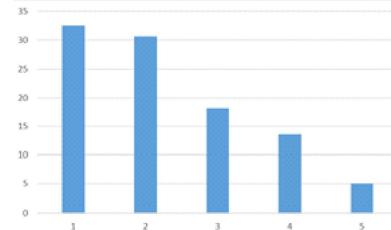


Graph 3: Practical potential of mediation activities

Based on their own experiences, respondents identified the most common situations in which they either required mediation themselves or were asked to provide it (cf. Graph. 4). The category “contact with authorities” encompassed everyday situations requiring various administrative tasks, with common examples including interactions with the immigration police, health insurance companies, and university (for students) or corporate (for employees) administration. Mediation activities were also frequently associated with the transfer of information in academic or workplace context, particularly in conveying work-related instructions. According to the respondents, mediation is often used in healthcare communication, most commonly for explaining medical instructions or simplifying the interpretation of medical reports. Additionally, respondents mentioned the use of mediation in less formal situations, such as communication with friends or family.

When comparing the actual communication needs expressed by the respondents with those anticipated for mediation by the CEFR, we conclude that certain mediation activities should be given greater emphasis, and language users should be systematically prepared for them in their lessons, while other items could be neglected or declared only for more advanced levels.

- 1) contact with authorities (including university administration)
- 2) when studying
- 3) at work / on a temporary job (mediation of instructions)
- 4) at the doctor's (mediation of instructions and text content)
- 5) other (when travelling, in contact with friends, etc.)



Graph 4: Students' experience with mediation

Conclusion

Although mediation as a communication mode has distinct features that clearly differentiate it functionally from other communicative modes, and although it is defined as such in authoritative linguistic-didactic sources, it is not given sufficient attention in teaching practice. This became evident through the presented analysis of teaching materials, which offer very few activities specifically aimed at the direct development of mediation skills. In part, mediation is practiced through activities primarily focused on other communicative modes, which in fact relegates its development to the background.

Students of Czech as a foreign language, therefore, lack sufficient awareness of this communicative mode, do not recognize its importance, and are not systematically guided in its application, despite its crucial role in successful communication and, in some cases, its indispensability.

By comparing the theoretical framework of mediation activities outlined in the CEFR CV with the real communicative needs of speakers, it was concluded that not all activities possess the same communicative potential. In the activities selected for research validation, students achieved average results. To achieve better outcomes, media-

tion needs to be given more space in instruction, and students should be explicitly trained in it.

Instructional means for such training should be intermodal, integrating various communicative modes, and should emphasize the social nature of mediation. These tools can introduce students to communicative situations by explicitly stating that the goal is not to express their own content but to appropriately convey someone else's communication with a specific aim. Methods such as critical reading and critical thinking are well-suited to mediation training (Stephany, 2023, 1–22), along with the application of principles of language-sensitive teaching (Rossner a Bolitho, 2023, 5–12). Furthermore, in line with the development of a plurilingual approach, the use of a language other than the target language could be accepted during training.

The development of mediation skills should be an integral part of any language teaching, whether native language or foreign or second language. The result should then be the conscious and competent application of this communication modality, as every language user can be a mediator /8/.

/8/ „As users of language(s) and informed about cultural and social practices, we are all potentially mediators.“ (Dendrinos, 2013, 1)

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