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An Investigation into the Knowledge of Mediation with English-Teachers

*Seda SIVACI*¹

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate English teachers' knowledge of mediation and their classroom practices in terms of Feuerstein's 12 features of Mediated Learning Experience. In order to collect data, a questionnaire survey adapted by Cheng (2011) from Williams and Burden's Mediation questionnaire, with a reference to Liao's Communicative Language Teaching questionnaire was employed to 17 English instructors working at a foundation university. The survey composes of two parts; in the first part there are 9 questions based on 4 vignettes and in the second part there are 12 statements related to MLE. The results indicated that the teachers did not have any idea about the notion of mediation, but their responses to the questions relating to their practices indicated that they employed universal features rather than situational features of 12 Mediated Learning Experience (MLE). As a result, it is possible to suggest that the teachers should be trained in terms of mediation to raise awareness for knowing what their roles are as mediators because of their critical roles in the classroom.

Key Words: mediation, classroom practices, mediated learning experience

1. Introduction

With a great emphasis on learner autonomy and life-long learning, the traditional role of teachers as the disseminator of knowledge has been changed. Now, teachers are supposed to teach learners how to control and regulate their own learning process and become problem solvers. Therefore, Seng, Pou and Tan (2003) propose that teachers should play the role of the mediator in the classroom to make learners active participants in learning process.

Mediation theory suggests that language learning is formed by the relationships with people around, and through the constant interactions with others, learners learn to use language (William & Burden, 1997). Hence, in mediation theory, all people around learners are regarded as mediators who "may be the parent, facilitator teacher, or some significant other who plays the intentional role of explaining, emphasizing, interpreting, or extending the environment so that learner builds up a meaningful internal model of the context or the world experienced" (cited in Cheng, 2011. p. 230).

¹ Lect./Hasan Kalyoncu University, seda.sivaci@hku.edu.tr.

When it comes to the language classroom, Vygotsky and social interactionists argue that teachers should not only act as the disseminators of knowledge, but also act as mediators or facilitators of their students' learning (Williams and Burden, 1997). In that sense, as mediators in classrooms, teachers can enrich their learners by helping them acquire the needed knowledge, skills and strategies to become effective and autonomous users. In that sense, Feuerstein highlights the importance of teacher role as a mediator in language instruction (1990). Accordingly, this paper aims to explore Feuerstein's theory of mediated learning experience (MLE) in teaching English as a Foreign Language. To fulfill the target, one question that follows to be addressed is proposed:

1. What knowledge about mediation do English instructors hold?
2. To what extent do the instructors act as mediators in teaching English as a foreign language?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Conceptions

The notion of mediation which is adopted in this study is based on social interactionist approach which stresses that learning is affected by social context in which they exist and need to communicate all the time. According to this approach, learners live in a social world, and they learn to use language they through the constant interaction with other people around them. One of the most essential aspects of social interactionism is that mediation from adults, usually parents and teachers, but also people around has a very significant role in the language learning process (Chang, 1993).

2.2. Meditational Approach to Foreign Language Learning

Vygotskian socio-cultural theory and Feuerstein's theory Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) are the theories which contributed to the development of meditational approach to learning. Both Vygotsky and Feuerstein underline the significant effects of socio-cultural environment on the development of children's learning. Both of them emphasize the crucial role of parents, teachers, peers and others as mediators since they are the ones children interact constantly during the learning process. Hence, in mediation theory, all people around learners are regarded as mediators who "may be the parent, facilitator teacher, or some significant other who plays the intentional role of explaining, emphasizing, interpreting, or extending the environment so that learner builds up a meaningful internal model of the context or the world experienced" (cited in Cheng, 2011. p. 230).

As for Foreign Language Learning, with the shift from teacher-centered education to student-centered, the language teachers have started to take the learners' needs, strategies and styles into consideration by putting them at the center of classroom organization (Henson, 2003). This changeover towards learner-centeredness has led to some changes in teachers' roles in language classrooms, which has significant contributions to the development of learner-centered education in language classrooms. While the traditional classrooms were teacher-centered, textbook-centered and instruction-centered, learner-centered classrooms need effective collaboration between students and teachers.

Even though the roles of teachers and teaching strategies in language classrooms have been changed, most EFL teachers claim that students still encounter numerous obstacles especially in writing and speaking in English in Turkey (Gönen, M. 2009; Karahan, 2007). The traditional roles of language teachers and strategies used in the classroom may be the reasons which cause the obstacles students meet during the learning process. The students are exposed to limited linguistic knowledge because of giving more importance to grammatical forms of language rather than other skills. On the other hand, Chen (2005, p.3) states that “the most successful EFL teaching programs should involve the whole learner in the experience of language as a network of relations between people, things and events”. Mediation theory offers chances to learners to practice English in communication for more effective language teaching (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Although Vygotsky laid the foundation of mediational approach, there are no practical implications suggested by him to mediate learners’ learning in the existing literature. In this respect, Feuerstein’s theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE, 1991) is used to conduct this study.

2.3. Feuerstein’s Theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE)

Feuerstein describes MLE as a “quality of interaction between the organism and environment” (cited in Chang, 1993, p.100). According to him, adults whether a teacher, parent, peer or anybody in the environment are the ones who can be mediators between tasks, social contexts and learner. In this respect, adults provide the experience because they are the ones who can understand the learners’ needs, capacities and needs through interaction in the learning process.

As for language classrooms, Williams and Burden (1997) emphasize that teachers should not only act as the disseminators of knowledge, but also act as mediators or facilitators of their students’ learning. In that sense, as mediators in classrooms, teachers can enrich their learners by helping them acquire the needed knowledge, skills and strategies to become effective and autonomous users.

Accordingly, Feuerstein highlights the importance of teacher role as a mediator in language instruction (1990). He believes that there are 12 different ways of MLE the teacher can mediate in the learning process. The first three, known as ‘universal’, are considered essential elements of all learning tasks. The other nine are considered important and helpful. However, they are considered ‘situational’ and depend on circumstances and culture where learning takes place. Twelve features of MLE are explained by William and Burden (1997) and shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Feuerstein’s MLE Features

MLE Features	Conceptualization
1. Significance	The teacher needs to makes learners aware the significance of a learning task so that they can see the value of it to them personally, and in a broader cultural context.
2. Purpose beyond the here and now	Learners must be aware of the way in which the learning experience will have wider relevance to them beyond the immediate time and place.
3. Shared intention	In presenting a task, the teacher must have a clear intention which is

	understood and reciprocated by learners.
4. A sense of competence	The feeling that they are capable of coping successfully with any particular task with which they are faced
5. Control of own behavior	the ability to control and regulate their own learning, thinking and actions
6. Goal-setting	the ability to set realistic goals and to plan ways of achieving them
7. Challenge	an internal need to respond to challenges, and to search for new challenges in life
8. Awareness of change	an understanding that human beings are constantly changing, and the ability to recognize and assess changes in themselves
9. A belief in positive outcomes	a belief that even when faced with an apparently intractable problem, there is always the possibility of finding a solution
10. Sharing	co-operation among learners, together with the recognition that some problem are better solved co-operatively
11. Individuality	a recognition of their own individuality and uniqueness
12. A sense of belonging	a feeling of belonging to a community and a culture

(Williams and Burden, 1997, p.69)

3. Method

The purpose of this study was to illustrate EFL teachers' knowledge of mediation and their classroom practices in terms of Feuerstein's Theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE). In this respect, 17 English instructors who work at the School of Foreign Languages of a foundation university were chosen as the participants of the study. They have been teaching English for 2-5 years and their ages ranges from 25-35.

In order to obtain the data to address the research question a questionnaire survey adapted by Cheng (2011) from Williams and Burden's Mediation Questionnaire (1997) in terms of Feuerstein's 12 MLE features, with reference to Liao's Communicative Language Teaching Questionnaire (2003) was used to collect the data in this study (see Appendix A). The questionnaire consists of four question items summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Questionnaire Questions and Scopes

Question	Main Content	Category	Focused Area
Question 1	Asking teachers whether they have idea of mediation Requesting teachers to identify mediators and traditional teachers to compare their roles with those of the four teachers	Open-ended	Cognition
Question 2	Asking teacher to scale their classroom practices	Open-ended	Cognition
Question 3	Collecting EFL teachers' demographic data	Likert-Type	Behavior
Question 4		Close-ended	Background

Adapted from Williams & Burden's *Mediation Questionnaire* (2000) and Liao's *Communicative Language Teaching Questionnaire* (2003, cited in Cheng, 2011, p.1113).

The data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed by SPSS version 21.0 for window to show the descriptive analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the present study are reported in order of two research questions in terms of the survey, followed by the discussion in relation to each of the research questions.

R.Q. 1: What knowledge about mediation do English instructors hold?

Findings showed that the only five out of 17 teachers knew the meaning of mediator. However, they had still some misconceptions and inadequate knowledge of mediation. They claimed that the mediator is “the person in charge of explanations in the classroom”, “who plays the teaching-learning platform”, and “who finds the middle way to resolve a dispute through being neutral”. One of them described mediator as the teacher who “should guide students to deal with difficult situations they face in real life by applying methods students learn in the class” which is a very close definition of mediation. The other 12 teachers declared that they did not have any idea about mediation.

In addition, the findings showed that most of the teachers mistook the traditional instructor for the role of mediator. 5 of them stated that they used PPP procedure (presentation, practice and produce) in every situation. However, only 4 of them stated that they sometimes applied this procedure when the situation and context need. In this respect, it seems that a small minority of the teachers were clearer about the knowledge of situational mediation. According to Nunan (1989), PPP procedure creates a teacher-centered atmosphere because teacher controls and organizes the instructional pace with students to give required skills and knowledge to get the correct answers. Liao (2003) adds that production part of the PPP procedure offers real situations for students to produce different forms of spoken and written language. However, since the classroom is teacher-centered, the role of the teacher is seen as ‘instructor’. In this sense, findings show that most of the participants in the study viewed their role as an instructor not as a mediator.

On the other hand, most of the participants stated that it was not possible to highlight the functions like “control of own behavior”, “sharing”, “awareness of individuality and uniqueness”, “sense of competence”, “ cooperation”, “sense of belonging” and “setting goals” since they had very strict curriculum and time. Surprisingly, 3 of them stated that these kinds of things were needed to the psychological counseling, so these were not part of their teaching practices. In contrast, only two of them stated they were trying to do their best to increase these functions in their teaching time.

R.Q. 2: To what extent do the instructors act as mediators in teaching English as a foreign language?

The results of the teachers’ responses to 12 MLE criteria were shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' Responses to the Behaviors Relating to Mediation

Question Item	Never	Sometimes	Often	Usually	Always	M	SD
	%	%	%	%	%		
Q1. Shared intention	-	-	-	5,9	94,1	4,9	0,24
Q2. Significance	-	11,8	5,9	35,3	47,1	4,17	1,01
Q3. Purpose beyond here and now	-	17,5	35,3	41,2	5,9	3,35	0,86
Q4. A sense of competence	5,9	-	11,8	23,5	58,8	4,29	1,1
Q5. Control of own behavior	-	11,8	17,6	29,4	41,2	4	1,06
Q6. Goal setting	5,9	23,5	17,6	41,2	11,8	3,29	1,15
Q7. Challenge	17,6	17,6	5,9	41,2	17,6	3,23	1,43
Q8. Awareness of change	5,9	17,6	35,3	35,3	5,9	3,17	1,01
Q9. A belief in positive outcomes	-	5,9	29,4	41,2	23,5	3,82	0,88
Q10. Sharing	-	-	17,6	58,8	23,5	4,05	0,65
Q11. Individuality	-	17,6	5,9	41,2	35,3	3,94	1,08
Q12. A sense of belonging	-	11,8	11,8	41,2	35,3	4	1

The results indicated that most of the teachers played the roles *universal* mediator rather than situational mediator. 94.1% of teachers claimed that they always made their instructions clear when they give a task to the students. 82.4% of the teachers claimed that they usually told their learners why they were to a particular activity, but 47.1% of them stated that they explained their learners they could use this learning activity in future. In this respect, it can be said that most of the teachers were good at explaining the activities and made the students understand how they could do it, but they did not play the specific role of the mediator which explains to learners "how conducting a learning activity will help them in the future and beyond the moment and situation for the time being only" (Feuerstein, 1980).

As for the *situational* roles of the mediators which are described in the other nine criteria, most of the teachers (82.3%) stated that they tried to foster students' feelings of competence and capability of learning. Accordingly, in the open-ended questions, the teachers stated that it was not possible without making the students believe in themselves. Second highest mean (4.05) showed that the teachers also believed that encouraging cooperation and group work were actively used in the classroom activities. Also, more than half of the teachers declared that they always tried to emphasize the importance of sense of belonging during the learning process (76.5%). The responses to other features of MLE were around 60-70%. It means, the majority of the teachers tried to employ the situational features.

Hence, it is possible to say that most of the teachers were in an agreement in applying the *situational* features of mediation. However, the results showed that they tended to employ *universal* features of mediation rather than *situational* features.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate whether English teachers know mediation and to what extent they act as mediators in teaching process even if they are not familiar with the notion of mediation. The results of the questionnaire survey indicated that majority did not have any idea about mediation and its features. However, their classroom practices showed that they employed universal features of MLE which can be “presented in all races, ethnic groups, cultural entities and socioeconomic strata” (Cheng, 2011) rather than situational features of MLE. Although there have been restricted study on this area, the findings of them have been to be similar. For example, Xiongyong (2011) investigated the knowledge of Chinese teachers in terms of mediation and their roles as mediators, and the studies showed the same results as the present study, that is the teachers stated that they had limited knowledge of mediation and mediator roles. In addition, Tahriri, A. and Rezaee-Manesh (2014) conducted a mixed method study to find out to what extent EFL instructors in junior and senior high schools, institutes, and universities in Iran have knowledge of mediation and how often they implement their knowledge of mediation in their classes. The results of the study showed that although there is a relationship between the instructors’ knowledge of mediation and their practice in their classes, their practice of mediation does not totally reflect their knowledge of mediation. Another study conducted by Xiongyong, Moses and Cheng (2012) proposed that EFL teachers in China could not mediate students’ learning because of the misconception of mediation and therefore most EFL learners sit passively in class receiving knowledge from the teacher rather than communicating effectively in the language. Hence, it seems possible to suggest that the teachers should be trained in terms of mediation to raise awareness for knowing what their roles are as mediators because of their critical roles.

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APPENDIX

MEDIATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear participants,

I am conducting research on "Knowledge of mediation and its implementation" and I would appreciate a few minutes of your time in accomplishing this questionnaire to help with my ongoing research.

Yours sincerely,

Question 1: Do you have any idea of the term "mediator" in EFL teaching?

Yes _____ No _____.

Please tick one choice between "YES" and "NO" at first. And then define or explain it if you answered "YES".

Question 2: Please read the following accounts on four EFL teachers' roles in their classrooms. Answer the questions that follow each account.

Teacher A thinks the teacher should make learners realize the significance of a learning task so that they can see the value of the task to their own. Learners should know how to conduct a learning activity will help them beyond the immediate time and place. In presenting a task, he makes instructions clear and ensures the intention is understood by the learners.

2.1. Is this teacher playing the role of mediator in his class?

Yes _____ No _____ Not sure _____

Please make comments on your answer here.

2.2. Is the role that you play in your own class like this?

Yes _____ No _____ To some extent _____

Please make comments on your answer here:

Teacher B argues that she fosters the learners' feelings of competence by encouraging them to control their own learning, thinking, and actions. She teaches the learners how to set realistic goals and to locate approaches of achieving them. Helping the learners to develop an internal need to confront challenges and then seek for new ones, she makes them monitor the changes in themselves, and understand human beings are constantly changing. During the activity, the learners' optimistic awareness is developed so that they realize the task is not as difficult as it seems to be.

2.3. Is this teacher playing the role of mediator in her class?

Yes _____ No _____ Not sure _____

Please make comments on your answer here.

2.4. Is the role that you play in your own class like this?

Yes _____ No _____ To some extent _____

Please make comments on your answer here:

Teacher C believes it important to make his students recognize that some problems are better solved by inviting them to share behaviors and co-operation among themselves on the basis of their own personality and the awareness of their own individuality and uniqueness. He also helps them to establish a sense of belonging to the whole class during the completion of the task.

2.5. Is this teacher playing the role of mediator in his class?

Yes _____ No _____ Not sure _____

Please make comments on your answer here.

2.6. Is the role that you play in your own class like this?

Yes _____ No _____ To some extent _____

Please make comments on your answer here:

Teacher D regards language as a system of grammatical structures. She teaches EFL basically to ensure that the students can use EFL correctly. The materials that she uses rely on teaching a list of grammatical structures. In her class, she follows the PPP procedure (i.e. presentation, practice, and production) for drilling new grammatical structures. Namely, she first presents a new grammatical structure, then directs her students to practice the structure in a controlled way, and finally asks them to use the structure in a free production activity.

2.7. Is this teacher playing the role of mediator in her class?

Yes _____ No _____ Not sure _____

Please make comments on your answer here.

2.8. Is the role that you play in your own class like this?

Yes _____ No _____ To some extent _____

Please make comments on your answer here:

Question 3: For each of the following 12 statements, please circle the figure from 1 for *never* to 5 for *always* that most closely agrees with your routine teaching practices. Consider your answers in the context of your current job or past work experience.

1= Never; 2= Sometimes; 3= Often; 4= Usually; 5= Always

How often do you:	Never	Sometimes	Often	Usually	Always
1. make your instructions clear when you give a task to your learners?	1	2	3	4	5
2. tell your learners why they are to do a particular activity?	1	2	3	4	5
3. explain to your learners how carrying out a learning activity will help them in the future?	1	2	3	4	5
4. help learners to develop a feeling of confidence in their ability to learn?	1	2	3	4	5
5. teach learners the strategies they need to learn effectively?	1	2	3	4	5
6. teach learners how to set their own goals in learning?	1	2	3	4	5
7. help your learners to set challenges for themselves and to meet those challenges?	1	2	3	4	5
8. help your learners to monitor changes in themselves?	1	2	3	4	5
9. help your learners to see that if they keep on trying to solve a problem, they will find a solution?	1	2	3	4	5
10. teach your learners to work co-operatively?	1	2	3	4	5
11. help your learners to develop as individuals?	1	2	3	4	5
12. foster in your learners a sense of belonging to a classroom community?	1	2	3	4	5