

# THE ASSET OF LINGUISTIC MEDIATION TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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**ABSTRACT:** Rapid changes in the communication environment call for resourceful communicators, meaning-making agents who can facilitate understanding and overcome barriers to effective communication. In the domain of foreign language teaching and learning linguistic mediation has been recognized as an essential skill to be developed and enhanced. The present paper discusses the necessity to further incorporate that skill in ESP courses at the TU-Sofia so as to boost students' competence and increase their chances of academic and professional success.

**KEY WORDS:** foreign language teaching and learning, ESP, modes of communication, transcultural competences, academic and employability skills, The European University of Technology EUt+

## РАЗВИВАНЕ НА УМЕНИЯ ЗА ЕЗИКОВА МЕДИАЦИЯ В СПЕЦИАЛИЗИРАНОТО ЧУЖДОЕЗИКОВО ОБУЧЕНИЕ

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**РЕЗЮМЕ:** Ефективното и качествено обучение на български студенти и специализанти по програми, включени в европейското образователно пространство зависи от множество фактори, сред които са и уменията за езикова и межкултурна медиация. Развиването на многоезични и межкултурни компетентности като част от образователните цели на специализираното чуждоезиково обучение на студентите от ТУ – София ще стимулира активното им участие в структурираната мобилност в рамките на Европейския технологичен университет EUt+, ще допринесе за изграждането им като технологично грамотни специалисти, способни успешно да работят както в национални, така и в мултинационални компании.

**КЛЮЧОВИ ДУМИ:** специализирано чуждоезиково обучение, езикова медиация, многоезични компетентности, Европейски технологичен университет EUt+, европейско образователно пространство

## INTRODUCTION

The incessant advance of technology swiftly transforms the communication environment in McLuhan's global village and the ever-increasing demand for versatile communicators is an anticipated reality. Consequently, consolidation and maximization of transcultural competences and communication have been the focus of foreign language teaching in most European countries for over a decade now. In addition, the development of linguistic mediation has been recognized as one of the basic plurilingual and pluricultural competences which should be properly addressed in any foreign language class. In the context of academia deficiencies in linguistic mediation strategies and skills put Bulgarian students at a disadvantage as they hinder the transfer of content and culture in joint research and study programs. Moreover, such shortage erodes the benefits of participating in projects like EUt+, and restricts access to top quality education.

A subject of multidisciplinary research, communication is the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols<sup>1</sup>. It is a phenomenon with many facets, a process with indispensable parts such as communicators, message, medium, entropy, intentions, expectations, feedback or actions, and redundancy which, on the one hand, counters the various forms of entropy that transform intelligible messages into unintelligible chunks of data and, on the other, bridges communication gaps that result from various factors, namely:

- language/terminological differences;
- lack of proficiency in the language or register of the discourse;
- certain cognitive gaps;
- cognitive dissonance;
- lack of topic-relevant information;
- rudimentary critical thinking skills;
- cultural differences;
- various physical and mental disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/communication>

Experience shows that the prerequisites for effective communication are numerous, yet the symbiotic relationship that is established between the communicators is best understood in view of the complex interdependencies which facilitate the efficient transmission of meaning that by itself relies heavily on message modification and linguistic mediation.

## LINGUISTIC MEDIATION PER SE

A specific competence to be developed in foreign language teaching and learning (FLTL), linguistic mediation was formally introduced around 2016 in parallel with the firm conceptualization of the foreign language learner as a social agent<sup>2</sup>. From an FLTL perspective *social agents* are people who successfully participate in communicative events; in other words foreign language learners interact with other participants in a specific discourse by trying to extract key information chunks which are further used for shared meaning reconstruction. The process of negotiating shared meaning in a particular communicative environment is a representation of the concept of linguistic mediation, which is described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as follows: "... the written and/or oral activities of mediation make communication possible between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly. Translation or interpretation, a paraphrase, summary or record, provides for a third party a (re)formulation of a [spoken or written] source text to which this third party does not have direct access. Mediating language activities – (re)processing an existing text – occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies"<sup>3</sup>. Within the context of language learning linguistic mediation, a process that allows overcoming separation, develops a combination of skills that enhance the essential life skills of identifying differences, resolving conflicts and reaching agreements.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/the-user/learners-as-a-social-agent>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants/linguistic-and-cultural-mediation>

In the global, multicultural and multilingual world mediation is vital for all types of social relations. In an effort to reboot the perception of the concept and in accordance with the purposes of the present paper a *specific definition* of the term *linguistic mediation* is proposed. It reads as follows:

*Linguistic mediation is a generic term that is used to describe a dynamic cognitive process which involves two or more foreign language learners in a baffling communicative situation. The aim of the communicators is to code and decode information in such a way as to get their messages across successfully while carrying out the intended communicative event.*



Fig. 1 Linguistic mediation

The definition provides for further reflections on the nature of the concept. For one thing, it implies many different types of content and cultural transfer across languages and within a language. The social agents aware of the disparity of their linguistic competences strive to bridge the cultural and/or language gaps in the discourse by negotiating and consolidating shared meaning thus avoiding as many cases of misinterpretation and/or miscommunication as possible. As an additional clarification it is essential to indicate the general criteria which are applied to differentiate between the basic types of linguistic mediation. As can be seen in Fig.2 these general criteria are input, language, culture, result, and channel.

General Criteria	Types of Linguistic Mediation
Input	<i>Oral</i> <i>Written</i> <i>Visual</i> <i>Multimodal</i> <i>Combined</i>
Language	<i>Intralingual</i> <i>interlingual</i>
Culture	<i>Intracultural</i> <i>Intercultural</i>
Result	<i>Oral</i> <i>Written</i> <i>Visual</i> <i>Multimodal</i> <i>Combined</i>
Channel	<i>Face-to-face (same location)</i> <i>Digital (online tools)</i>

Fig.2 General Criteria & Types of Linguistic Mediation

There are between 2 and 5 different types for every criterion. If one looks at the first and fourth criteria, input and result, depending on the mode of delivery one can enlist five types of linguistic mediation, namely oral (in spoken communication), written (when communication is set down in writing), visual (communication through images), multimodal (communication employs multiple semiotic modes, such as oral and written language, gestures, posture), and combined (both auditory and visual communication at the same time).

If needs must, social agents participating in monolingual communication employ intralingual mediation. However, in bilingual communication they resort to interlingual mediation. Likewise, if the communicative event is across cultures the social agents

practice intercultural mediation, and if it is within the same culture then intracultural mediation takes place.

The ever increasing digital interaction and collaboration involve multiple remote social agents who flexibly remix media and content in support of their messages. Digital mediation can be synchronous (taking place in real time), asynchronous (timing is different), spoken, written, and a blend of these.

Adopted by the Council of Europe in the CEFR's Companion Volume another approach to organizing linguistic mediation types is to focus on the specific activities performed by social agents when they mediate texts, concepts or communicative events. (See F.3)

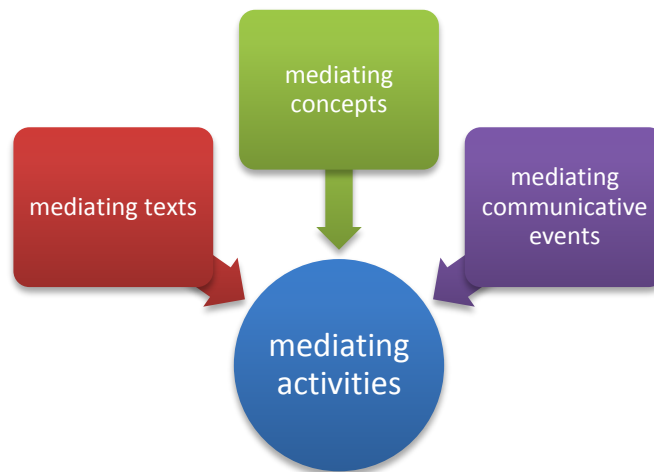


Fig. 3 Types of Linguistic Mediation: Specific criteria<sup>4</sup>

Using this three partite model to zoom in on the communicative purposes of an ESP course one acknowledges that the accent of most mediating activities is on content-specific communicative contexts and the learning objectives are subordinate to the acquisition of specialized vocabulary as well as an adequate response to and in content-specific communicative situations. Consequently, in developing linguistic mediation skills by way of practicing mediating activities foreign language instructors help students make meaning, create and disseminate information, shape experience,

<sup>4</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>

gain understanding and knowledge, and act as intermediaries whenever a situation arises. To this end, an interdisciplinary collaboration proves to be most efficient as it allows students to grasp the way specialized texts are produced, to understand the kind of formal conventions that are followed in the process of writing those texts. Ideally, the collaboration between content and ESP instructors must first and foremost lead to students demonstrating basic knowledge and understanding of subject-specific contexts. The joint efforts of the academic teams must also elaborate students' Independent reasoning, i.e. their critical thinking skills, and polish the written and oral communication skills of an independent FL user as these have been firmly established as parts of businesses' intangible assets, better known as knowledge capital which is highly valued by employers.

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In the most general of terms linguistic mediation is a two-step process of extracting meaning from visual/verbal/audio/multimodal source of information and relaying it so as to facilitate understanding and communication in a baffling situation. Hence, it is important to point out that linguistic mediation skills can be developed effectively in educational contexts that provide for students' ability to deal successfully with linguistic and discursive diversity as well as with multimodal forms of linguistic expression and representation.

The CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors helps foreign language instructors look further into the matter of enhancing linguistic mediation skills by provoking them to adapt the mediation "can do" statements to their learning objectives. Fig. 4 is a detailed representation of the mediation activities and strategies that ESP instructors can select from in accordance with their students' particular needs.

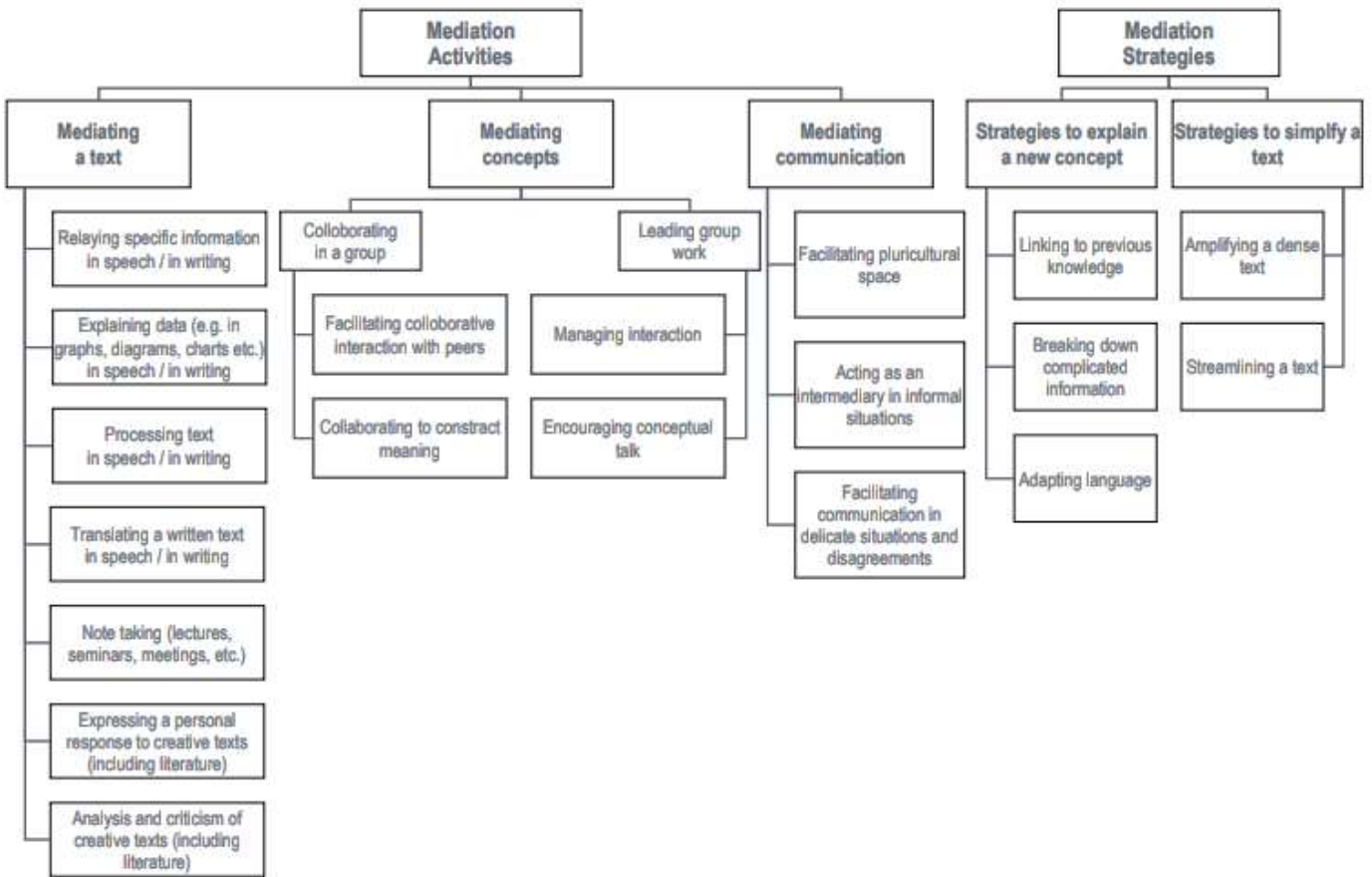


Fig. 4 CEFR Mediation Activities and Strategies

In an academic learning environment students need to process content of lectures and research papers, synthesize information in essays, demonstrate knowledge in writing reports, develop creativity and critical thinking in completing projects and giving presentations. Hence, the use of broad and specialized lexical resources that reveal field-specific terminology, jargon, and linguistic conventions is as important as the reconciliation of the adequacy of communication and the accuracy of code.

Teaching students how best to mediate concepts prepares them for effective problem-solving collaboration or a collaborative interaction in a shared task where critical thinking and consensus play indispensable role. Mediating communication is the



most demanding of the three mediation activities as it requires awareness of the dynamic plurality of multimodal texts that reflect the ever-increasing diversity of cultures and languages, the proliferation of multimedia and ICT, the transformations of language scape and the coexistence of multilayered identities. In a given context the most experienced and competent social agents recognize the need to facilitate communication so that the intended message is understood by all participants. Therefore, in addition to plurilingual and pluricultural competencies students should be trained to predict misunderstanding, a strategy that is applicable in all types of mediating activities, a strategy which relies on the synergy between individual knowledge and collaborative interaction in (re)construction and meaning negotiation.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

NASA's Future of Work Framework<sup>5</sup> (see Fig. 5) can be used as a beacon in all academic endeavors as it illuminates the attributes of the future workforce.

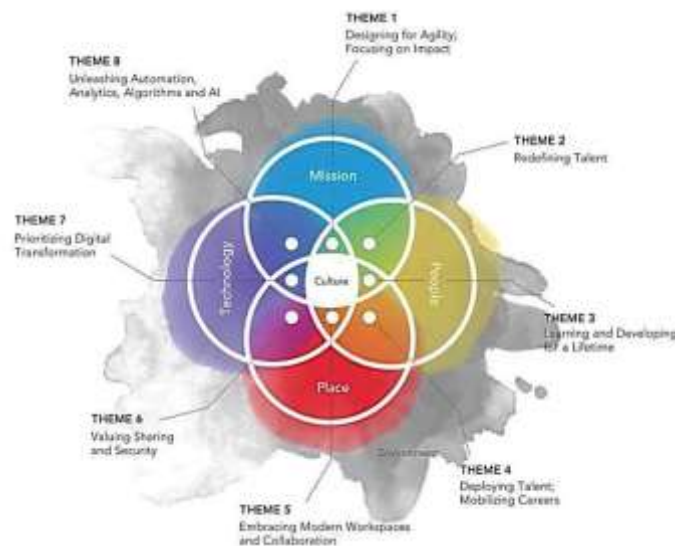


Fig. 5 NASA - The Future of Work

It is true that total agreement on a complex issue is impossible, however, looking at Themes 3, 4, and 5 (see Appendix for details) one can't help but admit that success

<sup>5</sup> <https://blogs.nasa.gov/futureofwork/2018/11/15/the-future-of-work-framework/>

in today's global environment depends on awareness, adaptability, mental agility, creativity, collaboration, sustainability, confidence, and hard work. In line with the Framework it is easy to understand all efforts to promote linguistic mediation in academia as a means to an end, a way to train students how best to communicate specialist knowledge, build relevant vocabulary, and resolve discipline-specific tasks. Boosting students' transferable skills will help them learn how to collaborate and adapt to the requirements of joint research and study projects like EUt+, develop their "work readiness" skills to become the adaptable, resilient, productive and bold employee of the future.

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## **APPENDIX**

### NASA's Future of Work Framework

#### Theme 3: Learning and Developing for a Lifetime

Rising life expectancies and an aging global workforce present organizations with unprecedented challenges and untapped opportunities. Organizations with a science and technology forward mission must highly value and provide learning and development for its workforce to ensure continued relevance and competitiveness.

#### Theme 4: Deploying Talent, Mobilizing Careers

Success depends on providing employees with experiences that inspire and challenge them throughout their career. Organizations need well trained, experienced leaders and professionals that can be matched with mission needs through the use of temporary assignments, internal rotations, reassignments and reinstatements, details in place and external engagement.

#### Theme 5: Embracing Modern Workspaces and Collaboration

Work can now be conducted anywhere and anytime through making information, data and tools available to an increasingly mobile workforce. Workplaces must also adapt as the work and workforce evolves. Modern workspaces are being redesigned for flexibility, autonomy and collaboration and to enable an increasingly remote, agile workforce.