La mediazione linguistico-culturale

Voci e istanze dall'accademia

a cura di Maria Chiara Ferro

LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

IL SEGNO E LE LETTERE

Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne
dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio'

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

ISSN 2283-7140
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2

LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto
Via Cervignano 4 - 20137 Milano
www.lededizioni.com - www.ledonline.it - E-mail: led@lededizioni.com

---

Volume pubblicato con il contributo
dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio' di Chieti-Pescara
Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne

In copertina
Photo by Clark Van Der Beken on Unsplash https://unsplash.com/@snapsbyclark

Videoimpaginazione: Paola Mignanego
Stampa: Litogì

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

SOMMARIO

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

MEDIATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A DIDACTIC EXPERIENCE WITH PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

Paola Brusasco

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.7359/975-2021-brus

Abstract

The publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors* (2018) has drawn renewed attention to intra- and cross-linguistic mediation as a set of strategies and skills meant to facilitate communication in the growing cultural diversity of contemporary societies. Without challenging the role of specialists such as translators, interpreters or mediators proper, some mediation abilities could be developed in language courses for non-specialist students, whose sectorial knowledge is likely to make up for imperfect language mastery. This paper is based on an experience teaching English to Psychology students. Envisaging them as mediators in situations where English may be the *lingua franca*, for example with migrants, and assuming their empathy and emotional intelligence, a few skills were selected from the *Companion Volume* – processing text, relaying specific information, and explaining data in speech – and practised through diverse activities and materials.

Keywords: cross-linguistic mediation; ELT; emotional intelligence; higher education; infographics.

1. Introduction

The publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors*[1] (henceforth *Companion Volume*) consolidates the shared met-

[1] Council of Europe 2018.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

alanguage and common objectives introduced by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*[2] (henceforth CEFR) with the aim to facilitate communication among teachers and define learners' competence levels and skills through internationally applicable criteria. In addition to the intent declared in the introduction – to integrate and enrich the descriptors at both ends of the scale, i.e. A1 and C2 –, the *Companion Volume* adds new sections whose contents, highlighting the role of social actors of both learners and teachers, are the product of an enlarged vision of the challenges of our time and the educational, training and human needs that these entail. The most relevant innovations concern skills related to online interaction, the response to literary and creative texts, the adaptation of descriptors for younger learners and sign languages and, above all, the wide section devoted to intra- and cross-linguistic mediation in the light of the growing cultural diversity of contemporary societies.

It is through multifarious mediation processes that civil and democratic coexistence is promoted, and school is a crucial environment to which the Council of Europe is dedicating particular attention. In the awareness that each pupil or student is a social actor, the learning process is envisaged as strictly related to mobility within and without the educational environment, to the attitude towards otherness, and contact with groups other than one's own. Identifying possible obstacles, implementing effective mediation strategies and striving to offer equal education opportunities despite social inequalities fall within the objectives indicated in *The Mediation Function of Schools*[3], a publication that with the *Companion Volume* and the project "Competences for Democratic Culture"[4], provides multilayered reflections on current societies and linguistic policies, and outlines an educational path in which mediation in its various forms plays a central role.

In line with the vision thus outlined, this contribution is an account of an experience teaching English to students of Psychological Sciences and Techniques at the University of Chieti-Pescara. The choice to introduce mediation strategies was dictated both by the desire to stimulate interest in language learning, which tends to be marginal outside Departments of Languages and Literatures, and by the consideration that – as often is the case when language is used for specific purposes (LSP) – knowledge of the subject was likely to reduce the difficulties deriving from the students' imperfect mastery of English. Imagining them as mediators in situations

[2] Council of Europe 2001.
[3] Coste - Cavalli 2015.
[4] Cf. Barrett *et al.* 2016.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

where English is the *lingua franca* (ELF), for example in interaction with or concerning migrants from different countries, and assuming empathy and emotional intelligence as inherent to their vocational choice, I chose to focus on three of the activities listed in the *Companion Volume* under the heading "Mediating a text" – namely "relaying specific information", "explaining data in speech", and "processing text". In addition to developing skills useful for the students' future careers and for society at large, the choice to include mediation strategies was also made to test the hypothesis that didactic activities thus conceived can enhance motivation and improve reading comprehension skills. The paper is divided into three sections: the first focuses on the concept of mediation, the second describes the classroom activities carried out, while the last section is a reflection on the students' reactions and exam results.

2. Mediation, translation and foreign language teaching

Moving beyond the model of the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading, writing –, the CEFR is the product of a vision based on agency which, with its emphasis on the actions that can be performed by using language, is reminiscent of Speech Act Theory[5] applied to foreign language learning. Hence the focus on language activities, categorised as reception, production, interaction and mediation. Of these, mediation was the least developed, defined somewhat reductively as activities in which "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"[6], mostly carried out as written translation, oral interpretation, and intralingual summarizing and paraphrasing when texts are incomprehensible to the recipient. A few other mediating activities were mentioned – dictation, reading aloud, repetition – but mainly with a view to assessment since they were considered unnatural in communicative situations.

The introduction to the *Companion Volume* states that while the descriptors of the previous edition (2001) were revised in the light of the observations and proposals made by scholars and language teaching institutes, mediation was "the longest and most complex part of the project"[7]

[5] Austin 1975.
[6] Council of Europe 2001, 87.
[7] Council of Europe 2018, 22.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

since the linguistic and cultural diversity of today's societies had brought it to the fore and required new descriptor scales "for mediating a text, for mediating concepts, for mediating communication, as well as for the related mediation strategies and plurilingual/pluricultural competences" [8].

Various scholars have pointed out the cognitive complexity of mediating operations, which involve sociolinguistic knowledge, language awareness and highly developed literacy levels [9], the ability to adapt the abstractness of the information to the verbal and visual situatedness of the task at hand [10], and the interpretation of meanings through recontextualisation [11]. Hence, the mediator is "a plurilingual social actor actively participating in the intercultural communicative event, drawing on source language content and shaping new meanings in the target language" [12]. While most of these features apply to translation as well, in mediation the emphasis is on the communicative event, which takes its peculiar shape on the basis of the time, place, contents and participants involved. Differently from translators, mediators do not need to figure out their future reader because the addressee is present or has been identified, and consequently the communication can be suitably tailored. Similarly to what happens in interpreting, the focus is on the contents of the communication rather than its form, which in mediation tasks can be adapted to fulfil the communicative purpose.

> I do not expect the mediator to be totally fluent in both languages involved, my view of mediation as a translanguaging activity reflects a radical departure from the model of the ideal speaker (i.e. a proficient speaker of the target language). In my view, the plurilingual repertoire of the successful mediator, though differently developed in each language, enables him/her to access both languages [...] in order to maximize communicative potential. [13]

The quotation above highlights a conceptual intersection with both Vermeer's *skopos* theory (a functionalist approach to translation) and contemporary trends in foreign language teaching. According to *skopos* theory, the purpose of the target text determines the translation strategy to apply to the source text, which no longer enjoys the revered status of an

[8] *Ibidem*.
[9] Dendrinos 2006.
[10] Shekan 1998.
[11] Stathopoulou 2015 drawing on Fairclough 2003.
[12] Stathopoulou 2015, 3.
[13] *Ibidem*, 4.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

"original" but is instead merely considered as a source of information [14]. Thus, equivalence does not exist as *a priori* labels to be picked from a lexico-grammatical repertoire outside the text, but has to be worked out within every single communicative situation. A similar relativisation is visible in Stathopoulou's reference to translanguaging and, above all, in her view of the mediator him/herself, who has access to both languages without aiming at the competence of an ideal or native speaker.

Especially with regard to English, the "native speaker model" has been increasingly criticised in recent years as functional to the spread of linguistic imperialism and responsible for "cultural disbelief" in the contribution of non-native teachers [15]. The hegemony of Kachru's norm-providing inner circle [16] has been rejected in the areas of ELF and intercultural communicative competence [17], in favour of a socio-culturally situated ability to mediate between any language and culture. Such challenges to native-speakerism are at the same time an expression of international users' desire to "appropriate" English as well as an attempt to reframe English language teaching within a multicultural paradigm with a translingual orientation. As Canagarajah [18] points out, in order for communication to happen, language users draw on all the codes they have at their disposal, thus transcending individual languages. Such dynamic interactions are envisaged as translingual rather than multilingual because languages complement each other – they are not separate entities added onto one another, but are constantly negotiated and drawn upon in the meaning-making process. Languages are among the various semiotic resources used within a certain ecosystem in order to construct meaning. This ecological metaphor highlights both the network of relations connecting participants, languages, gestures, symbols, cultures, situations and settings, and the uniqueness of each specific interaction which – though happening via conventionally shared meanings and rules – is the product of all of the above [19]. And if ecology "suggests a system, and it makes us reflect on change within that system and between that system and others" [20], language and language-mediated actions and experiences can intervene on and shape that system.

---

[14] Reiss - Vermeer 1984.
[15] Holliday 2015.
[16] Kachru 1985.
[17] Byram 1997.
[18] Canagarajah 2013.
[19] Kramsch 2002; Robinson 2011, in Laviosa 2014.
[20] Kramsch 2002, 14.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

Questioning the native speaker model goes hand in hand with the shift in attitude towards the use of the L1 and translation in the foreign language classroom. As a matter of fact, the importance of translation in foreign language education has been acknowledged in the Italian academic system by labelling the various languages taught as "Language and Translation" (e.g. Language and Translation – English). No longer considered as the cause of interference, the L1 "can be creative, enabling, and offer possibilities for voice"[21]. While for decades English language teaching was dominated by immersive methodologies like the direct method, the audiolingual method and the communicative approach, which ruled out any reference to or use of the L1, between the late 1980s and the early 2000s a number of scholars started reconsidering the role of translation. The first contributions were almost apologetic in their justification for its readmission in the foreign language classroom[22], suggesting that it would enhance flexibility, widen the learners' vocabulary and make them aware of errors provoked by interference. In time, however, claims in favour of translation extended to the ability to think in both languages, the impossibility to adopt avoidance strategies and the acquisition of practical skills. More recently, scholars from both translation studies and foreign language education have underlined its merits

> as an aid to second language acquisition, as a means of developing metalinguistic competence, as a motivational factor, as an essential skill in today's multicultural societies and globalized world and as an ecological practice that not only recognizes the value and relevance of students' first languages but also facilitates the creation of multilingual identities and protects linguistic as well as cultural diversity. [23]

Current teaching and learning orientations and outcomes seem to have downsized the notion of performance, and hence product, giving prominence instead to process and participants. Thus, translation attracts new attention, not in its professional, product-oriented sense, but as a dynamic, non-linear way of constructing and negotiating meaning, both intra- and cross-linguistically; it also underlies – among others – the ability to relay specific information, to explain data, to translate a written text in speech or viceversa, which are some of the activities listed in the *Companion Volume*. It is a more open and inclusive view of translation, which by conjugating cognitive and relational aspects requires emotional intelligence, empathy and – even more than in its more traditional forms – socio-cultural awareness.

[21] Canagarajah 2013, 6.
[22] Duff 1989; Sewell - Higgins 1996, in Laviosa 2014.
[23] Laviosa 2014, 28.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

3. Case study: a few mediation activities in the English course for Psychology students

3.1. *Preamble and rationale*

Although the *Companion Volume* focuses on primary and secondary education, many considerations seem applicable to higher education too. Thus, in an English course for non-specialist students, drawing attention to the mediating function of language – whether one's own mother tongue or a foreign language – may not only increase the students' interest in a minor, but also endow them with skills and strategies which are likely to be useful outside the academic sphere. As the course was addressed to students of Psychology, it could be assumed that emotional intelligence would partially compensate for language shortcomings, and that they would be familiar with the role of "facilitator" that mediation entails.

Outside of Departments of Languages or the Humanities, most English courses either veer towards the various areas characterizing Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), thus focusing on field-specific vocabulary and genre conventions, or consolidate syntax and develop reading skills so as to allow students to carry out research in their majors. As for the students, interest in language is often relatively low and limited to what is needed to pass the exam – an attitude that is partly understandable since they will specialise in other areas of knowledge, but at the same time somewhat surprising given the use of English on the job market, in everyday life, and in academic research.

In this particular case, the fact that (1) the exam would not produce a grade but only a pass/fail result, and (2) the learning outcome was set at level B1 of the CEFR, low enough for many to believe they already mastered it from secondary school, risked further undermining interest in the course.

The introduction of some skills and strategies characterising cross-linguistic mediation was meant to be a way of putting into practice the "ecological" pedagogy advocated by Kramsch[24]: looking at the L2 as a means and an end – with the aim of promoting a critical understanding of the interactions between students and teachers, among students themselves and between students and the outside world –, attempts were made to increase the learners' motivation by trying to simulate situations in which the students would have to draw on their knowledge of psychology.

[24] Kramsch 2002.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

On a very practical level, an initial obstacle was the syllabus published prior to my taking on the course, which focused on grammar and short psychology-related articles, and the description of the exam mode, i.e. grammar exercises and a reading comprehension test. Changes being impossible at that stage, the choice was to work mostly on written texts highlighting syntax and key specialised terms, and add activities – often in pairs or groups – which, bearing the exam mode in mind, would foreground reading comprehension but also take it to the next step – content mediation.

The students' mastery of English was very uneven as was to be expected since they came from different types of secondary schools, and approximately ranging from A1 to B2. Although some were able to follow an oral presentation in English and find the main information within a text, many showed difficulties in oral and written comprehension, and production appeared even more problematic. Consistently with the expected learning outcomes and the exam type, mediation activities were selected among those under the headings "Mediating a text", namely "explaining data in speech", "processing text", and "relaying specific information".

3.2. *Activities*

As far as mediation is concerned, level B1 users

> [c]an collaborate with people from other backgrounds, showing interest and empathy by asking and answering simple questions, formulating and responding to suggestions, asking whether people agree, and proposing alternative approaches. Can convey the main points made in long texts expressed in uncomplicated language on topics of personal interest, provided that he/she can check the meaning of certain expressions.
>
> [c]an introduce people from different backgrounds, showing awareness that some questions may be perceived differently, and invite other people to contribute their expertise and experience, their views. Can convey information given in clear, well-structured informational texts on subjects that are familiar or of personal or current interest, although his/her lexical limitations cause difficulty with formulation at times. [25]

The vision of mediation adopted in the course was integral, in the sense that it involved different registers of the same language or two languages. Thus, the activities proposed were mostly carried out in the L2, i.e. Eng-

[25] Council of Europe 2018, 105.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

lish, but Italian was used at times as part of the cross-linguistic mediating activity itself and when instructions appeared not to have been understood completely by the students.

The first two lessons were meant to set the ground by reactivating language use and acquiring key terms in the field of general psychology. The students worked on texts taken from websites – Mental Health Europe (https://www.mhe-sme.org), the American Psychological Association (https://www.apa.org/) and the Australian Psychological Society (https://www.psychology.org.au/). The texts selected were informative material providing introductions to the various branches of psychology, the main fields of application, and research. In this initial phase, various activities were proposed, ranging from traditional reading aloud, highlighting key words and their semantic fields and checking comprehension through teacher-led questions, to true/false statements and multiple choice questions, to more interactive tasks such as getting the students to read different sections of a text individually, discussing them within their group, then forming new groups where each student summarised his/her part to the others so as to recreate the contents of the full text using the information gap strategy in order to make each contribution meaningful. Short authentic audio and audiovisual material was also used to consolidate vocabulary and add variety, then more personal response was elicited by getting the students to think of movies, books or songs they could relate to the topics discussed.

3.2.1. Explaining data in speech

In consideration of the specialised field of language use, the first of the two B1 descriptors was chosen: "Can interpret and describe (in Language B) detailed information in diagrams in his/her fields of interest (with text in Language A), even though lexical gaps may cause hesitation or imprecise formulation"[26]. In the language pair in use, B referred to Italian and A to English, the language in which the texts were written. In groups, students worked on two different infographics, the first by Mental Health Europe and the second taken from the Perinatal Mental Health Project (https://www.pmhp.za.org), shown in *Figures 1* and *2* respectively. Although longer and much more articulate in its formulation, the text in *Figure 1* (https://www.mhe-sme.org/infographic-10-things-know-mental-health/) posed fewer problems since the figures are accompanied by full descriptions, and the students basically had to provide a simplified explanation in Italian.

[26] *Ibidem*, 109.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

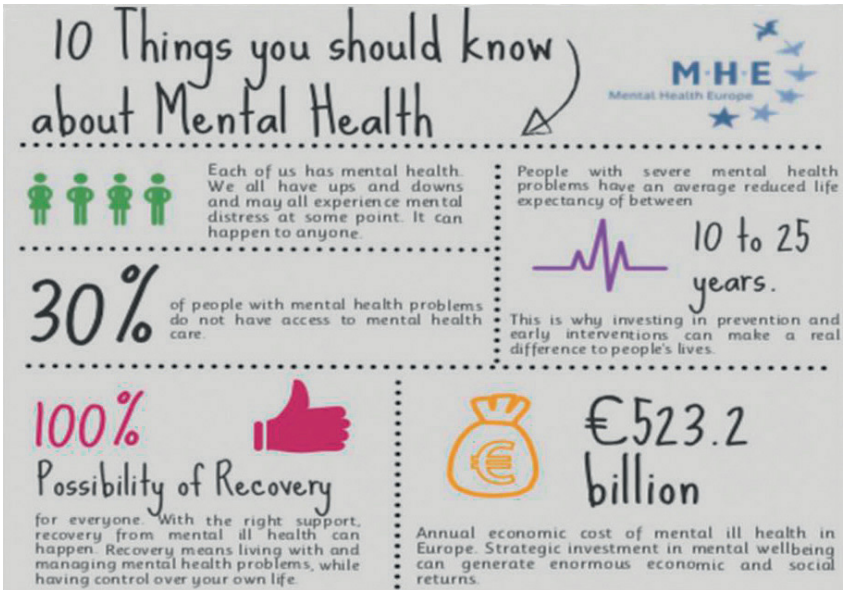

Figure 1. – Infographic by Mental Health Europe.

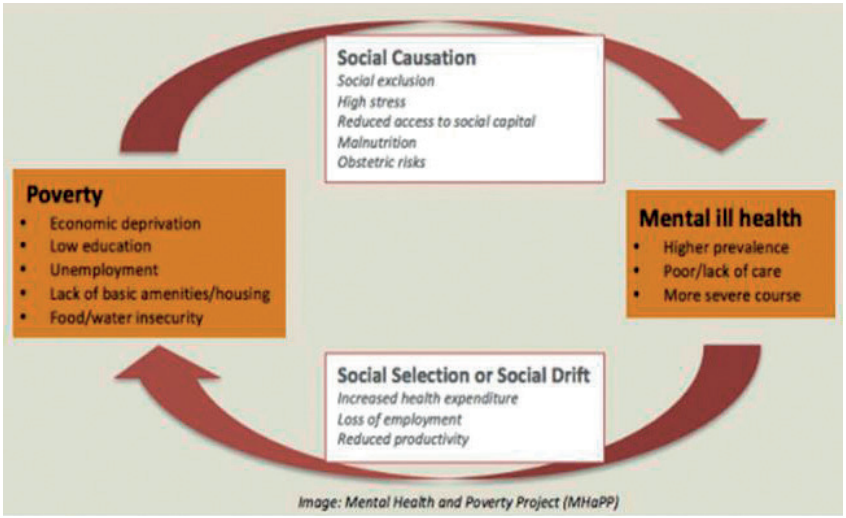

Figure 2. – Vicious cycle diagram from the Perinatal Mental Health Project.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

Figure 2[27], instead, required both an explicitation of what the arrows mean and the integration into full sentences of the bullet points shown. Within each group, the students collaborated to infer meanings and rehearse the Italian versions they would present individually to members of the other group in the next step, which was carried out in pairs.

3.2.2. Processing text in writing and in speech

Given the scope of the course, three descriptors were chosen: (1) "Can paraphrase short written passages in a simple fashion, using the original text wording and ordering", (2) "Can summarise in writing (in Language B) the information and arguments contained in texts (in Language A) on subjects of general or personal interest", and (3) "Can summarise (in Language B) the main points made in clear, well-structured spoken and written texts (in Language A) on subjects that are familiar or of personal interest, although his/her lexical limitations cause difficulty with formulation at times"[28]. Apparently more complex, task (1) was proposed first as it would bolster vocabulary and sentence formation, while (2) was mainly carried out intralinguistically in English, with short cross-lingual sections using Italian.

The topic chosen was "Mental health on the workplace", presented through an infographic by Mental Health Europe. The first page was read and analysed through teacher-led activities as it provided information and vocabulary necessary to process the rest of the text. Then, in groups, students focused on the section of page 2 shown in *Figure 3*[29].

Each group paraphrased the contents of the bubbles; once collected anonymously, the outputs were shown on slides and discussed both in terms of communicative efficacy and language correctness. *Figure 4* shows a few examples (including errors).

The paraphrases thus produced show various mistakes, especially with reference to the yellow bubble, whose abstract vocabulary and general advice was more difficult to grasp and reword. While the third sentence in the slide is hardly comprehensible because of grammar and lexis mistakes, and the fifth almost lacks any reference to the source text, the remaining three paraphrases, despite some language mistakes, manage to recreate most of the meaning of the bubble. The paraphrases of the green bubble,

[27] https://perinatalmentalhealth.wordpress.com/2017/04/30/poverty-and-mental-disorders-breaking-the-cyclein-low-and-middle-income-countries/.

[28] Council of Europe 2018, 111-112.

[29] https://www.mhe-sme.org.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

instead, are on the whole more effective. Apart from the last sentence, which seems to be a literal translation from Italian followed by chunks of the source text, and the third, where some lexical items arrest the flow of information, the other paraphrases express the key information in understandable forms. Although the output was not wholly adequate, one should consider that it was the first activity of this kind assigned to students who were not used to working on language use. Overall, the results testify to a certain ability to re-use key words while trying to reword the contents.

Figure 3. – Section of MHE's infographic on mental health on the workplace.

YELLOW BUBBLE
- The board level should consider mental health and wellbeing of employees also improving it's measurement.
- Talk to the management and board level about the possible ways of measuring the mental health.
- Should need to maintain wellbing into workplace and take back to board livel.
- Boards around the world should develop ways to check workers' mental health and resolve any problems that they found.
- Use a measurement scale and find a balance between the two level.

GREEN BUBBLE
- Open your mind and share your opinion about mental health.
- People should not be afraid of talking about mental health in every place and every situation.
- Create a culture open to bring talk about mental health freely and shared activity.
- Mental health should become a topic of conversation without any prejudices especially at work.
- Would be appropriate to not consider mental health a taboo, but deal with is as a topic of conversation during a walk, lunch and informal meetings.

Figure 4. – Examples of students' output.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

Figure 5[30], taken from the same infographic, shows the source text used for gist-summarising, while *Figure 6* shows the students' work, initially carried out in groups and then revised in plenary to produce a correct shared version.

Figure 5. – Section of MHE's infographic on mental health on the workplace.

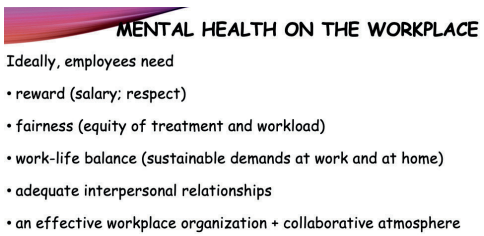

Figure 6. – Gist-summary (final version).

While working in groups, students could use both English and Italian, which gave them confidence as far as understanding the contents and identifying key words were concerned. They were encouraged to collaborate and use context, field-specific knowledge and proficiency in their own language to derive the meaning of unknown words rather than look

[30] https://www.mhe-sme.org.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

them up in dictionaries, thereby promoting inferencing and flexibility. The plenary discussion that followed was also held in both languages although the final gist-summary had to be in English so as to retain key words.

Task (3), referring to processing text in speech, was applied to a text of about 1,000 words on the psychology of immigration taken from the American Psychological Association website. Given the complexity, sensitivity and current relevance of the topic, a lesson was dedicated to building vocabulary and debating ideas on the basis of the text, which presented the experience from the point of view of both migrants and host communities, and discussed the opposite notions of cultural assimilation and multiculturalism, highlighting advantages and disadvantages for both parties. This preparatory part was carried out mainly in English, consistently with the course's expected outcomes. Students were then divided into groups of "migrants" and "hosts", "assimilationists" and multiculturalists" and given time to discuss the various identities, pros and cons, problems and solutions within each group. Then a round table was organised in the guise of a community meeting, where people were asked to give substance to their requests and claims by drawing on the ideas they gathered from the reading, so that the reality of all parties could be seen from their perspectives. In a monolingual class, such a setting provided a credible context for cross-linguistic mediation: "migrants" were asked to use English and only resort to Italian for occasional, single words; "hosts" could move between the two languages and mediate either for each other or for the other group.

3.2.3. Relaying specific information in writing

The *Companion Volume* describes this ability through three situations, two of which based on spoken source texts. Because of the course purposes, however, practice focused only on the descriptor referring to both source and target texts in written form, according to which B1 language users "can relay in writing (in Language B) specific, relevant information contained in straightforward informational texts (written in Language A) on familiar subjects"[31]. The texts chosen, taken from the APA website, focused on the integration of migrant children in the school system of the host country. The students were divided into two groups with one

[31] Council of Europe 2018, 108.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

text each detailing either "Information for educators" or "Information for clinicians / service providers". Both texts were informative and operational, providing information about the most frequently reported situations, challenges and strengths (e.g. the children's language barrier as against high aspirations and optimism upon entering school in the host country), and giving practical suggestions on how to organise assessment or, in the case of clinicians, on the need to provide culturally competent treatment. A role-play situation was set up whereby the students were consultants hired by municipalities or associations working with migrants; they had to analyse materials in English and prepare some basic information and instructions in Italian for their in-house colleagues. As the topics were complex and the texts contained a fair amount of LSP, a more guided activity was designed: a list of notes was handed out and each group had to find in the texts the paragraph where each point was dealt with (e.g. "immigrant children and learning disorders", "the influence of first language skills", "previous schooling", "cultural inadequacy of tests", etc.). While working in a collaborative learning environment allowed linguistically weaker students to engage with more capable peers and participate in the activity without feeling obliged to find solutions, it also gave everyone the possibility of using Italian to discuss their choices and doubts; moreover, the notes were meant to facilitate comprehension and highlight key words and crucial information so as to provide the foundations upon which the mediated text could be built. The next stage resorted instead to cooperative learning [32], whereby smaller groups were formed to identify the information to be mediated into Italian under two headings, *Cosa occorre sapere* and *Cosa fare / non fare* (i.e. "Things you need to know" and "What to do / not to do") taken on by different students in each group. The outputs, of which *Figure 7* shows an example, were much shorter and more schematic versions of the source documents, succeeding in relaying the most relevant information and instructions.

In exchanging the documents, each group acted as the receiving end of the instructions, so that clarity, coherence and communicative efficacy could be ascertained. An interesting aspect of the process was the degree of emotional involvement and empathy that the discussion generated, which transformed the foreign language classroom into a site of sociocultural awareness and intervention.

[32] Oxford 1997.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

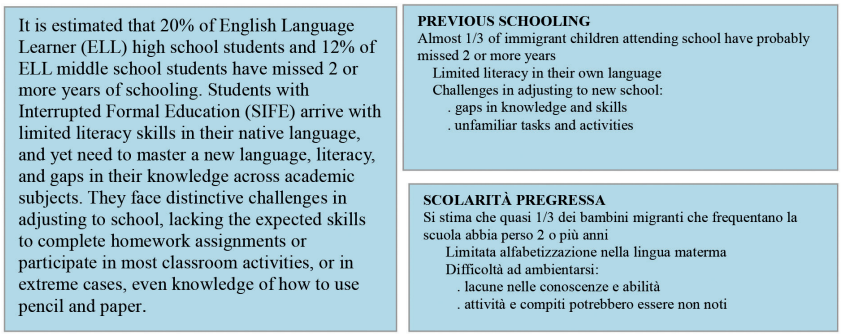

Figure 7. – An example of the activity on relaying specific information in writing.

4. Final considerations

As learning a foreign language has its corollary in learning about a foreign culture, which in turn sheds light on one's own mother tongue and culture, it seems just natural that mediation activities be a purposeful part of the process. In this particular case, the students' limited knowledge of English obviously affected the scope of mediation, and most sociocultural reflections were exchanged in Italian. However, apart from the immediately verifiable acquisition of specialised vocabulary and strategies of information retrieval, the experience activated the learners' soft skills and, according to their comments, helped them see ways in which their mastery of the foreign language, however limited, made them more active in the world and aware of how empowering achieving communication can be. The presence of non-Italian speakers would have made it all more realistic, but this was not the case, so communication in English had to be teleologically projected onto the students' exchanges outside of the classroom.

In general, the best and the most motivated students enjoyed this kind of work and acknowledged their learning progress. Weaker students, instead, said they would have preferred more traditional explanations followed by grammar exercises as dealing with language in a more dynamic and open way made them feel not in control and anxious. However, all agreed that the use of English, psychology contents and sociocultural relevance contributed to a sense of reality and personal involvement.

The texts on migration were particularly appreciated because they highlighted the relationship between language(s) and culture(s) – which

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

for those not majoring in foreign languages may not be a given – and made the students feel how, by engaging in language, they were "enacting sociocultural phenomena"[33]. Besides raising motivation and teaching L2 terminology and phrasing, the focus on mediation was meant to sensitise the students to the fact that communities – work communities, host communities, migrant communities, educational communities, etc. – have their codes and standards which need to be dynamically adjusted and brought to dialogue, and they, as culturally-sensitive multilingual citizens, can contribute.

Although it was a limited experience that could neither explore English language and culture deeply nor experiment with the various possibilities that mediation offers, the activities carried out produced interesting outcomes and suggested that integrating mediation in the language syllabus can enrich language education and contribute to the intercultural citizenship competences that need to be developed at all educational stages, while at the same time giving insight into learning styles and processes.

References

Austin 1975	J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, edited by J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisà, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975.
Barrett *et al.* 2016	M. Barrett *et al.*, *Competences for Democratic Culture: Living together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2016.
Buttjes - Byram 1991	D. Buttjes - M. Byram, *Mediating Languages and Cultures: Towards and Intercultural Theory of Foreign Language Education*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 1991.
Byram 1997	M. Byram, *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 1997.
Canagarajah 2013	S. Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*, London, Routledge, 2013.

[33] Buttjes - Byram 1991, 18.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

Coste - Cavalli 2015	D. Coste - M. Cavalli, *Education, Mobility, Otherness: The Mediation Function of Schools*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe, Language Policy Unit, 2015.
Council of Europe 2001	Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, 2001, English version: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, https://rm.coe.int/16802fc1bf.
Council of Europe 2018	Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*: *Learning*, *Teaching*, *Assessment*. *Companion Volume with New Descriptors*, 2018, https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989.
Dendrinos 2006	B. Dendrinos, "Mediation in Communication, Language Teaching and Testing", *Journal of Applied Linguistics* 22 (2006), 9-35.
Holliday 2015	A. Holliday, "Native-speakerism: Taking the Concept Forward and Achieving Cultural Belief", in A. Swan - P. Aboshiha - A. Holliday (eds.), *(En)Countering Native-speakerism: Global Perspectives*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 11-25.
Kachru 1985	B.B. Kachru, "Standard, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism: The English Language in the Outer Circle", in R. Quirk - H. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, 11-30.
Kramsch 2002	C. Kramsch (ed.), *Language Acquisition and Language Socialization: Ecological Perspectives*, London, Continuum, 2002.
Kramsch 2014	C. Kramsch, "Language and Culture", *AILA Review* 27 (2014), 30-55, doi: 10.1075/aila.27.02kra.
Laviosa 2014	S. Laviosa, *Translation and Language Education: Pedagogic Approaches Explored*, London - New York, Routledge, 2014.
Oxford 1997	R.L. Oxford, "Cooperative Learning, Collaborative Learning, and Interaction: Three Communicative Strands in the Language Classroom", *The Modern Language Journal* 81, IV (1997), 443-456.
Reiss - Vermeer 1984	K. Reiss - H.J. Vermeer, *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1984.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

Shekan 1998 — P. Shekan, *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Stathopoulou 2015 — M. Stathopoulou, *Cross-Language Mediation in Foreign Language Teaching and Testing*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2015.

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html

M.C. Ferro (cur.), *La mediazione linguistico-culturale. Voci e istanze dall'accademia* - Milano, LED, 2021
ISBN 978-88-7916-975-2 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/975-mediazione-linguistico-culturale.html