

# Mediation in the CEFR: Innovating Foreign Language Teaching in Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

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**Abstract:** Against the background of Sino-foreign cooperative education, traditional foreign language teaching is constrained by exam-oriented modes, resulting in students' inadequate practical language proficiency and intercultural competence. Based on the CEFR Companion Volume, this paper explores the connotation and classification of mediation competence. The paper analyzes the major problems in current foreign language teaching and puts forward targeted implementation paths. Integrating mediation activities into teaching can shift the focus from mere skill training to cultivating students' ability of meaning construction and cross-cultural communication. It offers new ideas for foreign language teaching reform and talent cultivation in Sino-foreign cooperative education.

**Keywords:** Mediation; CEFR; Foreign language teaching; Sino-foreign cooperative education

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching is key to Chinese-foreign cooperative education. It needs to develop students' overall foreign language ability, especially communication and cross-cultural skills, which directly affect teaching quality and students' academic performance. However, foreign language teaching in most programs is still influenced by traditional models and exam-oriented education, leading to clear weaknesses. Students lack oral expression and quick-response skills, and their practical communication ability fails to meet overseas study requirements. Meanwhile, they have weak cross-cultural awareness and cannot adapt well to cultural differences. They face double difficulties in both language use and cultural adaptation. Therefore, it is urgent to explore foreign language teaching reforms suitable for cooperative education. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) emphasizes communication, cross-cultural and multicultural competence, which closely matches the challenges and talent-training goals of foreign language teaching in cooperative programs. Its supplementary volume's new discussion on language mediation

activities offers a new perspective for competence development. Effective teaching reforms usually follow a gradual strategy: first, optimize the overlapping parts between existing local curricula and the CEFR, then target core elements of the framework that best suit local needs for key breakthroughs. Such selective adaptation is much more workable than complete transplantation <sup>[1]</sup>. Foreign language teaching in China's Chinese-foreign cooperative education can be reformed based on the CEFR. However, it should be adapted to national conditions, student characteristics, and teaching needs. Its theories on language mediation activities can provide theoretical guidance and practical references for teaching model innovation and the development of students' overall competence.

## **2. Mediation in the CEFR companion volume (CEFRCV): Background and connotations**

The concept of mediation originates from profound changes in global language use. With the advancement of European integration and globalization, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication has become a normal part of daily interaction. Language no longer serves merely as a communication tool for native speakers, but frequently acts as a medium for people with different linguistic backgrounds to exchange ideas. Traditional foreign language evaluation systems, which take native speaker competence as the standard, can no longer adapt to the practical needs of real-world language use. The mediation concept helps bring states, languages, and cultures back together by providing a third area for dialogue to overcome a conflict-inducing dualism <sup>[2]</sup>. North's systematic discussion of mediation provides theoretical support for its inclusion in the CEFR. He divides mediation into four types: linguistic, cultural, social, and pedagogic mediation <sup>[3]</sup>. Against this background, the European Commission formally published the CEFRCV in 2020. It regards mediation as a core language ability equal to reception, production, and interaction, and explains its concepts, types, and standards in a complete and systematic way. These four main communication modes have replaced the traditional four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This is a revolutionary update. North points out that language is not a static thing to learn and study, but a process or action, which is called "linguaging." People express thoughts through language. He also stresses the importance of social interaction in reaching agreement and improving mutual understanding <sup>[1]</sup>. Some scholars on Reflection Day argue that language should no longer be seen as an object. Instead, it should be re-conceptualized as a process — linguaging, which centers on agency and mediation <sup>[4]</sup>. In the CEFR, "proficiency" encompasses the ability to perform communicative language activities ("can do ...") while drawing upon both general and communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic) and activating appropriate communicative strategies <sup>[5]</sup>. This theoretical shift no longer regards learners as passive receivers of linguistic signs. Instead, it recognizes learners' agency to actively construct meaning and take part in discourse practices. From the perspective of linguaging, language is no longer isolated learning content. It acts as a medium connecting people with each other, people with society, and thoughts with expressions. Value is created through real-life communication, interactive dialogue and meaning negotiation. Based on this logic, the CEFR-CV stresses that language education should not only focus on mastering language forms. More importantly, it should develop learners' overall ability to communicate, cooperate, express opinions and understand diverse cultures in real situations. It highlights that language is essentially a social practice. This offers a new theoretical model for curriculum design, teaching assessment and competence development in contexts such as Sino-foreign cooperative education and cross-cultural foreign language teaching.

The CEFR-CV describes mediation activities as follows: 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 across modalities (e.g. from spoken to signed or vice versa, in cross-modal communication) and sometimes from one language to another (cross-linguistic mediation). The focus is on the role of language in processes like creating the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning, collaborating to construct new meaning, encouraging others to construct or understand new meaning, and passing on new information in an appropriate form. The context can be social, pedagogic, cultural, linguistic, or professional <sup>[4]</sup>.

CEFR CV divides mediation into mediation activities and mediation strategies. Mediation activities include three parts. First, text mediation handles text and information exchange, such as sharing information, paraphrasing content, translating, notetaking, and text analysis. Second, conceptual mediation builds ideas and opinions through group discussion, cooperative research, and guided communication. Third, interpersonal mediation removes barriers in communication by clearing misunderstandings, solving disagreements, and improving interaction. Mediation strategies are skills to support these activities. The two main strategies are explaining new ideas by linking existing knowledge and simplifying texts to match learners' understanding levels.

Therefore, mediation is not equal to translation. Translation is only one type of crosslingual mediation. Mediation covers much more than language conversion. It includes explaining concepts and reaching agreement within one language, transferring meanings across different modes, and building communication and shared meaning based on cultural and social contexts. Essentially, mediation focuses on meaningmaking by users rather than mechanical language conversion. In teaching, teachers simplify professional knowledge, and students learn through cooperation. In crosscultural situations, mediation balances language rules and cultural differences to reduce communication gaps. For this reason, CEFR lists mediation competence as a separate core dimension. It moves beyond traditional listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and focuses on learners' overall ability to solve real problems and improve interpersonal communication. It guides foreign language teaching from skill training to communication competence development.

In addition, the CEFR Supplement Volume abandons the binary division of native and nonnative speakers, using neutral terms Language A and Language B instead. This weakens the absolute authority of nativespeaker standards in traditional teaching and breaks the "nativespeakeronly" evaluation mindset, giving secondlanguage learners more freedom to express themselves. In mediation activities, nativespeaker norms are no longer the only standard. All language users enjoy equal rights in meaning negotiation, discourse mediation, and crosslingual communication. Based on their thinking and knowledge from Language A, learners understand, transfer, and reconstruct Language B and take part in communication as language mediators. This equal position respects learners' individual language development paths, includes mediation and crosslingual transfer abilities in education, and matches the agency and social mediation highlighted in languaging theory.

In summary, from the perspective of language teaching, mediation activities connect learners with society, other people, and cultures, and integrate language with society and culture. Running through language input, output and interaction, they function to construct meaning and reshape the direction of foreign language teaching toward developing learners' intercultural and communicative competence.

### **3. Problems and needs of foreign language teaching in Sino-foreign cooperative education**

The Outline for Building a Powerful Education Nation (2024-2035) clearly states that education should cultivate talents for the Party and the country, and fully serve the development of Chinese-style modernization<sup>[6]</sup>. Guided by this strategy, the core goal of Sino-foreign cooperative education is to train international interdisciplinary talents with solid professional knowledge, strong language skills and outstanding cross-cultural competence. At present, artificial intelligence is developing rapidly, and machine translation is widely used. Traditional foreign language teaching faces great challenges of transformation. How to promote foreign language teaching reform and cultivate high-quality students with comprehensive practical abilities has become an important issue in foreign language education. In real teaching practice, foreign language teaching in Sino-foreign cooperative education still meets many practical problems. Students' foreign language ability not only directly affects their willingness to study abroad but also plays a key role in their further study and long-term development.

#### **3.1. Insufficient development of practical language ability**

Students in Chinese-foreign cooperative education programs generally have weak practical foreign language skills and lack independent thinking in expression, failing to meet the needs of international cross-cultural communication in study and real-life use. In practice, most students only master basic vocabulary and grammar and are good at exam-taking, but their real-life language use ability is very poor. In real-world foreign language communication, they cannot flexibly use language knowledge to form sentences or share ideas. They struggle to state personal opinions clearly and completely. Many students dare not speak, do not know how to speak, or give empty expressions. They mostly use fixed sentence patterns mechanically instead of sharing personal thoughts based on real situations. Their language use is rigid, and the problem of "dumb English" is common.

This problem has several deep-rooted causes. First, students in these programs generally have weaker basic foreign language skills than those in regular classes, with limited language input, which creates natural disadvantages for later language use and opinion expression. Second, long-term exam-oriented education makes students misunderstand foreign language learning. They simply regard it as memorizing words, doing grammar exercises, and taking tests. They ignore the communicative nature and practical value of language and never form the habit of thinking actively and expressing personal ideas in foreign languages.

Besides, traditional exam-centered foreign language teaching makes the problem worse. Teaching mainly focuses on grammar explanation, vocabulary memorization, and written test training, while greatly neglecting oral practice, situational communication, and critical thinking expression. There are a few teaching activities to guide students to think independently and share personal views. Such long-term single-style teaching and training only helps students deal with exams. They lack core abilities, including practical language use, critical expression, and cross-cultural communication, which finally leads to poor practical language skills and a weak ability to express personal opinions.

#### **3.2. Insufficient cultivation of cross-cultural competence**

Scholars have not reached a unified definition of cross-cultural competence. Sun Youzhong clearly states that its core meanings include: respecting global cultural diversity, having cross-cultural empathy and critical cultural awareness; mastering basic theoretical knowledge and analytical methods of cross-cultural research; understanding the history and current situation of target-language countries, as well as similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures; interpreting and evaluating different cultural phenomena,

texts and products; communicating appropriately and effectively across cultures; and helping people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds achieve effective cross-cultural communication <sup>[7]</sup>. It can be seen that cross-cultural competence is not merely simple cross-cultural communication behavior. It has richer connotations and a wider range of coverage, and is closely related to personal growth experience. Among these elements, cross-cultural communication ability is particularly vital. Cross-cultural communication takes place in various situations. It can occur between people who speak the same language but have different cultural backgrounds, or between those with different languages and cultural backgrounds.

With the continuous advancement of globalization and the rapid development of internet technology, people increasingly interact with diverse cultural groups worldwide, making cross-cultural competence more and more important. This importance is also reflected in language teaching. In foreign language classes, cross-cultural communication happens all the time between students from different cultural backgrounds, between teachers and students, and between students and foreign teachers. After graduation, students will communicate and cooperate with others in various situations throughout their lives, so cross-cultural competence is a lifelong essential skill. Besides, people with cross-cultural competence should also be able to mediate cross-cultural conflicts. They understand the cultural backgrounds of both sides and can help clear misunderstandings and rebuild communication from a cross-cultural perspective <sup>[6]</sup>.

In cross-border education environments, students study in a diverse setting where Chinese and Western cultures interweave, values collide, and behavioral norms differ. They face not only language-based communication tasks but also constant cognitive conflicts, social frictions and adaptation pressures caused by cultural differences.

However, traditional foreign language teaching has long focused mainly on language knowledge. It overemphasizes exam-oriented training such as vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing, while neglecting the development of students' cross-cultural awareness, cultural understanding and ability to handle cultural conflicts. As a result, students lack the necessary knowledge and strategies to deal with cultural differences.

In real cross-cultural communication, misunderstandings, barriers and even conflicts easily arise from differences in cultural backgrounds, thinking patterns and communication habits. When facing cross-cultural conflicts in class interactions, academic exchanges and overseas study and life, students often feel helpless. They cannot make rational judgments, communicate effectively or solve problems properly, which further affects their learning experience, academic performance and cross-cultural adaptation.

## **4. Implementation paths of mediation in foreign language teaching of Sino-foreign cooperative education**

### **4.1. Progressive development of students' mediation competence**

Educators no longer define language merely as “a carrier of culture”, but regard language and culture as an integrated whole. For both beginner and advanced learners, mediation competence should be cultivated from the very beginning of their studies. Teachers shall integrate mediation competence with other language skills and incorporate language-mediating activities into phased training objectives. At lower grade levels, priority is given to developing students' basic mediating and translational competence through tasks designed to foster cross-cultural awareness and cognitive skills, such as describing pictures and telling stories from illustrations, requiring students to rephrase information in daily contexts. At higher grade levels, emphasis shifts to cross-cultural communicative competence. Students are expected to reconcile cultural differences

and resolve communication conflicts in professional and daily cross-cultural interactions. Teachers guide students to compare different phenomena and cultures and express their own opinions, so as to develop their communication skills in cross-cultural settings. For instance, mediation activities can be designed around stereotypes, prejudices, exclusion, aggression, and cultural conflicts. Following the principle of progressing from simplicity to complexity, students are gradually guided to consolidate their fundamental language-mediating literacy and strengthen core mediating abilities including information rephrasing, meaning negotiation and communication mediation. Meanwhile, their cultural awareness, cultural empathy, cultural interpretation and cross-cultural critical thinking are nurtured, enabling them to engage in effective communication and cultural interaction in diverse contexts.

## **4.2. Optimizing cross-cultural teaching design**

Undoubtedly, language-mediating activities develop not only learners' comprehensive linguistic competence but also are inherently connected to the cultivation of cross-cultural competence. A range of mediating activities, including text analysis, information delivery, and commentary, can effectively enhance learners' communicative ability. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages views learners as both social agents and cross-cultural mediators. When interacting with others or engaging with different cultures, learners first interpret and perceive diverse cultures on the basis of their personal social experiences.

In foreign language teaching in China, especially in non-first-tier cities where foreign residents are scarce, authentic foreign language environments are barely accessible, making classroom-based language contexts particularly crucial. The introduction of mediation into teaching enables the restructuring of teaching content centered on the cultivation of language mediation competence and the enrichment of mediation task materials based on real-life scenarios. Combined with existing textbooks and teaching resources, teaching can integrate cultural materials from both China and foreign countries and carry out targeted mediation activities with these materials as the starting point. Due to the fact that in foreign language instruction the learners meet not the target world "as it is", but rather a "pre-filtered construct" of the target world. They are presented with an interim world which has been prepared on premises firmly rooted in our own world<sup>[8]</sup>. This is why mediating activities become more important. With these activities, learners use their existing knowledge to analyze and understand the outside world and build their own target world through them. Moreover, Foreign language learning, on the one hand, extends our socio-cultural experience to new dimensions, but on the other hand it also makes us aware of the specific features of our own world<sup>[7]</sup>.

## **5. Conclusion**

Linguistic mediation is a core linguistic competence concept proposed in the 2020 version of the CEFR to meet the demands of global cross-linguistic communication. This concept not only addresses existing problems and improves teaching quality in foreign language education for Sino-foreign cooperative education programs but also applies to various cross-linguistic teaching contexts. It significantly boosts learners' comprehensive linguistic competences, including communicative competence and intercultural competence. Introducing cross-linguistic mediation into foreign language teaching for Sino-foreign cooperative education and putting it into practice by restructuring teaching objectives, developing suitable teaching content, innovating teaching methods and adjusting assessment systems can effectively solve common problems such as students' poor oral skills and weak intercultural competence. It helps better achieve the goal of cultivating

international talents and provides a new direction for the reform of cross-linguistic foreign language teaching in China. As the demand for cross-linguistic communication keeps growing in the future, the practical value of cross-linguistic mediation in various foreign language teaching scenarios will become more prominent, calling for further in-depth practical exploration and theoretical research.

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