

# Application of Teacher Mediation Theory in Large Classes at Higher Vocational College

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**Abstract:** Higher vocational colleges see mostly large language classes in which the students are almost invariably heterogeneous. The study focuses on teacher assistance to learners' process of working, investigating how the mediation theory is applied in large classes to promoting English language teaching and helping learners move into and through their ZPD as well.

**Keywords:** Teacher mediation; Large classes; Higher Vocational College

## 1. Introduction

With emphasis being put on the vocational education, higher vocational colleges see a big rise in the enrollment of students. And there appears such a crisis that most classes are surprisingly large. The largest class the writer once taught consisted of 110 students. If classes are large, they are almost invariably heterogeneous, and heterogeneous classes are more problematical when they are also large. Reflecting on our own learning experiences in school, we will realize that teachers can affect learning in a range of ways that go far beyond the transmission of knowledge. Some of these ways would be likely to include teaching learners how to learn, boosting their confidence, motivating, displaying a personal interest, enhancing self-esteem and creating a favorable learning environment.

Mediation, a term used by psychologists of the social interactionist school, refers to the part played by other significant people in the learner's lives, who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them.<sup>[1]</sup> Basically, the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skill and knowledge.

## 2. Mediation Theory and Its Importance

Reuven Feuerstein, the Israeli psychologist, suggests that a child's learning right from birth is shaped by the intervention of significant adults. He refers to these important figures in the child's learning as mediators or mediating adults, and the experience that they provide as mediated learning experiences.<sup>[2]</sup> These adults, at first parents, but later teachers, select and organize stimuli that they consider most appropriate for the child, shape them and present them in the ways considered most suitable to promote learning. They also intervene in shaping the child's early attempts at responding to stimuli, directing and encouraging more appropriate responses while explaining why one response is more useful or appropriate than another. Thus in contrast to Piagetian theory where it is believed that children develop at their own pace through interaction with the environment, the way in which significant adults interact with children is considered to play a central part in the latter's cognitive development. This enables the child to construct a view of the world and his or her place within it. Cognitive, social and emotional developments are seen as inextricably linked, and the establishment of an appropriate climate in the home or classroom within which this can be effectively fostered is as important as the content of what is conveyed. So Feuerstein considers the role of the mediator a key factor in effective learning.

Mediation theory is of particular importance for mediators to help learners move into and through their *zone of proximal development*. ZPD is Vygotsky's most widely known concept, which refers to the layer of skill or knowledge beyond which the learner is currently just capable of coping with. Working together with another person, either an adult or a more competent peer at a level that is just above a learner's present capabilities is the best way for the learner to move into the next layer. ZPD has important implications for teachers with regard to what they can do to help children in their learning. It provides a particularly positive message about how to help learners when they are stuck at any stage in their learning. It suggests that the teacher should set tasks at a level beyond which the learners are currently just capable of functioning. Meanwhile, principles should be taught to enable them to make the next step unassisted. What mediation theory tells us is that it is the role of the teacher that help learners to find ways of moving into their next level of understanding of the language.

## 3. Problems in Large Classes

Since learners in large classes are different from one another in many different ways that may affect the way they learn and the way they are taught, they present special problems for both learners and the teacher. The following are a set of common teaching problems in large classes: 1) effective learning for all -- The teacher is not sure whether the students are all learning effectively; the

tasks the teacher provides are either too difficult or too easy for many of the students. 2) materials—the teacher can't find suitable material, the textbooks are “homogeneous”—rigidly aimed at one kind of learner, with no flexibility or no options from which the learner can make selection of the material he/she is interested in. 3) interest—students get bored: the teacher can't find topics and activities that keep them all interested. 4) participation—The teacher can't activate all the students: only a few students—the most proficient and confident ones—seem to respond actively to the teacher's questions.

#### 4. Application of Mediation Theory

According to Vygotsky's concept of *zone of proximal development*, every learner has a layer of skill or knowledge which is beyond their current state.<sup>[3]</sup> Though students in large classes are different in their layers of skill or knowledge, every student has his/her own layer even though he/she is a non-proficient or non-confident one. Though there exist various problems in large classes, usually most of them can be combated with the help of teacher's finding appropriate ways to mediate and thus students in such classes can be helped to get out of their current stage at which they are stuck and move into their next ZPD. In the following mini-sections, some possible ways are suggested in which teachers can mediate and solve the above problems in large classes.

(1) Since the teachers is not sure whether the students are all learning effectively because the tasks are either too difficult or too easy for many of them, he/she can mediate the recognition of students' own individuality and uniqueness, a sense of competence, and an internal need to challenges. In individualized activities, students learn at their own pace and sometimes choose their own tasks and materials. The teacher can use compulsory plus optional instructions to tell the class that everyone has to do a certain minimal part of the task and the rest is optional, that is available to those who understand / can do it / have time/ wish to do more. The strategy of compulsory plus optional task allows learners to decide for themselves what quantity of content and level of challenge to aim for. For example, in an exercise of consisting of, say, ten questions, learners may be told: “Do at least six; do all ten if you can or have time.” A similar instruction can be given in tests. In this strategy, the compulsory part makes students, especially the non-proficient or non-confident ones feel that they are capable of coping with the task, and the optional part caters for the better students' internal need to respond to challenges. All this helps to make procedures more flexible and enables the students to adapt to different materials and tasks in order to make them maximally effective and useful for each of them.

(2) Since most textbooks are homogeneous—rigidly aimed at one kind of learner, with no options or flexibility, the teacher can try to mediate in the students a sense of competence, awareness of the way in which the learning experience will have wider relevance to them beyond the immediate time and place, and goal-setting, to make the homogeneous textbooks flexible so that they can attract students' interest and get more participation. A suitable case in point is that I once taught Unit 3 in College English (Book 3) whose title is *Why I teach*. Since this title may seem a little boring to most students, first I didn't go into the text directly, instead, I varied the topic and gave them such an optional question: “What profession do you like most? Why?”. in this way most students were activated to feel that they are capable of coping with the task and thus they including the low-level students, could present their opinions. Of course some students said they liked teaching and also gave their reasons. At this moment I asked them to compare their reasons with those stated in this text and thus led them to the topic of this unit. By providing such a question, I made the students understand that what was to be discussed would not only be limited within the present topic of teaching but also be extended to other profession they like to engage in after graduation, which would help to form their view of life, and that they should set realistic goals for themselves in learning this text, say, how to write similar articles. Thus this homogeneous material became a more flexible tool which can be used as an encouragement for the lower students to cope with the present task, as a purpose beyond now, and as a guide of how to write similar composition. Thus the students got more interested in and participated more actively in this material.

(3) Why students get bored in class? One reason may be that they are not interested in the topic. Another may be that the activities in class are not attractive. The teacher can probably deal with the problem by developing and encouraging the students' individuality, a sense of competence, challenge, and awareness of change. Sometimes the topic in a class can not reflect some students' uniqueness and they get bored. The teacher should not limit the whole class within this topic and should provide more relative topics for the students to let them select the one that will reflect their individuality. For instance, in dealing with the topic *Why I Teach* some students may feel that this topic is not their favorite one which may lead to their sense of incapability. So the teacher should provide some other relative topics such as *My Favorite Sports*, *My Ideal Career*; etc. to encourage students' individual choice and thus enhance their sense of competence and lay foundation for their interest. The teacher can also use the strategy of open-ended cues to mediate challenge in students to arouse their interest. In this strategy the teacher invites the class to respond to stimulus tasks or questions that have a range of possible acceptable answers rather than a single right solution. Some non-proficient or non-confident students have no interest in class, probably because they think that they are inferior to the better students and that they can not change to cope with the superiors, and thus they give up any interest in class. Therefore, the teacher should mediate the awareness of change in students to make them understand that human beings are constantly changing and they can change from the low to the high level. In this case, the teacher can present models who succeeded in this respect before the whole class to encourage the ones who lack such awareness to promote the interest in language learning.

(4) All that can arouse interest in language learning can raise students' motivation to engage in language task provided by the teacher. In addition, the teacher can mediate sharing in students to promote their participation in language task by optimizing the use of pair work or/and group work to encourage collaboration, which can make some problems better solved. The teacher can also promote students' participation in learning by mediating a sense of belonging to make students feel a part of a learning community and are not just lost in the crowd. In a more concrete sense, for example, the teacher should not only ask high-leveled students questions while isolating the lower ones, instead, should interact with them more often than not.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, teacher mediation theory has great significance in language teaching. When the concept of teacher intervention

is introduced to large classes, attempts can be made to personalize the curriculum and individual needs will definitely be satisfied, therefore helping language learners to move into their next ZPD, the primary goal of any education.

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(1) According to the calculation results, in the accident scenario of complete rupture of the ice methanol tank, the explosion overpressure in the nearest area of the office building is 0.15bar, impulse is  $60\text{N}\cdot\text{s}/\text{m}^2$ , and duration of overpressure is 8ms.

(2) can be reference for relevant construction failure criteria to assess the explosion overpressure damage of buildings, in order to ensure the building structure has enough antiknock strength and bearing capacity analysis, evaluation of structure, such as walls, doors and Windows, ventilation valve now bear ability of explosion load, according to the results of the analysis, the antiknock reinforced strengthening measures are taken.

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