

Mediative Functions among China's EFL Teachers in Interactive Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual framework that English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers can use to execute mediation in the language classroom, which draws on research works and articles related to effective procedures based on construction of knowledge during teacher-student and student-student interactions. In process of construction of learners' knowledge, the EFL teacher should play the role of mediator from the perspective of social constructivism. As such, this paper tries to elucidate EFL teachers' mediation functions which bring into play learners' potentials to the full in the case of the following four aspects: (a) the teacher as mediator interacting with learners, (b) the teacher as mediator facilitating student-student interactions, (c) the teacher as mediator developing interactive tasks or activities, and (d) the teacher as mediator generating interactive settings. It concludes with a discussion on some implications of mediation functions in EFL learning.

Keywords: English, Foreign language, China, Teacher, Mediation, Functions, Interactive, Classrooms

1. Introduction

Current education reforms imply that it seems necessary for teachers to implement the teacher role as mediator instead of that of disseminator in the language classroom since the value of adult mediation in children's learning can never be overstressed (Seng, Pou, and Tan, 2003). Teachers determine what education is and will be (Tseng, 1999) as schools are not only institutions where children acquire knowledge and skills, but also places in which they learn to socialize and collaborate with others, learn about the world of work, and get ready for responsible citizenship (Ashton-Warner, 1965; Cohen, 1984; Fisher, 2005). In order to adapt to this situation, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers confront many challenges and opportunities helping learners acquire comprehensive linguistic competence development through five aspects: language skills, language knowledge, attitudes, learning strategies, and cultural awareness (Ministry of Education of China [MOE], 2001, pp. 6-8). EFL teachers have to re-orient their roles from knowledge disseminators and instructors to those of mediators, organizers, partners, consultants, and facilitators to establish learner-centered English teaching (MOE, 2001). Teachers have to gear their teaching to improving students' learning independence (MOE, 2001). The shift in teachers' roles foregrounds the role of teacher as mediator of student learning (MOE, 2001) since classroom instruction is an effective process of knowledge construction under the circumstances of teacher-student and student-student interactions (Brown, 2001).

Mediation theory, located within the framework of social-constructivism, holds that all language users begin from birth to build relationships with people around them (Feuerstein, 1980, 1986, 1990; Vygotsky 1962; Williams & Burden, 2000). Through constant interactions with others, they learn to use language and make sense of the world (Vygotsky 1962, 1978; Williams & Burden 2000). Therefore, people around learners act as mediators who "may be the parent, facilitator, teacher, or some significant other who plays the intentional role of

explaining, emphasizing, interpreting, or extending the environment so that the learner builds up a meaningful internal model of the context or the world experienced” (Seng et al., 2003, p. 11). When it takes place in language classrooms, teachers ought to interact with their students and help them to apply the language themselves instead of only providing them with the language knowledge (Fisher, 2005; Williams & Burden, 2000).

2. Statement of the Problem

China’s new *National Standards of English Curriculum for Basic Education* (hereafter referred to as *Curriculum Standards*) was generated on the basis of multiple intelligences theory and social-constructivism (Fu, 2003; Gardner, 1993; MOE, 2001; Peng, 2005; Tang, 2009; Yang, 2005; Yu, 2005). Multiple intelligences theory holds that “learners individually possess diverse learning styles and intelligences” (Ediger, 2000, p. 35), and social-constructivism “provides various ways to access the students’ multiple intelligences” (Teague, 2000, p. 9). Now, the implementation of the new *Curriculum Standards* is in process throughout the country before another new circle of curriculum reforms for secondary education is made known. The development of the *Standards* seems indispensable as “the current situation of English education still does not meet needs of the economic and social development” (MOE, 2001, p. 2).

Implementing the *Curriculum Standards*, EFL teachers are requested to change “the notions and behaviors of learning for students and teaching for teachers” (National Curriculum, 2000, p. 18), which might lead to teachers’ role shift “from subject-centered, teacher-centered to student’s development-centered, and shift from one-way of knowledge to the all-round development including value and attitude” (National Curriculum, 2000, p. 7). Teachers need to care more about the teaching process rather than results, to help students know how to learn instead of only what to learn, and to help students establish creative learning instead of adaptive learning (MOE, 2001). Likewise, the *Curriculum Standards* contends that the teacher should no longer be authoritative but become the co-constructor of knowledge with learners (MOE, 2001). Under the new *Curriculum Standards* where the new educational beliefs of humanism and all students’ lifelong development are advocated, teachers are considered as the key to the reform (Tang, 2009). An appropriate comprehension of a teacher role directly ensures the full play of teachers’ professional quality so that the high-quality instruction can be achieved (Tang, 2009). Thus, the new *Curriculum Standards* tries to contribute to transferring not only students’ learning strategies but also teachers’ role (Fu, 2003).

However, in the current educational environment, numerous researchers and educators have articulated the teacher role shifts under the new *Curriculum Standards* theoretically rather than practically (e.g., Fu, 2003; Peng, 2005; Tang, 2009; Yang, 2005; Yu, 2005). To their thinking, teacher roles requested by the *Curriculum Standards* should be assessors, helpers, researchers, organizers, participants, tutors, facilitators, and prompters (Harmer, 2001; MOE, 2001). Ideally, this kind of shift in teachers’ roles foregrounds the role of mediator whose functions encompass those of the above teacher roles (Feuerstein, 1980; MOC, 2001; Sun, 2005). MOE can decide the goals, objectives, curricula, syllabi, and textbooks throughout China due to the high centralization of its education system (Liao, 2000, 2003, 2004; Yu, 2001), which plays an important part in stimulating EFL teachers to conform to prescribed teaching roles in the language class. Nonetheless, numerous studies have revealed that the spirit of the 2001 national *Curriculum Standards* for secondary schools has not really been put into effect and that EFL teachers’ elementary goal of preparing students for various public exams and role as knowledge-giver or transmitter through grammar-translation have remained unchanged (e.g., Le & He, 2007; Qiao, 2008; Wei, 2004; Zhang, 2007). It seems rooted in the deficiency of research regarding teachers’ roles (Leng, 1997; Ting, 1987). Since there exists a gap between the MOE requirements and EFL teachers’ classroom practices in terms of instructional roles, this study tries to contribute to the existing literature on teachers’ adherence to MOE requirements in EFL instruction.

3. Purpose of the Study

Classrooms are active places where teachers pose questions, provide feedback, administer rewards and punishments, praise, criticize, reply to students’ questions and requirements for assistance, and offer help when learners experience difficulties (Schunk, 2000). These interactions impact on students’ learning in that intervention affects cognition (Seng et al., 2003). Vygotsky (1962, 1978) asserts that higher mental processes are functions of mediated activities. The significance of human mediation in children’s learning can never be over-emphasized (Seng et al., 2003) since mediation views that “the quality of interaction between the individual and the environment via an intentional human being plays a pivotal role in the cognitive development of the individual” (Seng et al., 2003, p. 11). Accordingly, this paper is aimed at how the teacher can perform as the role of mediator in knowledge construction via four approaches: (a) the teacher as mediator interacting with learners,

(b) the teacher as mediator facilitating student-student interactions, (c) the teacher as mediator developing interactive tasks, and (d) the teacher as mediator generating interactive settings.

4. Teachers as Mediators Interacting with Students

Teacher-student interactions involve mutual communication between teachers and students. In process of interactions, instructors not only offer learners linguistic input and output to enhance their comprehensive linguistic competences in communication, but also help learners establish an active and open-minded mental attitude and get them ready for acceptance of language and its culture that they are learning (Brown, 2001).

Questioning in class is the primary form in teacher-student interactions, which is characterized by "IRF" between teachers and students: initiation, response and feedback (Ellis, 2004; Fisher, 2005). Effective questioning may arouse students' interest in study, stimulate their active thought and participation, and guarantee smooth implementation of interactions for the ultimate target of language acquisition. As the main question-asker, the teacher is supposed to take note of the following facets:

4.1 Raising More Referential Questions

Generally speaking, in EFL classrooms, teachers often pose both display and referential questions, with the former being typically closed and the latter open (Ellis, 2004). On the one hand, the asker of display questions holds possible answers beforehand, such as questions in light of linguistic knowledge and comprehension testifying learners' study progress. On the other hand, answers to referential questions are not ready-made but spontaneously flexible, such as questions on inference and analysis which attempt to assist students to acquire information. Teachers not only foster students' interest and thinking but also impel students to utilize more complex linguistic usages while they are responding to the teacher's referential questions. Therefore, teachers should increase the application of referential questions and lessen display ones to ensure more teacher-student interactions resembling authentic communication in life.

4.2 Ensuring Sufficient Time for Students' Pondering over Responses

Students' thinking is an indispensable part of their learning process, and giving them adequate thinking time is necessary for the best development of learning (Fisher, 2005). Teachers' wait time after asking a question will impact greatly on the quality of students' responses as students need some time to reflect on given questions prior to accurate and holistic responses (Wei, 2004). Students may provide more thoughtful responses as they are bound to feel less nervous and more self-confident if teachers increase the wait time for students' responses. In the long term, it is likely that more and more students are keen on participating in question-raising activities (Cheng, 2004).

4.3 Providing Positive Feedback to Improve Students' Performance

It seems crucial that teachers provide feedback to students in the language classroom (Cheng, 2004). Typically, feedback can be positive or negative (Brown, 2001). The former obviously surpasses the latter with respect to the significance of changing students' behaviors (Schunk, 2000). For one thing, positive feedback can make students realize that their responses are correct. For another, positive feedback can arouse students' interest and motivation in the learning procedure and most ideally strengthen their self-confidence (Schunk, 2000). Nevertheless, negative feedback or too much criticism will throw cold water on students' enthusiasm for study and dampen or even harm their self-worth (Schunk, 2000). As such, teachers might as well give students more praise but less criticism, in particular, when students err in the process of answering questions.

5. Teachers as Mediators Facilitating Student-Student Interactions

Collaborative learning among students is the fundamental trait of the interactive classroom (Wei, 2004). Not only does group work as a main interactive form provide students with more linguistic practices as well as rapport, but it also helps to cultivate students' sense of responsibility and learning autonomy (Schunk, 2000). The key to ensure smooth implementation of group work lies in whether teachers organize tasks effectively in the language classroom (Cheng, 2004). In general, pre-task instruction, while-task progress, termination of a task, and post-task feedback provision are viewed as four fundamental links in group work (Wei, 2004).

5.1 Pre-task Instruction

Teachers' instruction prior to an activity is essential since it would surely be a sheer waste of time should students fail to apprehend what they are required to do (Cheng, 2004). When proposing a task, the teacher should keep interactions with students by applying brief hints or simple questions within 30 seconds, which will lead them to the correct answer, but long contacts lose other students' attention (Schunk, 2000). The teacher exerts efforts to select easy tasks and then distributes them to students along with concise pre-activity interpretations.

Teachers can also show students simple demonstrations for them to imitate in advance if necessary. Furthermore, students should be notified of the termination time of an activity, and some reserved tasks ought to be prepared for students who accomplish the given task ahead of schedule (Cheng, 2004).

5.2 During-task Progress

In the process of group work discussion, the teacher mainly conducts round supervision and inspection to urge students' task completion (Cheng, 2004). In some events, the teacher may "mediate" students' task, offer them integrated favor and support, help them overcome constraints, and encourage them to employ the target language to the utmost (Ur, 2000). In particular, when some students are over enthusiastic with others being so passive as to keep silent, the teacher is required to make appropriate adjustments to guarantee the balance of students' participation in a task or activity (Wei, 2004).

5.3 Termination of a Task

Typically, the appropriate time of task termination will be planned before the outset of the activity so that the task can be accomplished within a given time. In principle, for best results, a task process is required to be terminated at once as students are about to feel fatigued because at this point, their learning efficiency is low (Cheng, 2004; Wei, 2004). Nevertheless, in most cases, language teachers overlook this issue by spoon-feeding students until they feel tired of learning rather than refer to it as an entertainment. In this regard, the teacher always shows much concern about students' learning capacity who tends to add some instructional contents to the class (Chen, 2005).

5.4 Post-task Feedback Provision

Teachers are supposed to provide students with feedback according to their performance in time of accomplishing a learning task. Teachers can give students feedback by means of various approaches, for example, giving correct solutions, listening to and then assessing students' suggestions, exchanging ideas, and displaying results from different groups (Cheng, 2004). Motivating feedback informs students that their answers are correct so that students in the future are on the way to being more competent and capable of potential learning (Schunk, 1989). Feedback indicating an error can also build efficacy if followed by corrective information on how students perform better (Schunk, 1989). Only in this way can the teacher appreciate students' painstaking efforts and achievements as well as offer them constructive suggestions for their improvement (Wei, 2004). Feedback regarding students' language can be incorporated with the feedback of task accomplishment or will be processed alone in the future (Brown, 2001).

6. Teachers as Mediators Developing Interactive Tasks

The learning task in the interactive teaching setting occurs at the interface of teacher-student and student-student interactions, and it is also the focus of instructional work (Brown, 2001). Consequently, in the teaching process, the teacher should manage to establish concrete interactive tasks and facilitate the implementation of these learning activities on the basis of curriculum standards and syllabuses (Ellis, 2004). The teacher is generally able to arouse students' interest in active participation by selecting, designing, organizing, and carrying out interactive tasks in order to develop students' linguistic competence and collaborative learning skills and strategies as well (Brown, 2001).

For this purpose, the teacher as mediator should protect learners' initiatives by taking into account the difficulty of a task, learners' anxiety factor, and task implications during the course of designing learners' tasks or activities (Williams & Burden, 2000).

6.1 Task Difficulty within Students' Reach

Now that students vary with their linguistic competences and cognitive levels, the teacher needs to take into full consideration students' differences in order to handle the degree of task difficulty and appropriateness prior to working out a task for students. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) implies that learners' achievements are mostly gained in the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1962). At the outset of the learning environment, the teacher might do most of work, after which the teacher and learners share responsibility (Schunk, 2000). With the development of learners' competence, the teacher gradually withdraws the scaffolding so that they can perform on their own (Campione et al., 1984). As Schunk (2000) contends, "the key is to ensure that the scaffolding keeps learners in the ZPD, which is altered as they develop capabilities" (p. 245). Students are confronted with challenges while learning within the bounds of the ZPD (Schunk, 2000).

Therefore, students' zone of current development (ZCD) should be separated from their ZPD so that their learning status quo and cognitive levels can be assessed dynamically. The teacher should restrict the extent of

task difficulty within students' reach of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1962). Simultaneously, teachers can help learners survive the ZPD to a higher level and achieve a greater independent capacity by providing guided scaffolding (Huong, 2003).

6.2 Taking Account of Learners' Anxiety Factors

Anxiety, in psychology, is conceptualized as a mental status of learners' worries and fears caused by the need to express oneself in a foreign language (Brown, 2001). Research shows that moderate anxiety can help students concentrate on their learning task completion (Brown, 2001). Nonetheless, excessive anxiety has an extremely negative effect on students' learning, which leads to dodging and even abandoning learning eventually. When teachers design tasks, learners' mental burden should be taken into consideration since tasks need to be comparatively challenging in order to arouse students' initiatives and learning desires (Wei, 2004). This kind of mental burden should be minimized so that students may utter their opinions and facilitate an interactive atmosphere among themselves or between the teacher and learners.

6.3 Developing Meaningful Tasks for Students

The ultimate purpose of language study is to learn to communicate in language, on the basis of which communicative abilities originate from linguistic application with meanings (Ur, 2000). First, a task must center on the expression of meanings rather than linguistic forms in order for students to realize the correlation between linguistic forms and functions as well as between language and its context (Cheng, 2004). Second, a task must relate to authentic communicative issues and matters that students experience currently or in the future, and this relativity tends to focus on learners' needs (Cheng, 2004). From this perspective, the design of a task has to be aimed at helping students to understand the personal meaning of this task and stimulate their intrinsic motivation of learning meaningfully (Cheng, 2004).

7. Teachers as Mediators Developing Interactive Settings

The setting is not only one of the formative factors in language instruction, but also a very significant arena to support and facilitate students' learning (Brown, 2001). With reference to social-constructivism, learning settings are places for students' unrestricted probing and autonomous learning. Teachers ought not to limit their functions only to providing tasks and facilitating interactions (Brown, 2001). They generate excellent learning settings suitable to interactions, where learners not only get teachers' support but also co-operate with each other (Brown, 2001). Ideally, learners manage to achieve their individual learning goals by employing a great diversity of tools and informative sources to fulfill a task (Cheng, 2004).

In view of teacher-student and student-student interactive effectiveness, the teacher as mediator is therefore expected to highlight the following aspects in relation to interactive surroundings.

7.1 Constructing Interactive Learning Settings between Learners and Multi-media

Interactions between learners and multi-media or the Internet pertain to the dimension of constructivist learning strategies, with the help of which learners can pose and answer questions and acquire immediate feedback and directions (Ellis, 2004). The multimedia web may provide learners with multi-dimensional aural-oral stimulus-response as well as colorful interactive interfaces. Learners' interest in study is then stimulated, their memory and cognition to knowledge are reinforced, and their goal of autonomous construction to knowledge is achieved. Internet sources are rich without temporal and spatial restrictions and can equip learners with favorable conditions for developing their individual and autonomous learning. Learners are able to acquire knowledge and skills from the study of materials and contents adaptable to their personalities (Wei, 2004). Meanwhile, students are capable of dominating their personal learning progress on the basis of the feedback from self-assessment testing systems on-line, which will help adjust their current learning strategies to better apply to their distinct personality facilitation (Brown, 2001; Wei, 2004).

7.2 Generating Excellent Classroom Contexts

A fine classroom setting contributes greatly to smooth progression of interactive activities (Brown, 2001). In this context, first, the teacher should conduct students' seating arrangements in the classroom so that it is beneficial to the implementation of interactive activities (Brown, 2001). Teachers can adopt different seat modules according to specific tasks or activities, such as groups of separate tables, reserving sufficient space between small groups and reducing mutual interference from groups (Brown, 2001; Wei, 2004). This module of separate tables adapts to small-group activities, in which the teacher plays the roles of facilitator, consultant, organizer as well as mediator who may maintain porous relations with learners and participate in a certain group (Ur, 2000). If the teacher meets a small-sized class, he/she may employ a "circle" or "horseshoe" table module to ensure that each student can see others for the purpose of convenient multi-interactions (Brown, 2001; Cheng, 2004). Such

modules apply to the whole class discussion, in which each student possesses the identical participation and thus enjoys discussing a task. Second, the teacher should choose the constitution of the study group utilizing pair-work and group-work models so that more students participate in a task (Brown, 2001; Cheng, 2004).

The two discussion models trigger students' independence and autonomy and increase their opportunities of communication in English. However, students have different levels of proficiency in English, so teachers are supposed to divide groups chiefly via "heterogeneity" and auxiliarily through "homogeneity" (Brown, 2001; Ellis, 2004). Students can benefit much from the heterogeneity group activity with the latter preparing different layers of tasks for distinct levels of students (Brown, 2001; Ellis, 2004). As such, students of different EFL proficiency levels can be promoted to develop their individual sense of achievement (Brown, 2001; Cheng, 2004).

7.3 Creating a Harmonious Affective Atmosphere

A happy, cheerful, democratic, harmonious, and lively atmosphere is bound to bring students a sense of security and enjoyment, which contributes to task progression and accomplishment for the following reasons (Fisher, 2005; Wei, 2004).

First, it seems critical to establish ample rapport between the teacher and students on the basis of mutual esteem and trust. The teacher and students should constitute a community, collaboratively constructing a learning atmosphere full of harmony, equality, and democracy (Wei, 2004).

Second, a proper approach to evaluation may be predetermined. Both excessive praise and criticism have a negative effect on students' academic development (Brown, 2001; Fisher, 2005). Effective praise is beneficial to students' acceptance of criticism (Fisher, 2005; Wei, 2004). In this regard, Brown (2001) concludes that effective praise from the teacher is subjected to seven principles as follows: (a) displaying sincere pleasure and concerns, (b) combining oral and non-oral praise, (c) elaborating on details of students' achievements, (d) being aimed at students' painstaking efforts, (e) owing students' success to their efforts, (f) cultivating students' intrinsic motivation, and (g) avoiding interrupting students' ongoing interactions.

Finally, it is up to the teacher to select a competitive or collaborative instructional style on the ground of specific situations in the EFL classroom. Competition-style interactions contribute to stimulation of students' initiatives and enthusiasm, but it easily brings about the failure of interactions on account of this competition (Brown, 2001). Thus, learners should be informed that their individual performance is significant to the fulfillment of a general task target in the competition-style interaction and that they must accomplish learning tasks with the aid of competition and collaboration (Feuerstein, 1980). Collaboration-style interactive learning helps generate co-operative relationships requiring collaborators to assist one another via interactions as learning goals are achieved by sharing and perfecting their individual perspectives.

8. Case Studies

8.1 Results

In case studies, generalization is not the ultimate target to seek, so there is no need of applying the representative sampling technique (Ary et al., 2006; Creswell, 2005; Liao, 2003; Stake, 1995). Purposeful sampling seems an ideal alternative as it is aimed at discovering, understanding, and obtaining the most effective insights by selecting a non-random sample (Merriam, 1998). Thus, in this paper, in order to identify the implementation of EFL teachers' mediative functions in interactive classrooms, five self-claimed teachers as mediators with respective pseudonyms--Huang, Jiang, Lv, Zeng as well as Zhang were sampled purposively for observations and interviewing.

Huang's role of mediator. Huang was experienced in managing the classroom and had the abilities to involve each of the students in the learning activities. She was encouraging and showed positive attitudes towards teaching her students. She acted as the role of mediator in many ways such as helping the students share and develop a sense of belonging and a strong belief in positive outcomes. She also gave more positive feedback rather than criticisms in terms of the students' performance. Even when she was correcting their errors, she could also draw on a more reasonable and acceptable manner. Huang designed the adequate tasks and activities for the students to participate in by allowing them opportunities for cooperative learning. Meantime, she showed much concern for the individual students and attempted to offer them constructive suggestions as well as realistic goals. As such, based on the favorable attitudes towards mediation, the correct cognition of mediation, and no situational constraints, Huang played a mediator better than the others of the five cases of teachers.

Insert Table 1 Here

Traditional instructional roles of Jiang, Lv, Zeng, and Zhang. Jiang, Lv, and Zeng held favorable attitudes towards mediation and possessed partial knowledge of mediation, but they were traditional instructors owing to the situational constraints related to the current education system. Zhang's misconception of mediation and situational constraints made her go far beyond the execution of the role of mediator though she had positive attitudes towards the role of mediator. In general, there was a considerable discrepancy between the four teachers' descriptions in the interviews and observed classroom practices. Zeng was the youngest of all the five teachers, but it seemed tough to come up with any highlight concerning the current educational reforms in his classroom practices as he instructed the students most conservatively and traditionally. Table 1 summarizes the traditional teacher roles that Jiang, Lv, Zeng, and Zhang performed as.

8.2 Situational Constraints

The research into the five case studies further verified that situational constraints influenced teachers' implementation of the role of mediator. As a mediator, Huang mediated her students best among the five self-claimed teachers in that she managed to conduct the vast majority of mediation functions, encountering the least serious constraints that she could overcome by drawing on her professional skills. However, Jiang, Lv, Zeng, and Zhang were constrained by the respective situational factors and failed to implement the role of mediator. The situational constraints were associated with the current education system, the students, and the teachers themselves as shown in Table 2. In particular, the current EFL education system impacted most seriously on the execution of the mediator role.

Insert Table 2 Here

9. Implications

Seng et al. (2003) contend, "MLE [mediated learning experience] and its underpinning philosophy will be an important foundation for understanding how we can reform education and pedagogy in this twenty-first-century world" (p. 18). However, in the course of the implementation of mediative instruction, teachers have already encountered numerous situational constraints associated with the current education system, students, and teachers themselves, among which constraints related to the education system are the most serious (Cheng, 2010). Therefore, implications are offered in the following account for the English language education system regarding the reduction of the large-sized class and the innovation of grammar-based examinations (Cheng, 2010).

9.1 Reducing the Large Class Size

The large-sized class is one of the most serious constraints in the implementation of the role of mediator since the small size class can provide students with sufficient opportunities to practice their spoken skills in the ways that they may have failed in more crowded classrooms (Cheng, 2010; Yang, 2006). Ng and Tang (1997) also assert that "China is not only the country with the largest population, but also has the greatest number of English learners in the world" (p. 66). China is confronted with a big problem with the shortage of EFL teachers as around two-thirds of them do not adapt to the current curriculum (Education in China, 2005). So the ratio of teachers to students seems extremely high in China, which goes against the normal principles of English language education since each class has at least 50 students on the average (Huang & Xu, 1999; Ye, 2007). These conditions tend to continue to be so and in turn restrict opportunities for students' oral English practice and enhancement of conversational skills in the language classroom (Tang & Absalom, 2000, cited in Yang, 2006). As Li (2004) argues below,

It is very difficult for a teacher to give appropriate timely guidance to individuals or groups in such large classes. Sometimes, teachers have to stop whole class discussions and ask the rest of the students who still want to speak to discuss their ideas after class or write down their comments in their homework. (p. 227)

Therefore, the teacher as mediator should be able to overcome situational constraints. Shih (1999, cited in Liao, 2003) suggests as follows for the purpose of providing a solution to the situational problem of a big class:

How to deal with large classes: teachers can rearrange the desks and chairs to leave room for various pair or group activities. Limit teachers talking time and let students participate in various communicative activities like information gap, role-play, and games. (p. 190)

As well, Liao (2003) believes that "a large class size is generally considered problematic in terms of using pair/group work because a teacher has a lot of difficulty in managing students and organizing teaching activities" (pp. 170-171). With reference to the findings of Liao (2003) and Cheng (2010), since the vast majority of EFL teachers in China teach large classes with 70 students on average, they are advised to address the kind of problem by (a) making students able to carry out pair and group work activities in the front of the classroom in different flexible ways, (b) conducting the lesson skillfully, (c) managing the classroom effectively, (d) arousing

the participating enthusiasm of the whole class, and (e) applying rich facial expressions and body language. All of these have already made it possible for students to co-operate with the teacher actively and on their own initiative.

9.2 Reforming Examination and Assessment System

The saying that “what you test is what you get” seems true in China since secondary school EFL teachers regard students’ streaming examination of English after junior high school (grade 9) and the national matriculation English test (NMET) after senior high level (grade 12) as the “baton” to instruction (Cheng, 2010; Li, 2004). The college/university entrance exam and the streaming exam restrict students’ English learning to the memory of discrete-point grammatical principles (National Curriculum, 2000; Tseng, 1999; Yang, 2003; Zhou, 2003). Besides, written examination is the only measure to assess students’ school achievement (Li, 2004). Apparently, there seems to be a discrepancy between the general curriculum objective shift “from basic education for higher learning to quality education for all” (National Curriculum, 2000, p. 22) and the current exam system featured by the notion that “entrance examinations to the secondary level and higher education are mainly based on summative knowledge and memory” (p. 19). Most ideally, the main reason for this phenomenon might be illustrated by Hedge’s words:

The examination system, for example, is usually a heavily constraining factor, especially where examinations are gatekeepers to higher education or good employment prospects. It would be a matter of high risk for a teacher not to train students for these. (2002, pp. 25-26)

Mediation is concerning dynamic assessment (DA), whose “objective is to change the individual’s functioning within the test context and to consider the observed changes as indicators of future changes that may be expected if proper teaching is given” (Seng et al. 2003, pp. 175-176). In addition, “the emphasis in DA is on unique and qualitative aspects of the child’s cognitive behavior”, and “the questions asked in DA are ‘how’ and ‘why’ rather than ‘what’ and ‘how much’” (p. 176). In contrast, standardized (static) tests emphasize static circumstances for all examined learners because the goal is to compare a student with their classmates, and this kind of test has no space for interposition by the examiner or questions from examinees (Seng et al. 2003). Seng et al. (2003) firmly believe that “persons who have been examined with dynamic methods of assessment are potentially capable of higher levels of performance, learning, and logical thinking than they are currently exhibiting” (para. 3 of Section *Foreword*).

In the last decade, critics have claimed that the existing exam system is in no position to “produce the kind of adaptable independent graduates who are able to apply their knowledge to new situations in a modern, fast-changing economy and society” (Education in China, 2005, p. 16). A reform of the exam system makes a narrowing impact on the curriculum because the examinations center on only the certain aspects of certain subjects (Education in China, 2005). As such, the shift of dynamic assessment from standardized testing is expected to make due contributions to the current curriculum orientations. Hopefully, the multi-dimensional dynamic assessment system is being developed little by little. As *National Curriculum* (2000) puts it,

The examination of more choices and different levels of higher education may be introduced. A new policy of allowing provinces or universities to organize their college entrance examinations on the total or some subjects may be approved. There are also some policies available, such as encouraging senior secondary schools to recommend well-developed students to directly enter colleges/universities without taking an entrance examination. (p. 23)

10. Conclusion

To sum up, mediation theory provides a broad stage for EFL teachers and learners in that through constant interactions with the teacher as mediator, students learn to use language and make sense of the world (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Williams & Burden, 2000). The teacher should not only provide students with knowledge about the language but also interact with learners and help them use the language by themselves (Fisher, 2005; Williams & Burden, 2000). As Feuerstein and Feuerstein (1994) assert, mediation-based learner-centered language teaching highlights students’ interactions and negotiation and considers language as a tool for creating social relations among students by working in pairs/groups. So the teacher in this context is to “mediate” learning (Feuerstein, 1980). Based on the thorough theoretical consideration on the EFL teaching role as a mediator and its application, this study attempts to conclude that the teacher role of mediator is theoretically acceptable and practically feasible, and it is also high time that EFL teachers re-oriented their instructional roles to adapt to the development of the society (Cheng, 2010; Sun, 2005).

From the perspective of the facilitation of learners' education quality, this study seems important since most Chinese students are unable to express themselves orally and literally in proper English (Li, 2004; Liao, 2000; Ye, 2007). Rather, they are exposed to limited linguistic knowledge attaching importance to grammatical forms of language only (Ting, 1987). EFL teachers focus on students' results in examinations only and teach what is to be tested traditionally (Kang & Wang, 2003; Li, 1996; Yang, 2003; Zhou, 2003). So students are fed up with EFL teachers' monotonous instruction and the teacher-centered approach with endless grammatical exercises (MOE, 2001). Nevertheless, most successful foreign language teaching programs should "involve the whole learner in the experience of language as a network of relations between people, things, and events" (Savignon, 1987, p. 236, cited in Chen, 2005, p. 3). Mediation theory probably provides learners with more opportunities to practice English systematically and render EFL learning to be more effective (Williams & Burden, 2000). In this event, teacher roles and their potential difficulties in the teaching procedure seem to be of interest to the current educational setting, and the role of teacher as mediator should take priority in language teaching (Feuerstein, 1990; Feuerstein & Feuerstein, 1991).

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Table 1. Traditional Roles of Jiang, Lv, Zeng, and Zhang

Teacher	Teacher Roles	Main Characteristics
Jiang	1) A teacher-centered instructor applying Chinese as a medium of instruction	1) Jiang tried to control the whole class and make her students “submissive” all the time so that most of them had no opportunities to regulate their learning. She failed to speak English fluently and had to employ Chinese as the medium of instruction.
	2) A grammar-translation-based spoon-feeder	2) Jiang was skilled at presenting the language points in the form of grammar-translation, but the students could only write and read English through grammar-translation sacrificing their listening and speaking.
Lv	1) A traditional grammar-translator	1) Lv focused teaching on the interpretations of grammatical rules. Doing grammatical exercises and reciting grammatical principles were the students’ main tasks in the class.
	2) The role of director	2) Lv tried to reform the traditional teaching method by directing some of the students to be “little teachers”, who, however, were unqualified and unable to meet their peers’ needs.
	3) An inflexible bilingual speaker	3) The Chinese language was Lv’s medium of instruction, and she spoke a bit of classroom English using the same tone, pace, and expressions.
Zeng	1) A spoon-feeder	1) Zeng controlled the class and eagerly gave the students answers before their attempts. The students were entirely passive knowledge-receivers.
	2) A grammar-based knowledge-transmitter	2) What Zeng taught were the grammar exercises as Zeng thought that the students could acquire EFL if he transmitted grammar to them.
	3) A non-standard bilingual speaker	3) Zeng’s poor pronunciation in Chinese and English was likely to be one of the reasons for his not implementing the role of mediator.
Zhang	1) An ineffective facilitator	1) Zhang intended to be the center of the class and control all the activities in order to facilitate the completion of the teaching contents.
	2) An experienced manipulator	2) Zhang relied on her long-term teaching experience to instruct her students traditionally in a skilled manner.
	3) A controller	3) Zhang took a mediator for a medium between students and knowledge.

Table 2. Situational Constraints of Jiang, Lv, Zeng, and Zhang

Situational Constraint	Teacher(s) (Who?)
Grammar-based examinations	Jiang, Lv, Zeng, and Zhang
The large-sized class	Jiang, Lv, Zeng, and Zhang
Students’ low proficiency in English	Jiang and Zeng
Students’ passive learning attitudes	Jiang and Lv
Students’ resistance to class participation	Jiang
The teacher’s lack of oral proficiency in English	Lv and Zeng
The teacher’s lack of knowledge of the role of mediation	Zeng
The teacher’s lack of cultural knowledge	Zhang
The teacher’s lack of training as the role of mediator	Lv