Sociocultural context of mediation in intercultural communication in the educational process of a higher education institution

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*Abstract: **The aim** of the article is to highlight the sociocultural role of mediation in intercultural communication in the educational process of a modern higher education institution. **Methods.** The study utilized a number of theoretical methods, including analysis, synthesis and generalization, which provided a systematic elaboration of scholarly theories and provisions related to the definition of mediation, its typology and its sociocultural role. **Results.** Mediation in intercultural communication in the educational environment of a higher education institution is considered as a complex, multidimensional multidisciplinary phenomenon that combines legal, socio-cultural, cognitive and pedagogical aspects. The modern understanding of mediation is characterized, which largely goes beyond traditional models of alternative conflict resolution and interprets mediation, as a process of mutual understanding, cooperation, coherence of meanings and coordination and*

interpretation of culturally conditioned content. It is emphasized that the sociocultural context plays a decisive role in mediation, since it is cultural differences that shape expectations, behavioral patterns, communicative strategies, and ways of interpreting information. In a multicultural educational environment, mediation becomes not only a tool for resolving conflicts, but also a means of supporting diversity, building constructive cultural dialogue, forming tolerance, and developing critical thinking. The multidimensionality of the mediation phenomenon is reflected in the four types outlined – linguistic, cultural, social, and pedagogical. They do not exist in isolation, but interact and complement each other in real communicative situations. **Conclusions**. *Mediation serves as a significant tool for forming an inclusive, open, and humanistically oriented educational environment. It provides an opportunity not only to ensure effective interaction between representatives of different cultures, but also to stimulate the development of key competencies of the XXIst century – intercultural competence, social responsibility, critical reflection, communicative flexibility, and cultural sensitivity.*

Keywords: *mediation, intercultural competence, intercultural interaction, critical thinking, foreign language training, sociocultural context of higher education.*

Соціокультурний контекст медіації в міжкультурній комунікації в освітньому процесі закладу вищого вищої освіти

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Анотація: ***Метою*** *статті є висвітлення соціокультурної ролі медіації в міжкультурній комунікації в освітньому процесі сучасного закладу вищої освіти.* ***Методи.*** *У дослідженні використано низку теоретичних методів, з-поміж яких аналіз, синтез та узагальнення, що забезпечили системне опрацювання наукових теорій і положень, пов'язаних з визначенням медіації, її типологією та її соціокультурною роллю.* ***Результати.*** *Розглянуто медіацію в міжкультурній комунікації освітнього середовища закладу вищої освіти як складний, багатовимірний мультидисциплінарний феномен, який поєднує правові, соціокультурні, когнітивні та педагогічні аспекти. Схарактеризовано сучасне розуміння медіації, яке значною мірою виходить за межі традиційних моделей альтернативного врегулювання конфліктів і тлумачить медіацію як процес взаєморозуміння, співпраці, когерентності смислів та узгодження й інтерпретації культурно зумовленого змісту. Наголошено, що соціокультурний контекст відіграє визначальну роль у медіації, оскільки саме культурні відмінності формують очікування, моделі поведінки, комунікативні стратегії та способи інтерпретації інформації. У мультикультурному освітньому середовищі медіація стає не лише інструментом усунення конфліктів, а й засобом підтримки різноманіття, побудови конструктивного культурного діалогу, формування толерантності та розвитку критичного мислення. Багатовимірність феномену медіації відображена в окреслених чотирьох її типах – лінгвістичному, культурному, соціальному та педагогічному. Вони не існують ізольовано, а взаємодіють і взаємодоповнюють одне одного у реальних комунікативних ситуаціях.* ***Висновки.*** *Медіація слугує значущим інструментом формування інклюзивного, відкритого та гуманістично орієнтованого освітнього середовища. Вона надає можливість не лише забезпечити ефективну взаємодію між представниками різних культур, а й стимулювати розвиток ключових компетентностей XXI століття – міжкультурної компетентності,*

соціальної відповідальності, критичної рефлексії, комунікативної гнучкості та культурної чутливості.

Ключові слова: *медіація, міжкультурна компетентність, міжкультурна взаємодія, критичне мислення, іншомовна підготовка, соціокультурний контекст вищої освіти.*

Introduction. In the era of intensive globalization, accompanied by active migration processes, the spread of international educational programs and an increase in the share of foreign students in higher education institutions, intercultural communication is becoming a key element of successful interaction of all participants in the educational process. At the same time, there is a growing need to form the ability to engage in constructive dialogue between representatives of different cultural communities, which involves not only mastering foreign languages, but also understanding sociocultural norms, values, behavioral patterns and communicative strategies of other cultures. Besides, cultural differences create risks of misunderstandings, conflicts and communication barriers. In this context, mediation is a key tool that promotes effective dialogue and mutual understanding [1; 2; 3]. In this context, mediation appears as one of the most effective tools for ensuring harmonious interaction, as it is aimed at creating conditions for understanding, mitigating cultural barriers and finding joint solutions in situations of misunderstanding or conflict.

Mediation in intercultural communication is not limited only to the function of resolving disputes. It acts as a mediating mechanism that facilitates the interpretation of cultural codes, meanings, and communicative intentions of parties belonging to different sociocultural contexts. Its effectiveness is largely determined by the extent to which the mediator is able to take into account cultural differences, adapt strategies for facilitating dialogue, and create a space for an equal exchange of ideas. This leads to rethinking the goals, content and technologies of higher education. To be a member of the modern global world, it is necessary to have a multicultural education, familiarity

with the "other", the skill of intercultural interaction, overcoming internal cultural contradictions and own limitations [4]. Cultural mediation, in turn, is designed to become a mediator between a person and cultural phenomena. That is why research into the sociocultural context of mediation is important for understanding how cultural specifics influence the perception of information, communicative styles, argumentation schemes, and expectations of communicators.

The educational environment of a higher education institution functions as a space of intense sociocultural interaction, which makes it particularly sensitive to manifestations of cultural diversity. As a result, there is a need to implement innovative pedagogical approaches and technologies that contribute to the development of students' intercultural competence, the formation of tolerance, empathy, critical thinking, and the ability to peacefully resolve conflicts. Mediation as a pedagogically structured process can become an effective tool for integrating such skills, because it allows modeling real situations of intercultural interaction, promotes awareness of the cultural characteristics of communication partners and forms the ability to achieve understanding in conditions of cultural diversity.

Therefore, sociocultural dimension of mediation in an educational context requires a comprehensive theoretical understanding, which involves the analysis of social, cultural, psychological and pedagogical factors that influence the communication process. The study of this phenomenon makes it possible to determine the optimal conditions for creating an inclusive educational environment in which each participant can realize their cultural potential, feel safe and take an active part in the educational process.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Research focused on the development of mediation in higher educational settings forms a multifaceted theoretical framework that integrates ideas from dialogic pedagogy, sociocultural theory, intercultural competence, and negotiation practices. These approaches complement each other, providing a comprehensive understanding of how higher

education institutions can function as sociocultural environment for mediation and constructive communication.

The findings of R. Alexander [5] and N. Mercer and S. Hodgkinson [6] emphasize the key role of classroom dialogue in the processes of cognition, and shared meaning-making. Dialogue is viewed as a culture of interaction that presupposes openness, argumentation, and mutual recognition [6]. These studies rely primarily on qualitative methods for analyzing classroom talk, which allows identifying the mechanisms by which dialogic communication influences students' cognitive development. At the same time, the high dependence of conclusions on a specific cultural context and the limited scalability of these methods are significant limitations for their application in educational programs.

An important addition to the dialogical tradition is research done by J. King and R. Chetty on code-switching in multilingual classrooms [7]. They demonstrate that switching languages is not a violation of the norm, but rather an interaction strategy that expands students' communicative resources. This is essential for understanding the mechanisms of linguistic mediation in culturally diverse environment of modern higher education institutions.

The sociocultural theory of learning developed by J. Lantolf [8] creates an important conceptual bridge between dialogue, cultural mediation, and the development of linguistic competence. This paradigm views learning as a process of collaborative action, in which mediation – both linguistic and cognitive – serves as the central mechanism of development. The sociocultural approach substantiates the importance of specially organized forms of facilitation and mediation, but remains primarily theoretical and requires methodological translation for application in educational programs.

M. Byram [9; 10], who developed the concept of intercultural communicative competence, has made a significant contribution to understanding the role of mediation in education. The scholar articulates the idea of cultivating "intercultural citizens"

capable of understanding and critically reflecting on cultural differences. In turn, J. Corbett [11] notes that although "mediation" has become very important in intercultural language education, many teachers do not fully understand what exactly is meant by this term.

Thes concepts of mediation have been normatively developed in the updated Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) [12], where mediation is defined as an independent linguistic activity that includes interpretation, reformulation, and facilitation of mutual understanding between communicants. Thus, mediation is institutionally enshrined not only as a communicative skill but also as a pedagogical goal and tool as well.

The work of D. Coste and M. Cavalli [13] expands on the aforementioned ideas, viewing educational institution as a space of "otherness" and mobility, where the mediational functions of the educational environment facilitate the integration of different cultural and linguistic groups. An important practice-oriented element here is the use of intercultural development assessment instruments, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) – widely utilized and effective cross-culturally valid assessment for forming cultural competence [13].

The studies by J. Brett [2], and R. Lewicki, D. Saunders, D. Barry [15] offer clear models for analyzing the parties interests, evaluating alternatives, and developing negotiation strategies. Despite their initial focus on business and diplomatic contexts, many principles can be adapted to the educational sphere. However, such models require significant adaptations for youth audience, as well as ethical rethinking, since some negotiation techniques may be incompatible with educational goals. The most comprehensive example of adapting negotiation approaches to the educational environment is presented by D. Johnson and R. Johnson [16]. Their peacemaking education model combines elements of negotiation, mediation, and social-emotional skills training, offering a structured program for training mediators for educational

sphere. However, the empirical basis for such programs is characterized by variable research quality and a limited number of long-term evaluations of their effectiveness.

Identification of previously unresolved parts of the general problem. By combining the principles of dialogic pedagogy, formation of intercultural competence, and negotiation models, the scholarly literature analyzed above shows that mediation in educational settings is interdisciplinary in nature. Dialogical approaches reveal the mechanisms of educational communication, sociocultural theory explains the mediation process, the CEFR intercultural framework provides normative coherence to the concept of mediation in higher education institutions, and negotiation models provide procedural clarity for the process of mediation.

However, significant gaps remain: a lack of empirical research combining qualitative and quantitative methods; the need to adapt negotiation techniques for educational practice; and the need for a deeper theoretical understanding of the sociocultural context of mediation, and, based on this, research into the sustainability of students' mediation skills.

Formulation of the objectives of article (setting the task). The purpose of the article is to highlight the sociocultural role of mediation in intercultural communication in the educational process of a modern higher education institution. The set goal presupposes the realization of the following objectives: 1) to study the essence of the concept "mediation"; 2) to characterize the typology of mediation taken into account its multidisciplinary nature; 3) to consider mediation in the intercultural educational environment of a modern higher education institution as an effective tool for overcoming communication barriers.

Presentation of the main research material. Initially, mediation was formed as a practice of conflict resolution in the legal and social spheres in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s, when there was a need for alternative dispute resolution methods (ADR) [17]. Gradually, researchers noticed that mediation approaches can be useful

not only in legal, but also in interpersonal communication, including in the educational environment.

The modern university educational environment as a space of intercultural interaction is characterized by the multidimensionality of sociocultural factors that influence the process of communication between students of different cultures. This environment includes different levels of cultural dynamics – from individual values and communicative styles to collective norms of academic behavior. Mediation in such an environment involves not only the elimination of conflicts, but also the creation of conditions for constructive cultural dialogue, in which the parties recognize and legitimize differences in cultural positions [14]. Mediation in the context of intercultural communication is considered as a purposeful process of facilitating mutual understanding between participants who belong to different cultural communities and have different systems of symbols, codes, social norms and communicative strategies. Unlike classical models of conflict mediation, communicative mediation is aimed at reducing misunderstandings and promoting adaptation to cultural diversity [15; 18].

Culture in conjunction with other disciplines can become the key to resolving individual internal and external contradictions. Mediation as a function of culture actualizes the deep tasks of culture itself. In the process of life, a person forms his own identity, learns cultural norms, values necessary for integration into society. In this case, mediation practices are designed to activate social and cultural ties, interact with target social groups, and promote the development of both formal and non-formal education. Mediation is designed to perform an intermediate function, to help establish contact between a person and a cultural phenomenon, to establish a connection with cultural memory, to find a reference point in the flow of avalanche-like information, to promote the development of cultural identity and to help eliminate cultural isolation [19].

The CEFR of 2001 first focused on mediation, along with interaction, as a communicative language activity and recognized the unique role of the social dimension in communication [12]. Interaction is not simply the sum of reception and production, but introduces a new factor: the co-construction of meaning. Mediation takes this aspect, that is, the awareness of the dynamic nature of meaning-making, to another level. In fact, it integrates and goes further than co-construction of meaning, emphasizing the constant connection between the social and individual dimensions in language use and language learning. Although the 2001 CEFR does not fully develop the concept of mediation, it focuses on two key concepts: the co-construction of meaning in interaction and the constant movement between the individual and the social planes in language learning, mainly through the concept of the learner as a social agent. Furthermore, the emphasis on the mediator as an intermediary between interlocutors underlines the social perspective of the [8]. Thus, although not explicitly stated, the descriptive structure of the CEFR assigns mediation a fundamental role in an action-oriented approach, similar to the role attributed to it by various researchers in the analysis of the language learning process.

The CEFR describes mediation as certain actions of those who help when, for some reason, there is a communication gap which needs to be flled, and the same (or similar) content is conveyed using different language (not necessarily just one different language), in order to bridge that gap. The most obvious example of such a gap is when two speakers who do not know each other's language require a third language, or a translator, to mediate their message. The CEFR pays particular attention to this cross-linguistic mediation – but in informal settings, as is most likely to happen in real life, rather than the formal job of a translator or interpreter. Communication gaps can also exist between varieties of a language (for example, different dialects) or between registers of language (such as the differences between formal and informal language, and all shades in between) [12]. Furthermore, mediation needs to happen when communication gaps are caused by social or cultural differences, or through a

breakdown in communication caused by a disagreement. Mediation can also occur between the skills needed in language input and output: for example in a lecture, a student might listen to a lecturer speaking, write down notes to be read later. In this example, the same content is transferred across all four skills. The language that is used each time may be different, relevant to the context, but the ideas and content remain more or less the same. The notion of integrated skills comes into mediation.

Mediation therefore covers the emotional, cognitive, social and cultural intelligence we need to use language in many different real-world contexts, and to help our understanding further, the CEFR sets out a number of different can do descriptors, at the different levels from Pre-A1 up to C2. It categorises the descriptors into different scales. In many of the scales, the descriptors can be used to talk about a language activity happening within one language (English, for example) or across more than one language (English to Spanish, for example). The CEFR also describes different domains for mediation – personal, public, occupational and academic – which can provide more ideas for activities [12].

The concept of mediation is called a "nomadic notion" [20, p. 223], since it covers a wide range of dimensions and connotations and is used differently in different spheres of human activity – from diplomatic and commercial spheres to the pedagogical field in general (where mediation involves constructive interaction and the creation of a trusting atmosphere between all participants in the educational process) and foreign language learning in particular. The very concept of "mediation" originates in philosophy, namely in German idealism and dialectical materialism: for Hegel, thought was a mediating process, an abstract operation through which knowledge was acquired [21, p.13].

The above-mentioned philosophical basis of the concept of mediation served as the basis for researchers to distinguish two of its key types – cognitive mediation and relational mediation or mediation in relationships (relational mediation) [13, p. 28]. The first of the two involves a number of cognitive operations, while the second covers

the management of interpersonal interaction and even conflicts. According to scholars, the boundary between these two types of mediation is rather vague – relational and cognitive mediation are often, if not usually, combined, not excluding each other [13].

Considering the multifaceted nature of the multidisciplinary phenomenon of mediation and the previous scientific achievements in this field in general, four types of mediation are distinguished: linguistic, cultural, social, and pedagogical [21]. Linguistic mediation includes (but is not limited to) an interlingual dimension, particularly in the sense of knowing how to translate and interpret, more or less formally, or transform one type of text into another. However, this type of mediation also includes an intralingual dimension, which can be in the target language (e.g., summarizing an L2 text in L2) or in the source language, including the native language. Summarizing an L1 text in L1 is also an act of mediation, probably with an emphasis on linguistic expression as much as on the transmission of information. Another form of linguistic mediation is the flexible use of different languages, for example in a multilingual educational environment. J. King and R. Chetty [7] talk about explaining, summarizing, clarifying, and expanding a text from one language into another language more familiar to students, while A. Creese and A. Blackledge [22] and G. Lewis, B. Jones and C. Baker [23] point to the importance of managing the shared communication or narration of a text in different languages in a multilingual classroom, engaging all students.

The process of linguistic mediation, which attempts to facilitate understanding, is also a process of cultural mediation. It involves working at a level of sophistication sufficient to preserve the integrity of the source and to understand the essence of the intended meaning. Moving from one language to another necessarily involves moving from one culture to another or from some cultures to other cultures [10]. This points to mediation as the crux of cultural awareness. The latter is applied within a language, as well as between languages and cultures, taking into account idiolects, sociolects and the connections between styles and text genres. This also applies to the correlation of

different subcultures: social and professional within the general culture of society. This expansion of the concept of mediation naturally leads us to a third type: social mediation.

The social aspect of mediation concerns the language user, who plays the role of a mediator and interacts with different interlocutors. In this context, mediation involves facilitating communication itself and/or (re)formulating the text, (re)constructing the meaning of the message. After all, difficulties in understanding may not be due to language; it may well be a consequence of a lack of knowledge or experience, insufficient knowledge of a particular area. And it is this process of (re)constructing meaning that ensures the development of the individual.

Within the framework of social mediation, three complementary concepts are distinguished: 1) mediation as a zone for uniting new partners [24]; 2) creating a "third envoronment" [25]; 3) critical cultural awareness (the ability to critically and based on clear criteria evaluate perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries) [9, p. 53]. The latter of these concepts leads to the promotion of critical thinking, the ability to question and conceptualize, which is a traditional goal of general education, which brings us to the next type of mediation, pedagogical mediation.

In general, the educational process is a form of mediation. Although countries and languages differ greatly in their pedagogical cultures, they usually represent some combination of shared learning [5; 6]. Teachers try to transfer knowledge, experience and, above all, the ability to think critically on their own – which together constitute cognitive mediation. However, much of the time in the classroom is spent on establishing relationships, organizing learning activities, integrating certain individuals, keeping students on task, preventing problems, solving problems, etc. In this regard, pedagogical mediation includes: facilitating access to knowledge; encouraging others to develop their thinking (cognitive mediation); co-constructing meaning as a member of a group (collaboration as cognitive mediation); and creating

the conditions for all of the above by organizing and controlling the space for creativity (relational mediation).

Conclusions. Summarizing the results of the study, it can be stated that mediation in intercultural communication in the educational environment of a higher education institution is a complex, multidimensional and integrated phenomenon that combines legal, social, cultural, cognitive and pedagogical aspects. Its modern interpretation largely goes beyond traditional models of alternative conflict resolution and considers mediation as a process of mutual understanding, cooperation, coherence of meanings and coordination of culturally conditioned contents.

An analysis of the evolution of the concept of mediation – from its formation in the legal sphere of the USA to its interpretation within the framework of the CEFR – shows that mediation has become a key component of communicative activity, which encompasses not only linguistic mediation, but also social and cultural interpretation of contents. The CEFR emphasizes the centrality of the social dimension in the process of creating meaning and defines the mediator as an active social agent capable of overcoming communicative gaps of various types, caused by linguistic, cultural, social or cognitive factors. Thus, mediation appears as a mechanism for integrating the individual and sociocultural dimensions of communication.

Furthermore, the sociocultural context plays a decisive role in mediation, since it is cultural differences that shape expectations, behavioral patterns, communicative strategies and ways of interpreting information. In a multicultural educational environment, mediation becomes not only a tool for resolving conflicts, but also a means of supporting diversity, building constructive cultural dialogue, forming tolerance and developing critical thinking. Mediation practices contribute to a stronger integration of students into the educational process, the development of their cultural identity, and an increase in the level of emotional, social and cultural competencies.

The multidimensionality of the mediation phenomenon is reflected in the four types – linguistic, cultural, social and pedagogical. They do not exist in isolation, but

interact and complement each other in real communicative situations. Linguistic mediation is inseparable from cultural; social – from critical cultural awareness; pedagogical – from cognitive and relational aspects of the formation of interpersonal interaction. It is thanks to such integration that mediation contributes to the comprehensive development of the individual in a multicultural educational environment.

Therefore, mediation in intercultural communication is a significant tool for the formation of an inclusive, open and humanistically oriented educational environment. It provides an opportunity not only to ensure effective interaction between representatives of different cultures, but also to stimulate the development of key competencies of the XXIst century – social responsibility, critical reflection, communicative flexibility and cultural sensitivity.

The scope for further research in this sphere can be aimed at developing specific pedagogical technologies and methods for integrating mediation into curricula, as well as at empirical research into the effectiveness of mediation practices in the real conditions of a multicultural university environment.

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