



SOFT SKILLS/LIFE SKILLS AND ACADEMIC COMPETENCES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Abstract

In this paper, we will explore the importance of developing life skills in the domain of teaching and learning languages. If we consider the information and guidelines outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) regarding language proficiency, we can observe that mediation plays a significant and decisive role in the learning process, as highlighted by Fratter and Fratter (2020). The descriptors of mediation require both learners and teachers to possess specific abilities, skills, and competencies, which we can categorize as 'life skills' (WHO, 1997). Life skills and academic competencies are closely interconnected; for example, the ability to work in groups or solve problems through language use. In this paper, following an overview of the life skills outlined in the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference, we will illustrate some best practices for developing life skills in the academic context for language learning.

Keywords

life skills, language learning and teaching, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) Companion Volume

Introduction

The acquisition of a foreign/second language is a lifelong process that unfolds very slowly and requires learners to develop not only knowledge, skills, and cognitive strategies but also presupposes that everyone is willing to open to others, engage personally, and reveal aspects of their own personality. This learning/teaching process is quite delicate, encompassing interpersonal skills and requiring the knowledge of appropriate techniques for managing relationships and communication within a group.

According to the sociocultural constructivist approach (Jonassen 1994; Jonassen 1999; Jonassen, Rohrer-Murphy 1999, Varisco 2002), learning is a process grounded in dialogue, interaction, and collaboration among learners. It is through collaborative and negotiated processes mediated by dialogue that pre-existing knowledge is reshaped and restructured. This is an active process wherein the learner, in relation to the world, constructs meaning through direct and active experience rather than through the passive acceptance of knowledge and content. Knowledge construction is not exclusively a mental process; it also involves aspects of personality, emotional and cultural dimensions, and importantly, relational aspects. For instance, the ability to relate to others using appropriate interpersonal skills and effective communication is essential for anyone learning a language. Effective communication and interpersonal skills are two of the ten life skills highlighted by the WHO (1997), specifically referred to as effective communication and interpersonal relationship skills.

Life skills are defined as skills and abilities that everyone should possess to overcome the challenges of daily life (WHO 1997). Skills such as stress management, the ability to recognize and manage our emotions, the ability to learn to communicate, and the ability to relate effectively with others are essential life skills needed today more than ever.

If life skills refer to the competencies and abilities necessary/useful in everyday life, soft skills are abilities and competencies considered essential in the workplace, as described in the following definition from the Oxford Reference Dictionary: "Are competencies that employees possess associated with activities such as customer handling, communication, problem-solving, and teamworking. According to various surveys, these soft skills are considered by employers to be of very high importance and (in the UK) sadly lacking amongst new recruits".

In general, the term "soft skills" is used in contrast to "hard skills," which refer to technical competencies (hard) as opposed to personal and social competencies (soft). Hard skills, being related to objective, measurable, and quantifiable technical competencies (Boffo, Iavarone, Nuzzaci, 2022), require formal learning, and the same applies to soft skills - such as problem-solving abilities. These cannot be considered innate abilities; instead, they



require specific training to acquire the relevant competencies, techniques, and effective strategies for their "putting into action".

1 Life skills and mediation in language teaching

How are life skills and soft skills related to language learning? To answer this question, it is necessary to refer to the concept of mediation present in the CEFR of 2001 and elaborated in the 2020 version, in the Companion Volume, where mediation is connected to communication and learning, as well as social and cultural aspects. Mediation "is increasingly seen as a part of all learning, but especially of all language learning" (CEFR-Companion Volume 2020, 36)

Mediation is presented as a multifaceted concept that, depending on the perspective from which it is observed, reveals new and interesting avenues for development: mediation in the context of language learning embraces linguistic, conceptual, and communicative dimensions; mediation in the context of teaching practice embraces methodological dimensions and pedagogical orientations (choice of approaches and methods); mediation in the context of personal/relational development falls within the basic skills (knowing how to be) of a language teacher.

In the Companion Volume, the concept of mediation is detailed and expanded into three further macro-categories: "Mediating a text", "Mediating concepts", and "Mediating communication". The scales clearly highlight the nature of these three types of mediation, which pertain to the purely linguistic sector ("Mediating a text"), the cognitive and relational sector ("Mediating concepts"), and finally the relational/intercultural sector ("Mediating communication"). The latter two scales are more clearly related to the development of interpersonal relationships and teamwork, requiring the possession of specific life skills. Therefore, the Companion Volume considers certain aspects that go beyond language learning/teaching and involve the learner as a whole, within the interaction during the communication process (knowing how to be and knowing how to learn).

Despite the constant attention to these aspects, the descriptors of the CEFR Companion Volume do not clearly specify the type of life skill necessary for the acquisition of a particular competence and, similarly, the document, by its nature, does not provide the methodology to be used for their development.

2 Beyond the Companion Volume

An important contribution to identifying and listing the life skills necessary to support competencies in individual competence descriptors was provided by Fratter and Fratter in their book "Dinamica di gruppo per lo sviluppo delle life skills" (2020).

The book offers an initial analysis of the descriptors for mediating concepts and mediating communication, aimed at identifying the skills and competencies necessary for both language teachers and students during mediation activities. This analysis, which was further explored in Fratter (2021, 2023), highlighted that the primary skills required for mediation actions correspond in part to the well-known life skills identified by the WHO, defined as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour, that enable individual to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO 1997: 1). Life skills are closely connected to: a) the emotional sphere, including self-awareness and emotion management; b) the relational sphere, encompassing empathy and effective communication; c) and the cognitive sphere, covering problem-solving, decision-making, and creative thinking. These skills and competencies are reflected in the mediation descriptors, as shown in the following table (Table 1), where the first column lists the reference areas and corresponding life skills from the WHO document (1997); the second column presents some descriptors from the CEFR Companion Volume (2020) in which the key words referring to life skills are indicated in *italic*; and finally, the third column gives the relevant life skills that should be possessed by the learner, and first of all by the teacher, that need to be developed in a training course in the classroom group.



Tab 1 The life skills analysis in the Companion Volume (2020) (from Fratter, Fratter 2020)

Areas and Life skills (WHO, 1997)	References in CEFR Companion Volume (2020)	skills and strategies required
Area 1		
Problem solving	MEDIATING CONCEPTS> Collaborating in a group> Collaborating to construct meaning - Liv. B2 (p. 109) “Can contribute to collaborative decision making and problem solving, expressing and co-developing ideas, explaining details and making suggestions for future action”	Problem solving
Area 2		
Critical thinking Cognitive thinking	MEDIATING CONCEPTS >Leading group work > Encouraging conceptual talk- Liv. C2 (p. 113) “Can effectively lead the development of ideas in a discussion of complex abstract topics, giving direction by targeting questions and encouraging others to elaborate on their reasoning”	Decision making
Area 5		
Coping with emotion, coping with stress	MEDIATING COMMUNICATION> Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements - Liv. C2 (p. 116) “Can deal tactfully with a disruptive participant, framing any remarks diplomatically in relation to the situation and cultural perceptions”	Manage conflicts

In the first descriptor highlighted in Table 1, "Collaborating to construct meaning," several life skills (in italics) have been emphasized, namely problem-solving skills and decision-making skills. Upon close examination of the descriptor, it becomes evident that the linguistic competencies described are closely intertwined with relational and interpersonal competencies (life skills) that need to be practiced cross-culturally and consciously in language activities in the classroom.

Such relational skills can certainly be part of experiential learning acquisition (informal learning), but not exclusively so, as many of them require specific educational pathways (formal and non-formal learning). This is especially true in multicultural training groups, where incidents of intercultural misunderstanding can arise precisely due to inadequate pragmatic language use. The language classroom can be the privileged place for personal growth both of the individual within the group and of the group as a whole and, in particular, in multicultural and multilingual groups where differences are one of the main constituent features of the groups themselves and where language learning requires first and foremost effective communication between members of the class group.

The life skills outlined in the third descriptor (Table 1) can be categorized within Area 5 (coping with emotions and stress), as linguistic learning involves the ability to manage even intercultural conflicts, which require careful attention due to their connection with the cultural backgrounds of those involved. "Deal tactfully" is not just a linguistic matter, but passes through relational, social and pragmatic skills and implies, in addition, that the social and cultural norms necessary to enact "acting tactfully" in the cultural context of reference are possessed and are properly managed.

Therefore, starting from the analysis of the descriptors in the CEFR-VC presented in the book "Dinamica di gruppo per lo sviluppo delle life skills" (Fratter, Fratter 2020), it is highlighted the need for teachers to design activities



aimed at developing life skills integrated with language teaching. In this volume potential training paths for language teachers have been identified. These paths, through the application of the Mediation descriptors of the CEFR-VC, enable the integrated development of life skills within language learning courses.

3 Life skills for teachers and students

How does a language course become an optimal laboratory for the development of social skills? A language course can provide an opportunity for personal growth both for individuals within the group and for the group as a whole. This element is particularly achievable in multicultural and multilingual groups where differences themselves present interesting points of discussion. Specifically, in L2 classes, there are different group dynamics (Fratter, Fratter 1999) among people from different cultures, speaking different languages, and with different mindsets. For these reasons, every class potentially harbors the possibility of conflicts arising, which must be effectively managed by both the teacher and the students through specific techniques and strategies such as for instance problem-solving and decision-making.

In addition to being subject matter experts, language teachers should also function as mediators and advisors, especially in multicultural contexts. Effective classroom management is facilitated by a proper handling of group dynamics and the ability to monitor interpersonal relationships, which can be enhanced through the use of effective communication, such as assertive communication.

The second language classroom emerges as one of the most suitable and effective contexts for the development of life skills. Indeed, it can provide an excellent opportunity for personal growth both for individuals within the group and for the group as a whole, offering the chance for engagement with diversity: linguistic, cultural, and ethical diversity, among others. From the descriptors in the Companion Volume, there is a particular emphasis on the importance of group work in achieving common goals, on negotiation activities necessary to facilitate collaboration among individuals, and on the ability to interact effectively. As stated, access to knowledge and concepts through language occurs through collaborative group work and "when someone has the official or unofficial role of facilitator, teacher, or trainer. In either context, it is virtually impossible to develop concepts without preparing the ground for it by managing the relational issues concerned" (CEFR-VC 2020, 110).

Relational mediation is represented in the initial descriptors of conceptual mediation activity (Fratter, Fratter, 2020; Fratter forthcoming), specifically in the scale "Facilitating collaborative interaction with peers" and "Managing interactions". These are skills necessary to "establish conditions" for effective work and this is relational mediation (CEFR-VC 2020, 108). As clearly stated, this mediation is necessary "to lay the groundwork," to establish the essential conditions for creating peer relationships and managing interactions within the group, which are in turn indispensable for meaning construction. The descriptors in the scales focus, for example, on the ability to "organise and manage collaborative group work efficiently" (B2+ "Managing interaction" CEFR-VC 2020, 223).

4 Academics competencies and life skills

In reference to language learning among university students, it is essential to consider the competencies and skills required to linguistically engage effectively in academic settings involving the management of oral and written textual genres focused on disciplinary content with varying degrees of formality.

Regarding oral communication, students need to manage various types of texts (Fragai, Fratter, Jafrancesco 2017, 130) such as debates, interviews, oral presentations at conferences, and university seminars. In particular, debates and seminars are types of oral communication that require communicative exchange among participants and adherence to specific sociolinguistic and cultural norms. These include knowing how to ask for or give the floor, capture attention without causing embarrassment, interrupt without creating conflict or tension, and tactfully express disagreement through the appropriate use of the speech markers necessary to perform these functions.

Simulating debates and seminars is a common practice used by language teachers to exercise language functions and related structures in authentic contexts. Furthermore, debates and seminars can serve as a means to engage learners in mediation descriptors. In the scale "Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements," mediation fully embodies its role in resolving disputes, misunderstandings, or disagreements. "This scale is intended for situations in which the user/learner may have a formal role to mediate in a disagreement between third parties, or may informally try to resolve a misunderstanding, delicate situation or disagreement between them" (CEFR-VC 2020, 118). As emphasized, mediation of disagreements, in addition to linguistic competencies, requires specific life skills such as conflict management.



Through language use, cultural, intercultural, relational, and interpersonal aspects are incorporated, necessitating the use of particular competencies and skills such as recognizing tension and conflict on a cultural level and taking action towards their resolution (problem-solving) by making appropriate decisions (decision-making).

Conclusion

Considering the discussion presented in the preceding paragraphs regarding the mediation descriptors in the Companion Volume to the CEFR (2020), developing life skills in learners of a foreign/second language is therefore a fundamental aspect of language teaching, but more broadly, it is crucial in any type of education. Learning a language not only entails mastering the linguistic code but also involves the ability to manage interactions between people appropriately. According to Boffo et al. (2022, 3), "In terms of education, approaches that foster the development of life skills focused on student centrality gradually encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning and the well-being of others, promoting emotional development and personal, social, and emotional skills."

For these reasons, it is necessary for teachers to equip themselves with the necessary tools to manage communication in the language classroom; they must promote the development of a communication platform in which students can feel free to express themselves and in which they can also grow in interpersonal skills. This is facilitated through fostering good interpersonal relationships developed through teamwork, problem-solving abilities within groups, and the ability to assertively and tactfully communicate their ideas, opinions, and needs. To achieve this goal, teachers, trainers, and educators need to "equip" themselves with the necessary tools, but primarily, they need to develop a precise self-awareness and embark on a journey of self-knowledge.

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