

# A Survey of Attitudes toward Mediation among Chinese High School EFL Teachers and Their Classroom Constraints

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**Abstract**—This paper raises concerns about Chinese high school EFL teachers' attitudes toward mediation and their classroom constraints. From the data gathered in the survey of 152 EFL teachers, the findings indicate that most teachers fail to mediate students' learning due to situational constraints that they encounter though they hold positive attitudes toward mediation. Statistically, teachers with higher educational qualifications have more positive attitudes toward the mediator role than those with lower qualifications. Most of them view the lack of advice from relevant experts and of training on the implementation of mediation as the most influential of all the constraints. It is thus proposed that EFL teachers re-orient their roles from traditional instructor to mediator with the help of re-education programs.

**Index Terms**—EFL teachers, attitude, mediation, constraint

## I. INTRODUCTION

Current education reforms imply that it seems necessary for teachers to implement the role of mediator instead of disseminator in the language classroom since the value of adult mediation in children's learning can never be overstressed (Seng, Pou, & Tan, 2003). From the perspective of facilitating learners' education quality, this study is expected to be important since most of China's high school students are unable to express themselves orally and literally in proper English (Ye, 2007). Rather, they are exposed to limited linguistic knowledge attaching importance to grammatical forms of language (Ting, 1987). The most successful foreign language teaching programs, however, 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 provides learners with more opportunities for them to practise English systematically and to render the language learning more effective (Williams & Burden, 2000). In this regard, the role of teacher as mediator should take priority in language instruction (Feuerstein, 1990; Feuerstein & Feuerstein, 1991).

## II. QUESTIONS

To fulfill the target of exploring teachers' attitudes toward mediation and their classroom constraints, two questions that follow to be addressed are proposed:

1. What are EFL teachers' attitudes toward mediation?
2. What situational constraints hinder teachers from implementing mediation?

## III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Constructivism, "a vast and woolly area in contemporary psychology, epistemology, and education" (Von Glaserfeld, 1997, p. 204), is a widely-used term by psychologists, educators, curriculum designers, and some others (Woolfolk, 2004). Most of the users of this term tend to stress learners' commitment to understanding the meanings of objects and their learning development through personal and communal participation (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999). People are accustomed to talking about constructivism in two forms: individual and social constructivism (Palincsar, 1998; Phillips, 1997; Woolfolk, 2004). Individual constructivist approaches are related to how individuals establish certain elements respecting their cognition and affection derived from their psychological organ (Phillips, 1997). Thus, individual constructivism is known as psychological constructivism, of which Piaget is a preminent representative (DeCorte, Greer, & Verschaffel, 1996; Paris, Byrnes, & Paris, 2001). In Piaget's view, though social surroundings seem important to children's enhancement, social interaction is not the main approach for children to adjust their thought (Moshman, 1997). By contrast, social constructivism concerns the formation of communal knowledge of distinct schools and how the process of people's common cognition about the world is conveyed to other individuals of a socio-cultural community (Woolfolk, 2004).

Social constructivism as a pedagogical theory has developed in the last few decades (Teague, 2000). Gergen (1995) argues that, in the model of social constructivism, all knowledge is constructed through social interaction. More talented people are able to transmit knowledge to others, and language learning could effectively be processed at this point when these participants get involved in constructing knowledge through interaction (Gergen, 1995; Woolfolk, 2004). If social constructivism is appropriately applied in the language classroom setting, it will surely impact on each facet of the class including the innovation of the implementation of the teacher's role (Teague, 2000), which is also the focus of the current study.

"Mediation theory has played a central role in social constructivist framework" (Sun, 2005, p. 6), which "is concerned with helping learners to become autonomous, to take control of their own learning, with the fundamental aim of enabling them to become independent thinkers and problem-solvers" (Williams & Burden, 2000, p. 68). Mediation is thus conceptualized as the correlation between the universe and humans who build up this relationship by applying physical and mental instruments (Feuerstein, 1986; Lantolf, 2000).

Since not every interaction encompassing a task, a learner, and a mediator has a quality of mediated learning experience (MLE), according to Feuerstein (1980), a system of the MLE criteria is developed to distinguish different levels of MLE interactions. In the MLE program, Feuerstein (1980) therefore proposes 12 parameters as indispensable criteria for evaluating the quality of MLE interaction: significance, purpose beyond the here and now, shared intention, a sense of competence, control of own behavior, goal-setting, challenge, awareness of change, a belief in positive outcomes, sharing, individuality, and a sense of belonging (pp. 289-290). The program consists of 400 cognitive tasks constructed to instruct the skills as models in terms of issues on mental activities, problem solving, and learning strategies (Feuerstein & Feuerstein, 1991). Meanwhile, Feuerstein (1980) believes that teachers or other adults can "mediate" in large numbers of different ways. Even each of all the 12 criteria of the MLE program also belongs to a mediation strategy or technique (Feuerstein & Rand, 1997; Rodriguez & Bellanca, 1987; Skuy & Mentis, 1999). In other words, there are 12 different ways of mediation rooted in these 12 MLE criteria, which might provide adequate flexible space for the teacher in the language classroom to conduct mediation (Seng et al., 2003).

#### IV. DATA COLLECTION

##### A. Instrument

To obtain the data to address the research questions, a survey was adapted from William and Burden's *Mediation Questionnaire* (2000) testing teachers' attitudes toward mediation respecting Feuerstein's 12 MLE functions, together referring to Liao's *Communicative Language Teaching Questionnaire* in which Liao (2003) claimed that China's high school EFL teachers encountered situational constraints associated with the current educational system, students, and teachers themselves. Concurrently, an assumption in the case of the effects of teachers' demographic attributes on attitudes toward mediation should be allowed for since "attitudes develop early in childhood and are the result of parents' and peers' attitudes, contact with people who are 'different' in any number of ways, and interacting affective factors in the human experience" (Brown, 2001, p. 168). Given potential linguistic biases from EFL, a Chinese version questionnaire was employed in the study, subject to a panel of experts in Chinese.

##### B. Subjects

The current study was conducted in Henan province located in eastern central China for the accessible population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007). According to Creswell's (2005) rough estimate of a survey sample size, 350 teachers were chosen randomly from 350 secondary schools in Henan. A vital difficulty with the survey is that a smaller percentage of pre-sampled participants tend to answer questionnaires (Liao, 2003). Out of the 350 distributed questionnaire sheets, 152 effective copies (43.4 %) were returned, but "power is not an issue" since the sample size is large with 100 or more subjects (Stevens, 1996, p. 6, cited in Pallant, 2007, p. 205).

#### V. FINDINGS

##### Findings for RQ1: What Are EFL Teachers' Attitudes toward Mediation?

In this study, the data of the teachers' attitudes toward mediation were elicited from the responses to Item 1 of the questionnaire, in which there are 12 statements scaled from 1 to 5, representing *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, and *strongly agree* (see Appendix). The average score for each item is 3, with the minimum total 12 and the maximum 60. The data analysis was processed via the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* version 16.0 for Windows.

TABLE 1  
TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO ATTITUDES TOWARD MLE FUNCTIONS

Question Item	Frequency					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Ranking
	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree			
a1. Shared intention	1	8	23	89	29	3.91	.785	8 <sup>th</sup>
a2. Significance	6	13	37	70	24	3.62	.988	11 <sup>th</sup>
a3. Purpose beyond the here and now	6	13	62	58	11	3.37	.893	12 <sup>th</sup>
a4. A sense of competence	0	4	12	77	58	4.25	.714	4 <sup>th</sup>
a5. Control of own behavior	0	5	14	65	67	4.28	.769	2 <sup>nd</sup>
a6. Goal-setting	0	6	19	69	57	4.17	.798	6 <sup>th</sup>
a7. Challenge	0	6	34	77	33	3.91	.777	9 <sup>th</sup>
a8. Awareness of change	0	9	46	73	23	3.73	.791	10 <sup>th</sup>
a9. A belief in positive outcomes	0	3	4	44	100	4.60	.645	1 <sup>st</sup>
a10. Sharing	0	4	13	71	62	4.27	.732	3 <sup>rd</sup>
a11. Individuality	0	2	20	69	57	4.22	.727	5 <sup>th</sup>
a12. A sense of belonging	0	8	27	69	46	4.02	.839	7 <sup>th</sup>

First, the frequencies of the teachers scaling each of the 12 mediation statements (marked *a1-a12*) on attitudes, means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and ranking orders (based on *M*) are summarized in Table 1, which shows that most of the participating teachers supported the application of mediation as each of the mean values (*M*) exceeded the average score (= 3.00). In particular, "a belief in positive outcomes" (1<sup>st</sup>), "control of own behavior" (2<sup>nd</sup>), "sharing" (3<sup>rd</sup>), and "a sense of competence" (4<sup>th</sup>) are ranked the four highest in the means regarding the teachers' attitudes toward mediation. The means of the first three features are lower, where "purpose beyond the here and now" and "significance" are rated lowest.

Second, a hypothesized assumption was formulated to detect the effect of the participants' demographic data on their attitudes toward mediation: The difference is significant in teachers' attitudes toward mediation across the groups of gender, age, teaching-year, educational background, grade-level, and class size at the  $p < .05$  level. To test this hypothesis, one-way ANOVA and *t*-tests were conducted as shown in Tables 2-4.

TABLE 2  
T-TEST FOR TEACHERS' ATTITUDES ACROSS GENDER AND EDUCATION QUALIFICATION GROUPS

Group	<i>F</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Mean Difference	<i>p</i> . (2-tailed)
Gender	.054	.559	145	.03547	.577
Education qualification	.710	3.675	145	.24070	.000

TABLE 3  
ATTITUDE MEANS OF TEACHERS WITH DIFFERENT EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

Education Background	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Std. Error Mean
Higher qualification	104	4.1348	.36863	.03615
Lower qualification	43	3.8941	.34237	.05221

TABLE 4  
TESTS FOR TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD MEDIATION ACROSS FOUR GROUPS

Group	<i>dfB/dfW</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> . ( <i>p</i> -value)
Age	2/144	.077	.926
Teaching years	2/144	.672	.512
Grade level	5/141	1.094	.367
Class size	2/144	1.533	.219

Two independent-samples *t*-tests were performed and measured no significant difference between the male and female participants in the means on the attitudes toward mediation since the *p*-value is .577 ( $>.05$ ), but the teachers' attitudes toward mediation were significantly influenced by their education qualifications at the *p*-value .001 ( $<.05$ ) as shown in Table 2. Inspection of the means suggests that the participants with higher qualifications (i.e., master and bachelor) were more positive toward mediation than those with lower ones (i.e., two-year diploma and secondary school certificate) as presented in Table 3. Four one-way ANOVA tests were administered and showed no significant difference in the respondents' attitudes toward mediation as regards the mean scores across the groups of age, teaching-year, grade-level, and class size ( $p > .05$ ) as shown in Table 4.

### Findings for RQ2: What Situational Constraints Hinder Teachers from Implementing Mediation?

It seems hard for the teachers' positive attitudes toward mediation to accurately determine what they did since attitude-behavior is not always one-on-one consistent due to situational constraints (Oskamp, 1991). Item 2 of the questionnaire required the respondents to answer the 20 statements to be measured on a scale of 1 to 6, representing *not sure*, *not at all*, *only a little*, *fairly*, *a lot*, and *quite a lot*. Most of the participants ( $n = 147$ ) offered their answers with 17 missing values, and five participants left this item blank whose missing data did not constitute a threat to the wanted validity of the instrument since the valid sample size exceeded 100 (Stevens, 1996, cited in Pallant, 2007). No participants added other constraints while scaling this item. The 20 statements were categorized into three sections associated with (a) China's current education system (*a-d*), (b) the students (*e-g*), and (c) the teachers themselves (*h-t*).

The frequencies of the 20 constraint items, means, standard deviations, and ratings (according to *M*) for the participants' constraints that they scaled are summarized in Table 5, where the mean of 75% of the items ( $n = 15$ ) is over 3.5 ( $M > 3.5$ ). The top three constraints are "lack of advice from related experts" (1<sup>st</sup>), "lack of training as the role of mediator" (2<sup>nd</sup>), and "lack of funds paid for teacher role training programs" (3<sup>rd</sup>). The remaining 25% of the constraints ( $n = 5$ ) were believed least influential ( $M < 3.5$ ), which are "lack of cultural knowledge" (16<sup>th</sup>), "mandatory textbooks" (17<sup>th</sup>), "mandatory syllabuses" (18<sup>th</sup>), "lack of oral English proficiency" (19<sup>th</sup>), and "attitudes toward teaching work" (20<sup>th</sup>).

TABLE 5  
TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO SITUATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Constraint Item	Frequency						<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Ranking
	1 Not Sure	2 Not at All	3 Only a Little	4 Fairl y	5 A Lot	6 Quite a Lot			
a. Mandatory syllabuses	17	21	41	49	13	3	3.20	1.215	18 <sup>th</sup>
b. Mandatory textbooks	13	22	42	53	12	2	3.24	1.136	17 <sup>th</sup>
c. Grammar-based exams	7	12	22	42	39	24	4.14	1.353	10 <sup>th</sup>
d. Large-sized class teaching	2	11	17	37	40	40	4.51	1.284	4 <sup>th</sup>
e. Students' low proficiency in EFL	1	4	23	51	41	27	4.42	1.084	6 <sup>th</sup>
f. Students' passive learning attitudes	0	1	28	55	44	16	4.32	.936	8 <sup>th</sup>
g. Students' resistance to class participation	4	4	35	44	45	13	4.11	1.125	11 <sup>th</sup>
h. Your lack of oral proficiency in English	5	31	54	46	11	0	3.18	.965	19 <sup>th</sup>
i. Your lack of knowledge as the role of mediator	6	16	41	52	21	10	3.66	1.183	15 <sup>th</sup>
j. Your lack of cultural knowledge	4	25	58	46	12	2	3.29	.981	16 <sup>th</sup>
k. Your lack of support from school	13	22	23	43	35	11	3.67	1.411	14 <sup>th</sup>
l. Your lack of mediation-based teaching materials	7	8	26	38	41	27	4.22	1.342	9 <sup>th</sup>
m. Your lack of mediation role-related teaching aids	4	10	26	30	47	30	4.33	1.316	7 <sup>th</sup>
n. Your lack of mediation role effectiveness testing tools	4	11	14	36	45	37	4.48	1.316	5 <sup>th</sup>
o. Your lack of time to prepare the mediation-based lesson	4	18	38	41	27	19	3.86	1.298	12 <sup>th</sup>
p. Your lack of training as mediator	0	6	13	36	48	44	4.76	1.102	2 <sup>nd</sup>
q. Your lack of funds paid for teacher role training programs	1	11	25	26	32	49	4.56	1.352	3 <sup>rd</sup>
r. Your lack of advice from related experts	0	7	12	39	34	55	4.80	1.168	1 <sup>st</sup>
s. Your lack of cooperation with colleagues	2	25	35	36	35	14	3.81	1.279	13 <sup>th</sup>
t. Your attitude toward teaching	10	67	36	21	7	5	2.75	1.150	20 <sup>th</sup>

## VI. DISCUSSION

From the survey, it was noted that most of the teacher participants viewed the lack of advice from relevant experts and of training on implementing the mediator as the most influential of all the constraints since the teachers' knowledge of mediation greatly affected their attitudes toward mediation. It was not surprising that the teachers with senior educational qualifications held more favorable attitudes toward mediation than those with junior qualifications. This also confirms Grosser and Waal's (2008) claim that mediation tool training or re-education programs should be developed to "provide the necessary knowledge, skills, and moreover attitudes to pre-service teachers to become mediators of learning in order to ensure the development and growth of thinking skills" (para. 1). Thus, enhancing teachers' qualifications seems to hold great importance in the current educational setting respecting EFL teachers' re-education programme.

China is taking measures to facilitate the re-education of EFL teachers to continuously raise the holistic quality of instructional power by carrying out a system of teachers' required academic qualifications (National Curriculum, 2000). In 1999, the Ministry of Education of China proposed the execution of teachers' continuing education project for China's high schools, whose goals "are to train all the teachers in order to meet the needs of quality education, particularly the training for implementing the new national curriculum...and improving the pedagogical practice" (National Curriculum, 2000, p. 18).

China has about 572,000 secondary school EFL teachers, and around 55% of the junior school EFL teachers and 80% of the senior school EFL teachers have obtained university degrees (Cheng & Wang, 2004; Education in China, 2005; National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC], 2008). Apparently, upgrading the subject and pedagogical knowledge of so many teachers would be expensive and time-consuming, so the normal type of re-training available would probably be short-term intensive seminars and workshops (Cheng & Wang, 2004). This project seemed to affect about 550,000 secondary school EFL teachers and millions of secondary students learning EFL in China (Liu & Gong, 2000; NBSC, 2008). Post-training teachers' classrooms, however, are still characterized by teacher-centeredness and textbook-centeredness as "teacher colleges/universities are accustomed to copying comprehensive universities, and

taking care of developing discipline knowledge and research, and paying little attention to pedagogical knowledge and abilities” (National Curriculum, 2000, p. 18).

Therefore, it seems equally important to extend teachers’ scope of knowledge on the implementation of mediation in process of the promotion of teachers’ qualifications through which their comprehensive language skills are expected to be upgraded. For that to happen, teachers have to acquire a rich command of EFL without which “fostering students’ language proficiency would be a very difficult task to accomplish” even in the mediated context (Cheng & Wang, 2004, p. 3). The findings of this study are thus expected to provide some implications for teachers’ upgrading of education qualifications and challenges that they face while implementing mediation. In view of the current instructional environment, many elements restrict teachers’ implementation of mediation, which deserve to be lessened until overcome through deeper educational reforms and teachers’ personal efforts.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study is aimed at investigating China’s high school EFL teachers’ attitudes toward the role of mediation in order to reveal why so few teachers have mediated their students’ learning and what can be done to make future classrooms more mediative. Hopefully, this study is among the initial attempts to explore EFL teachers’ attitudes toward mediation and their situational constraints in time of implementing the mediator role. Based on the findings, a conclusion is drawn that most high school EFL teachers fail to mediate students’ learning on account of situational constraints that they come across though they hold positive attitudes toward mediation. It is a tough challenge for EFL teachers to administer mediation smoothly by overcoming situational constraints related to the current education system in China, students, and teachers themselves. It is therefore proposed that EFL teachers in China should re-orient their roles from traditional instructor to mediator with the help of teachers’ re-education program.

## APPENDIX MEDIATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear participants,

I am conducting research on “A survey of attitudes toward mediation among Chinese high school EFL teachers and their classroom constraints” and would appreciate a few minutes of your time in accomplishing this questionnaire in order to help with my ongoing research. Your responses will be used for research purposes only and kept absolutely confidential. Be kindly informed that your answered questionnaire sheet will not fall into any wrong hands. No participants will be named in the research. The validity of this survey depends on the extent to which your responses are open and frank. So you are warmly required to answer honestly. Thanks for your cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Xxx

**Question 1:** For each of the following 12 statements, please circle the figure from 1 to 5 that most closely agrees with how you feel. Consider your answers in the context of your current job or past work experience.

It is important to:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. make your instructions clear when you give a task to your learners.	1	2	3	4	5
2. tell your learners why they are to do a particular activity.	1	2	3	4	5
3. explain to your learners how carrying out a learning activity will help them in the future.	1	2	3	4	5
4. help learners to develop a feeling of confidence in their ability to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
5. teach learners the strategies they need to learn effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
6. teach learners how to set their own goals in learning.	1	2	3	4	5
7. help your learners to set challenges for themselves and to meet those challenges.	1	2	3	4	5
8. help your learners to monitor changes in themselves.	1	2	3	4	5
9. help your learners to see that if they keep on trying to solve a problem, they will find a solution.	1	2	3	4	5
10. teach your learners to work co-operatively.	1	2	3	4	5
11. help your learners to develop as individuals.	1	2	3	4	5
12. foster in your learners a sense of belonging to a classroom community.	1	2	3	4	5

**Question 2:** There are 20 factors listed below. Please indicate how much each factor influences your teaching role by circling the figure from 1 to 6. If there are some other elements that hinder you playing the role of mediator, please list them and circle the relevant figure representing the extent to which each element influences your role.

Situational constraints	Not sure	Not at all	Only a little	Fairly	A lot	Quite a lot
1). The mandatory syllabus	1	2	3	4	5	6
2). The mandatory textbook	1	2	3	4	5	6
3). Grammar-based exams	1	2	3	4	5	6
4). Large-sized class teaching	1	2	3	4	5	6
5). Students' low proficiency in English	1	2	3	4	5	6
6). Students' passive learning attitudes	1	2	3	4	5	6
7). Students' resistance to class participation	1	2	3	4	5	6
8). Your lack of oral proficiency in English	1	2	3	4	5	6
9). Your lack of knowledge as the role of mediation	1	2	3	4	5	6
10). Your lack of cultural knowledge	1	2	3	4	5	6
11). Your lack of support from your school	1	2	3	4	5	6
12). Your lack of mediation-based teaching materials	1	2	3	4	5	6
13). Your lack of mediation role-related teaching aids	1	2	3	4	5	6
14). Your lack of mediation role effectiveness testing instruments	1	2	3	4	5	6
15). Your lack of time to prepare the mediation-based lesson	1	2	3	4	5	6
16). Your lack of training as a mediator	1	2	3	4	5	6
17). Your lack of funds paid for teacher role training programs	1	2	3	4	5	6
18). Your lack of advice from experts	1	2	3	4	5	6
19). Your lack of cooperation with colleagues	1	2	3	4	5	6
20). Your attitude toward teaching	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Question 3:** Please complete the following demographic information as appropriate.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Year(s) of teaching EFL: \_\_\_\_\_

Educational qualifications attained:

-----Bachelor's Degree                      -----Two-Year Certificate

-----Secondary School Certificate              -----Others

The grade you are teaching in:

-----Junior Grade One                      -----Junior Grade Two

-----Junior Grade Three                      -----Senior Grade One

-----Senior Grade Two                      -----Senior Grade Three

The average number of the students in your class: \_\_\_\_\_

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