

Resolving tensions caused by high-stakes assessment in an L2 classroom through mediation

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The Finnish classroom assessment culture is considered that of assessment for learning. The situation in upper-secondary schools is different, however. While teachers in Finland appreciate assessment supporting learning, they feel unable to merge it with assessment of learning outcomes, and favour the latter due to the Matriculation Examination (ME; e.g. Leontjev, submitted), a high-stakes exam growingly used in university admission. Learners, likewise, expect teachers to prepare them for the ME (Lakkala & Ilomäki, 2013), the results of which play a significant role in their further studies. The tension between assessment for learning and exam preparation is, therefore, often resolved in the benefit of the latter. In the present study, we illustrate how this tension can be resolved for teachers and learners in the benefit of supporting learning both in praxis – a dialectical unity of theory and practice, drawing on a detailed analysis of two interactions with learners. We will discuss the implications for the development of teacher classroom practices and teachers' professional development.

Keywords: power of tests, matriculation examination, sociocultural theory, mediation, L2

1 Introduction

The Finnish school system has not been testing-oriented (Tarnanen & Huhta, 2008, p. 270). As a testimony of this, Finland has only one national high-stakes examination, the Matriculation examination, which students take towards the end of the upper secondary school studies. With teachers' strong autonomy, all other assessments could be categorised as classroom-based, teacher-made assessments (see, e.g., Sahlberg, 2007; Pollari, 2017).

The latest versions of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for upper secondary school (FNBE, 2016; FNAE, 2020) have a greater emphasis on the ongoing, formative nature of assessment to support and enhance learning as well as the active role of learners in the assessment process. This change is embedded firmly in the principles of assessment *for* learning (AfL; Black & Wiliam, 2010) and critical assessment (Shohamy, 2001). In fact, the classroom assessment culture in Finland can be described as assessment *for* learning (Davison & Leung, 2009; Tarnanen & Huhta, 2008).

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The Finnish upper secondary school, however, is also strongly impacted by the Matriculation Examination (ME; Välijärvi et al., 2009). As a national high-stakes examination, the ME has its guidelines and requirements. The foreign language (hereinafter, L2) test has four subsections: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, as well as writing an essay. The writing subsection accounts for one third of the total points in the entire language examination (i.e., 99 out of 299 points)¹. The Finnish upper-secondary school learners and teachers alike are familiar with the rating scale, requirements, and practicalities of the ME. For instance, at the time of the study, learners were penalised if they exceed the length set in the instructions by 25% or more (as of autumn 2022, learners are penalised if they exceed the length by one character or more). Recognising the well-defined writing construct of the ME, we highlight that the assessment culture it elicits is that of AoL with its values and practices, which may lead to the goal of exam preparation becoming separate from that of promoting learning (Välijärvi et al., 2009). The power of the ME has been recently growing, as it is now used to a greater extent as part of university admission.

This has led teachers to focus more on summative assessment with little formative feedback, oftentimes limiting what is being assessed to reflect the ME (Leontjev, submitted; Atjonen et al., 2019; Hildén & Fröjdendahl, 2018; Mäkipää & Hildén, 2021; Välijärvi et al., 2009). These authors attributed many of their findings to the role of the Matriculation Examination, at least partially. To give a further example, Mäkipää and Oaukrim-Soivio (2019) found that, in upper-secondary school learners' ($n = 918$) opinion, teachers primarily used tests and exams as assessment. Earlier, Välijärvi et al. (2009), in a study of 8,500 upper-secondary school students, found that 35% of the respondents felt that their teachers only taught for the ME. Learners, too, expect their teachers to prepare them for the ME (Lakkala & Ilomäki, 2013), a high ME score being a major goal of their education (Pollari, 2016). Indeed, as Shohamy (2001) claims, assessment is always a way to exercise control over individuals, dictating “to test takers what they need to know, what they will learn and what they will be taught.” The ME also causes anxiety and stress (Pollari, 2016). That is, in Finland, the tension between the product-oriented, comparability-informed ME and assessment to support learning, which is process-oriented and rooted in equity in education, is often resolved to the benefit of the former. Furthermore, in Finland (Leontjev, submitted; Atjonen et al., 2019) and elsewhere (Poehner & Inbar-Lourie, 2020), even when teachers recognise the benefits of assessment to support learning, they often resort to the practice more familiar to them – assessment of learning outcomes and unidirectional feedback on the product.

As a way to resolve the challenge of merging the standardised high-stakes assessments and assessment to support learning, Poehner and Inbar-Lourie (2020) argued for dialectical partnerships between teachers and researchers – *praxis*. In *praxis*, teachers are not research subjects but partners who contribute as teaching professionals putting the theoretical principles, concepts, and frameworks to test in their classroom. The goal of such partnerships should be developing assessment as activism (Poehner, 2011) – assessment serving as a way to enable support to learners as they require it, creating opportunities for ongoing development. In the present study, informed by sociocultural theory, this is achieved through integrating mediation into the assessment process.

We will discuss the sociocultural concept of mediation in more detail in the following section. Here, we mention that in the classroom, mediation is discussed as

emerging in *reciprocal interaction* between the knowledgeable other, usually the teacher, and the learner. Furthermore, mediation is always *directed toward a qualitative transformation*, creating novel knowledge, ways of thinking, and acting. Our goal is not to write on the power of tests per se. Instead, we propose how mediation can help resolve what teachers and learners experience as a tension between preparing for the ME and promoting learners' writing in L2 English. Hence, the excerpts are selected to illustrate how the ME can be used as a mediational means to develop learners' writing, focusing on the process rather than the product of writing – the text at hand.

To elaborate, focusing on two interactional episodes, we will illustrate how through mediation, reasons for learner struggles in L2 writing were uncovered and opportunities for the development of learner writing were created using ME as a mediational means. We will also explore how the researcher's mediation early in the partnership (the first interactional episode) shaped the teacher's guidance in later teacher-learner interactions (the second episode). The research questions are the following:

- 1) How can researcher's mediation directed to learners create opportunities for developing teacher's mediation?
- 2) How, if at all, does mediation help to resolve tensions evoked by the Matriculation Examination and develop learners' understanding of quality writing?

We will use the labels 'the teacher' (T) and 'the researcher' (R) to signal when we refer to ourselves as the participants in the study and 'we' to mean 'the authors of the paper'. We will next elaborate on mediation and mediated action.

2 Mediation in the classroom

Mediation is one of the central concepts in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT). Vygotsky (e.g., Rieber & Carton, 1987) argued that it is in interaction with the more capable others that novel intellectual abilities emerge. Mediation is central to this process. Rieber and Carton (1987) argued that any psychological activity, be it when individuals are functioning independently or cooperatively, is mediated. An individual functioning independently relies only on mediational means they have already internalised. Working with others, they also make use of those mediational means available from others (Rieber & Carton, 1987). The range of what the individual is capable of doing when mediation from others is available is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD marks individual abilities which are in the process of maturing and is not a static 'zone', a stage of an individual's development, but is created and changes through mediation from others. As a pedagogical practice, mediation moves the focus away from the most efficient form of assistance toward guidance emerging in working *with* learners (Poehner & Leontjev, 2020).

Feuerstein's (e.g., Feuerstein et al., 2010) notion of reciprocity is relevant for understanding teachers' mediation as different from feedback. *Reciprocity* refers to making note of how a learner responds to the mediator's (e.g., the teacher's) guidance. It builds on the understanding that mediation both **limits** the way the learner can react and **creates novel opportunities** for the learner to react. This

understanding suggests that mediational intentions should be considered *together* with how individuals respond to them.

Mediation compels us to reconsider classroom interaction. Task completion becomes secondary to guiding learner development. This guidance becomes possible as sources for learner struggles emerge in interaction. Wertsch's (e.g., 1994) work on mediated action further explains how mediation emerges and mediational means are used by the agents in the interaction. Wertsch (1994) argued that individuals' (in the classroom, learners' and teachers') actions understood as mediated actions are characterised by an irreducible tension between mediational means and the agents. Mediated action becomes, thus, a powerful means for understanding classroom interaction.

Mediation as instructional practice has been realised in various ways, though often focusing on diagnosing learners' ZPD, which implies that teachers should start from implicit mediation and gradually guide learners more explicitly to find out how close learners are to independent functioning (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). However, Johnson and Golombek (2016), for example, recognised that graduated mediation is not always feasible and developed the concept and practice of *responsive mediation*, directed at growth points, that is, a moment or a series of moments of "cognitive/emotional dissonance" (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; McNeill, 2005). It emerges as "teachers and learners stay attuned to each other's changing state of knowledge and understanding over the course of an educational activity" (Johnson & Golombek, 2016, p. 48), which Mercer (2004) termed *intermental development zone* (IDZ). Briefly, IDZ is a process in which shared knowledge is created as both the teacher and the learner mutually orient towards a joint goal.

In the present study, we explored two processes happening simultaneously: the teacher's actions mediated by the researcher and those of the learners mediated by the teacher (and, in early interactions, by the researcher), focused on transforming ME from an obstacle, whenever it emerged as one, to a mediational means. With mediation at the heart, the tensions addressed in the study can be presented as follows (Figure 1).

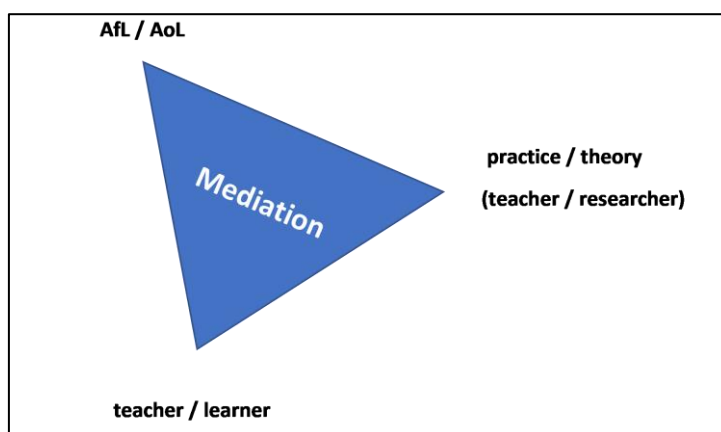


Figure 1. Mediation in the study.

Both the teacher and the researcher aligned in their purpose of resolving tensions between AfL (guided by the principle of equity) and AoL (operationalised as the ME). Our joint goal was a shift in teacher-learner interactions and learner understanding of writing from the identification of issues in written products,

informed by the ME construct, to the writing process, guided rather than constrained by the ME. Working together, we approached this goal (a) as a practising educational professional and (b) as a researcher actively using theoretical concepts and frameworks. Hence, the second tension mediated in the study is that between theory and practice. The researcher engaged in mediating the teacher and the learners. The teacher contributed, informed by her teaching history and the joint history with the learners – this dialectical engagement allowed for creating and maintaining IDZ. The final tension was between the teacher and the learner in these interactions. Instead of a more common resolution of this tension as unidirectional feedback to learners, through the teacher's (and the researcher's) mediation, a mutual understanding of learner struggles and how to address them was constructed.

3 Methodology

3.1 *Participants and data*

The learner-participants came from two L2 courses, one in autumn, one in the following spring semester, at an upper secondary school in Finland. The school was a teacher training school belonging to a university. In this paper, we focus on two interactional episodes, with OPI1 and OPI2. OPI1 was in her final year of upper secondary school about to take her ME; and OPI2 was a learner in his second year of upper secondary school. We focus on these two learners, as we found the interaction with them the most interesting with regard to the extent which the ME was used as a mediational means by the agents in the interaction.

The teacher was, too, a participant in the study. By the time of the study, the teacher had more than twenty years of teaching experience and a PhD on assessment in Finnish upper secondary L2 studies (Pollari, 2017). While the teacher had a background in research, from the outset, she contributed to the study as a practising educational professional.

The audio-recorded oral interactions with learners were the main data. There were seven sessions with individual learners spanning over two days in the first course (totalling 46 minutes 53 seconds) and five such sessions in the second course during two days (total length 61 minutes 56 seconds). The sessions were transcribed with minimal use of transcription markings (Appendix A). OPI1 and OPI2 were in the first and the second course, respectively.

3.2 *The writing activity*

The principle underlying the design was that the procedures should as closely as possible reflect the usual classroom routine. Planning and revising were emphasised throughout the learners' writing process. The teacher asked all learners whether they wanted us to explicitly correct or just mark the points in the essays that were found problematic. A synthesis was given to the learners focusing on the most notable or recurring issues in the text, based on the categories forming the construct of writing in the ME. The ME writing construct is further elaborated in the tool used in the courses, in which the ME scale was transformed into a checklist of points that learners needed to pay attention to in their writing. The tool was collaboratively designed by the teacher and the

researcher in the study and an ME censor (Appendix B). The teacher then asked the learners whether they wanted oral feedback from her, as she would sometimes do in her practice.

3.3 Interactions with learners

Prior to the oral interactions with learners, they were given back their essays and given time to familiarise themselves with the written feedback. While the rest continued working on the assignment given to them for the lesson, those who opted for oral assistance from the teacher came one by one to the teacher and the researcher with their essays. The teacher and the researcher, who familiarised themselves with all of the learners' essays prior to the sessions, also glanced through the essay before each session. After each session, the researcher wrote a quick reflection on the interaction and points to ask from the teacher later. There was no specific structure as to how the sessions should progress. However, the SCT notion of mediation was discussed regularly between the teacher and the researcher during the whole study, that is, prior to, during, and following the sessions. These discussions involved both the conceptual and ontological basis of mediation and its realisation in the classroom, along the lines we outlined in Section 2.

During the early sessions with the learners, as the teacher learned to mediate, her assistance still lacked a systematic orientation to qualities of mediation. During these early sessions, the researcher intervened in the interaction, the intervention serving as the model for the teacher of how learners can be mediated. The teacher gradually started to systematically enable and maintain IDZ with the learners in which a joint understanding of learner writing and how to develop it emerged. The teacher's interaction with OPI2 will illustrate this. In all teacher-learner interactions, both Finnish and English were used flexibly.

3.4 Analysis

The teacher-learner interactions were analysed turn by turn to trace how specific understanding occurred in an individual over a short period of time (Wertsch, 1985). Using mediated action as the unit of analysis, we traced how this understanding emerged on the intermental development zone (IDZ) constructed by the participants in the interaction. In our analysis, we built on the model of mediated action by Burke (e.g., 1969), which has five elements: **act** (what happened), **scene** (the context in which the act occurs), **agent, agency** (in Burke's model, how the agent acted, that is, how the action was mediated), and **purpose** (the intentionality of the agents in their action). We found mediated action to be particularly relevant for the present study, as mediational means can both constrain the action and create novel ways to act, which allowed us to trace (1) how the ME was used in the actions of agents in the interaction and (2) two kinds of mediated actions, that of the teacher and that of the learners.

Feuerstein's (Feuerstein et al., 2010) notion of reciprocity too informed our analysis. We explored (a) how the researcher's mediation created novel opportunities to react for the teacher and (b) how the mediation from both the teacher and the researcher guided the learners' actions. We will consider how the teacher, first largely subconsciously (OPI1) and subsequently consciously (OPI2), oriented to the learners' reciprocity, which both created new ways for the learners to respond

and allowed the participants in the interaction to explicitly bring the ME into it. For this, we will analyse the teacher's (and the researcher's) assistance to learners together with how the learners responded to it. Simultaneously, we will analyse how the researcher, in his turns during the first interactional episode, mediated both OPI1 and the teacher.

4 Results

In the present section, we explore the insights into learners' struggles that emerged in interaction with them. We will focus on how the ME was brought into the interactions and used to guide learner development, becoming thus a mediational means to shape its development. The goal of the first interaction, as mentioned, is to illustrate how both the learner was guided by the teacher and the researcher and the teacher was guided by the researcher.

4.1 Interaction with OPI1

In this section, we will illustrate how the researcher guided the teacher's understanding of a contingent and dialogical process of working *with* learners with the intention to create a qualitative change in learners' thinking which, then, will change their writing process. The researcher's intentionality was to mediate the learner, OPI1 *and* the teacher. These and other mediational processes will be uncovered, informed by mediated action as a concept (characterised by the irreducible tension between agents and mediational means) and a unit of analysis, detailed in Burke's (1969) framework. We are focusing, therefore, on the tensions illustrated in Figure 1.

In Excerpt 1, the researcher intervenes at the start of the interaction. R's intentionality is twofold: (1) to allow the learner to create the basis upon which the mediation is to be built and (2) to provide a model for how teacher-learner interactions can start. We also use Excerpt 1 for presenting in detail how Burke's (1969) model, focusing in later excerpts on the dialectics between the agents and mediational means to trace how IDZ was created and maintained in the interaction.

Excerpt 1. Giving agency to the learner.

1. T: okay uh:
2. R: would you like to ask
3. T: Yeah
4. R: us first
5. OPI1: uh: vois niinku ihan suomeksi /uh: could it be like in Finnish/
6. R: joo saa /yes you can/
7. T: voi joo /you may, yes/
8. OPI1: e: mä siis no emmä tiää että muistaks mulla niinku että helposti tulee just
9. tommosii kirjoitusvirheitä ((shows)) /well, I don't know if you remember that like these writing mistakes ((shows)) kind of happen to me easily/
10. T: m::
11. OPI1: niitä mun pitää just miettiä mut esim täällä oli jotain on my opinion ja tääl mä tavallaan heti tajusin et mitä siinä on väärin tai sillee /those I just have to think about, but for example, there was something *on my opinion* and I kind of immediately realised what was wrong with it/
- 12.

The **mediated action** we focus on in Excerpt 1 is the **act** of OPI1 revealing the issues in her writing she considers important to focus on. The **scene** in which the auction is performed is the interaction among the teacher (T), the learner (OPI1), and the researcher (R), the **agents**, focusing on developing OPI1's draft. The **agency** interesting to focus on is that of OPI1, as this agency is co-created with the researcher. We termed the excerpt as 'giving agency to the learner' to capture the twofold intentionality of the researcher: (a) creating an opportunity for OPI1 to verbalise her struggles and (b) creating a model for the teacher for actualising the theoretical concepts of mediation and IDZ in classroom interaction with learners. The act of OPI1 verbalising her struggle also completes her thinking, allowing her to recognise better what exactly she considers important in her writing.

In response to R's intentionality, OPI1 first negotiates the language of the conversation (line 5). OPI1 then uses *on my opinion* and the word *relievement* (not mentioned but pointed out by the learner; line 8) to illustrate a problem in her writing that she appears to be aware of. OPI1 then brings the teacher's (and the researcher's) attention to a particular issue of which OPI1 is aware and which she considers important. The learners' reciprocity reveals that OPI1 realises that there are recurrent mistakes she makes and may recognise some of them as mistakes. However, she cannot correct them. OPI1 also brings the joint history with the teacher to the exchange ("if you remember"; lines 8–9), affording the creation of an intermental development zone in which the participants collectively work towards understanding how OPI1's issue can be resolved. Simultaneously, as discussed, R's lines 2 and 4 serve as implicit mediation for the teacher. In other words, the learners' action, guided by the R's intentionality, reveals how giving agency to the learner leads the learner to revealing what they consider important to address (accuracy with the focus on recurrent issues). The learner's action is also mediated by their joint history with the teacher. This serves as the basis for the teacher to start her guidance (Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2. Selecting cases to address.

13. T: näitten kohalla no nyt se ei oo ollu se ongelma tuo oikeinkirjoitus vaan
 14. tämmöstä sanaa relievement ei oo olemassa /for these, well now it was not a
 problem with spelling, but there is no such word as relievement/
 15. R: niin /right/
 16. OPI1: a::
 17. T: vaan se on relief /but it is relief/
 18. OPI1: a: siis mä aattelin et onks se niinku /a: so I thought if this is like that/
 19. T: et et niinku se suurin ongelma /that that this biggest problem/
 20. OPI1: Okei
 21. T: tässä oli että ne kaks sun [keskeisintä] /here it was that these two were your
 [central]/
 22. OPI1 [joo] /[yeah]/
 23. T: käsitettä /concepts/
 24. OPI1: joo /yeah/
 25. T: eli forgiveness ja relief niin /that is forgiveness and relief so/
 26. OPI1 Okei

T starts by stating that the word *relievement* does not exist and that it should be *relief* (lines 13–14 and 17). The teacher focusing on the incorrectly spelt words builds on OPI1's "these typos kind of happen to me easily" (Excerpt 1). In other words, the teacher's action is guided by OPI1 considering such mistakes as important. To

this, OPI1 responds that she herself thought that ‘relievement’ might actually be correctly spelt as ‘relief’ (line 18). This yields insights into OPI1’s ZPD.

Later that day, the teacher and the researcher discussed why they did not focus on this issue, and it emerged that they both decided this would not be useful for developing OPI1’s writing as a process. Considering the idiosyncratic nature of the English word formation, it would be difficult for OPI1 to generalise beyond the essay under discussion. Furthermore, this would not be mediation, which is focused on bringing a qualitative transformation in learner thinking. Finally, this would not resolve the OPI1’s struggle of making spelling mistakes easily in general and would deviate from the joint alignment to helping the learner with writing ME essays *and* develop her writing. We also note that in these early sessions, the teacher’s moves were subconscious – hence the researcher’s goal was to guide the teacher to apply the sociocultural concept of mediation in her practice. Indeed, T herself remarked about these early sessions, “I went with the flow”.

Instead, T goes on to say that in her evaluation, the word *relievement* and the word *forgivement* (which the teacher pointed at in the learner’s text) are central issues in OPI1’s text (lines 19 and 21). The teacher, thus, starts to change the direction from individual infelicitous forms in OPI1’s writing as disjointed issues to thinking systematically about writing as a process with reference to the centrality or importance of certain vocabulary in particular texts.

As it will emerge later, T used the pieces of information collected about the learner so far to guide her writing. That is, T recognised a growth point emerging at the outset of the interaction with OPI1, who recognised accuracy as important, was able to recognise infelicitous forms in her writing but was unable to fix them. In Excerpt 3, the teacher continues to build the joint understanding with OPI1, starting to formulate an explanation for focusing on the two specific lexical issues in OPI1’s writing.

Excerpt 3. Involving the researcher – shifting the focus.

27. T: ne oli niinku systemaattisesti kirjoitettu väärin ja mua se lukijana häiritäsi mä
 28. en tiää miten paljon sen sua häiritäsi. /they were like systematically written
 incorrectly and, as a reader, it bothered me I don't know how much it bothered
 you./
 29. OPI1: joo hh /yeah hh/
 30. R: umm hmh it’s not like about what sort of: is: uh: particularly problematic
 31. about this essay, I would rather think in terms of what you can do to make it
 better
 32. T: m:
 33. OPI1: Yea
 34. R: because things like relievement it’s just that we don’t [know]it like we could
 learn it
 35. OPI1: [yea] hh
 36. R: but there is no chance probably that you would have it during the: exam
 37. T: Yeah
 38. R: when you use the same word, but I would think more in terms what you can do
 39. when you write
 40. OPI1: Huh
 41. R: to: make less of such [mistakes]
 42. OPI1: [yeah]
 43. R: the number of mistakes this is where you lose more most of the points
 44. OPI1: Yeah
 45. R: this is where you should pay attention
 46. OPI1: yea:h that’s true

In lines 27–28, T explains that as the two words were written systematically incorrectly, the issue is serious, also linking it to the ‘communicativeness’ part of the construct assessed in the ME (see Appendix B). As the teacher confirmed during the following discussion with the researcher, the implication is that if the text bothers the reader, the effectiveness of its message can be lost. The teacher’s action – suggesting that not all accuracy issues are of the same weight in the text is mediated by (a) OPI1’s concern about the accuracy in her texts and (b) the ME. We note here that OPI1 did not bring the ME as an obstacle, though accuracy, emphasised as an important part of the ME writing construct, is clearly her concern. However, the irreducible tension between agents and mediational means in mediated action should be taken into account. Here, the teacher’s intention was, as we discussed after the session and as the researcher recognised (see below), to discuss OPI1’s challenge with reference to the ME.

It is not clear whether OPI1 understands the explanation as intended. However, she accepts it (line 29). As a part of the psychological activity, the teacher in line 28 (a) makes the researcher’s assistance available to the learner and (b) asks for a confirmation of her thinking from the researcher, who explicitly brings the ME into the interaction, moving the focus from identifying the issue to acting upon it. As mediation to the learner, the researcher’s intention is to transform the task to make it manageable for OPI1. The researcher brings the ME as a mediational means. The researcher’s action is to move the focus away from the specific essay to the level of writing processes (“what you can do when you write”; lines 38–39). As mediation to the teacher, this signals that (a) the focus should be changed to guiding the learner’s thinking about her writing beyond the text at hand and (b) an explicit connection with the ME can be made for the learner.

Excerpt 4. Linking to the previous performance.

47. T: yeah, there were quite a [few] mistakes
 48. OPI1: [mm]
 49. T: but also because the because the key keyword
 50. OPI1: yea:h
 51. T: last time you wrote *marriadge*
 52. OPI1: yeah hh
 53. T: you sort of you misspelled it, but it ↑wasn’t sort of because you didn’t use the
 54. wo:rd all the time, but *forgivement* comes here in every
 55. OPI1: [yeah, many times]
 56. T: in [every single] sentence almost
 57. OPI1: [yea]
 58. T: [so:] it it gets a bit irritating...

At the start of Excerpt 4, the teacher agrees with the researcher (line 47). However, the teacher does not yet build on the researcher’s intentionality to move the focus beyond the text at hand. The concept of mediated action explains the teacher’s reciprocity to the researcher’s intentionality. Namely, other mediational means, too, mediate the teacher’s action, one of them, the *joint history* with the learner (line 51), brought initially by OPI1 (Excerpt 1). The teacher uses this joint history to illustrate the difference between an accuracy problem in the previously written text and that discussed presently. Even though *marriage* was previously misspelt, the teacher did not find it that problematic since OPI1 used it only a few times in the text. This is different from *forgiveness* used numerous times (lines 53–56). OPI1 acknowledges this in lines 55 and 57. The teacher’s intentionality in the

action is to help the learner further understand that different mistakes can have different weight in the eyes of the reader. This teacher's action is thus qualitatively different from the action in Excerpt 3. Here, the teacher shapes the OPI1's understanding of what "systematically written incorrectly" (line 27) means. OPI1's reciprocity is also different. On the surface, OPI1's reaction both at the start of Excerpt 3 and here is laughter, which can be interpreted as adoption of a more passive position in the interaction (Glenn & Holt, 2013) or even embarrassment. Here, however, OPI1's laughter intervenes into the teacher's explanation. Furthermore, in line 55, OPI1 explicitly indicates that she recognises the frequency of the incorrectly spelled form. We, therefore, rather interpret it as indicating OPI1's recollection of that experience, which guided the joint the understanding of her struggle and how to address it. The teacher completes her thought, strengthening OPI1's emerging understanding ("in every single sentence almost", line 56). The teacher's turn, therefore, builds on OPI1's turn in line 55. While the intention is to help the learner, the unfolding interaction creates a cognitive/ emotional dissonance for OPI1 (Excerpt 5). At this point, the focus is shifted to mediating OPI1's emotions.

Excerpt 5. Mediating learner's emotions.

76. OPI1: ...I think I could do better
 77. R: [yea]
 78. T: [m:] you could I have seen you write much better
 79. OPI1: yeah hh
 80. T: much much m:uch better some of these typing mistakes
 81. OPI1: yeah hh

OPI1's turn in line 76 emerges as a result of a clash between OPI1's own experience as an L2 writer and the currently unfolding joint understanding. The teacher confirms OPI1's experience, simultaneously working with OPI1's emotionality. However, it is more than just encouragement. The teacher's action creates an opportunity for the learner to grab the responsibility for her own performance (as she can do much better in their joint evaluation). Whether the teacher recognises the growth point – OPI1 knows she can do better but does not fully understand how – is not clear. However, in Excerpt 6, the focus of the mediation *is* shifted to helping OPI1 "do better".

Excerpt 6. Proposing revision strategies.

82. T: you do them you make these mistakes quite often
 83. OPI1: m:
 84. T: ...I think that this is just a sort of a question that you have to be extra careful
 85. ((taps on paper))
 86. OPI1: Yeah
 87. T: so when you have written your essay in the Matriculation Exam, just leave it
 be
 88. There
 89. OPI1: Yeah
 90. T: do something else, read a text [or]
 91. OPI1: [yeah]
 92. T: go to the toilet
 93. OPI1: yeah hh
 98. T: and then sort of very very carefully look at each letter

99. OPI1: m:
 101. R: particularly if you know that you make mistakes like in *because* pay special
 102. attention to *because*
 103. OPI1: Yeah
 104. R I think that's the- if like if you think about the mistakes that you know that
 you
 105. make in many essays, right, that'd be the first thing to look at because this is
 when
 106. you know that this is the mistake I make, and this is what I can easily sort of
 107. Solve

The teacher again informs OPI1 that she makes vocabulary and spelling mistakes quite often. This generalisation brings the interaction back to the original point OPI1 raised (Excerpt 1, lines 8–9). However, now it is different, as it builds on the joint understanding of the learner's performance and potentially different essay evaluation depending on how central the vocabulary items are in the essays as well as on that OPI1 has a capacity to write with greater accuracy. The teacher, then, proposes a self-regulation strategy that OPI1 can use during the ME (lines 88–98). This strategy creates an opportunity for the learner to distance themselves from the text, making the task of finding accuracy problems in it more manageable. The teacher also brings the ME as a mediational means, using the ME format which allows taking a break to suggest that the learner can orchestrate the breaks such that they happen during the writing process, not at the end of it. While this strategy answers to OPI1's general challenge of "writing mistakes happening easily", it does not build on the joint understanding constructed so far – some accuracy issues being more serious than others. Hence, the researcher transforms the teacher's suggestion, inviting OPI1 to focus on the mistakes she is likely to make (lines 101–107). This action is mediated by the whole of the preceding interaction, including responding to OPI1's cognitive/emotional dissonance (Excerpt 5), which the researcher recognised as a growth point.

The researcher's intention is to invite OPI1 to analyse her own writing, which by this time, the participants know she can potentially do, *and* making this task manageable for her. The researcher, namely, works towards transforming OPI1's thinking about revision as noticing text about which correctness she doubts towards building on OPI1's writing experience. As mediation to the teacher, this elicits the necessity to work within learners' Zone of Proximal Development and to build on the joint understanding emerging in the IDZ. The researcher's rationale is that focusing on the whole text may not allow OPI1 to develop it (as emerged at the outset of the interaction). Focusing on particular mistakes OPI1 knows she makes, on the other hand, is likely to be within her ZPD. This is implied by OPI1's "I can do better". The suggestion to be selective builds on the emerging joint understanding that not all mistakes are of the same weight.

At the end of the interaction, the teacher explicitly builds on this latter: "if you are not sure of the word, then try not to use it every sort of in every place (.) try to use synonyms try to use other ways of saying that". The teacher, then, maintains the intermental development zone in which a joint understanding of how OPI1 can resolve her struggle. This shows the teacher's growing recognition of mediation as a contingent systematic process building on learners' reciprocity. Furthermore, the teacher used the ME as the mediational means to guide OPI1's writing process rather than a means to evaluate her text (with reference to the ME scale or the checklist in Appendix B, for example).

4.2 Interaction with OPI2

In this section, we will illustrate, with reference to the exchange between the teacher and OPI2, the teacher's internalisation of the mediation whose focus is changing the ME from an obstacle to a mediational means to guide learner writing development.

It transpired that OPI2's essay, while having an impressive vocabulary, lacked in its structure, ending abruptly. One reason for the teacher to mark this issue as important was that in the teacher's experience, learners often treat their ME writing having a purpose of complying with the separate aspects of the ME construct based on their understanding of the weight of separate aspects, rather than treating these holistically to produce quality texts. Hence, the length limit set for the ME essay can hinder their writing, as happened with OPI2's text, who sacrificed the quality of his text to complying with the ME length requirement (Excerpt 7). We note that in the teacher's experience, learners sacrificing the quality of their ME writing to length, and has become more common.

Excerpt 7. Staying within the length limit.

1. T: and a:lso I have written tha:t your beginning and your ending s:omehow <I:
2. would have liked to see> some sort of a- I like sort of circle stories
3. OPI2: m:
4. T: but you sta:rt with something ...
5. OPI2: ↑yeah
6. T: and then you come to some sort of a conclusion at the end where you tie all
7. these things that you have discussed
8. OPI2: I actually have a comment on ↑that ... When I was doing this or writing this
9. essay. At the end, I really tried to like do: I really tried to ehm create a proper
- ending
10. T: Uhu
11. OPI2: because it was reaching the word limit or ↑limit, I could not- it was really hard
- to
12. OPI2: e:h, to be honest, I I really wasn't like why I really wasn't satisfied with the
- ending because-
13. T: m:
14. OPI2: it could have been much better. I felt that it was quite- I I didn't finish it like
- completely
15. OPI2: I also explain it as concentrating a bit too much on one one perspective I really
16. wanted to like
17. T: Yeah
18. OPI2: take another perspective
19. then I thought that it would have gone like way too way past this ((taps))
20. T: m:
21. OPI2: that's why I quite like stopped stop stopped like maybe too early

The teacher's action at the start of the interaction, eliciting a coherence issue in OPI2's text, is mediated by her experience with learners' ME essay writing, as we outlined above. As mediation, it is rather explicit, taking the responsibility for performance away from the learner. The teacher, though, during our discussions, stated that it would be difficult to apply the graduated principle of mediation in every interaction with the learners because of the time constraints. Eliciting the issue more explicitly, thus, was a conscious choice here, mediated by the time constraints. That said, the teacher recognised OPI2's reciprocity, taking a more

passive role in the interaction after line 9, allowing OPI2 to verbalise his actual challenge, similar to how this happened in the interaction with OPI1. The teacher's assistance created an opportunity for OPI2 to react in a particular way. OPI2, namely, reveals that for him, it was hard to create a proper ending to the essay due to the ME constraints. OPI2 recognised the issue, clearly expressing his dissatisfaction (lines 12–14), but he could not resolve the tension (line 11). Furthermore, OPI2 explains what he wanted to achieve and why he ended up running out of space (lines 15–19). The reason that OPI2 ran out of space (“take another perspective”, line 18) is, too, guided by the ME, whose rating rubric lists presentation of more than one point of view in argumentative texts (Appendix B). OPI2's action – his verbalisation of the struggle – is, thus, strongly mediated by the ME (as is his challenge in writing the essay). This suggested to the teacher that the solution was likely within his ZPD. Hence, the teacher decides to change the ME length requirement from an obstacle to a means for developing OPI2's writing. From here, the teacher and OPI2 jointly construct a solution for OPI2's challenge (allowing IDZ to emerge) – as is illustrated in Excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8. Strategy for staying within the length.

22. T: ↑I don't think like you would have gone way past this because I don't think that
23. this is sort of- do you remember how many characters you have? without spaces
24. ↑my suggestion is that now that you go back to the classroom
25. OPI2: m:
26. T: ↑try to see: if you could find one or two perhaps two sentences where
27. you could have some some sort of a *in addition* or
28. OPI2: m m:
29. T: *furthermore* or *however nevertheless in conclusion* or something like that and then
30. write an ending sentence
31. OPI2 OK
32. T: it doesn't have to be a paragraph, just sort of a sentence
33. OPI2 ↑OK

As the first step, the teacher tells OPI2 that he has not surpassed the length limit (Line 23). This elicits for OPI2 that he should still operate within the parameters of the ME essay. The teacher then asks the learner to go back to the classroom and complete the text using a few sentences only as well as to include several linking adverbs to the body paragraphs to satisfy the ME cohesion requirement. The teacher does not provide a detailed model for how the learner can do it. As T revealed in the subsequent discussion, “I wanted him to see it himself.” That is, she wanted to give the learner agency, building on the given suggestions: (a) brief concluding sentences and (b) more cohesion in the text, including making a connection to the introductory paragraph.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Our motivation for this study was increasing educational equity, with which the assessment culture prevalent in the upper-secondary school classrooms in Finland may come into conflict according to both teachers (Leontjev, submitted; Välijärvi et al., 2009) and learners (Mäkipää & Oaukrim-Soivio, 2019). Our specific focus was

on changing the ME from an obstacle to learner writing to a mediational means to guide it.

As we illustrated based on two cases, the obstacles that the ME creates are different for different learners. In both cases, however, assessment using the ME scale and focusing on the gaps in the learners' texts would not have resolved the learners' challenges. We note that the teacher favoured formative feedback from the outset. However, even formative feedback is often unidirectional rather than reciprocal (Poehner & Leontjev, 2020). Mediation, emerging in working together *with* the learners rather than given to them, allowed for guiding learners in a qualitatively different way than feedback does.

Our analysis of the two excerpts does not aim for generalisability but to illustrate the mediational processes as outlined in Figure 1. The first interaction illustrates how IDZ is created in a collaborative activity. In this activity, the teacher's intentionality to develop the learner and the researcher's intentionality to mediate (a) the learner's understanding of the writing process and (b) the teacher's guiding practice into a systematic process come together. These two mediational processes became visible when the actions of the participants in the interaction were considered as mediated actions. OPI1's understanding of her writing process was mediated by the teacher and the researcher. The teacher's understanding of mediation and her actions were guided by the researcher, who, in turn, built on the teacher's contribution to the interaction in guiding the learner *and* the teacher. Finally, the tension between the ME (AoL) and assessment directed on promoting learner writing was resolved by making the ME a means to develop learner writing and shifting the focus beyond the learners' challenges in the text at hand to writing processes.

This shift was particularly evident at the end of the first interaction when the teacher proposed a strategy that OPI1 could use. While on the surface, the strategy seems to be created by the teacher and the researcher, it is the outcome of the whole interaction, created jointly as the participants' histories and understandings emerged on the intermental development zone. Just like in the first interaction, the teacher's guidance to OPI2 emerged as the joint understanding of OPI2's struggle surfaced in the interaction. This time, the researcher did not intervene, meaning that the teacher guided the learner based on her understanding of mediation, mediational means, and mediated performance.

With regard to the second research question, being sensitive to learners' reciprocity guided the way that the interactions unfolded, yielding deeper insights into areas of learners' struggles. Namely, both learners were aware of their challenges but could not resolve them, which would not have surfaced should the assistance have been given in a unidirectional manner.

In the first interaction, the format of the ME was used to construct a strategy that makes addressing spelling mistakes manageable for OPI1. OPI1's joint history with the teacher created a joint understanding that OPI1, indeed, had the capacity to write better, which, in turn, created a context for proposing what OPI1 could *herself* do to improve. In her interaction with OPI2, the teacher used the length limit of the ME (which OPI2 perceived as an obstacle) to guide his writing, making it more concise. This was the teacher's way to enable the learner's development: once OPI2 practices finishing the existing essay concisely, he is more likely to write a different essay similarly. We would like to highlight that the two interactions unfolded very differently. This difference was not simply due to the presence of the researcher in the first interaction but a necessary outcome

of the concept of mediation—a dialogical contingent process accomplished *with* learners (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Poehner & Leontjev, 2020)—guiding the interactions. We, hence, argue that the benefit of such interactions is *precisely* in them being different, creating opportunities for different learners to thrive—which is at the heart of equity in education.

To be sure, documenting learners’ attitudes to, preferences of, and perceptions of classroom assessment and feedback—the focus of much research in Finland with regard to the influence of the ME in upper-secondary school classrooms—is important. Jointly working towards a change in classroom assessment and learner guidance practices, we made a further step, building on this research. Indeed, any development of classroom assessment that positions learners as active agents in the assessment process and is about finding how to support learner development is necessarily aimed at increasing equity in education (see Johnson & Golombek, 2016). We, thus, note that a similar dialogical approach of working with learners can uncover other inequities in the growingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms (see Perumal et al., 2020).

The implications of our study are, thus, above all, pedagogical. We argue that researcher–teacher partnerships can be essential in resolving challenges such as merging assessment of learning reflected in the ME and assessment for learning elicited in the Finnish National Core Curriculum. However, considering the necessity of scalability of developments as the one we outline in this paper, we propose that an approach to teacher professional development (Johnson & Golombek, 2018) could involve a two-step process when teachers first collaborate with researchers on developing their practices and then, jointly with researchers, conduct in-service training.

Limitations of the study should be mentioned. One of them is the lack of learners’ perspectives. Knowing how learners perceived the teacher’s mediation and how they used it could have added to the interpretation of the classroom interaction and added strength to our argument. Furthermore, even though we discussed mediation with reference to Johnson and Golombek’s (2016) notion of responsive mediation, this concept emerged relatively late in our discussions. Hence, it did not shape the interactions between the teacher and the learners, just our subsequent interpretations. Should we have engaged with responsive mediation earlier, we would focus more on the learners’ *perezhivaniya*² emerging in the interactions. Finally, considering that resolving tensions was at the heart of our collaboration, designing the study based on the Activity Theory could have been beneficial (e.g., Herazo et al., 2019).

We note that we are aware of inequities and anxieties that emerge as a consequence of high-stakes assessments such as the Matriculation Examination (Pollari, 2016; Leontjev, submitted; Shohamy, 2001). In a sense, then, our exploration and proposal for how the ME can be used to guide the development of learner writing perpetuates these inequities. However, we illustrated that the ME preparation should not be about focusing on the product and the ME can indeed become a means for changing learners’ understanding of the L2 writing process. This, as any practice which positions learners as active agents in assessment and is about finding how to support learner development, is aimed at increasing equity in education (see Johnson & Golombek, 2016).

Endnotes

¹ We are not claiming that the construct that the ME elicits is poor. In fact, in our opinion, the ME writing construct has been defined quite well (see Appendix B). It, namely, elicits (1) communicativeness (how effectively the author is able to convey the message), (2) the content and structure of the text (including cohesion, coherence, and versatility of means to engage the reader), and (3) language richness and accuracy, each category having descriptors for band scores from “0” to “99”. Still, learners and teachers alike focus more on the accuracy part of the scale, as evidenced by research outlined in this paper.

² Perezhivanie – emotional lived experience and a dialectical unity of emotion and intellect. It is not the experience itself but how individuals interpret it through the prism of their emotion-intellect.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Transcription markings.

| Symbol | Meaning |
|-------------------------|---|
| text | a stressed word or a part of it underlined |
| A: [text] B: [text] | overlapping utterances |
| : | elongation of the preceding sound |
| /text/ | English translation of the text originally in Finnish |
| ((text)) | comment or extralinguistic information |
| hh | Laughter |
| <text> | noticeably slower pace |
| ↑ | rising pitch |
| ? | slightly rising intonation, usually at the end of the utterance |
| ... | skipped turns |

Appendix B. Checklist created from the ME writing rating scale.

| Communicativeness | Content and organisation | Language breadth and accuracy |
|--|---|--|
| Does your text target the target audience that it needs to (check the task)? | What is the central idea of this composition? | Have you tried to use varied words and phrases? |
| Do you use the language that is appropriate for the task and the audience? (e.g., appropriately formal / informal) | Which are the ideas work well and which need more elaboration? | Have you tried to use other than just basic words? (for example, 'nice', 'good', 'very', 'thing', ...) |
| What sections of your text are clear and what paragraphs are still unclear or difficult to read? | Where do you have enough details or examples and where should they be added? Why? | Have you used your verbs in the correct tense? |
| At which points does your text hold the reader's interest? Are there points at which it fails to do that? Why? | Where is the organisation clear and where is it confusing? | Are the verb forms correct? |
| Have you tried to get your reader interested in your text right from the beginning? How did you do that? | Do you use connecting devices in a versatile way? | Have you checked for subject—verb agreement? |
| | Did you divide your text into paragraphs? Is there just one main idea in each paragraph? | Have you used the correct prepositions? |
| | Do you start with each paragraph with a sentence that contains or refers to the main idea of the paragraph? | Have you left out the articles where they are required? |
| | If it is an argumentative text, do you present it from more than one point of view? | Have you used all your pronouns correctly? |
| | Do you repeat the same thing several times? | Is your choice of adjectives and adverbs appropriate? |
| | | Have you written in complete sentences? (narratives may differ in this) |

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