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***Applying the descriptors
for “Facilitating the pluricultural space”
(Council of Europe, 2020) in an action research
study of an L3 English lingua franca
telecollaboration***

An action research study, aimed to build intercultural competences and mediation skills through communicative language activities, was conducted by the author during a telecollaboration project between L3 students from universities in Poland (n = 22) and Kyrgyzstan (n = 21). As a pre-post measure of mediation skills, descriptors from the *CEFR Companion Volume* (CEFRV) were adapted to create a self-assessment questionnaire. The skills focus was on understanding, being understood and developing positive, empathetic and respectful attitudes across cultures. Participants took part in synchronous computer-mediated communication in-class meetings with tasks to do in small, international groups, involving information exchange and comparing and contrasting. Offline they completed follow up tasks, working in the same groups, communicating as they wished. Data from the self-assessment questionnaires from the Polish students was triangulated with reflections written following the first online encounter, and extracts from interviews made at the end of the project. Statistically significant gains were found on only 2 of the self-assessment statements, and these were corroborated by quantitative



and qualitative oral and written data from the participants. Length of the telecollaboration and alignment between tasks and the questionnaire are suggested as possible factors for the moderate changes in mediation skills noted. Reflections are made on possible changes to procedure, tasks and the self-assessment instrument.

Keywords: action research, CEFR Companion Volume, mediation, facilitating pluricultural space, L3 English, telecollaboration

Słowa kluczowe: badania w działaniu, CEFR Companion Volume, mediacja, tworzenie przestrzeni różno-kulturowej, język angielski jako J3, telekolaboracja

1. Introduction

This article examines mediation within the context of communication between students of different cultures, with proficiency in English ranging from A2-B2+, meeting for the first time in an English as a lingua franca online telecollaboration. Bringing together young people from markedly different cultural contexts, European, predominantly Christian Poland and Central Asian, predominantly Muslim Kyrgyzstan, aimed to raise awareness, increase openness and build deeper understanding. Telecollaboration is defined as an “internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence,” (Helm, 2013:28). In a short-term virtual exchange of this nature participants are initially not known to each other and are brought together for a specific purpose. Nothing can be assumed in this transient context (Kecskes, 2014). In order to cooperate successfully on joint productive tasks, everything must be negotiated (Canagarajah, 2007; Zhu, 2015), “explaining, learning, comparing across differences, revealing complexities, challenging assumptions, working out accommodations and solving problems” (Brownlie, 2017:48). In this paper these actions are understood a form of mediation, “Facilitating a pluricultural space” (Council of Europe, 2020) (CoE).

Mediation was included in the original Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), (2001) in the specific context of enabling communication “between persons who are unable, for whatever reason, to communicate with each other directly” (CoE, 2001:14). No scales were included. However, communication strategies were envisaged as ways in which a speaker used all their available resources to achieve successful communication in a specific

situation, or to complete a task. These strategies were considered “application of metacognitive principles: *Pre-planning, Execution, Monitoring, and Repair Action* to the different kinds of communicative activity: Reception, Interaction, Production and Mediation” (CoE, 2001:57). Mediation strategies specifically were “ways of coping with the demands of using finite resources to process information and establish equivalent meaning.” (CoE, 2001: 87). This suggests an interaction between notions of mediation, use of communication strategies and the developing, yet still limited resources of a learner. As will be shown, these aspects were to be further evolved and expanded by North (the lead author of CEFR) and colleagues in subsequent research to develop descriptors for mediation (2014-2017, see North, Piccardo, 2016), which provided the foundation for mediation in the revised versions of CEFR (CoE, 2018, 2020).

Mediation as envisaged in the Common European Framework Companion Volume (CEFR CV), (CoE, 2020) is a considerably more complex process (North, Docherty, 2016) involving understanding not only the words, but also the intention of a speaker, interpretation which, in turn, requires intellectual effort, pragmatic competence and interpersonal skills. As a reciprocal process, mediation also involves awareness of one’s own speech and the willingness and ability to strategically adapt to and accommodate the needs of the interlocutor. In this way mediation is not only transmission of information, but also achievement of successful communication through co-construction of an understandable version of the message, a “self-effacing bridging effort to ‘get something across’ and facilitate the (mutual) understanding of other people” (North, Docherty, 2016: 24).

CEFR CV (CoE, 2020) follows the approach of the Council of Europe, advocating for an open and inclusive attitude to languages and cultures, described as plurilingualism. The ideal is for a “plurilingual population able to accept otherness, to empathise and to communicate across linguistic and cultural barriers” (North, Panthier, 2016:18). Thus mediation “is all at once cognitive, communicative and intercultural” (Beacco et al, 2016: 54) with strong social and relational purpose. This plurilingual competence comprises holistic knowledge, attitudes and skills about languages and cultures which can be developed “when the classroom is a space where several languages and cultures- and the relationships among them- are encountered, explored and related to each other” (Candelier et al., 2012:8). In increasingly multicultural societies this is seen as a means of building concord between different groups.

In the project which is the subject of this paper the participants use English as a lingua franca (ELF) to communicate, “defined as uses of English by interlocutors who do not share an L1” (Mendes de Olivera, 2024: 106). In the

CEFRCV, (CoE, 2020), within the section on Mediation, language is viewed as a tool actively used in social contexts to co-construct meaning (Vygotsky, 1986) through interaction, facilitating learning and reflection. Mediation is understood not simply as a means of supporting language, but as bringing people together, by creating a space in which they are able to negotiate and come to an understanding, despite differences in assumptions, views, needs or intentions (North, Piccardo, 2016). In the classroom, mediation may also take the form of cognitive scaffolding for understanding of new concepts, or relational support by the teacher, while in collaborative work, members of the group may help to effect the mediation, or alternatively it may be led by an individual. The aim is to ensure that everyone understands the task to be done, the concepts involved, and all can contribute to a mutually acceptable resolution through a process of “*linguaging*”, “*a dynamic, never-ending process of using language to make meaning*” (Swain, 2006:96). It is this collaborative aspect of mediation which is the subject of the research project to be described.

In the CEFRCV (2020) mediation is divided into a series of activities, namely: mediating a text, mediating concepts, mediating communication, followed by mediation strategies. Mediating communication is divided into three subscales: “*Facilitating pluricultural space*”, “*Acting as an intermediary in informal situations*”, and “*Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreement*”. Cultural mediation, an aspect implied in “*Facilitating pluricultural space*”, is defined as “*understanding, explication, commenting, interpretation and negotiating various phenomena, facts, texts, behaviour, situations, feelings, emotions, etc., between people belonging to different cultures or subcultures*” (Zarate et al., 2004: 103).

Within an international telecollaboration participants are thrust into situations where they are ‘pushed’ to communicate (Swain, 1985) with unfamiliar international partners. Developing the ability to deal with “*otherness*” can take place when there is an appropriate “*space*” in which this is possible (Piccardo, North, 2016:27). This process of discovery of cultures and languages through identification, comparison and reflection encompasses both cultural and communicative mediation (CoE, 2020). The scale “*Facilitating a pluricultural space*”, part of the Mediating Communication set, is based on three key concepts: building understanding of the differing views, attitudes and assumptions among participants; showing respect and empathy towards the views and attitudes of others; and circumventing misunderstandings, or dealing constructively with such situations should they arise (CoE, 2020:114). The scale anticipates progress as the user broadens their linguistic and pragmatic repertoire, from the ability to show interest and empathy through questions and answers at B1, through increased

flexibility in response at B2+, which enables greater expression of sensitivity and more extended explanation (CoE, 2020:114). It was selected for use in an action research study of the telecollaboration project which is the topic of this paper, as it offered a focus for operationalization of the skills needed by participants in an intercultural virtual exchange. The study investigated development of these skills through student reported use, not only using the scale, but also in written and oral reflections. The mediation skills as such were not graded, rather, course assessment focused on students' ability to describe and discuss the ways they had applied mediation during the telecollaboration in an oral interview at the end of the course.

2. Literature review

2.1. Mediation descriptors of the CEFR CV

Development of the mediation scales and their publication in the CEFR CV, initially in 2018, and in their final form in 2020, has inspired a large number of publications explaining and discussing the extended interpretation of mediation. These include a number by the authoring team, some of which focus on the creation and validation of the descriptors (North, Docherty, 2016; North, Panthier 2016; North, 2020), others on explanation of underlying concepts (Piccardo 2022a, 2022b; Piccardo, North, 2019; Piccardo, North 2020; CEFR Expert Group, 2023) and on aspects relating to implementation of the descriptors (North, Piccardo, Goodier, Fasoglio, Margonis-Pasinetti, Ruschoff, 2022). As official translations of the CEFR CV were available only in English and French, local publications with explanation and commentary followed, such as Janowska and Plak (2021) in Poland.

The ways in which mediation is operationalized within the CEFR CV is however, not without criticism. Within English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research distinct characteristics of discourse have been identified. Participants in new groups using English as a language of communication need to accommodate to each other's language and establish acceptable norms (Ehrenreich, 2009). Accommodation (Jenkins, 2022) includes phonological, linguistic and pragmatic aspects. In short, as their aim is successful communication, participants are flexible and agentive with language, using it to meet their own needs, rather than adhering to standard forms (Leung, Jenkins, 2020). Bearing this in mind, Leung and Jenkins (2020), discussing the initial version of the CEFR CV (2018), raise questions as to whether the scales for mediation of communication sufficiently allow for ELF or multilingual discourse. The scale "Facilitating a pluricultural space" is evaluated

positively in terms of affordance for agency and flexibility, yet reservations are expressed about “monolingually constituted descriptors” (Leung, Jenkins, 2020: 39). The main difficulty identified appears to be judging what is “good mediation” due to its contextualized, contingent and fluid nature. As the effectiveness of each mediation depends on those engaged in it, they argue that conception of standards is unrealistic. Deygers (2019) argues that for mediation to take place, at least two other communicative skills are required, and so suggests that separate scales in the CEFRCV may in fact be superfluous, querying whether mediation can be operationalized a fifth skill. The CEFR expert group (2023) go further, questioning whether the aspects contained in the “Facilitating a pluricultural space” scale and the “Facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements” scale require assessment at all. Dendrinou criticizes the approach taken by ELF researchers who focus narrowly on linguistic features of inter-lingual ELF communication, rather than studying the situational context of the interactions in which “linguistic hybridity” (2024:9) takes place.

The authors of the CEFRCV advocate using the descriptors to create Action-oriented scenarios for mediation (Piccardo, North, 2019; Piccardo, 2022a, 2023), envisaged as real-life tasks that can be introduced in the classroom, creating affordances for enactment, discussion and reflection. The descriptors provide both the inspiration for the scenario and the means for its assessment. In this vein, the volume edited by North et al. (2022) offers a series of 12 case studies of application of CEFRCV mediation descriptors across a variety of settings, involving learners of all levels of proficiency.

There is as yet, however, limited research available on application of the mediation scales of CEFRCV in teaching and learning contexts. Luis (2024) applied the mediation scales in analysis and classification of communicative mediation tasks in two ELT textbooks in use in Portugal. Some difficulty was found with classification due to interconnection between different scales. For example, tasks identified as having features from “Facilitating a pluricultural space” also involved interpretation and explanation of texts, and task implementation in groups required skills from the “Collaborative interactions with peers” scale. Indications were also made of the need for teachers to develop deeper understanding of “intercultural communication” (Luis, 2024:349) to better enable implementation of mediation in their teaching. Masats, Moore and Herrera (2024) used the CEFRCV scales from Mediating a text to examine use of languages and multimodal resources by Catalan secondary school learners of English in non-formal contexts. The study offers insights into teacher and learner mediation in use.

2.2. L3 lingua franca communication in telecollaboration

Intercultural telecollaborations are most often between foreign language students and first language users of the target language, with English the most frequently used language. Less common are so-called lingua franca projects where English is the language of communication (ELF), but not the first language of either group. While interest in this is now growing (O'Dowd, 2025), in a scoping review in 2018, Akiyama and Cunningham found only 9% of studies (out of 55 synthesized) were lingua franca.

Telecollaboration has been widely found to bring positive results in terms of language proficiency, lowering of negative affective factors, growth in cultural knowledge, awareness and sensitivity, and soft skills (see O'Dowd, 2021; Dooly, 2022 for overviews).

In lingua franca telecollaboration, there appears to be an absence of research focused specifically on mediation. However, the Soliya programme (Helm, 2013) employed a dialogic model which made use of trained facilitators who provided supportive linguistic and cultural mediation in discussion between international participants of deliberately chosen sensitive and controversial topics. The opportunity to express divergent views with respect and empathy was viewed as leading to deeper understanding of differences. The model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) includes aspects of mediation, interpreting and relating between cultures, although originally used with reference to text. The ICC model has been widely adopted for theorization in telecollaborations (Godwin-Jones, 2019) and yet is not without criticism (Hoff, 2020), despite its considerable contribution to the field. Baker, (2015) highlighted the need for studies of language use in ELF settings to include a broader understanding of what makes communication successful, going beyond the linguistic, to include student attitudes and cultural sensitivities. He pointed out that how students can be encouraged to make use of their whole semiotic resources in international encounters, purposefully and with empathy, is under-researched, and also under-represented in teacher education. Studies on intercultural pragmatics in telecollaboration also include some aspects of communication that occur within the CEFRCV mediation scales, (e.g. Cunningham, 2017). A small number of recent studies of online collaborations focus specifically on aspects of strategy use in communication. Cimeni, Sert and Jenks (2022) in multimodal conversation analysis of an L3 online collaboration for university students from Türkiye and Kazakhstan, with English as the lingua franca, examined how students managed to maintain the topic of discussion, finding use of strategies to compensate for limited

proficiency. Wach et al., (2025) in a telecollaboration between university students of Dutch from Poland and Hungary examined the type and use of communication strategies in Dutch to maintain interaction during three online discussions on cultural differences. “Time gaining and reduction strategies” were found to be most frequent, significantly more often used by lower proficiency learners, followed by “linguistic compensation”, within which “use of multilingual repertoires” was the most frequent occurring (p.85). Echoing findings from other studies (e.g. Cirit-İşıklı et al., 2023), online collaboration was found to stimulate use of communication strategies as a natural feature of authentic interaction.

According to Dendrinis (2024), there is little research into interaction which shows how learners mediate with each other to facilitate communication and understanding. As shown in this review, as yet there appears to be no research applying the Mediating communication scales for “Facilitating a pluricultural space” from the CEFRCV. In addition, there is relatively little research where English is the medium of communication (L3, ELF), which examines how learners negotiate mutual understanding in online telecollaboration and includes non-European participants. This study aims to contribute to filling that gap. To this effect the research questions are:

- 1) What specific mediation skills (understood specifically as making oneself understood, understanding others, developing positive, empathetic and respectful attitudes across cultures, based on the Facilitating a pluricultural space CEFRCV scale) do students report applying during the telecollaboration? What evidence of these do they give?
- 2) How do students’ self-reported mediation skills (as specified) develop during an L3 telecollaboration project?
- 3) To what extent does the self-assessment questionnaire based on the “Facilitating a pluricultural space” CEFRCV scale capture development in the specific mediation skills?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This was an action research project conducted by the author, who taught the Polish group (see 3.2). The pedagogic aims were to support students in developing mediation skills to enable them to communicate online empathetically and respectfully with international partners from a different culture, and conduct collaborative communicative tasks. The action re-

search aims were to *investigate* the process of mediation as reported by the students, *observe* and *measure* changes in student reported levels of the specific mediation skills, *evaluate* the self-assessment instrument, and *reflect* on the pedagogical outcomes (Kemmis, McTaggart, 1988). The organization of the telecollaboration did not allow for recording of the synchronous online encounters, therefore, data on mediation was collected through student report. This was structured for triangulation, quantitatively through a pre-post-self-assessment questionnaire on specific mediation skills to measure any development; qualitatively, immediate, and shortly following the event, through written student reflections on guided prompts to provide more descriptive data about the process, and distally, through students' retrospective oral reflections about their mediation skills in individual interviews conducted by the teacher-researcher. For reasons of space, however, the retrospective data is analysed and presented quantitatively.

3.2. Context and participants

43 undergraduate students took part in the international telecollaboration. 22 were Year 3 (final) first language Polish students of Applied Linguistics, studying two foreign languages, with either L2 German/French as the lead language and English as L3. The target level for the lead language was C1 and B2 for English. The virtual exchange was part of a Practical Course (*Thematic conversations*) taught by author and was credit-bearing. Student oral communication skills were assessed. The international partners were 21 Year 2 first language Kyrgyz/Russian/Korean, students of Psychology from an English-medium university in Kyrgyzstan, taking a lecture course in *Multicultural studies*.

3.3. Telecollaboration design and implementation

The telecollaboration took place during 8 weeks in spring 2023. It comprised three synchronous Zoom video conferences (30-45 minutes each) which took place in class with students working at individual computers. Students were organized randomly into groups of 2/3 from Poland and 2/1 from Kyrgyzstan. Out of class, students contacted each other between the synchronous encounters. The procedure is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Telecollaboration procedure: overview

Time	Event	Activity and Student Outputs	Topics
Week 0 Poland	Preparatory session	Pair and group discussion	Factors causing difficulty in comprehending someone speaking English; contributory factors, strategies to facilitate intelligibility of own speech.
Poland and Kyrgyzstan	Pre-questionnaire	Online	
Week 1 All	Synchronous online Encounter 1 Pre-questionnaire	Online approx. 30 minutes. Small groups 3-4 people.	Language learning experiences- similarities and differences
Week 2 Poland	Log 1 entry	Written responses to prompts, submitted via Moodle platform.	Guided reflections on Encounter 1
Weeks 2-3 All	Post-encounter tasks	International small groups produce poster, and 2-3 minute recording.	Poster/recording Language learning experiences- similarities and differences
Week 7 All	Synchronous online Encounter 2	Online approx. 30 minutes. Small groups 3-4 people.	Comparing cultures through images
Week 8 All	Synchronous online Encounter 3 Post-questionnaire	Videoconference for all participants. Online 1-minute oral presentations (read aloud)	Short summary of what was learned about the culture of the international partner’s country
Week 14 Poland	Interviews	In-person Extract 3-4 mins.	Mediation skills-Identify strengths and what to develop

Source: own work.

3.4. Data collection instruments

Data comprised: for both Polish and Kyrgyzstan students, pre/post self-assessment questionnaires; for Polish students only: written reflections to prompts completed after the first synchronous online encounter (Weeks 1 and 2), and students’ retrospective reflections about their mediation skills in individual interviews conducted by the teacher/author in week 14, where students identified their strengths in mediation skills from the questionnaire, and areas they felt they needed to develop. Thus, assessment of the media-

tion skills was made solely by the students. Student written reflective tasks were acknowledged, but not graded. Table 1 column 1 shows the timeline for the whole project. The instruments are described below.

3.4.1. Self-assessment Questionnaires

As the CEFR is declared to be “open and flexible, so that it can be applied, with such adaptation as proves necessary, to particular situations” (CoE, 2001:7) a collaborative process between the author and the Kyrgyz partner was applied to create a self-assessment (can-do) questionnaire based on descriptors from the CEFRCV “Facilitating a pluricultural space” scale. This included agreeing the descriptor focus, levels and number. It was decided that each can-do statement should contain one idea, which entailed division of some descriptors. As the language of the descriptors was found too complex for the participant proficiency level, a simplified English as a lingua franca version was agreed as the target. Based on joint discussion, 12 statements from the original descriptors were selected and through iterative videoconferencing consultation, simplification and paraphrase, a final version of 11 can-do statements was agreed, with skills ranging from B1-B2+ arranged in ascending order (see Appendix).

Example of changes made:

The original version (B2) “Can work collaboratively with people who have different cultural orientations, discussing similarities and differences in views and perspectives.” (CoE, 2020), became two statements: Can-do 4, “I can work together successfully with people from different cultures” and Can-do 5 “With people from different cultures, I can discuss similarities and differences in our views and perspectives”. “Work collaboratively” was simplified to “work together with”, while “people who have different cultural orientation” became “people from different cultures”. Overall, the aim was to make statements distinct and remove possible overlap. The completed self-assessment questionnaire was accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale, from 5- I completely agree, to 1- I completely disagree. Questionnaires were conducted in English in week 1 and week 8, online on Google forms, with separate links for students from Poland and from Kyrgyzstan.

3.4.2. Student written reflections

Following the first encounter, students received the following prompts (Log entry One) and were asked to write their reflections on the experience.

For the research, only reflections from students who had completed both pre-and post-questionnaires were included (n = 16).

Log entry one: Understanding each other. Challenges and how you dealt with them.

Before

How did you feel about working in an international group before the first encounter began?

How did you prepare for the first encounter? What did you do? Give as much detail as you can.

During

Try and answer these questions. Give examples whenever you can.

Could your interlocutor(s) understand you? Easily? (how do you know?)

Did you have to adjust your speech- your words, what you said, how you said it? If yes, what, how, why? Give examples.

Were there any points when you needed to ask your interlocutor to repeat, explain, clarify? – did you have to say you couldn't understand? How did you do that? What did you say?

Were there any moments that were difficult for some reason? If so, when, why? What did you do?

After

Looking back, how would you describe your first encounter? Explain why you think this.

Was there anything that surprised you? What? Why? Please explain.

Is there something you would like to do in order to improve the next encounter? If so, what, why? Please explain.

3.4.3. In-person interviews

Individual interviews were conducted by the author/teacher-researcher with all the Polish students in week 14, i.e. 6 weeks after the telecollaboration ended. This was part of the assessment of communicative skills, as the project was within a practical language course, with a B2 target level. (Their oral skills in this interview, plus completion of 3 written reflective tasks, formed the basis for a course credit, with the grade depending on the oral skills). Students were asked to re-read their log entries and think about the list of mediation skills two weeks prior to assessment, but exact questions were not given in advance. All interviews, which lasted from 5-7 minutes, were audio-recorded. The question analysed here was:

Which of these mediation skills do you think are your strengths? Which do you feel you still need to develop? Please explain.

Students were shown the full list of Can-do statements during the interview (see Appendix).

4. Data analysis procedures

4.1. Pre/post-questionnaires

As the questionnaires comprised ordinal Likert scales, median scores were calculated for each question for each sub-sample, Kyrgyzstan and Poland students, for both pre-and post-questionnaires. SPSS 28.0 (2021) was used for all the analyses. For the pre-questionnaires a Mann-Whitney test for non-parametric data was used to assess for significant differences between the sub-groups. For the post-tests, a Wilcoxon signed rank test was run to calculate for significant difference between the pre- and post-questionnaire results. However, due to low response rate for the Kyrgyzstan sub-sample, this was only conducted for the Poland group.

4.2. Student written reflections

The Polish students' reflections were coded following Braun and Clarke (2006) in two ways, first, using initial coding following iterative reading, and second, using deductive codes based on the Can-do statements 1-4. For example, in initial coding, the following extract was coded "understand me" and the part from They.. onwards, as "Explains and justifies".

I think my interlocutors could understand me pretty well. They were able to answer all my questions, and they didn't ask me to repeat anything. I could also tell from their facial expressions and gestures (like nodding) that they didn't have much trouble understanding me.

In the deductive coding, Can-do 2 "I can show interest and empathy to people from other cultures, by asking and answering simple questions, and saying I agree and understand" was divided into a series of codes: shows interest; shows empathy; asks questions; answers questions; agrees; says understands. These codes were first analysed separately. Next the extract was read as a whole. Showing interest and empathy was taken as the primary motif. If individual codes could not be interpreted in this light, they were then discounted. The above extract was coded "asks questions" and attributed to Can-do 2.

Can-do 4 “I can work together successfully...” was operationalized as “can complete the tasks that were required”. (For reasons of space, the complete list of deductive codes is not given.) For both coding approaches a code-recode procedure, separated by a break of several days, was used to increase reliability. After iterative re-reading, examples felt to be representative were selected for the qualitative part of the data presentation.

4.3. In-person interview extracts

The interview question (see 3.4.3.) was analysed. Interview segments were listened to several times and the Can-dos and mediation skills mentioned as “strengths” and to be “further developed” noted. As the author was the sole researcher, after a 3-day interval the analysis was repeated for reliability. Frequency for each of the Can-dos was calculated, separately for “strengths” and for “to be developed”. Rankings were created.

4.4 Ethical conduct

Institutional ethical approval for the study was not required. Both the pre- and post-questionnaires included a question asking students for consent for use of their responses for research purposes. This was preceded by a statement assuring them of anonymity. (Student names are represented by their initials). In the final evaluation written questionnaire for the course (not discussed in this paper), Polish students were asked for consent for use of the written reflections, and, in a separate question, for permission to use data from the in-person interviews, both with assurance of anonymity.

5. Results

5.1. Self-assessment questionnaire

For pre-questionnaires, (see Appendix), 16 were collected from Polish students (73% response rate) and from the Kyrgyzstan participants, 13, (62%). 19 Poland post-questionnaires were received, but only 2 from Kyrgyzstan. Of the Polish post-responses, only those who had also completed the pre-questionnaire were included.

On the 5-point Likert scale self-assessment pre-questionnaire a median score of 4 (I agree) was found for each can-do statement. No significant

differences, however, were found in the results for any of the questions on the pre-test between the groups (Poland $n = 16$, Kyrgyzstan $n = 13$) on a Mann Whitney test for non-parametric data.

Due to the low response rate from Kyrgyzstan students ($n = 2$) on the post-questionnaire, comparison between the two groups was not made. The final encounter and post-questionnaire fell on the last day of the Kyrgyzstan academic year which likely explains the low response rate. Comparison of the pre- and post-telecollaboration self-assessments in the Polish group showed no change in most of the responses. However, responses to Can-dos 4 and 5 (see 3.4.1.) were found to have changed significantly (Can-do 4 $p = 0.032$, and Can-do 5 $p = 0.034$) on a Wilcoxon signed rank test, with the median rising from 4.0 to 4.5 in the case of Can-do 4, and from 4.0 to 5.0 in the case of Can-do 5.

5.2. Written reflections from Polish students: quantitative analysis of deductive codes

As described in 4.2, the written responses were deductively coded according to Can-dos 1-4 from the self-assessment questionnaire. Results were as follows:

Can-do 1 "I can communicate across cultures by starting a conversation" was overtly mentioned by 2 people.

Can-do 2 "I can show interest and empathy to people from other cultures, by asking and answering simple questions, and saying I agree and understand" was mentioned by 5 people. Two more incidences of asking questions were found, but as they did not meet the requirement for showing empathy and interest, one was disqualified because of negative comments towards the Kyrgyz partners, counted as showing lack of empathy; and a second instance which described asking "rote" questions, was removed as no empathy was evidenced.

Can-do 3 "When I work together with people from other cultures, I can adapt the way I work, so we can all work together" was mentioned by 12 people. Problems with internet connectivity or technology in general (headphones, sound) were mentioned by 14 people, in several cases with overt comments indicating that this had negative impact on task completion.

Can-do 4 "I can work together successfully with people from different cultures" was mentioned or implied by 7 people.

In sum, moderate support for the Can-dos 1-4 was found in the written reflections, with Can-dos 3 and 4 most frequently mentioned.

5.2.1. Qualitative evidence from student written reflections.

To offer more information, responses felt to be typical have been selected as illustrative examples of the specific mediation skills. Both mentions coded Can-Do 1 stated “we started with introducing ourselves” (Student NK), clearly indicating that they initiated the conversation.

As indicated in 4.2, Can-do 2 was subdivided into several codes. Of these, “Asking questions” was the most frequent. As this example illustrates, it was detailed:

I have asked many times “If things are clear? “Can you hear me?’ “Do you know what I mean by that?” They answered my all questions nodded their head and said “yes”. (Student KW)

The primary aspect of Can-do 2 was “Showing empathy”, as explained here:

I also tried to give some examples to make sure they knew what I was talking about or to give them some options to choose from. For example, “How did you learn the languages? Did you learn it only at school, did you go to any extra classes outside of school, or maybe you used any language learning apps [...]?” (Student AG)

The “Adapting” aspect of Can-do 3 was most frequent of all the codes. The following student representatively describes compensating for technical (frequently mentioned) and linguistic difficulties:

We also communicated on chat, in moments when they didn’t have good internet connection. I tried to say in very easy way, and use basics words, because they don’t know English in the same way as we so I tried to adapt my language to them. If they don’t understand me they ask me “could you repeat, please? [...] I explain some words, give synonyms, be patient and listen carefully, avoid sophisticated words. I didn’t give any pressure and I give them time to think about my question. (Student OZ)

Successful cooperation in Can-do 4 was mainly indicated by positive attitudes and emotions, e.g. “we were laughing and it was obvious that neither we nor the people from Kyrgyzstan were stressed or discouraged by the other party.” (Student KC). However, the main objective was that the task could be completed. The following extract indicates that although not all participants were engaged, completion of the task was achieved successfully:

Our Kyrgyzstan mates weren't the most helpful if I'm honest. [...] During our conversation only one person was speaking and the other kept talking in their language to the other, which we couldn't understand. We had a pleasant conversation about the boy's time in Poland and his memories from the visit. It was quite interesting getting to know about their experiences and we tried our best to ask them the prepared questions and get the needed information about the differences in our school learning. (Student KL)

5.2.2. Data from interview extracts

For reasons of space, interview extracts were analysed quantitatively, indicating only the mediation skills to which students referred as their strengths, or as ones they felt in need of development. The Can-do statements ranked highest are reported here. As strengths, the Polish students most frequently identified Can-dos 2, (n = 9), 4 (n = 7), 8, "During intercultural encounters I can explain things that are not clear" (n = 6). Can-dos 1, 3 and 7, "When I work with people from other cultures, I can encourage others to take an active part and give their opinions" were each identified by 5 people.

Mediation skills in need of development most frequently selected were Can-dos 1 (n = 5) and 6, "When I work with people from other cultures, I can encourage others to take an active part and give their opinions" (n = 5). It can be seen that Can-do 1 was selected as both a strength and in need of development. Those feeling it needed developing mentioned factors such as shyness, language proficiency and interpersonal skills to explain their answer.

Of the remaining, Can-do 5 was reported 4 times as a strength, while Can-dos 9-11 were mentioned as strengths by only one or two people (Can-do 10), and 11 by one as a skill to be developed.

6. Discussion

Each of the research questions (RQs) will be discussed in turn.

RQ1: What specific mediation skills do students report applying during the telecollaboration? What evidence of these do they give?

Evidence to answer this question came from the written reflections. Can-do 2 "I can show interest and empathy to people from other cultures, by asking and answering simple questions, and saying I agree and understand" was partly enacted in the preparation class prior to the first

encounter, where learners discussed the question of mutual intelligibility in English and actions taken to build it, and may be an indication of the benefits of a task-aligned approach. This seemed to be reflected in the number of mentions of linguistic mediation undertaken. Variation in participant levels of proficiency, both within and across the groups, meant that accommodation and linguistic adaptation (Jenkins, 2022) were frequently mentioned as a requisite for task completion.

Evidence for Can-do 3 “I can adapt the way I work so we can all work together” was given in reports of agentive use of synchronous chat or offline text messaging adopted in some groups to compensate for, or supplement, oral proficiency skills, but also as a response to poor internet connectivity, and background noise. Use of chat, however, needed negotiation as Kyrgyzstan L1 Russian speakers, finding the Polish participants appeared to be able to understand their oral comments to each other, began writing in Russian in the chat, only to discover that their partners could not read Cyrillic script. The Polish students demonstrated determination to complete the tasks, motivated, as evidenced in their writings, by the fact that the project output was needed to obtain a credit. Some reported having to work hard convince their international partners to cooperate, as obtaining responses from them was contingent to being able to complete the offline collaboration task which involved cross-cultural comparison (evidencing one of the skills for Can-do 6 “I can encourage others to take an active part”). Not all of the Kyrgyzstan participants were highly invested in the project and had no institutional incentive to be. However, lack of engagement also applied to some of the Polish students. Similar difficulties are not uncommon in telecollaborations (Dooly, Vinagre, 2022).

In the interviews, Can-do 1 “I can communicate across cultures by starting a conversation” and 6 “When I work with people from other cultures, I can encourage others to take an active part and give their opinions” were mediation skills reported as in need of development. To possibly explain the need for Can do 1 skills, one participant wrote that she found herself leading a conversation for the first time and became aware she was used to others accommodating to her, whereas in the exchange she was the one who had to make adjustments, which was challenging. Other studies stress the importance of preparatory work to support the beginning stages of a telecollaboration (Dooly, 2022; Helm, van der Velden, 2020). In Can-do 6 the “encourage others to take an active part” is a relational skill that requires diplomatic language, meaning that it may possibly have been inhibited by limited proficiency skills, contrasting with “encourage someone to give their opinions” which is linguistically simpler and probably more familiar. Pedagogically, these skills could also have been supported by introducing pre-encounter language focused activities.

RQ 2: How do students' self-reported mediation skills (as specified) develop during an L3 telecollaboration?

Data on changes in mediation skills came from the questionnaires and the interviews. The self-assessment can-do statements yielded almost uniformly positive responses of 4 on a 5-point Likert opinion scale both at the onset and following the telecollaboration, with no differences noted for the assigned CEFR level of the can-dos. The lack of increase for 9 of the 11 can-dos may possibly have resulted from the length of the telecollaboration, including only three live encounters over an 8-week period. However, as Godwin-Jones (2019) reports, this length is average for such an exchange.

The significant increase on Can-do 4 (B1+) "I can work together successfully with people from different cultures" reflects findings of other studies (O'Dowd, 2021; Helm, van der Velden, 2020). In the final interviews, which took place 6 weeks after the post-questionnaire, Can-do 4 was the second most frequently identified strength among the mediation skills, confirming the finding. This was despite the impediment of technical difficulties, as in other telecollaborations (O'Dowd, 2016), and time pressure in the synchronous meetings. Can-do 5 (B2) "With people from different cultures, I can discuss similarities and differences in our views and perspectives", also saw statistically significant gains. This may have been an artifact of design of the project tasks, as both online encounters 1 and 2 featured compare and contrast activities, with increasing complexity. Students were also asked to critically reflect on aspects of the tasks in later written log entries. Thus, Can-do 5 was enacted throughout the project. Piccardo (2022a), recommends use of the descriptors to create Action-oriented scenarios, while this project followed separate pathways for task design and creation of the Can-do questionnaire. It would appear, however, that where the two aligned, as in Can-do 5, the participants recognized and acknowledged growth in the associated skill. Overall, on reflection, student awareness of mediation skills would appear to have increased and there would seem to be possible scope for further change, with adjustments to tasks.

RQ3: To what extent does the self-assessment questionnaire based on the Facilitating a pluricultural space CEFRCV scale capture development in the specific mediation skills?

There were issues due to the fact that participants selected "I agree" to all the can-dos at the onset. As some differences were noted in the post-questionnaire, it seems that participants had responded thoughtfully, and random answering can probably be excluded. This leaves several possible explanations: that students did not have enough time, or opportunity to develop the specific skills; that linguistic proficiency may have precluded

development in the skills; that students were satisfied with the level of skills they had at the onset and so felt no need to work on those skills (a ceiling effect); or that they selectively focused on “developing positive, empathetic and respectful attitudes across cultures” to the exclusion of other skills. More findings and systematic research on selected variables would be needed to be able to comment further. One change to consider would be changing the wording of the response scale, by replacing level of agreement with evaluation of level of ability, e.g. Rate your ability in these skills on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (very high). The scale might also be lengthened, to allow for smaller increments. In sum, although some developments were captured, in its present form, for this specific context, the questionnaire appears to have been limited, but with revision this might be amended. The value of the questionnaire for promoting awareness of mediational skills, was, however, in the context described, without question.

7. Conclusions

The pedagogical aim of this action research project was to build intercultural competences and mediation skills, with the emphasis in this paper on the specific mediation skills of making oneself understood, understanding others, and developing positive, empathetic and respectful attitudes across cultures. Polish participants in this project unanimously endorsed it as a memorable and worthwhile experience (data from course evaluation questionnaire), with individuals reporting improved confidence in interpersonal communication skills during the interviews. Pre-post use of the self-assessment “Facilitating the Pluricultural Space” scale, supported by reflective written and oral tasks, appears to have given the Polish participants the sense of a positive outcome, despite small measurable changes being recorded on the self-assessment scale. Amendments to the rating part of the questionnaire may be enough to increase its effectiveness.

There is scope for further research. From a pedagogical perspective, structured preparatory linguistic activities and discussion on how, for example, to “show empathy”, or “encourage others to take an active part” could increase participant confidence and self-efficacy. If implemented in a design where provision of support is applied in an experimental group contrasted with a control group, this might provide interesting outcomes on the self-assessment questionnaire, on the basis of the fact that pre-encounter work may have been a contributory factor in strong student perceptions of Can-do 2 as a strength in this study. Changes to the rating part of the self-assessment would need testing in new groups, possibly with L2 students

of English in contrast to L3 students, to investigate possible effects of linguistic proficiency on the mediation skills. This would need a language test for comparison.

The research is not without limitations. Above all, the data is one sided, with an unfortunate absence of comparative post-data from the Kyrgyzstan group. The data for Poland was also incomplete, with only 16 of the 22 participants supplying both pre- and post- questionnaires. This reflected diversified “investment” in the project by some participants, which impacted on information gathering, motivation, and emotions (Dooley, Vinagre, 2022). Contextual differences, with the project in Poland being credit-bearing in contrast to Kyrgyzstan, were also a factor. The mediation skills themselves were self-assessed by the participants, rather than rated objectively, which could be claimed to lower the reliability. However, triangulation of the questionnaire data was obtained, although also from student report, in both reflective writing and oral interview data. Observing mediation in action is problematic, as being watched affects participant performance (Hawthorne effect). A possible alternative would be filming the online encounters, although this would entail an increased number of exchanges to lower the observer effect through familiarization, and technically would require better internet connectivity than was available during this project. This was action-research and consequently had practical classroom limitations.

This study contributes to research on mediation according to the CE-FRCV (CoE, 2020) by describing the first application of part of the “Facilitating a pluricultural space” in an L3 telecollaboration between European and Central Asian students. Although using student report rather than direct data on use of specific mediation skills, it goes some way to fill the gap in providing information on how mediation operates in action in an international encounter between ELF learners.

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Appendix: Self-assessment Questionnaire: Mediating Communication: Facilitating Pluricultural space

Please assess your skills from on the scale from 5- I completely agree, to 1- I completely disagree.

- 1) I can communicate across cultures by starting a conversation. (B1)
- 2) I can show interest and empathy to people from other cultures, by asking and answering simple questions, and saying I agree and understand. (B1+)
- 3) When I work together with people from other cultures, I can adapt the way I work, so we can all work together. (B1+)
- 4) I can work together successfully with people from different cultures. (B1+)
- 5) With people from different cultures, I can discuss similarities and differences in our views and perspectives. (B2)
- 6) When I work with people from other cultures, I can encourage others to take an active part and give their opinions. (B2)
- 7) I can help the cross-cultural communication by listening to the different ideas, feelings and opinions and by making suitable comments. (B2)
- 8) During intercultural encounters I can explain things that are not clear. (B2+)
- 9) During intercultural encounters I can suggest what was actually meant in order to make it clear. (B2+)
- 10) In intercultural encounters, I can show I appreciate other perspectives different than mine. (B2+)
- 11) In intercultural encounters, I can help others understand. (B2+)

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