THE FLAVOUR OF COMMUNICATION
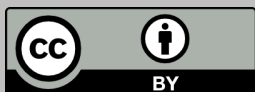
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Abstract

The flavour of communication is a reflective narrative that recounts a journey of discovery using adapted CEFR (2020) mediation skills to develop more effective communication skills for a university pluricultural cohort of healthcare students. In mediation, language is conceptualised as more than a linguistic construct, as the skills focus primarily on the needs of the other person in the interaction. Is my message clear, am I intelligible? Can using soft skills such as respect and empathy render the interaction more successful, particularly if the other person should be from a different culture. The CEFR (2020) mediation skills tend to reflect various sociocultural and interactional competence theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980; Kramsch, 1986) where the emphasis is getting communication right in the context. In CEFR (2020) mediation, with its unique and useful interplay of micro skills, all forms of communication are activated to facilitate understanding (Piccardo, 2020), as can and should happen in real-life. Mediation skills are transferrable academically and professionally. They can be used for a range of communicative acts and can make us more aware of the complex nature of language, which includes collective, cognitive and social functions (Piccardo et al., 2019).

Keywords: Competency Framework, Communication, Mediation, Sociolinguistics, Collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

The flavour of communication is a reflective narrative that recounts a journey of discovery using adapted Common European Framework (CEFR, 2020) mediation skills to develop more effective communication skills. The journey began with an assignment on a Masters' course, which led to a Distinction dissertation, and in 2023 a BALEAP presentation

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'Deconstructing communication skills: a competency framework for Foundation healthcare students using CEFR (2020) mediation skills'.

During the Masters' course I had been introduced to the mediation skills in the CEFR 2020 Companion volume and felt the descriptors touched on skills and senses which could give a new flavour to communication. Mediation is about sensing the other person in the interaction, being aware of their needs, and flavouring the interaction to meet these needs (Goodier, 2019b). The needs can include an awareness of how much the other person is understanding and reacting to this by, for example, adapting use of language to a use of more simple words, or the use of a slower, clearer pronunciation. The other person may belong to a different culture and have different ideas and understandings of issues. They may already know something about the topic under discussion or they may know very little; awareness of this can influence the effectiveness of the interaction. Mediation is, therefore, so much more than a linguistic concept. What really deconstructs previous ideas of effective communication is the addition of soft skills in the mediation descriptors, for example respect, sensitivity and empathy. When these soft skills are present in communication, all the previously mentioned effective skills are also likely to be present.

When my research into using mediation descriptors began, I was teaching a cohort of 17 international foundation stage healthcare students from 12 different cultures, many of whom used English as a first language. Yet they were often not effective, intelligible communicators, and the speaking descriptors we were using did not seem to focus on how their communication skills really could be improved. The discovery of the mediation skills felt like I might have hit the jackpot, particularly with regard to the use of soft skills which are such a vital part of communication in healthcare, and also National Health Service (NHS, 2024) values.

THE CEFR MEDIATION SKILLS

On discovery of the CEFR mediation skills, it seemed like a good idea to try them out with a communication task for the cohort of healthcare students which I was teaching. This meant looking more carefully at the CEFR mediation scales.

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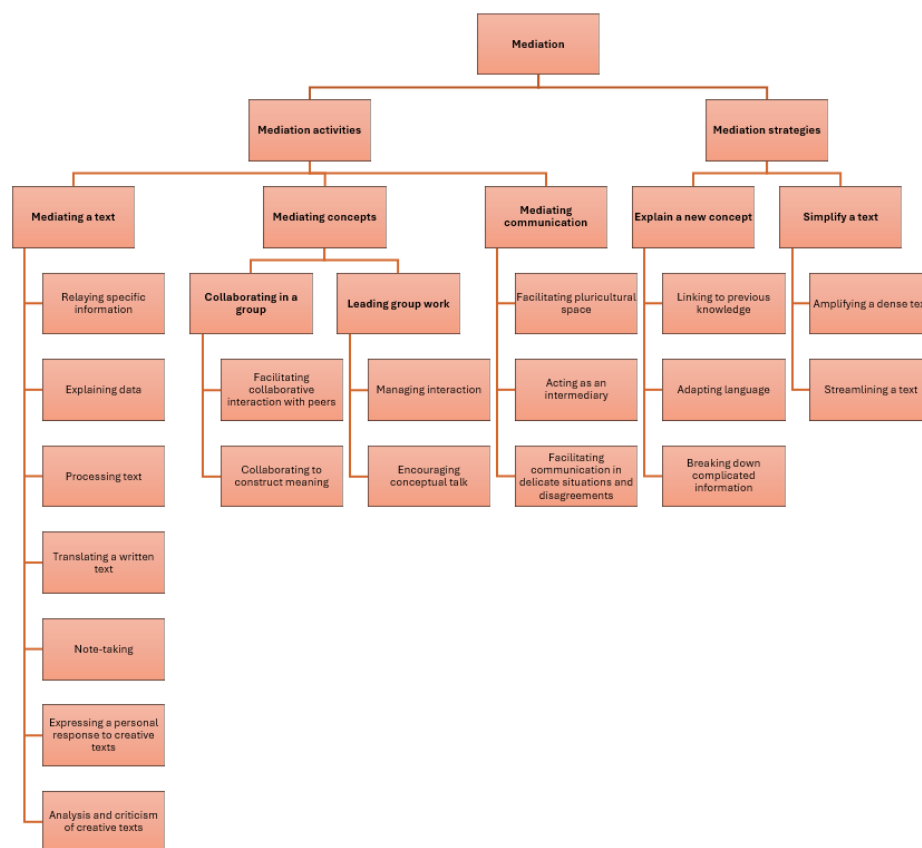
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Figure 1: adapted from CEFR (2020, p.90) mediation activities + mediation strategies

As can be seen in Figure 1, the CEFR mediation skills are a complex interplay of micro skills which focus on facilitating the communication of information through the use of integrated skills and collaborative interaction. The Mediation strategies intend to facilitate the Mediation activities, for instance *Adapting language* in order to *Relay specific information*.

The mediation competencies tend to reflect real-life communication where skills are integrated, practical and action-oriented, for example actively helping others to understand specific information when *Mediating a text* and collaborating to ensure that concepts are mutually understood (Goodier, 2019b; Kiddle, 2019; Piccardo & North, 2019). Within the scales, there are skills which can be considered *dominant* mediation scales because they are fundamental or core to most communicative acts (Liontou & Braidwood, 2021; Goodier, 2019a). Examples of these dominant scales can be *Processing text, Collaborating to construct meaning, Facilitating communication in delicate situations, Adapting language, Linking to previous knowledge.* Other scales, such as *Explaining data* are considered *supplementary* scales*, as they are more

specific (Liontou & Braidwood, 2021). All the mediation skills are relevant and useful communicative competences which could significantly upgrade both the academic and professional communication skill set of the C1 English language level university healthcare cohort.

Mediation in the CEFR is the fourth category for communicative language skills, and linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence are seen as intertwined (CEFR, 2020). Combining these competences is supposed to lead to more effective use of language for different purposes in different contexts (CEFR, 2020). In mediation the language user would be consciously and creatively adapting what they say to promote better understanding (Goodier, 2019b). The CEFR (2020, p.35) refers to this communication as 'languaging', which is similar to 'talking an idea through', and what Piccardo (2020) calls using 'language as a process'. Communicative tasks can be used to develop this mediation languaging process and help learners to evaluate their communicative ability with the use of relevant and specific mediation skills (Goodier, 2019b). The mediation skills descriptors can aid the process of reflection by giving learners the language to describe abilities, and also the teacher language to use for specific, focused and constructive feedback (Goodier, 2019a; Gibbs, 2015). Moreover, the use of this language can help to heighten awareness of new understandings and perspectives regarding communication.

Brand (2020) lists several reasons why CEFR mediation has gained in significance. This includes an increase in the number of people choosing to study and work abroad, and courses related to healthcare have seen ever-increasing numbers (Gale, 2021). Phipps et al. (2001) maintain that the greater movement of people has led to increased importance being attached to cooperative learning and working together. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) also seems to have influenced the growth of mediation where subject specific content and use of language have become more integrated (CEFR, 2020).

These factors and a closer exploration of how Halliday's (1973) communicative approach has evolved to include a greater focus for example on sociocultural competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980), interactional competence (Kramsch, 1986; Hall, 1995), and functional competence with its focus on 'can do' (Savignon, 2002), helped confirm the decision to experiment with the mediation descriptors. My cohort of healthcare students needed the ability to be able to flexibly adapt their communication skills to the variety of professional contexts they would find themselves in (CEFR, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). Mediation skills seemed to encompass these skills,

bringing together relational, cognitive, cultural and linguistic factors (Piccardo, 2020). Cognitive and attitudinal learning can complement a constructivist approach where learners can construct ideas as to how and why it can be effective to communicate in a certain way in a certain situation (Vygotsky, 1978; Kurtz et al., 2005). For example, how active listening can be used effectively to understand another's needs, and how the use of empathy can lead to more positive outcomes from the interaction (Kurtz et al., 2005). The CEFR diagram in Figure 2 shows how mediation combines reception, production, and interaction. The wide-ranging competencies of mediation skills so neatly appear to meet the needs of increasing social and educational diversity characteristic of communication in the 21st Century (CEFR, 2020; Goodier, 2019b; Brand, 2020).
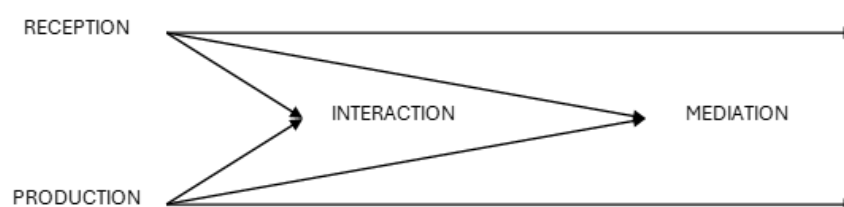

Figure 2: The relationship between reception, production, interaction, and mediation (CEFR, 2020, p.34)

CONTEXT AND PROCESS

The university healthcare students' foundation course lasted one academic year, and the focus was on improving their communication skills through the use of skills-based tasks on topics relating to healthcare. In semester 1 the students researched ethical issues related to healthcare, and this included a discussion task on these issues. At the time, I had been introduced to the CEFR (2020) companion volume where I had seen the mediation descriptors. I thought I could design a mediation descriptors framework to use with the discussion task so that the students could self-assess their communication skills. The design and use of this framework was written up as a main assignment on my Masters' module. It was awarded a really good mark, and this empowered me to continue to use the mediation skills for further tasks in the next semester. In semester 2, students carried out research into evidence-based practice in healthcare, with reference to PICO (patient/problem, intervention, comparison, outcome) case studies. The students had to present their case study to the class. The presentation was a communication task, so I looked again at the mediation descriptors

to see if these could also be used for the students to self-assess their presentation skills. Again, this seemed to work. The students were becoming familiar with the descriptors, and could see which skills they were making progress in. Subsequent to the presentation, the students had to roleplay their PICO case study in a patient-clinician consultation. The focus of this task was again effective communication, and another opportunity to use the mediation skills. I designed a new mediation descriptors framework for the students to self and peer assess their communicative competency in the roleplay task. The design and use of this framework was the focus of my Masters' dissertation.

Ultimately, the three-tasks - discussion, presentation and roleplay - became a step-by step re-cycling process for the use of mediation skills to develop the students' communication skills. It was a rewarding journey discovering how useful the mediation descriptors were and how well they could be adapted to different communicative tasks.

Let's look at how these series of tasks evolved in more detail.

THE FIRST EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TASK USING MEDIATION DESCRIPTORS: A DISCUSSION TASK AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

The discussion task was based on the rather tricky area of ethical health issues, such as euthanasia and abortion, and could be more successful for my pluricultural cohort if there was a heightened awareness and respect of other students' ideas, and culture. Mediation skills also encompass the use of soft skills such as respect and empathy, hence a selection of relevant mediation skills could be used to construct a competency framework for students to self-assess their communicative competency in the discussion task. North (2018), Goodier, (2019b), and Silverman et al. (2005) maintain that the CEFR descriptors are better used for learning rather than assessment, as learners can subjectively measure and reflect on their ability using the *can do* statements and criterion-referenced judgements.

I structured the discussion using Tyson Seburn's (2016) academic circles idea in which each student takes on a role, for instance Discussion leader, Summariser, Contextualiser. The roles usefully reflect *can do* competences in the C1 Mediation descriptors – *Can make sure everyone is included in a collaborative environment; Can identify and summarise key points; Can weigh up different points of view.* As a communicative task, academic circles aim to improve 'learner engagement' and 'collaborative construction of knowledge through group sharing and

discussion' (Seburn, 2016; Alexander et al., 2008, p.112). Aspects such as collaboration and sharing are key skills in mediation.

As an action-oriented language use situation, the discussion task could offer the opportunity to develop the 'multiple, highly interrelated subcompetencies' of the mediation scales (Piccardo & North, 2019; Stoynoff, 2012, p.524). In order to create the competency framework for the students to assess their communicative performance in the discussion task, relevant mediation descriptors were chosen and adapted to suit the students' needs and the discussion task (Figueras, 2012).

CHOOSING AND ADAPTING DESCRIPTORS FOR THE MEDIATION COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

The CEFR descriptors for Overall Mediation C1 were the starting point for the creation of the relevant descriptors for the framework, as this was the target level for the students.

C1	Can act effectively as a mediator, helping to maintain positive interaction by interpreting different perspectives, managing ambiguity, anticipating misunderstandings and intervening diplomatically in order to redirect talk. Can build on different contributions to a discussion, stimulating reasoning with a series of questions. Can convey clearly and fluently in well-structured language the significant ideas in long, complex texts, whether or not they relate to his/her own fields of interest, including evaluative aspects and most nuances.

Figure 3: CEFR (2020, p.91)

However, the B2 descriptors contain significantly more aspects of effective communication, for example *a supportive environment, encouraging people to explore issues and adjusting sensitively the way they express things, clarifying the opinions, work collaboratively with people from different backgrounds, convey detailed information and arguments reliably*. Hence, mediation profiling was used to look up and down the descriptors vertically, as well as horizontally, for skills from other levels to include in the framework. In the CEFR, it can be useful to focus on the wider breadth of competences, which can be adapted across the levels, and applied to different tasks (Goodier, 2019b).

B2	Can establish a supportive environment for sharing ideas and facilitate discussion of delicate issues, showing appreciation of different perspectives, encouraging people to explore issues and adjusting sensitively the way he/she expresses things. Can build upon other's ideas, making suggestions for ways forward. Can convey the main content of well-structured but long and propositionally complex texts on subjects within his/her fields of professional, academic and personal interest, clarifying the opinions and purposes of speakers.
	Can work collaboratively with people from different backgrounds, creating a positive atmosphere by giving support, asking questions to identify common goals, comparing options for how to achieve them and explaining suggestions for what to do next. Can future develop other people's ideas, pose questions that invite reactions from different perspectives and propose a solution or next steps. Can convey detailed information and arguments reliably, e.g. the significant point(s) contained in complex but well-structured texts within his/her fields of professional, academic and personal interest.

Figure 4: CEFR (2020, p.92)

Within the CEFR descriptors 'boundaries are fuzzy and overlap is inevitable' (CEFR, 2020, p.250), hence care was needed to ensure the adapted skills were accessible, specific and focused (Zhang et al., 2019). This can aid both transferability of the skills and sustainability of the task (Boud & Soler, 2015).

Table 1 shows the mediation skills competency framework which was created to be used with the discussion task.

Mediation skills	Pre-task: What you think (good, ok, find tricky) Consider what would be necessary to do well in these skills	Post-task: How you did (good, ok, improved) Consider why
Processing text in speech		
Can identify and summarise clearly key points		
Can interpret and describe clearly visual data		
Collaborative interaction with peers		
Can follow a line of argument		
Can ask questions for clarification/demonstrate interest		

Can ask questions to stimulate logical reasoning (hypothesising, analysing, inferring, justifying, predicting)		
Can weigh up different points of view + how agreement might be achieved		
Can make sure everyone is included, no one dominates, a collaborative/positive environment		
Facilitate pluricultural communication		
Can act as mediator in intercultural encounters, anticipate problems, maintain positive interaction		
Can demonstrate sensitivity to different perspectives, formulate any reservations/disagreements in such a way as to avoid offence		
Expressing a personal response		
Can express clearly reactions and emotions to a text + say why		

Table 1: Mediation skills competency framework created for discussion task.

The mediation skills competency framework has ten descriptors, grouped into four sections to aid recall and ease of use. The section headings make use of dominant mediation scales such as *Processing text, Collaborative interaction,* and *Facilitate communication.* The descriptors use dominant mediation skills such as giving clear explanations, using logical reasoning, and being sensitive to others' ideas. The framework also contains supplementary skills such as explaining data and expressing a personal response which were skills inherent to the discussion task.

It could seem that there is some logical progression to the mediation descriptors in the framework, but the framework is not designed with a prescriptive structure in mind. The grouping of skills can provide a focus for the competences, though explanations and collaborative, supportive interaction are relevant, core skills which can be used throughout the

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task. This non-prescriptive nature can give learners the opportunity to personalise the task, experimenting and intertwining linguistic and professional skills. Natural interaction does not repeatedly use the same patterns, and learners need opportunities to experiment with what they can do and make their own meanings (Willis, 1996).

Using the mediation skills competency framework, it was hoped that the students could focus on key skills necessary in the transfer of information from text to speech, collaborate to ensure the interaction is inclusive and logical, and show respect and sensitivity for others' ideas, while being able to clearly express their own emotions. The mediation competences also required the learners to use critical thinking skills – analysing, evaluating, creating, hence reflecting Bloom's taxonomy of higher order thinking skills, which were essential higher-level skills required for the cohort of healthcare students both academically and professionally (Bloom et al., 1956). To ensure understanding of the competency descriptors in the framework, time was spent pre task unpacking the terminologies for self-assessment to identify meaning and possible language use for the skills.

The students used the framework to self-assess their performance in the discussion task both pre and post task using criterion-referenced judgments - *good, ok, find tricky, improved*. Their judgements could help them and I focus on their strengths and weaknesses. From the students' self-assessed judgments, it seemed that the skills which the learners felt needed improving were - asking questions appropriately, discussing various possibilities to an issue, organising ideas, being more confident, listening attentively, and being sensitive to others' ideas and cultures. Rather unintelligible pronunciation was also identified in the areas to improve; hence a possible descriptor to add in subsequent frameworks.

The updated CEFR 2020 Companion volume added extra scales for phonology. These were not included in the mediation skills but seemed useful as a focus for improving the pronunciation of the target learners. In phonology, the CEFR (2020, p.243) mentions 'intelligibility' as the goal rather than native-like competence. Walker, Low & Setter (2021) refer to this as international intelligibility, which is vital for the effective transfer of information, also for 1st language users. Intelligibility can be helped by effective use of pauses, pace, and voice tone, modifying some features of speech, and adjusting some expectations as a listener, particularly according to Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core (Walker et al, 2021, p.8; Jenkins, 2007). Although native-like competence, also accent, may not be the goal (CEFR, 2020) awareness of the importance of intelligibility is necessary as pronunciation can be responsible for up to two-thirds of communication breakdown (Walker & Jenkins, 2000). Learners who are able to focus on

their intelligibility can become more confident in interactions (Walker & Jenkins, 2000; Jenkins, 2007).

I decided to use this experiential discussion task using mediation skills for one of my Masters' assignments. Doing more research into CEFR mediation skills, I found out that *Can do* descriptors to assess competence apparently originate 'from the field of professional training for nurses' (CEFR, 2018, p.32). My interest had been sparked, and I felt inspired to continue my journey with the mediation skills, and work on continuing to improve the communication skills of the healthcare cohort.

LET'S USE THESE MEDIATION DESCRIPTORS MORE: A PRESENTATION TASK

In semester 2 the healthcare students had to give a presentation to the class on a Patient Investigation Comparison Outcome (PICO) case study, which they individually researched. This was another communicative task, and the meditation skills could be used again for the students to self-assess their presentation performance. Huckin (1988, cited in Jordan, 1997, p.115) maintains that case studies based on evidence from academic research enable students and professionals to 'form sound arguments' which entail the use of higher-order reasoning – one of the fundamental skills in mediation. This can also challenge their linguistic resources. Moreover, as the content for the presentation was learner-generated, this would give students greater ownership of and responsibility for the tasks, and also hopefully more motivation in an end product which could be meaningful.

The presentation task was an opportunity to revisit and reinforce the use of mediation skills. The mediation descriptors gave the students a certain terminology to refer to the communication skills they needed and were practising, what Goodier (2019b) calls a 'detailed and validated reference'. Recycling use of the mediation skills enabled the competences to become more transferable and gave learners objectives to aim for. As a teacher, they could be used for constructive and meaningful feedback.

In order to create a framework for the presentation, I realised that similar mediation skills would continue to be useful – clear explanations, consideration of different points of view, and use of sensitivity towards others' ideas. A descriptor for pronunciation was added, which could help students focus on their intelligibility. Table 2 shows the mediation skills competency framework that was created to use with the presentation task. As with the discussion task, the students used the

framework to self-assess their performance pre and post the presentation task.

Mediation skills	Pre-task: What you think (good, ok, find tricky) Consider what would be necessary to do well in these skills	Post-task: How you did (good, ok, improved) Consider why
Processing text in speech		
Can clearly and confidently, sequence, summarise, and signpost information		
Can clearly interpret and explain data/details		
Can be understood clearly with appropriate use of pace/pauses, word and sentence stress, and tone of voice		
Can weigh up different points of view/possibilities using logical reasoning (hypothesising, analysing, inferring, justifying, predicting)		
Can answer questions clearly, sensitively, and confidently		

Table 2: Mediation skills competency framework created for Presentation task

In their self-assessment of the presentation task, the skill which most students felt needed improving was using logical reasoning. Logical reasoning is a higher order thinking skill and can often be challenging for learners, particularly a consideration of different perspectives and arguments (Alexander et al., 2008). It is a vital skill for the effective use of evidence-based practice in healthcare (Silverman et al., 2005), and in many other professions. Nearly half of the students felt they could improve their intelligibility, and this means being more aware of the needs of the other person involved in the communicative act to understand what is being said. Effective communication really is not so much about the native-like standardisation of English but can very much be about achieving an intelligible and comprehensible non-

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standardisation of English (Walker et al., 2021) – mostly through carefully choosing what to say and how to say things.

In the Q&A following the presentations, students started to discuss how the various case studies might develop in a patient-clinician consultation. This paved the way for the roleplay task, which would be based on the students' researched case studies. Issues which were discussed relating to the upcoming roleplay task included the amount of explanation to give to a patient, the choice of words to use, awareness of concerns or different ideas that a patient might have with treatments and checking patient understanding. They are basic communication issues which can arise in many interactions and are reflected in the mediation skills descriptors. These skills could be improved with yet another round of using mediation skills with the next task. The roleplay task.

THE ROLEPLAY TASK: THE PROCESS CONTINUES – A THIRD GO WITH MEDIATION DESCRIPTORS AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

I chose the roleplay task using the mediation descriptors as the main focus for my Masters' dissertation research study. By the time I started my dissertation I had identified most of the communication learning needs of the cohort of healthcare students and also used the mediation skills fairly successfully to address these needs in both the discussion task and the presentation task. The roleplay task was an opportunity to use the mediation skills to further develop the healthcare students' communicative competences. A competency framework was created for the students to self and peer assess their performance in the roleplay task.

ROLEPLAY TASK: OET AND NHS

I had never been much of a fan of roleplays, but the healthcare students' PICO case study would be really useful if set up as a patient-clinician roleplay. It would give the students a real example of how theory can be transformed into practice. Roleplays feature in globally accepted speaking tests and guides for healthcare such as the Occupational English Test (OET, 2018). The OET uses a roleplay task for its patient – clinician speaking test and the OET speaking criteria contain many similar skills to the CEFR (2020) mediation skills, such as summarising, signposting, eliciting, clarifying, appropriate use of pace and tone, and of soft skills such as respect and empathy. These soft skills are also NHS values (NHS, 2024), hence were relevant to the healthcare cohort and also to the

adapted mediation descriptors for the roleplay mediation skills competency framework.

To refine the creation of the descriptors for this mediation competency framework, I conducted five expert interviews. The five expert interviewees come from a range of backgrounds, though all in education, and were asked their opinion on mediation skills in the CEFR, OET/roleplays, and communicative skills necessary for health professionals. The interviewees identified the following needs as important for the development of effective communication skills for the students:

- integrated skills

- 'soft' skills', for example respect, empathy

- confidence

- intercultural competence

- asking appropriate questions

- using appropriate language

- clear pronunciation/intelligibility

- knowledge and use of small talk

The experts were divided over the authenticity and usefulness of roleplays, but the general consensus was that if the roleplay is relevant and action-oriented it can be more successful. Regarding use of mediation descriptors, the experts maintained that these can be useful as metalanguage for both students and teacher, and their use is more suited to self-assessment. North (2018) maintains that the CEFR descriptors are indeed better suited to learning rather than assessment. The experts stated that adaptation of the mediation skills is necessary to fit the context and students' needs, and that this can be improved with the use of mediation profiling.

THE MEDIATION SKILLS COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK CREATED FOR THE ROLEPLAY TASK

Mediation skills	Pre-task: What you think (good, ok, find tricky) Consider what would be necessary to do well in these skills	Post-task: How you did (good, ok, improved) Consider why
Processing text in speech		
Can clearly and confidently sequence, summarise, signpost information		
Can adapt use of language to ensure meaning is clear		
Can explain/check understanding of key points clearly and link to previous knowledge		
Can be understood clearly with appropriate use of pace/pauses, word and sentence stress, and tone of voice		
Collaborative interaction		
Can ask appropriate questions for clarification/demonstrate interest		
Can elicit/encourage another's ideas and use active listening, and appropriate turntaking to allow other person to speak		
Can weigh up different points of view/possibilities using logical reasoning (hypothesising, analysing, inferring, justifying, predicting) + how agreement might be achieved		
Facilitate communication		
Can maintain positive/respectful interaction and anticipate problems in intercultural encounters		
Can demonstrate sensitivity and empathy		
Can establish a positive/supportive environment, also with use of appropriate body language		

Table 3: Mediation skills competency framework for roleplay task.

The mediation skills competency framework for the roleplay task has ten descriptors, grouped into three sections to aid recall and use. The

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mediation descriptors provide a focus for competences which can be used throughout the task in no specific order. Natural dialogue and the use of the mediation skills in the competency framework was encouraged in this experiential task. Opportunities were given for practice, analysis and reflection in a supportive and collaborative environment, where the students could personalise the use of the mediation skills. This was made easier and more motivating by the fact that the case studies had been researched by the students, it was their content, and hence engagement in the task had a meaningful personal interest. 'Going beyond specific skills into individuality is the real challenge of experiential learning' (Kurtz et al., 2005, p.70). All this could better enable the transferability of the mediation skills and improvement in the students' communication skills (Piccardo & North, 2019). As Piaget (1936) says 'You only really learn what you create for yourself'.

As with the discussion and presentation tasks, criterion-referenced judgments are provided for the students to self-assess their performance in the roleplay pre and post task. Peer assessment was also conducted using these criterions, and then a peer rating index (PRI) was utilised to determine the amount of agreement between students and teacher on individuals' performances of each skill. The use of these descriptors formatively was an opportunity for constructive and supportive feedback, which could feed forward into the learning process (Gibbs, 2015; Goodier, 2019a). All roleplay performances were transcribed in order to analyse the language used by the students and how this related to the skills in the mediation descriptors.

CHOOSING AND ADAPTING THE DESCRIPTORS FOR THE MEDIATION SKILLS COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK FOR THE ROLEPLAY TASK

The three section headings in the framework, similarly to the discussion task framework, make use of dominant mediation scales -*Processing text, Collaborative interaction,* and *Facilitate communication.* Communication can be considered effective if interaction includes all three aspects of mediation.

Effective *Processing text* means giving clear explanations using pronunciation and language which the other person can understand - choosing words and expressions the other person can comprehend, speaking slower and pausing more if the other person is struggling to follow, helping the other person understand by linking information to their previous knowledge, and checking that they are understanding.

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Collaborative interaction deals specifically with the collaborative elements of mediation which can be conducive to effective interaction, and interactional alignment (CEFR, 2020; Rasenberg et al., 2020). Descriptors in the framework for collaboration, for example weighing up different points of view and coming to an agreement involve the use of logical reasoning and hence tend to assume a certain level of social and cognitive maturity (Goodier, 2019a). Collaboration also involves asking appropriate questions and using active listening to encourage interaction. Active listening can only really occur if effective turntaking is taking place. Turntaking is therefore included in the framework, though not specifically mentioned in CEFR mediation skills. Effective turntaking can be vital for collaborative interaction (Silverman et al., 2005), though different cultures can have different viewpoints on turntaking, and when to give space and time to others in an interaction (Hall, 1995).

Facilitating communication is the final section of descriptors in the framework, and this includes relational competences and NHS (2024) values such as respect, empathy, sensitivity, and positivity, which should pervade the entire consultation (CEFR, 2020; Silverman et al., 2005). Collaborative interaction tends to require a positive and supportive environment (CEFR, 2020; Kalet et al., 2004). In the CEFR this is mostly mentioned in the B2 levels but is a prerequisite for all levels. Regarding the use of soft skills, these are life skills and human skills, and vital to relationship-centred care (Kalet, et al., 2004; Silverman et al, 2005). They are qualities which all users may not have, are often 'dependant on past experience' (CEFR, 2020, p.251), and use tends to be the result of a link between personal values and professional values. In healthcare it is necessary not only to care, but to learn how to communicate this care, also with appropriate use of body language and non-verbal messages.

ROLEPLAY SELF-ASSESSMENT AND USE OF MEDIATION SKILLS FRAMEWORK: ANALYSIS OF DATA

From the students' self-assessment judgements following the roleplays, it seemed that students felt fairly confident in the category *Facilitating communication*, as two-thirds of the students had chosen *good* for this skill. These soft skills, such as empathy, sensitivity, being supportive and also having good body language are vital to effective healthcare, and often skills intrinsically inherent in those who have chosen to either study or work in healthcare. They are also relational competences which can make most communicative acts more effective, as they are intrinsically human skills, life skills, and fundamental interpersonal skills (Kalet, et al, 2004). The transcripts of the roleplays illustrated how the students used

the mediation skills from the framework naturally as a specific focus for appropriate language, and they were particularly good at using appropriate language to express soft skills, for example *I'm sorry to hear that, I can imagine you're feeling…., It's completely understandable to be worried.* The CEFR (2020, p.92) maintains that the use of values such as respect and empathy aim to 'facilitate understanding and communication between users who may have for example cultural or intellectual differences'. *Building on pluricultural repertoire* was an additional scale in the 2020 CEFR (2020, p.123), where the facilitation of communication is likely to be ensured if a 'neutral, trusted, shared space' is created (CEFR, 2020, p.114) for 'language and culture to come together as part of communicative competence' (CEFR, 2020, Section 1.3). Besides, the significance of this can be seen in how the UK University's International Strategies seem to be attaching ever greater importance to cultural training (Krebs, 2020).

A skill which the students felt that they had improved through the repeated use of the mediation descriptors with the various tasks was explanations/*Processing text in speech and* focusing on those key ideas in the mediation descriptors such as checking the understanding of key points and linking information to the other person's previous knowledge (Canale & Swain, 1980). *Adapting use of language*, however, received the most varied responses - appropriate choice of language in a specific context with a specific person seems to be a skill which requires flexibility and much practice.

Being understood received the highest number of 'oks' regarding performance, which means most students were not good but just ok at this skill. Features of intelligibility, such as the use of pauses and appropriate use of stress can take time to improve and can also be lost when enthusiasm for the content and interaction itself takes over (Walker et al., 2021). Intelligibility can actually depend on many variables, for example being used to or more accepting of another person's way of speaking (Walker et al., 2021). The key to intelligibility is ultimately sensing and checking whether the other person is understanding and adapting language to suit the other person's needs.

With regard to *Collaborative interaction*, encouraging the other person to speak and weighing up possibilities received the highest percentage (29%) for the number of students who felt they did worse at a skill. Weighing up possibilities can be a challenging skill involving higher order thinking skills needing much practice (Alexander et al., 2008). Encouraging the other person to speak involves active listening and turntaking, which can take a good degree of self-control and awareness of the other person to ensure the interaction is collaborative (Hall, 1995).

Enthusiasm can also interfere with the ability to listen actively and take turns in the interaction appropriately. Turntaking appropriately was rather a tricky skill for some of the students. This is such a vital part of effective conversation, inherent in the idea of collaborating (Silverman et al., 2005), and rather than just thinking what we are going to say next, which is often the case, making a real effort to actively listen to the other person. Actively listening means considering the other person's ideas, weighing up possible differing points of view. It is a skill involving higher order thinking skills and one which can often require much practice in order to do well. It is a skill which is more effective if used in conjunction with the soft skill of sensitivity.

ROLEPLAY PEER ASSESSMENT AND USE OF MEDIATION SKILLS FRAMEWORK: ANALYSIS OF DATA

Peer assessment was conducted by the students and the teacher for each healthcare professional roleplay performance, using the mediation skills framework. This was an opportunity for students to repeat the use of the framework to reinforce awareness of the mediation skills. A peer rating was quantified using a peer rating index (PRI) to help determine the amount of agreement between students and teacher on individuals' performances of each skill. For the PRI, a Good (G) was awarded 3 points, an OK (O) 2 points, and an Improve (I) 1 point. For example, if the peers judged 10 Goods for a student and 4 OKs, the PRI would be calculated as PRI = (10x3 = 4x2)/14 = 38/14 = 2.71. A PRI of 3.00 would mean high agreement for G/G.
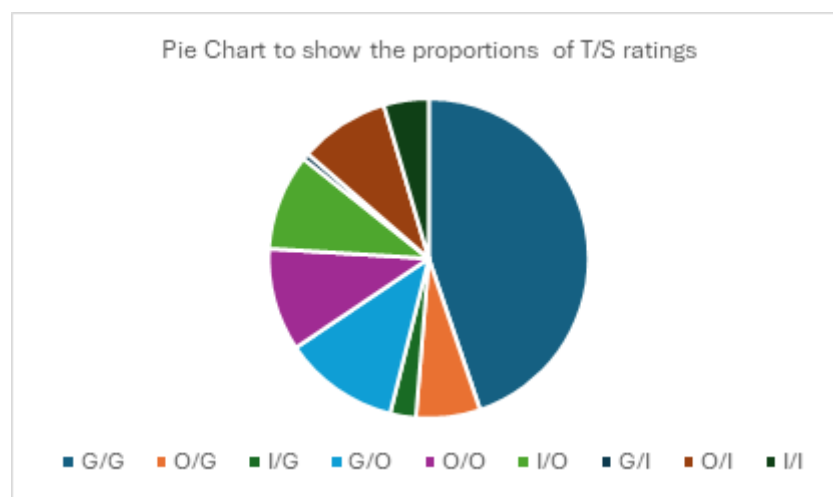

Figure 5: Proportions of T/S (Teacher/Student) ratings

Figure 5 highlights where the ratings or judgements of the students and teachers agree. The pie chart shows that there was a 45% agreement for G/G (Good), in blue, which means that there was much agreement between the teacher and student peer assessments. Agreements also occurred with O/O (OK) in darker blue (10%), and I/I (Improve) in dark grey (5%), making that a total 60% where the teacher and student agreed showing a certain validity of use for the descriptors.

Amidst the variations in judgments, 19% of students gave themselves a higher judgement than the teacher, but 21% a lower judgement. These variations show that there was a fairly equal distribution between students who overestimated themselves and those who underestimated themselves. Boud and Falchikov (1989) state that over-estimation of performance can be common with weaker and less mature students whereas stronger, more mature students tend to have the opposite tendency. It could be argued that over-estimating performances by peers could be seen as supportive and encouraging, and the sharing of the experience in a positive way. Goodier (2019b) maintains that peer support is a key aspect of mediation, in that it relates to the needs of others. Kurtz et al., (2005, p.3) argue that self and peer assessment can be unsettling, as communication skills are 'closely bound to self-concept, self-esteem and personal style'. OK can be a judgement used by students when they are unsure of the level of capability (Sargeant et al., 2011).

Skill	Average PRI
Can clearly and confidently sequence, summarise, signpost information	2.71
Can adapt use of language to ensure meaning is clear	2.66
Can explain/check understanding of key points clearly and link to previous knowledge	2.58
Can be understood clearly with appropriate use of pace/pauses, word and sentence stress, and tone of voice	2.49
Can ask appropriate questions for clarification/demonstrate interest	2.69
Can elicit/encourage another's ideas and use active listening, and appropriate turntaking to allow other person to speak	2.81
Can weigh up different points of view/possibilities using logical reasoning (hypothesising, analysing, inferring, justifying, predicting) + how agreement might be achieved	2.80
Can maintain positive/respectful interaction and anticipate problems in intercultural encounters	2.82
Can demonstrate sensitivity and empathy	2.62
Can establish a positive/supportive environment, also with use of appropriate body language	2.86

Table 4: Average PRI for each of the 10 skills

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Table 4 shows the average PRI for each of the 10 skills. Agreement is higher (2.86) for the descriptor regarding a positive and supportive environment facilitated by good body language. This is a skill students appeared to be good at, perhaps because this is usually a skill inherent in healthcare students. Soft skills such as sensitivity and empathy and adapting use of language both have low average PRIs possibly because these skills are particularly hard to judge. The lowest average PRI (2.49) was for being understood. Intelligibility can be hard to judge as this can depend on many variables, for example being used to or more accepting of another person's way of speaking (Walker et al., 2021). As a general consensus, the students felt that the judgements could help identify which skills were stronger or weaker, and hence which skills they would need to improve.

All students felt that the roleplay task had been a useful experience which they had engaged with emotionally. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) state that roleplay can be considered an emotional experience creating an affective factor which can aid learning, though it seems this can very much depend on the creation of a supportive environment, relevant content, and relevant roles for experiential learning to take place effectively.

IMPACT

The study using CEFR mediation skills with the pluricultural healthcare cohort can be considered successful, though mediation is arguably a tricky and abstract competence to develop and measure. This does raise questions such as to what extent it is perhaps an innate skill or even perhaps dependent on culture. What seems clear is that it is a skill which can be learnt, and learning consists of doing, of participating fully in meaningful tasks which build knowledge and skills (Piccardo & North, 2019). The cohort of healthcare students did use the mediation skills as a specific focus for appropriate language and performance in the tasks (Carless, 2007), and their communication skills tended to improve with each meditation task-based cycle (Piccardo et al., 2019; Boud & Soler, 2015). The mediation competences gave students and teacher specific and attainable goals for improvement in communication skills, and a language for talking about and evaluating learning (Goodier, 2019a). Core/dominant mediation skills can be used with a variety of tasks thereby integrating language, academic, and professional skills (Shackleton et al., 2021).

The impact of this study using mediation skills has continued to enter into my daily work experiences at university. I started to consider the

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mediation skills in the competency framework in various interactions, such as when giving 1:1 tutorials, and I began to understand better why international students may not understand their lecturers. I used the mediation skills to improve team-working skills and trying to ensure relationships with individuals are inclusive, positive, supportive and collaborative. I have given talks on the use of CEFR mediation skills to raise awareness of how communication skills can be developed and practised in a different way, with different focuses. The other person being at the heart of that focus and using our senses in an altruistic way to ensure understanding occurs in interaction. In a way, CEFR mediation skills reflect that rather elusive characteristic of charisma in communication which can make us more approachable, likeable, and relatable. I am currently developing a communication resource which can be used across the university for both students and staff, and perhaps even to improve communication in other organisations I belong to, for example the rowing club.

CONCLUSION

This reflective narrative on the flavour of communication has aimed to make us think more about the way we communicate, and how CEFR mediation skills can be used to develop more effective communication skills. The concept of mediation in English language teaching is fairly new, but its use seems to be growing as ever more contexts and activities appear to provide opportunities for its use (Goodier, 2019a).

Mediation is a practical concept that describes what happens in real communication (Goodier, 2019a), where the learner plays a 'pro-active', real-life role (CEFR: 2020, p.124). The mediation skills with their emphasis on collaboration, intercultural communication, re-formulating information, and acknowledging other viewpoints are skills for lifelong learning which can 'equip learners' academically and professionally for the future' 'in an increasingly connected world' (Goodier, 2019b).

Learning to use mediation skills effectively can be challenging, because they are inherently complex cognitive and interpersonal skills (Goodier, 2019a). Some people may mediate more naturally than others (Goodier, 2019a), but everybody can improve their use of these skills through greater awareness, learning and relevant practice.

A final thought in this reflective narrative comes from Haraway (2016, p.12) who suggests that what we do, what we think, and how we do things does matter: 'It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.'

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Notes

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