

4 Learners' diaries as a tool for teachers' assessment in teletandem

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to present the assessment practice carried out by means of learning diaries within institutionally integrated teletandem, a bilingual model of Virtual Exchange (VE) embedded into foreign language courses at São Paulo State University (UNESP), in Brazil. Teachers read learners' diaries on a weekly basis and provide one-to-one feedback related to (1) telecollaborative learning processes, (2) difficulties and affective factors, and (3) linguistic aspects. This asynchronous form of assessment in the form of teachers' feedback on learners' diaries not only guides each individual learner's autonomous learning, but also allows teachers to select relevant information to be used in synchronous group discussions and teaching in face-to-face lessons.

Keywords: learning diaries, formative assessment, teletandem.

1. Introduction

Classroom assessment practices are generally defined and described in relation to the purposes they have: summative assessment is carried out with the purpose of accountability (i.e. to grade and classify students' work), usually at the end of a period of instruction; formative assessment, on the other hand, is carried out

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concurrently with instruction and serves the purpose of guiding teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). They are both legitimate forms of evaluation in educational settings and are likely to be used in an integrated way (Black & Wiliam, 2009), i.e. tests designed with a summative purpose may be utilized also to inform teaching and learning.

VE is “an embedded, dialogic process that supports geographically distanced collaborative work through social interaction, involving a/synchronous communication technology so that participants co-produce mutual objective(s) and share knowledge-building” (Sadler & Dooly, 2016, p. 2). As a classroom integrated project, VE is commonly assessed by means of different tools, depending on the goals of the exchange. The concept of classroom assessment, according to Black and Wiliam (1998), encompasses activities carried out both by teachers and students, which can be used as feedback to provide information to modify the teaching-learning process in which they are engaged. This definition seems particularly relevant for VE contexts due to three aspects. Firstly, it proposes that assessment can be carried out through any activity participants are engaged in. Because telecollaboration involves different pedagogical tasks by means of which students should learn and co-construct knowledge, any of these tasks could be used as an assessment tool. Also, the concept includes both teachers and students as agents of assessment. In VE projects, due to its inherently collaborative nature, it seems coherent that all the agents (teachers, students, and students’ VE partners) should be involved in assessment practice that can guide teaching-learning activities. Finally, it suggests that classroom evaluative practice should be oriented by a formative perspective, and it emphasizes the critical role feedback plays in assessment. Feedback is central because it fosters what Black and Wiliam (2009) call formative interaction: synchronous or asynchronous “‘moments of contingency’ in instruction³ for the purpose of the regulation of learning processes” (p. 12). The authors explain that moments of contingency are characterized by (1) real-time adjustments teachers make during one-to-one instruction or whole class discussion, (2) feedback teachers provide through

3. The authors consider that instruction involves both teaching and learning processes.

grading practices (and through evidence derived from homework), or (3) feedback students offer at the end of a lesson to plan a subsequent lesson, for example (Black & Wiliam, 2009, pp. 10, 11).

In VE projects, besides getting feedback from their teachers, students have opportunities to give and receive feedback in a reciprocal way by means of different tools while interacting with peers and carrying out the various tasks proposed. Based on these tenets, we aim at presenting the assessment practice carried out in institutionally integrated teletandem, a bilingual model of VE based on the tandem principles. We focus on the formative purpose of assessment by describing teachers' feedback on learners' learning diaries. According to Moon (2010), reflective/learning diaries or journals are terms that can be used to refer to the engagement of learners in registering "ongoing issues over time" with the purpose or "intention to learn from either the process of doing it or from the results of it" (p. 3). In this chapter, the terms 'learning diary' and 'reflexive diary' are used interchangeably. From within the theoretical framework briefly presented, the use of diaries involves both the learner's and the teacher's perspectives in the assessment practice. As learners write their diaries, they are expected to reflect upon and monitor their learning, which implies a selection of the information they consider relevant. As teachers read their learners' diaries and provide feedback, they can select the information that they consider pertinent to guide teaching and learning. We intend to present teachers' feedback, focusing on the kind of information that is selected and how this seems to create moments of formative interaction to guide the teaching-learning process.

2. Overview of the teletandem project

Teletandem (Telles & Vassallo, 2006) is a bilingual VE project in which speakers of different languages (who live in different countries) are paired up in order to learn each other's language and culture by means of videoconferencing tools. It was introduced at UNESP in 2006, and more recently has been adopted in other institutions (cf. Aranha & Cavalari, 2021

– www.teletandembrasil.org). Throughout the years, the practice has been adjusted to fit the needs of the different cohorts and the various contexts in which the practice is implemented. Until 2020, nearly 8,000 university students have participated in the project at three of the university's *campi*: Assis, São José do Rio Preto, and Araraquara. The concept and the approach of this VE is based on the tandem principles (Brammerts, 1996; Telles, 2006) of reciprocity (each participant should collaborate with his/her partner's learning), separation of languages (each language must have a separate moment of practice), and autonomy (each participant should be responsible for his/her own learning).

Teletandem can be implemented in diverse modalities (institutionally non-integrated, semi-integrated, and integrated) that depend on how institutionally and pedagogically integrated the practice is on both sides of the partnership. We focus on the organizational proposal of institutionally integrated teletandem (iiTTD), as described by Aranha and Cavalari (2014) and Cavalari and Aranha (2016). In this modality, at São José do Rio Preto, dyads of English and Portuguese speakers meet once a week, during eight weeks. Teletandem tasks are connected to the English course syllabi in 'Language Teacher Education' and 'Translations Studies' undergraduate programs. The tasks are related to the overall objectives of the VE (learning a foreign language and culture) and of the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) courses, and consist in developing linguistic intercultural skills and improving the overall communicative competence.

The learning design is organized into two macro tasks (Aranha & Leone, 2017), the Teletandem Oral Sessions (TOSs) and the Teletandem Mediation Sessions, which are organized in various micro tasks. The TOSs are the conversations between pairs of university students via a videoconferencing tool. Mediation sessions are meetings in which the teacher/mediator and the group of students discuss problems encountered during TOSs, achievements related to different competences, evaluation of the learning process, and other issues raised by the participation in the project. The micro tasks are carried out by the students with the purpose of helping them prepare for the participation in the macro tasks. These include:

- answering questionnaires – a pre-project questionnaire (to self-evaluate proficiency level and set learning goals) and a post-project questionnaire (to assess the teletandem experience and the extent to which learning goals have been met);
- attending a tutorial (orientation meeting) that gives learners an overview of the project;
- writing reflexive diaries after each TOS;
- producing a text, video, or audio (depending on the course teletandem is integrated in) in the foreign language one is learning (and sharing it with the teletandem partner); and
- offering feedback to the oral or written production in one's native language.

Each of the micro tasks may be used as an assessment instrument, either with a formative or a summative purpose, in line with the specificities of the learning scenario in which teletandem is integrated. In general, teachers tend to grade students' participation by means of reflexive diaries, and their achievements by means of the (final version of the) collaborative outcome, i.e. text, video, or audio files. As far as the authors of this chapter are concerned, no rubrics have been created so far for either of these assessment instruments.

In this chapter, we address specifically the formative assessment practice carried out by teachers as they provide feedback on learning diaries. We present examples of diaries written by Brazilians participating in exchanges with students from the UK and from the USA, between 2016 and 2020. According to Cavalari and Aranha (2016), the learning diary is an instrument “to stimulate ongoing reflection about the learning process” (p. 332). Participants are expected to reflect upon their teletandem experience, ponder over any difficulties they might be facing (and possible solutions), and evaluate their progress toward the learning goals they have set when they answered the initial questionnaire. In the

initial phase of the project, during the tutorial, the teacher presents questions to guide learners as they write their diaries⁴.

“After each teletandem oral session, it is essential that you write a learning diary. Writing the diaries aims at helping you reflect upon what happens during the sessions and how you can benefit from the experience. When you write your diary, try to reflect on:

- Which topics were discussed during that specific session? What did you learn?
- Go back to the learning goals you set when you answered the initial questionnaire. Explain how your participation in the project has been helping you achieve them. If you conclude that you might be on the wrong track, think about ways to make adjustments.
- Make comments about (1) moments in which there was any conflict, or you faced any difficulty; (2) the causes for that; and (3) how (or if) the problem was solved.
- Has your partner been supporting your learning process? How? Did you negotiate these issues during the session?”

Learners can decide if they want to write their diaries in English or in Portuguese, and they should write one diary entry per week on *Google Docs*® after each teletandem oral session. These entries are stored in a personal folder on *Google Drive*® that is shared with the teacher. The diaries are given weekly feedback by the teacher who can select recurrent and/or relevant issues to be discussed in the mediation sessions held during face-to-face language lessons (Cavalari & Aranha, 2019).

4. These guidelines were translated by the authors. The original text can be found on the website: <https://teletandemriopreto.wixsite.com/ibilce/como-produzir-o-diario>

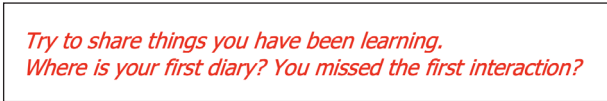
3. Assessment by means of learners' diaries

From the formative perspective, feedback is considered an essential element of assessment since it may foster regulation of the teaching-learning process. To describe formative assessment practice by means of learning diaries, we focus on the feedback provided by different teachers who read teletandem participants' diaries on a weekly basis. We present what teachers focused on, i.e. the content of the feedback, and how teachers provide feedback, i.e. the strategies they use. We also discuss how offering one-to-one feedback seems to enable teachers to collect information that may feed group discussions in face-to-face lessons (mediation sessions) and guide the teaching-learning process in the VE.

3.1. Feedback related to learning aspects in iiTTD

The most common content of teachers' feedback is related to different aspects of learning in teletandem. When learners vaguely (or do not) mention their learning, teachers try to encourage them to reflect upon it.

Figure 1. 2016_UK_diary02



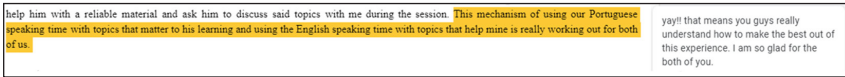
*Try to share things you have been learning.
Where is your first diary? You missed the first interaction?*

The feedback is inserted in a different color at the end of the diary entry. The teacher nudges the participant to reflect on his learning process and achievements in the following entries and asks about the accomplishment of another task – the TOS. A missing diary entry may result from a student's absence from the oral session. This strategy may foster autonomous learning in teletandem, and, at the same time, allows the teacher to be updated about the accomplishment of the VE tasks.

Teachers' feedback also focuses on teletandem guiding principles. [Figure 2](#) emphasizes the role that teletandem principles play in this learning setting and

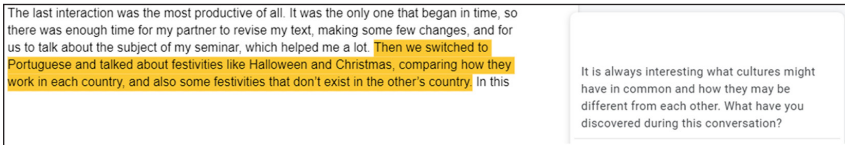
draws students’ attention to the collaborative (reciprocal) aspect that ensures the mutual benefits that the practice should offer. This type of feedback reinforces the guidelines teachers give students in the tutorial (and in mediation sessions). This reinforcement may serve the purpose of positive feedback, by telling students what seems to be going right.

Figure 2. 2020_USA_diary03⁵



Teachers also address intercultural aspects in teletandem learning. In Figure 3, the student mentions holidays and festivities in both countries.

Figure 3. 2015_USA_diary05⁶



The teacher highlights the relevance of ‘comparing and contrasting’ cultural elements that arise during the oral interactions. As several studies⁷ on telecollaborative learning have showed, looking for similarities and differences in how cultural issues are perceived in different countries is essential to foster the development of intercultural competence. It is relevant to consider that this feedback includes a question that the student may answer if he/she wishes. Experience has shown that students tend to answer this type of question in the following diary entry, triggering asynchronous moments of contingency.

5. A more readable version of this figure can be viewed online in [supplementary materials](#).

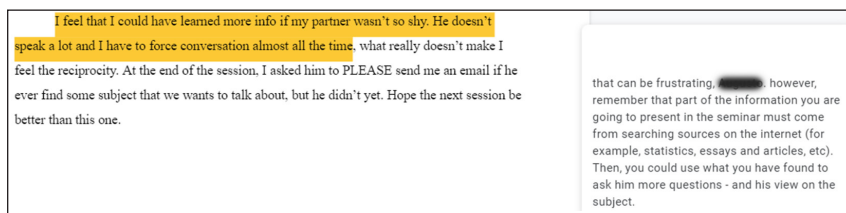
6. A more readable version of this figure can be viewed online in [supplementary materials](#).

7. c.f. [Levet \(2015\)](#) and other studies on the Cultura Project: <http://cultura.mit.edu/publications>

3.2. Feedback related to students' difficulties and emotions

Teachers' feedback is also focused on students' struggles and feelings. Figure 4 shows that the Brazilian learner is facing interpersonal difficulties, and he seems to be frustrated by the fact that his partner is shy and does not collaborate as expected.

Figure 4. 2020_USA_diary04⁸

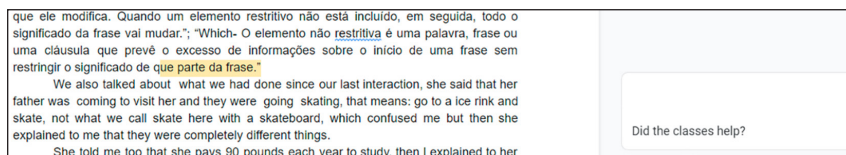


The teacher tries to be sympathetic about the American partner's nonreciprocal attitude. At the same time, she suggests that the Brazilian student uses the collaborative task proposed for this learning scenario (the collaborative creation of a PowerPoint presentation on a cultural topic) as support for the oral interaction. Just like in Figure 1, this type of feedback sheds light on the connections among the various tasks that teletandem participants are expected to carry out as a form of support for their learning. In this sense, formative assessment by means of teacher's feedback on learning diaries seems to encourage the integration of face-to-face and telecollaborative practice, as proposed by Cavallari and Aranha (2016).

Figure 5 refers to the challenges the Brazilian student faces to explain relative clauses (in Portuguese) to her American partner. Even though it is an EFL course, the teacher's feedback entails a connection between teletandem practice and face-to-face EFL lessons within a teacher education program.

8. A more readable version of this figure can be viewed online in [supplementary materials](#).

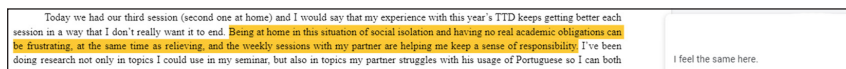
Figure 5. 2016_UK_diary03⁹



It is relevant to note that teletandem participants are not expected to know how to explain linguistic norms and rules because they are native (or proficient) speakers – not language teachers. However, because this participant was enrolled in a language teacher education undergraduate program, she probably felt that she should have known how to explain ‘relative clauses’, a topic which had been taught in one of the face-to-face lessons. The student is actually focusing on her (lack of) abilities to explain the grammar topic. The teacher’s comment (question) seems an attempt to (1) offer support in relation to a difficulty that is related to her competence to become a foreign language teacher, (2) foster the learner’s reflection on what he/she learned (or not) about a linguistic topic that was focused on in the face-to-face lesson. At the same time, the teacher may get information on how effective that specific lesson might have been, which is in accordance with **Black and Wiliam’s (1998)** proposal that classroom assessment should inform both teaching and learning.

Figure 6 reveals the learner’s struggles in dealing with social and physical distancing rules that should be obeyed due to the COVID19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 6. 2020_USA_diary01¹⁰



9. Our translation to the sentence the teacher selects to add the feedback to: Which - the non restrictive element is a word, phrase or clause related to excessive information in the beginning of a sentence without restricting the meaning of the sentence. A more readable version of this figure can be viewed online in [supplementary materials](#).

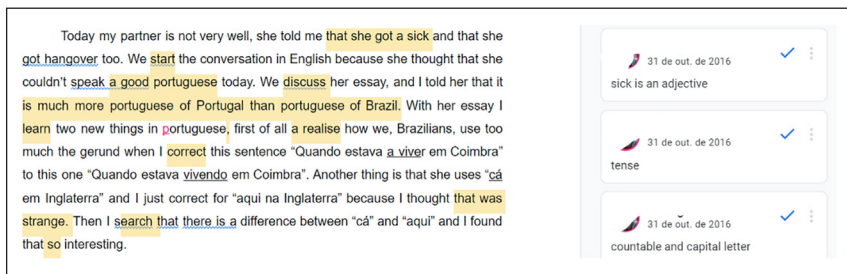
10. A more readable version of this figure can be viewed online in [supplementary materials](#).

Even though this difficulty is not particularly related to the teletandem setting, the feedback is intended to show the learner that she is not ‘alone’ and reveals that the teacher acknowledges the crucial role that affective factors play in the telecollaborative learning process, as widely studied in face-to-face contexts as well.

3.3. Feedback related to linguistic (in)accuracies

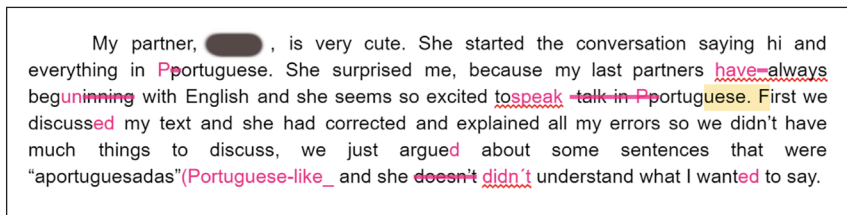
When the diaries are written in English, teachers focus on linguistic inadequacies and suggest the revision of some words or stretches of text. They sometimes use the comment box to give hints on what should be revised (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. 2016_UK_diary04



In other cases, they use the ‘suggesting edits’ feature of Google Docs, which allows students to track the changes made to the file and accept them or not (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. 2016_UK_diary01



It is relevant to note that this teacher's 'suggestions' are a revision strategy that leaves space for learners' decisions on what (or if) they want to change in their own diary entries. Revising the learners' diaries in terms of linguistic inaccuracies may seem at 'odds' with the purpose of the diary, which is to foster reflection. However, since the feedback is individualized and private, it is not likely to threaten learners' faces and it can inform them about linguistic aspects that must be improved.

All these instances of feedback are considered 'asynchronous moments of contingency' in which teachers try to support the individual student's learning process. Whereas asynchronous moments are present in every comment, diaries may also serve to feed the synchronous moments of contingency, i.e. group discussions in face-to-face lessons. As teachers give feedback, they collect the most recurrent and/or relevant issues in a separate file called 'mediation sessions'.

Figure 9. 2020_USA_teacher's file

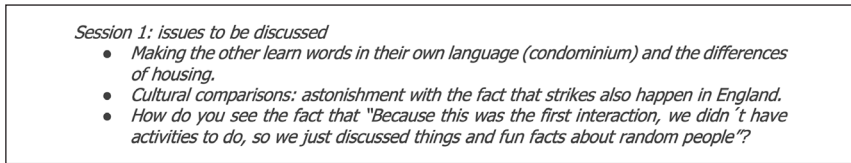


Figure 9 indicates that the asynchronous one-to-one feedback assists teachers' planning and contributes to the synchronous group discussion. This, in turn, may help teachers create a coherent whole as they establish links between what is done in the VE and what is done in face-to-face lessons. This seems to be in accordance with Black and Wiliam (2009), who propose that these two moments of contingency should have the purpose to inform the teaching-learning process.

4. Conclusions and lessons learned

Feedback to participants' diaries allows teachers to assess not only what students say they are (not) learning, but also what they are struggling with

and how they feel about the challenges they are facing. Besides, when diaries are written in English, feedback can focus on language and reveal both the teacher and the student some learning gaps on linguistic development. While teachers establish a private, one-to-one, asynchronous dialogue with individual learners, they also collect relevant information to be discussed in mediation sessions. As challenging and time-consuming reading all the learners' diaries on a weekly basis may be, this formative assessment practice allows teachers to follow students' autonomous and collaborative work and to make informed decisions about the language teaching-learning process, which are crucial aspects of meaningful integration of telecollaborative practice and face-to-face lessons. It should be noted, however, that this type of formative assessment is not guided by pre-established rubrics. Feedback seems to be based on the knowledge the teacher has of each individual student and of the specificities of the learning setting. In this sense, feedback on learners' diaries seem to open a window for the teacher to (1) contemplate the individual's achievements; (2) understand the accomplishment of the different VE tasks by each learner, and (3) establish connections with the broader pedagogical objectives of the EFL program.

5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/i4ios0jfiyhvkkke6wz1h5gqsfpv9gzb>

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