

# 6 Peer assessment of process writing in a virtual exchange project

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## Abstract

One of the possible ways of assessing students' collaborative work in Virtual Exchange (VE) is by the use of Peer Assessment (PA) – a formative assessment technique in which students review each other's work to provide descriptive feedback on the basis of a set of criteria. This article describes a VE procedure, in which students from three different institutions collaborate on the preparation of a tourist brochure. The project participants include two European English for tourism classes and a group of native-speaker participants of an English composition class at a US university. The proposed VE scheme is supplemented with a possible PA procedure and evaluation criteria that has been developed on the basis of previous VE experiences, the students' post-project feedback, and the subject literature.

**Keywords:** peer assessment, foreign language learning, formative assessment, virtual exchange.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the defining features of VE is collaboration, which involves working with other peers both from the home and the partner institutions towards a common

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goal. The collaborative learning can also be reflected in the assessment process through the use of PA, during which students provide each other feedback on the basis of a set of clearly defined criteria. PA is inherently linked with the idea of learner autonomy and learner-centred education, in which the teacher transfers some part of control to the students, who, in turn, need to assume a certain degree of responsibility for their own learning.

As a part of formative assessment (also termed as *assessment for learning*), PA engages students in the process of co-creating assessment criteria and providing feedback to each other. As Little and Perclová (2001) observe, the ability to use assessment criteria in practice can bring far-reaching benefits as it helps students understand standards of both in-class and high-stakes assessments. Moreover, by assessing others, students learn how to apply the standards to reflect on the quality of their own work and, thus, develop self-assessment skills. Assessing peers' work based on clearly articulated criteria encourages students to make decisions, analyse, and reason, which also contributes to their cognitive development and critical thinking skills (Cheng & Warren, 2005). Additionally, some studies show that learners prefer to receive critical remarks from their peers rather than from the teacher (Black et al., 2003) and consider them more motivating and useful (Czura, 2016; Peng, 2010). Deakin-Crick et al. (2005) add that the value of PA lies in the fact that the students offer each other feedback using more approachable language and feel free to ask other students questions they would otherwise feel inhibited to ask.

Critics of PA point out that students with a low level of linguistic competence are not able to correct other students' mistakes. It must be noted, however, that this form of assessment does not only refer to linguistic correctness, but can also include an array of other criteria, such as content, structure, or very specific language-related aspects described and explained in detail prior to PA. As Cheng and Warren (2005) indicate, PA and teacher assessment of the same work may produce different results. This should not be approached as a drawback as these two forms of evaluation have different objectives; PA has a predominantly formative function based on providing feedback according to assessment criteria, whereas teachers' assessments, especially in an institutionalised context,

often need to be supplemented with a formal grade. The main merit of PA lies in the fact that it enables students to analyse each other's work and provide descriptive feedback according to previously established standards (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019).

Since PA is embedded in the social context and, thus, may evoke specific cognitive and emotional reactions, introduction of this form of assessment should be treated as a multi-stage process for which students should be gradually prepared. It is particularly important in contexts where students are not used to working autonomously, without teachers' direct supervision (cf. Czura & Baran-Łucarz, 2021; Verzella & Sendur, 2019). Research also suggests that students benefit from such a scaffolded approach, and the quality of the feedback they provide increases as they gain more experience (e.g. Shuijsmans, Brand-Gruwel, & Van Merriënboer, 2002). Gielen and De Wever (2015) underscore "the need for structure and support to ensure effective feedback" (p. 437), which can be achieved when peer feedback is based on a list of clearly defined assessment criteria and aims to provide answers to three major questions proposed by Hattie and Timperley (2007): "Where am I going?", "How am I going?", and "Where to next?" (p. 88). The assessment criteria can be provided in the form of peer checklists, categorical scales, or selected curriculum requirements. The specific design of the PA procedure needs to take into account, among others, the educational context in which it takes place, course objectives, group dynamics, students' prior experience, task type, content, and, in the case of VE, additionally the mode of communication and language(s) used.

PA can be easily incorporated into task design, and often one can find its application as an assessment tool in VE projects to support collaborative language learning (e.g. Dooly & Sadler, 2019; Van de Kraak & Lai, 2020; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011). PA tools typically involve rubrics, checklists, corrective comments, and written reports; however, they can be adapted to match more specific objectives of a VE project. For instance, in their VE project that involved elements of gamification, Sevilla-Pavón and Haba-Osca (2017) used PA "in the form of votes in assessment rubrics and voting polls for digital

stories [...] and oral presentations” and written “investors’ reports” as a part of a larger reward system that was concluded with “an award ceremony” (p. 244). Additionally, online tools such as TEAMMATES (Dooly, 2022, this volume) and Wooclap (Vuylsteke, 2022, this volume) enable smooth implementation of PA among all distanced partners, offering feedback that is immediately available to both students and teachers.

Regardless of the form and mode of PA, it is prerogative that students receive appropriate training and guidelines that would help them provide feedback to each other on different aspects of learning in a constructive and non-threatening manner (for an example of a project preparing students for giving and receiving online peer feedback see Ennis et al., 2021). On the basis of their study, Ware and O’Dowd (2008) underline the role of teacher’s scaffolding: “Instructors must not only make clear their expectations that students provide feedback, but they must also provide examples of when and how to provide feedback” (p. 56). To this end, in their course focused on developing linguistic accuracy and complexity through VE, Ware and Cañado (2007) put forward a set of sample guidelines on language-related and interpersonal interactional strategies that can help students formulate efficient and meaningful feedback.

There are ample studies that show that PA can benefit the learning process in a VE project. This chapter does not showcase the whole assessment process in a VE, but rather presents a step-by-step approach to introducing PA. The procedure has evolved as a result of previous VE projects involving students of tourism from Italy and Poland, and American students of English composition. The first-hand experience of the past VE projects, the participants’ opinions about the collaborative writing, US students’ feedback to the received drafts (for details see Verzella & Sendur, 2019), and a thorough review of subject literature helped us to take a critical look, by observing the strong points as well as the shortcomings of the previous exchanges and student outputs. The PA procedure was modified accordingly with a view to providing the students with better support throughout the process, facilitating closer intercultural dialogue and improving the consistency of peer feedback. In the next section, we delineate and reflect on the redesigned PA procedure, which, in our view, addresses to a

greater degree the needs of students in our educational context. Some concrete examples of assessment criteria are also provided.

## 2. Overview of the VE project

The original VE project involved three groups from three different countries – two groups of English for tourism (EFT) students at two European universities and a group of native speakers from an American university. The group from Poland, taught by the second author, consisted of undergraduate students of tourism and recreation at the Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University. The English as a foreign language/English for specific purposes course aimed at developing the students’ general language skills to a B2 level, and equipping them with the necessary EFT language. The second European group made up of students completing a master’s degree in heritage and tourism at the University of Molise, Italy, attended a EFT class with similar objectives to that of the group based in Poland. The third group consisted of native English speakers enrolled in an obligatory English composition class at North Dakota State University, US. This course aimed to help students develop their writing skills in a variety of genres for different audiences, and to come to see writing as a collaborative and negotiated process.

On the linguistic level, the VE project was designed to enable students to use English as a global lingua franca, which entails “linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural common grounds” (Verzella & Sendur, 2019, p. 171) and acquaint them with the principles of persuasive writing that may be of use in their future professional activity. Additionally, given the interactive and international nature of the project, it was also intended to encourage students’ reflection on the importance of intercultural competence.

The main student output was a travel brochure advertising a selected region or a tourist attraction addressed to young, college-educated international tourists. This was supposed to be written in a persuasive language and illustrated with appropriate visual aids. Following Dudley-Evans and St John’s (1998)

recommendation, the teachers adopted the synthesis of the product and process approaches to writing. Accordingly, the collaborative writing started with a presentation and detailed analysis of model texts. Then, working towards the final product, the students produced several drafts on the basis of the comments received from their peers (for more detailed analysis of the VE project see [Verzella & Sendur, 2019](#)).

In the post-project discussions, the students and the partnering instructors came to the conclusion that notwithstanding all the values the VE brought into our courses, there had been some flaws in the design and planning that needed reconsidering for future use. We all agreed that the project was too long and too complicated. The continuing and repetitive character of the tasks (too many rounds of peer feedback), as well as their complexity (the students had to prepare their own brochures, comment on their peers' work, analyse, assess, and make use of the comments provided by the reviewers and introduce appropriate revisions) brought about the feeling of weariness and a longing for the task to come to an end. The students from the European universities also complained about the lack of opportunity for more direct contact with the partners due to the asynchronous nature of the project. Another drawback was an incomplete understanding of the assessment criteria. Although the Polish and the Italian groups had been given a set of guiding questions, these were perceived as rather vague and failed to guide the students on what to look for in their peers' work.

With the wisdom of hindsight and after a critical analysis of the VE procedure, a modified approach has been designed. The main changes introduced in the redesigned version are: (1) the incorporation of synchronous partner sessions, including a synchronous peer feedback meeting, (2) reduction in the number of PA rounds, (3) formulating a new set of PA criteria, and (4) providing the students with more detailed guidance on using the criteria. The following paragraphs describe the modified version of the VE that is yet to be trialled. As it is a proposed model which can be further modified for other VE projects, the participant groups are referred to as ESP (English for Specific Purposes) groups and NS (Native-Speaker) students.

The modified VE project is designed for two months in total, with at least four synchronous sessions supplemented with asynchronous communication. As before, the final product, i.e. a tourist brochure, is prepared in pairs by students from the same institution and then further developed on the basis of the feedback received from their VE partners. The objective of the first introductory session, ideally conducted as a videoconference involving all ESP participants, is to offer the students an opportunity to get to know each other and learn about their respective study programmes and institutions. Alternatively, if arranging a group videoconference is not possible, the first meeting will be arranged individually by the students outside the regular class hours. The next two synchronous sessions between the ESP partners are used to discuss the typical aims, structure, and content of a tourist brochure, exchange ideas about the planning stage of the task, and offer each other initial peer feedback. The last synchronous session between the ESP groups is devoted to the first round of peer feedback. The second round of PA is provided by the NS students and sent to the original authors by email.

### **3. Assessment**

It must be underlined here that the objective of the procedure described below is not to provide an overview of the whole VE and corresponding assessment processes, but to depict the steps necessary to familiarise the students with their roles in PA, who, in this particular context, have never experienced PA before (cf. [Verzella & Sendur, 2019](#)). Ideally, the same procedure should be implemented in both ESP course groups, as the students are engaged in the same task and offer one another peer feedback according to the same criteria. Due to differing course objectives, the set of assessment criteria used by the NS students may focus in greater detail on the language-related aspects, such as foreign language (L2) accuracy and the use of appropriate rhetorical strategies and persuasive discourse.

Step 1 – *Orientation*: in order to better orient instructional planning and the design of the VE project, during the first session, the teacher talks with the

students about their prior writing instruction in the L2 classroom and their learning strategies related to this skill. Additionally, the students are asked about their experience of collaborative learning and using technology for general and learning purposes.

*Step 2 – Task setting:* the teacher introduces the task, i.e. collaborative work that aims at designing a tourist brochure for a specific target group, and explains the approach to writing adopted in this particular VE project. The students are informed that they are to plan, look for relevant information, and design a travel brochure advertising a tourist destination of their choice. They learn that they will have a chance to discuss these issues and exchange perspectives through synchronous and asynchronous communication tools with peers from another country enrolled in a similar ESP course. If necessary, the basic features (editing, saving, commenting, etc.) of Google Docs, the editing tool selected for the purposes of this project, are explained and practised.

*Step 3 – Analysis of a model text and introduction of assessment criteria:* on the basis of model examples, students discuss the characteristics of a tourist brochure. In particular, they focus on such aspects as the content strategy and structure, the relevance of the text to the target group, and the design and use of visual aids. As regards the language-related aspects, the students list vocabulary and grammar structures typical of such texts. The assessment criteria (see [Table 1](#) below) are explained gradually by means of leading questions, e.g. how many parts does a travel brochure consist of? What is the objective of each part? What makes the brochure potentially appealing to the target group? As both groups are set exactly the same tasks, a common set of criteria is devised by the two instructors.

*Step 4 – Practising the use of assessment criteria:* the students in both ESP groups are presented the same/similar travel brochures (e.g. designed by students in previous years) and in small groups try to assess the text against the student assessment grid discussed earlier. Next, during the whole-class discussion, the students present their feedback and justify their choices. This creates space for exchanging ideas and practising the use of the criteria, and, at the same



time, enables the teacher to intervene in cases of misunderstandings or biased judgement.

Table 1. A sample student assessment grid

<b>Student assessment grid</b>			
<b>Criteria</b>	<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 To some extent</b>	<b>3 Yes, fully</b>
<b>CONTENT STRATEGY AND STRUCTURE</b>			
The material is ordered in a way that is logical, clear, and easy to follow.			
The text is divided into paragraphs.			
Precise and relevant headings are used.			
The content is relevant to the target group (international tourists aged 20-30).			
Comments:			
<b>DESIGN AND USE OF VISUAL AIDS</b>			
The layout (arrangement of text, graphics, colours) is well-designed and carefully prepared.			
There is a good balance of text and visual aids.			
The visual aids well illustrate the content.			
Comments:			
<b>USE OF GRAMMAR AND LEXICAL ITEMS</b>			
Lexical items: Tourism-related vocabulary is used (vocabulary listed during class discussions).			
Grammar: The target audience is addressed directly (e.g. second person pronouns, direct questions).			
Comments:			

Step 5 – *Preparation of the first draft and the first round of PA*: in pairs, the students from the same institution plan their work, research relevant

information, and prepare the first draft of their brochures. During two synchronous online meetings, they have a chance to exchange ideas with their VE partners and ask for their opinion regarding the selected tourist attraction or illustrations. The real-time meetings are organised out of class at the times arranged by the students within the project time schedule. Once the first draft is ready, it is exchanged with the VE partners, who provide their feedback and justify their evaluations in the comment section of the grid. Additionally, the assessors are encouraged to leave more detailed comments/corrections in the Google Docs file. Then, the ESP groups meet during the final synchronous session to discuss their mutual evaluations and comments. This stage of PA is later briefly summarised in-class.

*Step 6 – Composing and sharing the second drafts with the NS project partners:* after the second draft is completed, it is sent to the NS partners, who offer their peer feedback on the basis of the common set of criteria created by the ESP instructors. The students should be encouraged to leave comments in the margins and tracked, in-text corrections in the document. Depending on the character of the NS class, additional criteria connected with the students' specialist expertise can be devised for these assessors. For instance, the NS participants of the original project were enrolled in a composition course; therefore, apart from the feedback on the design and the use of visual aids, which could be done by students of all kinds of specialisations, this group was additionally asked to comment on the content, structure, and rhetorical strategies. With NS partners, more emphasis can also be put on language-related aspects. Then the students return the corrected brochures by email to the original authors. In the final steps, the ESP students introduce the corrections and submit the final products to the teacher.

## 4. Conclusions and lessons learnt

Our experience shows us that learner autonomy should not be taken for granted in tertiary level students (e.g. Czura & Baran-Łucarz, 2021). At the beginning of the original project, students in the Polish institution voiced their concerns about the need to work collaboratively and provide feedback to each other. They

admitted that they would rather receive more straightforward instructions from the teacher. Whereas the Italian students looked forward to receiving feedback from native speakers of English, they expressed their doubt about the quality of feedback offered by inexperienced students from the partner institution (Verzella & Sendur, 2019). Consequently, we were aware that PA needs to take a step-by-step approach and be adapted to students' needs and beliefs. Naturally, in other projects the level of scaffolding will depend on students' familiarity with this mode of assessment and their autonomous learning skills.

Although the same approaches to assessment in all partner institutions are on the whole not essential to the success of a VE project (Czura & Dooly, 2021), given the complexity of the current initiative that involved three partner institutions, each with a distinctive role, and several rounds of peer feedback, we think it is necessary to set the same assessment criteria for all the ESP participants. Clearly defined criteria and common standards will help the students prepare their brochures, provide more reliable feedback, and understand the corrective comments they will receive from their peers. As can be seen above, the assessment criteria were presented and discussed on the basis of a model text, which, in our view, helps students better conceptualise the criteria and adds to the authenticity of the task. We understand that sometimes, for various reasons, it is impossible for all participating institutions to agree on common assessment procedures and criteria. In a situation where the partners are assigned different tasks (like the NS group in the current project) or PA is carried out only within one partner institution, the compatibility of criteria is not essential and students can be encouraged to formulate assessment criteria themselves under the teacher's guidance.

In the modified VE procedure, we added synchronous PA sessions. It was motivated by the findings of the study conducted by Zheng, Cui, Li, and Huang (2018), according to which synchronous sessions between students engaged in PA provided a valuable forum for discussing the feedback and eliminating any misunderstandings. It was revealed that such synchronous meetings "significantly improved students' writing performance, qualitative feedback quality, meta-cognitive awareness, and self-efficacy" (Zheng et al., 2018, p. 1). Additionally, the exploration of seven different PA designs

indicated that “chances of fulfilling all the feedback functions, and discussing all the feedback aspects, increase when both written and oral feedback are being provided” (Van den Berg, Admiraa, & Pilot, 2006, p. 34). Apart from these research-proven benefits, the synchronous sessions will provide the participants with the possibility to practise their speaking skills in meaningful, authentic conversations, and engage in intercultural dialogues with peers from other cultural backgrounds.

The VE described here is rather complex and involves three institutions, some of which have different tasks to complete. The redesigned model ought to be treated as one of the many possible ways in which PA can be conducted in VE. It can be further modified and adapted to the specific needs of potential partners, their varying curricula, and expected learning outcomes. Our teaching experience shows that PA has a potential for improving students’ own learning, enhancing the understanding of assessment criteria (cf. Czura, 2016) and, in the case of VE, creating a platform for authentic communication across cultures.

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