

7 TEAMMATES in virtual exchange: tool and tips for peer assessment

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Abstract

Virtual Exchange (VE) in higher education often involves small, online working groups who meet outside of class time. This lack of teacher presence in the meetings has its advantages (e.g. more student-centred, more autonomous environments); however, it also presents challenges for assessment. This chapter introduces an online platform called TEAMMATES and briefly describes how it has been used for continuous peer assessment in an ongoing VE between two university classes in language teacher education.

Keywords: peer assessment, virtual exchange, telecollaboration contract, digital communicative competences.

1. Introduction

As the use of communication technology for connecting learners has grown exponentially in language teaching, there has been a movement to consolidate the pedagogical foundations for VE (see Dooly & Vinagre, 2021 for an historical overview of other terms applied). As is evident in many of the chapters in this book, the origins of VE have long been attributed to the influence of the Communicative Approach (CA) in language teaching (Brammerts, 1996; Dooly, 2010, 2017; Kern, 1996; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2017; Vinagre, 2016). It is important to underscore its impact on language teaching,

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learning, and assessment, and subsequently VE. In particular, CA has a role in understanding learning objectives and how to assess these goals “in terms of *language use*” (Thornbury, 2013, p. 188; this author’s emphasis). In this sense, the VE pedagogical design is often based on CA principles (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). Teachers feel VE can best encompass the use of meaningful tasks that create opportunities for spontaneous use of the target language for genuine communication. However, assessment presents a challenge for pedagogical application of VE and, as Hauck, Müller-Hartmann, Rienties, and Rogaten (2020) point out, the assessment process (inevitably should) tie back to the task design for the VE.

This chapter describes the peer assessment used during a VE in language teacher education in which the telecollaborative activities, as part of the course design, form a central nexus for the learning process (Fuchs, 2021). A principal aim of the course is to foment the active engagement of future language teachers in communicative online situations that facilitates learning (content and language). The aim is that they can experience and reflect on how to transfer this knowledge to similar contexts for their pupils, departing from the baseline of CA in language education. The two teacher educators plan the course programme together (despite being listed in their relevant university programmes as different subjects) so that both groups are expected to do the same principal activities and go through a similar evaluation process, including peer evaluation across international borders.

This chapter describes the use of an online platform for peer assessment that can be easily integrated into the VE pedagogical design in language teacher and Foreign Language (FL) education. The VE in question began in 2003 and has been ongoing ever since (see Dooly & Sadler, 2016, 2020, for more details of the evolution and current state of the VE). What is of interest to this chapter are the weekly online meetings carried out in small work groups, held outside of class, and during the entire course. Together the working groups design a telecollaborative language learning project and their collaboration is one of the components of the VE that is assessed through the platform TEAMMATES (explained in more detail below). Moreover, because the student teachers are

learning about CA and language teaching, the tool is combined with descriptors aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR; [Council of Europe, 2020](#)).

The principal theoretical underpinnings of the teaching approach of this course lie in the seminal work done by [Vygotsky \(1986\)](#), which highlights the role of mediated action (and interaction) as central to the learning process as well as placing particular emphasis on student-centred learning ([Bruner, 1961](#); [Schulman, 1986](#); [von Glaserfeld, 1989](#); see also [Dooly, 2022](#), this volume, for discussion of the ‘student-centredness’ of VE). The design of the VE aims to ensure that the online meetings, integrated into the overall teaching programme lead “to (a) uptake of ideas, (b) scaffolding to ensure conceptual understanding, and (c) handover – that is, successful transfer and assimilation of new knowledge into already existing knowledge and understanding” ([Dooly & Sadler, 2020](#), p. 6). Inevitably, this handover of knowledge entails a significant amount of learner autonomy, in particular in VE settings ([Cappellini, Lewis, & Rivens Mompean, 2017](#); [Fuchs, 2021](#); [Marjanovic, Dooly, & Sadler, 2021](#)). Peer evaluation has been put forth as a relevant means of promoting learner autonomy ([Little & Perclová, 2001](#)), although this must be supported and facilitated through instruction, training, and empirical learning of peer evaluation procedures ([Czura & Sendur, 2022](#), this volume).

Peer assessment has been touted as a means to provide learners with key opportunities to take responsibility for their learning, including critical reflection (analysis), monitoring and applying critical evaluation of theirs and their peers’ outcomes as well as the learning process ([Chew, Snee, & Price, 2016](#); [Topping, 1998](#)) although many scholars suggest that for learners who are not fully autonomous, teacher support in providing feedback is more effective ([Lantolf & Poehner, 2008](#); [Lyster & Ranta, 1997](#); [Sauro, 2009](#)).

Thus, peer evaluation (of both in-class and VE activities) is continuously present throughout the course. These evaluations were included in our pedagogical design to support the students’ growing awareness of the need to be responsible for their own learning, which has been advocated as a key

foundation for effective telecollaboration (O'Rourke, 2007; Ushioda, 2000; Warschauer & Kern, 2000) as well as promoting student-centred learning through technology (Thomas, Reinder, & Warschauer, 2013). However, the efficacy and success of CA approaches such as VE does not lie only in the technical teacher know-how; innovation in the underlying pedagogy is also germane. One of the key aspects of teacher competences in VE environments is the promotion of learner autonomy (Dooly, 2010; O'Rourke, 2007; The EVALUATE Group, 2019); thus as future teachers, experiencing and practising peer evaluation during VE can provide a basis for empirical development of this key teacher competence.

2. Overview of the VE project

TEAMMATES² was first used as a tool for peer assessment by the author during her long-term collaboration with another teacher based in the USA (at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign). The collaboration between our courses began in 2003 after 'meeting online' through a mutual contact and has continued, non-stop, since 2004 (Dooly & Sadler, 2016, 2020; Sadler & Dooly, 2013). The students are studying to become language teachers; most of them will teach English as L2 or as an FL, others will teach other languages. The language they will teach depends on the student profile of that year because both courses (in Spain and in the USA) have a percentage of international students who will return to their countries and teach their languages as L2.

The course covers various aspects of technology-infused language teaching. Three main areas that are covered are (1) theories of language acquisition; (2) the design of FL (or L2) teaching activities within project-based language learning approaches, including VE; and (3) the integration of technologies in learning FLs (methods, planning, effective application of resources, etc.). Because the students are studying VE as an approach, their own VE experience is considered to be vital to their professional development. This implies that

2. <https://teammatesv4.appspot.com/web/front/home>

their participation in the VE should be taken into consideration as part of their final evaluation at the end of the course. Discussion of the importance of active participation (which goes beyond simply ‘being there’) is carried out at the beginning of the course and the students are given a ‘telecollaboration contract’ (see [supplementary materials Appendix 1](#)) so they are aware of the descriptors that are used for evaluation.

As future language teachers, the expected learning outcomes of the students covers several domains: academic competences such as being able to develop criteria and materials for embedding technology and VE into teacher practice; linguistic competences such as being able to communicate effectively in tasks related to teaching in both in-person and online sessions; and professional competences that include working effectively in collaboration with others both in-class and telecollaboratively.

TEAMMATES is not used to evaluate all of the above competences since the students are engaged in many more activities than only the VE. TEAMMATES is used for the evaluation of their online collaboration as well as providing insight into their preparation prior to taking part in activities (the VE is considered to be the institutional tasks even though they take place outside of class hours).

3. Assessment

TEAMMATES was developed in 2010 and we began to use the platform in 2013. For the moment, the platform is free for use although it is stipulated in the webpage that the company will “provide its services free for as long as [they] can”. The platform was designed by teachers and learners for use by members of the educational community. Students can provide peer evaluations through any device that has an internet connection and are not required to have an account to access the evaluations; however, students with a TEAMMATES account will be able to see the entire record of their peer evaluations. Students without an account can only access the current peer evaluation and are responsible for storing their evaluations as a PDF if they wish to keep a record.

Teachers must have an account to create the evaluation templates for their students. The dashboard of the programme is not overly ‘user friendly’ and requires some time to become acquainted with all its functions; however, once an evaluation template has been set and used, it becomes easier. It is recommended to do a few test runs before applying the system to an actual class setting.

A key feature that has proven worthwhile for our VE is the possibility to set up pre-established groups for ‘team peer evaluation sessions’. The assessment between teams can be set as anonymous for their peers while the teachers can see the overall evaluations as well as receive confidential observations from the different members of the teams. This allows the teachers to intervene in a timely fashion in the event that the team cohesion or collaboration appears to be unsatisfactory.

The assessments can be (pre)scheduled to be opened, then closed and available to each team member at specific intervals, which ensures feedback after all the meetings (or randomly if preferred) and it is not necessary for the teacher to remember to do so after each meeting (see Figure “Setting up scheduling of TEAMMATES surveys” in [supplementary materials](#)). This is especially useful if the groups have meetings scheduled at different timetables.

The evaluations can be set so that group members not only receive feedback from other team members, but there can also be feedback between teams – a useful feature for activities that include demonstrating and discussing output between smaller groups in the VE classes. Students or teams can also receive individualised feedback from teachers, including invited lecturers. This makes the platform highly suitable for VE assessment which involves at least two, sometimes more partner teachers (see Figure “Grouping recipients for individualised feedback in TEAMMATES” in [supplementary materials](#)).

To keep the feedback brief but efficient ([Figure 1](#)), we try to keep the questions short and quick to answer, typically asking Likert scale questions for each team member and limiting the number of ‘essay’ type questions to optional (asking for a more reasoned reflection on their peers’ performance) .

Figure 1. Simple-to-answer questions

Question 2: How much did you learn from this individual about the materials (learning style) they were responsible for bringing to the meeting?


Only the following persons can see your responses:

- The receiving student can see your response, the name of the recipient, but not your name
- Instructors in this course can see your response, the name of the recipient, and your name

Evaluatee/Recipient

████████████████████ (Student)

I learned about it in depth and and was pushed to reflect.
 I learned about it in depth
 I learned but needed more depth
 A little bit
 Nothing

 [Optional] Comment on your response

Given the profile of our students (future language teachers), we focus some of our questions on collaborative partnership and leadership qualities (see [Table 1](#)). The descriptors we have elaborated are adapted from the domain of ‘mediation’ found in the CEFR ([Council of Europe, 2020](#)).

Table 1. Example of descriptors for leadership qualities

How well did your peer (NAME) take a lead role to organise communicative activity during the meeting? Choose one descriptor that best fits your peer’s performance during this meeting.
S/he recognises undercurrents in interaction and takes appropriate steps accordingly to guide the direction of the talk. S/he almost always effectively leads the development of complex abstract topics, while guiding the discussion through key questions and encouragement to others to elaborate their ideas further.
S/he usually organises and manages collaborative group work efficiently. S/he gives precise instructions for group work and formulates questions and feedback to encourage mates to contribute to the ongoing assigned activities.
S/he sometimes builds on the other mates’ ideas and links them into coherent lines of thinking. S/he occasionally explains how another idea (not necessarily own) fits with the main topic under discussion.
S/he does not intervene much and when does so, it is usually to provide informative sentences about their own ideas. S/he does little to encourage others to contribute to the discussion.

We also ask for peer feedback on communicative competences in the language of instruction and communication between partners (English). Using TEAMMATES to do so provides us insight into communicative competences in online meetings that we do not normally have direct access to evaluating ourselves in face-to-face classes. Again, using the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) as a baseline for our questions, we might ask the group members to rank their peers according to descriptions as follows (Table 2).

Table 2. Example of descriptors for communicative skills in online meeting

How well did your peer (NAME) communicate during the meeting? Choose one descriptor that best fits your peer's performance during this meeting.
S/he communicates confidently and effectively for both professional (e.g. discussion of tasks, course content) and personal purposes (small talk, etc.). S/he is able to adapt and even support other speakers, even those with thicker accents or is evidently struggling with the target language.
S/he communicates effectively for both professional (e.g. discussion of tasks, course content) and personal purposes (small talk, etc.). S/he has some problems understanding others with thicker accents or problems using the target language but quickly asks for clarification.
S/he communicates through relatively simple language use for professional (e.g. discussion of tasks, course content). Does not participate much in personal discussions (small talk, etc.). Does not typically engage with others with thicker accents or with apparent difficulties in the target language.
Hardly interacts with others and when does so, uses short, extremely simple utterances.

Many proponents of VE have argued that these learning environments are ideal for promoting the digital skills required in modern society (Bates, 2011; Dooly, 2017; The EVALUATE Group, 2019). Given that the recent adaptations to the CEFR now include digital interactions, we have also adapted these descriptors for the peer assessments in TEAMMATES for our VE (see Table 3).

Table 3. Example of descriptors for digital communicative skills in online meeting

How well did your peer (NAME) perform digitally during the meeting? Choose one descriptor that best fits your peer's performance during this meeting.
S/he can express their ideas with clarity and precision. Regularly combines audio, text and available technology for highly effective communication (e.g. screensharing, camera position, etc.).

S/he can express their ideas with clarity and precision. Sometimes combines audio, text and available technology for effective communication (e.g. screensharing, camera position, etc.).

S/he can express their ideas with some help. Infrequently combines audio, text and available technology but efforts do not always result in effective communication (e.g. screensharing, camera position, etc.).

Hardly interacts with others orally, prefers text only. Positioning with the camera seems awkward at times.

4. Conclusions and lessons learnt

It is important to underscore that the first evaluations and exchanges often create student anxiety as they are not always familiar with the concept of interdependence in the learning process and activities which can promote it (Chew et al., 2016; Czura & Sendur, 2022, this volume; Dooly & Sadler, 2020; Panadero, Romero, & Strijbos, 2013). Some adaptation, support, and open dialogue is necessary to move students towards more autonomous learning and an acceptance of continuous peer evaluations. The challenges and pushback from students regarding peer assessment have been well documented elsewhere (Alfares, 2017; Czura & Sendur, 2022, this volume; Forrester & Tashchian, 2010; Jacobs & Loh, 2003). For instance, during one iteration of our VE, a student received quite negative peer feedback reports at the beginning of the exchange. In a private email to the teacher following the report, the student was angry and concerned about the report, expressing that she felt it was ‘unfair’ and she was uncomfortable being judged by her peers. Nonetheless, she soon followed peer suggestions and became notably more participative, both in-class and online. This was subsequently reflected in higher peer evaluations of her performance. She also began to take more initiative as a group leader and became a ‘champion’ of peer feedback as an effective teaching strategy (see Dooly & Sadler, 2020 for a more detailed account).

A key strategy we have found to be most effective for dealing with student anxiety regarding peer assessment is to always schedule time for discussion about the process during in-person classes. At the beginning, dialogue is best focused on the purpose of the continuous assessment. We include a ‘telecollaboration

contract' (see [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 1) which is a type of voluntary 'learning contract' that outlines key behaviours and actions for successful VEs. This contract is signed by the student as a pledge to engage in specific, positive collaborative learning behaviours. Students are assured that the contract goes three ways: the group can lodge 'breach of contract' complaints against other mates and even the teachers. It is important to note, however, that we insist that detailed accounts of steps taken to improve telecollaborative relations between the group members must be provided before a group is allowed to claim breach of contract and before moving to 'fire' a group member. The contract also serves as an outline of the criteria that will be used for the peer assessment through TEAMMATES and as factors to be taken into account at the end of the exchange when students are required to submit longer, informed reports of their group activities and performance.

There must also be time and space for dialogue during the exchange to deal with students' feelings of anxiety and potential resentment for having to and being continuously 'judged' by their peers. Learners are not necessarily comfortable with these roles ([Panadero et al., 2013](#)) and students may feel that this should solely be the teachers' responsibility ([Strijbos et al., 2009](#)). Referencing the telecollaboration contract and the importance that learner autonomy has for language learning are valuable points for supporting students' acceptance of the process, but the teacher must not forget that it is a gradual process that requires patience and understanding.

Data that has been analysed from different iterations of the VE described above have shown that the students gradually take on more and more responsibility for their learning ([Dooly & Sadler, 2020](#)). Despite evidence of some resistance to the pressures of continual peer assessment during the VE, the learners do begin to self-manage and monitor their own learning activities. The combination of peer learning and peer assessment promotes the interaction necessary for L2 learning, it also promotes learner responsibility and reflection. These processes can be facilitated through online platforms such as TEAMMATES so that the VE teachers can focus more on supporting the ongoing development of their pupils.

5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/h07c4tblgshw86y0pwkxvivvfzxgo3q>

Recommended readings

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