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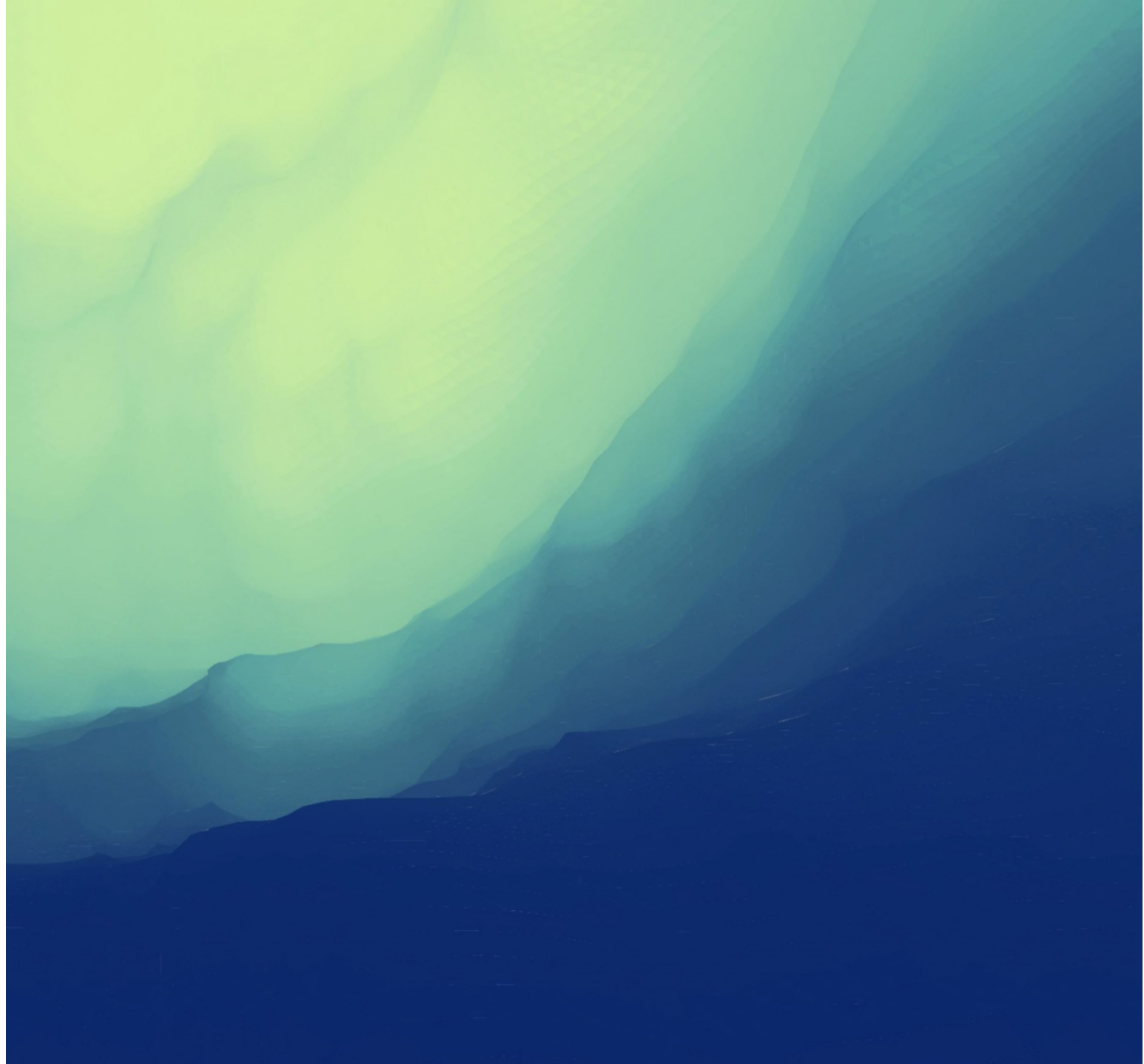
# Empowering feedback: boosting student agency in the formative assessment process

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# "Empowering feedback": Two directions

How can we **add power to the feedback** that students receive?

How can we help this feedback to **empower students**? What is involved in this process of (intended) empowerment?

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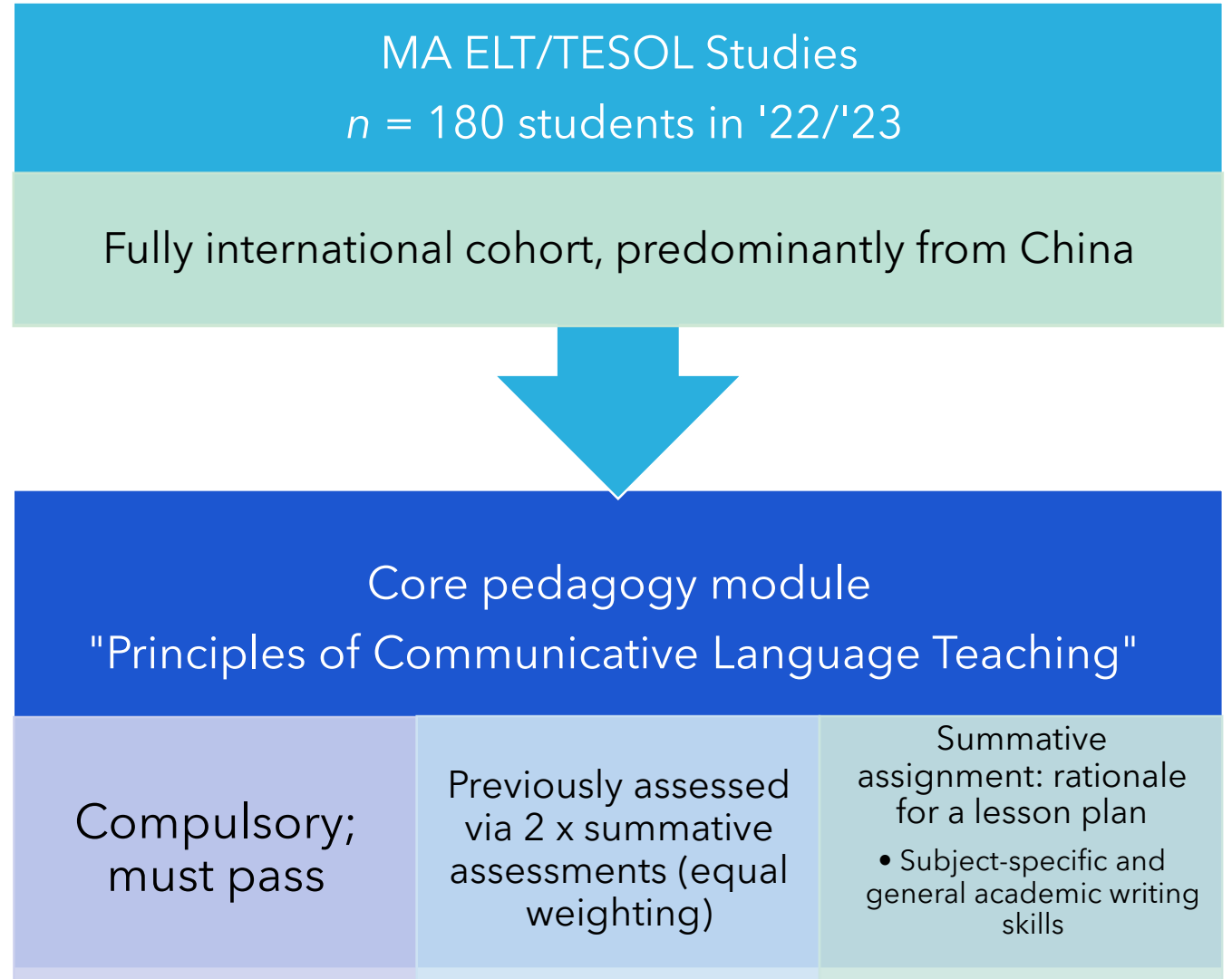
# Overview

- **Our context**
  - Challenges with prior assessment methods

- **About the formative assessment**
  - Task design; formative assessment cycle; success criteria
  - Scaffolded peer feedback: what it looks like

- **Outcomes and reflections**

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# Our context

MA ELT/TESOL Studies

*n* = 180 students in '22/'23

Fully international cohort, predominantly from China

Core pedagogy module
"Principles of Communicative Language Teaching"

Compulsory; must pass

Previously assessed via 2 x summative assessments (equal weighting)

Summative assignment: rationale for a lesson plan
- Subject-specific and general academic writing skills

# Challenges with the pre-existing approach

- High levels of assessment anxiety, particularly given high-stakes assessment context

- Lack of opportunities for development of student self-regulation and learner autonomy
  - Linked to traditional paradigm of "tutor provides feedback – student acts on feedback" (e.g. Nicol 2009; Sadler 2009)

- Difficulties engaging with formative assignment feedback has potential to generate further disempowerment (e.g. Green 2019)

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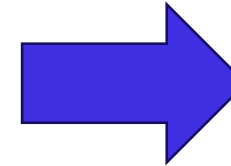
# Challenges with the 'linear' approach
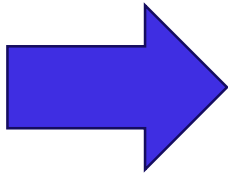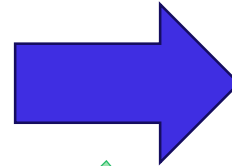
Complete summative assignment → Tutors provide feedback → Complete summative assignment → Tutors provide feedback

**What happens here?**
- Few/no opportunities for Ss to engage with feedback in a guided manner
- Reduced effectiveness and uptake of feedback; limited opportunities for self-regulation
- Continued high anxiety / low self-efficacy for Assignment 2?

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# Our aim

**Increase student agency and empowerment**

- How?
  - Students produce small-scale tasks modelled after summative assignment; iterative module-length process
  - Allocated to "working groups" of 5-6 peers, in which they reviewed (anonymised) peer examples
    - Promoting learner autonomy via reduced dependence on teacher and increased opportunity for problem-solving (e.g. de Guerrero & Villamil 1994; Tsui & Ng 2000, in Hu & Lam 2010: 373)
  - Fortnightly workshop sessions with tutor input: additional feedback 'strand'

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# What it looks like: task design

**Scaffolding** (Wood et al. 1976) via pre-chosen theme and 'bite-size' task to gradually build confidence and competence

- **"Workshop Tasks"** :
  - Linked to theoretical content covered in lectures/seminars
  - Require subject-specific skills linked to summative assessment (and students' future careers), e.g. designing a lesson stage

e.g. Week 4 Lecture content: Planning Teaching & Learning

Workshop 2 Task:

Outline three lesson tasks following the Pre/While/Post staging structure, related to planning a holiday (vacation). Write a short rationale for your tasks, justifying your choices and explaining how your lesson is communicative.
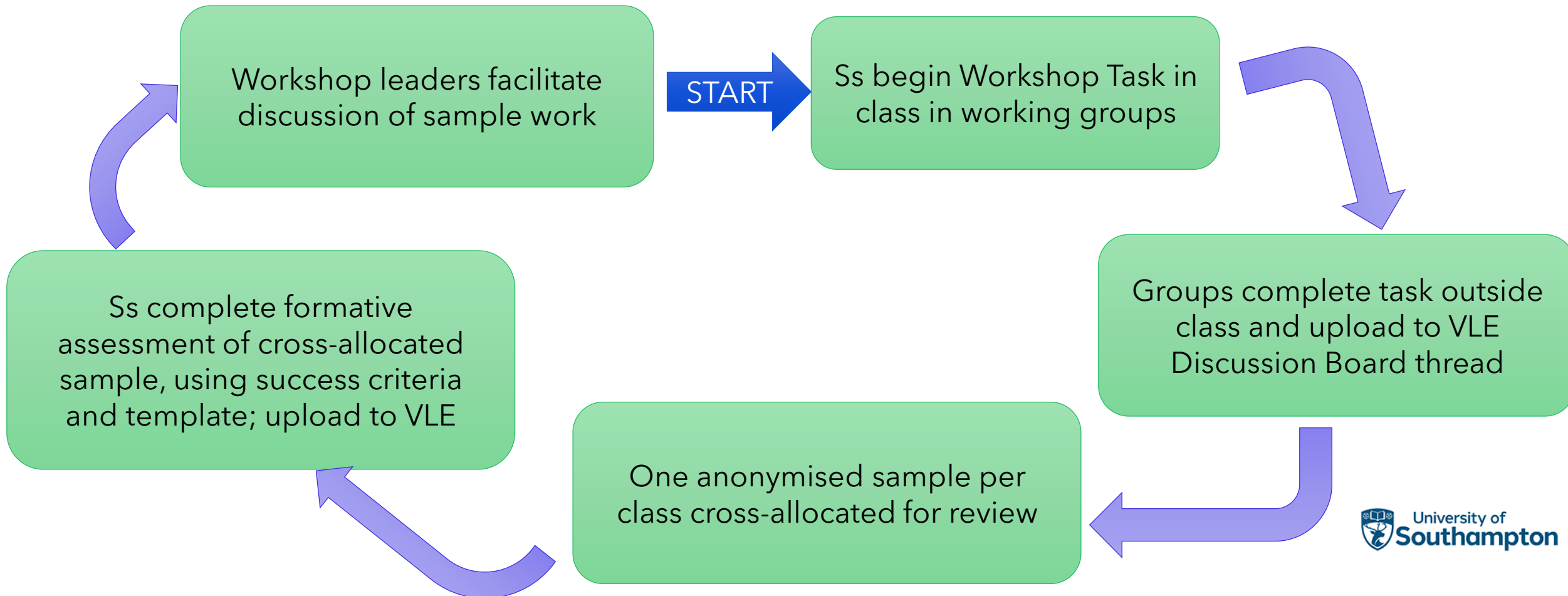
Smaller-scale task to begin with – planning three activities and a short rationale

Pre-chosen theme to allow focus on communicative principles (main assessment focus)

Strength of communicative design/ rationale assessed in the summative

# What it looks like:
# the formative assessment cycle

- Predominantly facilitated through workshops
- Students pre-allocated into "working groups" of 5-6 (approx. 5 working groups per class)



Workshop leaders facilitate discussion of sample work

**START**

Ss begin Workshop Task in class in working groups

Groups complete task outside class and upload to VLE Discussion Board thread

One anonymised sample per class cross-allocated for review

Ss complete formative assessment of cross-allocated sample, using success criteria and template; upload to VLE

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# What it looks like: feedback

4C-RE: Workshop Task 1

4C

4C-Workshop 1 Formative Assessment Template(1).docx (22.169 KB)

**1. Student uploads their group's task to VLE**

Mark Rose

RE: 4C-RE: Workshop Task 1

**2. Non peer-reviewed groups receive written tutor feedback:**

Targeted feedback links explicitly to success criteria

Does the plan align with outcomes?

The plan seems to align with the first two learning outcomes. However the third - By the end of the lesson, most learners will be able to discuss their favorite mode of transportation with peers. – will be more problematic given the learner's limited command of the language (see below).

Are activities appropriate for age and level?

The activities in the preparation and presentation stages seem well suited to the age and abilities of the learner. The production stage may be too much of a cognitive challenge – to what extent will A1 beginners be able to 'discuss' this topic? To what extent will the suggested guidance from the teacher result in a practical 'discussion'?

Does the rationale show knowledge of the literature, and use this effectively to justify the pedagogical choices made?

You show solid awareness of LING 6041 related literature such as Ur and Nation. Your observation that effective vocabulary learning requires the use of 'high frequency and simple' words (for beginners) was a solid one.

Does the rationale discuss principles outlined in LING6041 content, as well as elements of a wider communicative approach. Are less communicative elements fully justified?

There is awareness of principles outlined in LING6041 content. You could perhaps have explored precisely how and why multi modalities benefit student learning for example  answering this question is key to showing a rationale for your lesson planning choices.

**"Mediated" autonomy?**
- Meeting students halfway in terms of expectations around feedback
- Partial response to student perception of peer feedback as "less than" (e.g. Vuogan & Li 2023)
- Students are not "left on their own" as sole providers of feedback

# What it looks like: "Success Criteria"

An **excellent** response (Distinction)…

**Lipnevich et al. (2014: 540):**
Effective FA involves students understanding:
- their current performance;
- the desired state;
- how to "mind the gap" or reduce this difference

**Assessed in the summative assignment:**

- **Alignment of planned activities with learning outcome**

- **Consideration of learner characteristics e.g. age, proficiency**

- **Subject understanding; use of literature to justify pedagogical choices made**

- **Understanding of broader pedagogical principles reinforced throughout module**

| A **good** response [60-69] … (Merit) | Devises a lesson plan/stage that **mostly aligns** with the chosen learning outcome, although there may be some minor misalignment <br><br> Includes activities that are **mostly appropriate** for both the age (adult OR young learner) **and** level (beginner) of the learners, although one aspect (age/level) may be less strong than the other <br><br> Shows a **solid** knowledge of the literature on teaching vocabulary and uses this **mostly effectively** to justify the pedagogical choices made <br><br> Demonstrates that principles outlined in LING6041 content (e.g. incidental vs. intentional learning), as well as elements of a wider communicative approach (e.g. student-centred learning) have been **considered in the majority of** the lesson plan/stage, with, at least **some nuance**. Any less communicative elements should be **mostly justified** e.g. with respect to learners' needs |
|---|---|
| A **fair** response [50-59] … (Pass) | Devises a lesson plan/stage that **partly aligns** with the chosen learning outcome; some parts may not be well-aligned <br><br> Includes activities that are **partly appropriate** for the age (adult OR young learner) **and/or** level (beginner) of the learners; some aspects of learner characteristics may not have been considered <br><br> Shows **some** knowledge of the literature on teaching vocabulary and **begin to** use this to justify the pedagogical choices made <br><br> Begins to demonstrate that principles outlined in LING6041 content (e.g. incidental vs. intentional learning), as well as elements of a wider communicative approach (e.g. student-centred learning) have been **considered in some parts of** the lesson plan/stage. Less communicative elements should be, at least partly, justified |

A **weaker** response (Fail)…

# Empowering peer feedback: a responsive process

**Version 1:** Students first choose the success criteria band that best represents the work they are assessing and then complete prompts:

*We think this example is a [mostly/somewhat] [excellent/good/fair/weaker] response because....*

*Two things this example has done well:*
*1)*
*2)*

*One thing this example could do to improve:*
*1)*

**Challenges:** Lower engagement with prompt element than hoped

**Reflection:** Do students have the support they need to autonomously complete this part?

- What experience, if any, does this cohort have with giving peer feedback?

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# Empowering peer feedback: a responsive process

**Version 2:** More structured and explicit guidelines → more engagement

Agency facilitated progressively (e.g. Kinsella et al. 2023)

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**6. Evaluate this work by completing the sentence and listing the information required below:**

**Section A**

Now look at the Success Criteria for Workshop Task 1. Each band ha[s] bullet points which are arranged thus:

- Criterion 1 – alignment with learning outcomes
- Criterion 2 – appropriateness of lesson activities
- Criterion 3 – knowledge of literature
- Criterion 4 – consideration of LING6041 principles

**List two things this example has done well.** For each one, cut and p[aste] point from your chosen mark band in box 1, cut and paste the extra[ct] commenting on in box 2, and then put your reasons as to why you t[hink] box 3:

| Example 1 | |
|---|---|
| Box 1: Success criteria bullet point (Mark:   ): | Box 1: Success crit[eria] |
| Box 2: Rationale extract: | Box 2: Rationale e[xtract] |
| Box 3: Why you think this is a good example? | Box 3: Why you think this is a good example? |

**List one thing this example could do to improve**. Cut and paste the appropriate bullet point from your chosen mark band in box 1 that you think could be improved, cut and paste the extract from the rationale you are commenting on in box 2, and then put your reasons as to why you think it requires improvement in box 3:

| |
|---|
| Box 1: Success criteria bullet point: |
| Box 2: Rationale extract: |
| Box 3: Why you think this could be improv[ed] |

**Section B**

**Complete this sentence below** – do not forget to delete the words in the [brackets] that you do not need:

We think this example is a [mostly/somewhat] [excellent/good/fair/weaker] response because....

**"Mediated" autonomy:**
Meeting students halfway in terms of expectations around feedback

# Peer feedback as a vehicle for empowerment : Examples

**Success Criteria**

| A **good** response [60-69] … | • Devises a lesson plan that **mostly aligns** with the chosen learning outcome, although there may be some minor misalignment<br>• Shows a **generally solid understanding** of Scrivener's (1994) model (authentic/restricted exposure, noticing, self/guided discovery, authentic/restricted output), although this may not be consistent across all stages. There is a **good attempt** to integrate the model into the lesson plan<br>• Makes **mostly relevant and accurate** reference to a range of literature to support the pedagogical choices made.<br>• Demonstrates that principles outlined in LING6041 content (e.g. restricted v authentic output), as well as elements of a wider communicative approach (e.g. student-centred learning) have been **considered in the majority of** the lesson plan/stage, with, at least **some nuance**. Any less communicative elements should be **mostly justified** e.g. with respect to learners' needs |
|---|---|
| A **fair** response [50-59] … | • Devises a lesson plan that **partly aligns** with the chosen learning outcome; some parts may not be well-aligned<br>• Shows **some understanding** of Scrivener's (1994) model, although there may be weaker understanding of some elements. **Some attempt** to integrate the model into the lesson plan, though this may not be completely successful<br>• Makes **some** reference to literature to support the pedagogical choices made, although this may be **limited in scope** or **not always fully relevant and/or accurate**<br>• **Begins to** demonstrate that principles outlined in LING6041 content (e.g. restricted v authentic output), as well as elements of a wider communicative approach (e.g. student-centred learning) have been considered in some parts of the lesson plan/stage. Less communicative elements should be, **at least partly**, justified. |

**Mark: 55**

Peer suggested mark based on evaluation of success criteria

We think this example is a mostly fair response because firstly this lesson plan mostly aligns with their learning outcomes. Secondly, their rationales show some understanding of Scrivener's (1994) model, although there may be weaker understanding of authentic exposure, they also attempt to integrate the model into the lesson plan. Thirdly, they demonstrate principles outlined in LING6041 contents, however, in some part of the rationales, they did not achieve to link the articles to the activities, in other words, they did not explain why the articles proof their activities can help to achieve learning outcomes.

Two things this example has done well:

1) In their rationale, they use many materials in 6041 context.

2) Activities in Lesson Plan are suitable for student's age (10-12).

3) Learning outcomes are quite specific.

One thing this example could do to improve:

1) The references are not in alphabetical order.

2) In the present stage, although they consider activity 1 as an authentic exposure, it's actually quite restrictive.

3) In their rationale of practice stage, they just provide citations and paraphrase articles but they did not achieve to explain why it's good for students and why it could help to achieve learning outcomes.

Referring to success criteria when justifying mark given – similarly to how we would provide feedback (assessment literacy)

Awareness of wider academic skills

Developing criticality

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# Student perceptions – Mid-module feedback

## *What do you like about the module? What should we continue doing?*

During workshop, I have the opportunity to **share my opinions with my groupmate**. I like this very much.

**Teamwork** in workshop

Group discussion is great for **fostering our oral English ability**

Teachers… **[k]eep tracking students' feedback and learning process** to prevent students from not keeping up.

[The module structure] can underpin what we have learned and **check whether we can put knowledge into practice**, which is useful.

I also prefer workshop tasks and **we can also get feedback to review**.

After the workshop, **I can get feedback so that I know what needs to be improved**.

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# Student perceptions – Mid-module feedback

## *Is there anything you think we should change about the module?*

I hope everyone can write their own lesson plans every week, and then **the teacher will give detailed one-to-one comments and revision suggestions. Only in this way can I get promoted**

Too much group work, **individual work should be encouraged**

Honestly, **I will not read others' work after the class**.

It rarely exercises my ability of writing lesson plans, because I can only write some parts in group cooperation each time, and **the feedback is from students, which is not professional**

Group members are **not active**

**Challenges to increasing agency:**

1. Low levels of self-regulation – not a 'quick fix' scenario

2. Not all are immediately convinced of benefits of group work/feedback and prefer an individual approach

3. Perception that teacher feedback is superior to student feedback

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# Wider outcomes

## Summative performance

Average score 1.5 marks higher than '22/'23

Reduction in failed scripts and in scripts achieving lowest passing category ("Pass"/ 50-59)

Increase in scripts in two highest categories: Merit (60-69) **+13.8%**, now the most frequently-awarded category (was Pass); Distinction (70+) **+2.1%**

## Progressive perception shift

From '23/'24 Semester 2 mid-term feedback:

*"I think I gradually learned how to justify my lesson plan… The formative assessment is also helpful because it's a kind of example of justification for us to reflect on our learning."*

# Longer-term outcomes: Formative assessment as a vehicle for self-regulation?

In your feedback, you mentioned, "**The rationale does discuss principles outlined in LING6041 content but as noted above, greater explanation and definitions would have been useful. For example, in your discussion of Porter, 2016, you could have linked this to the idea of 'modalities' to explain how her memorisation ideas benefit learning**." This insight made me realize that our explanation failed to fully connect Porter's memorization methods within the broader framework of multimodal learning theory and course content.

**To address your feedback and improve our discussion, I have considered how to refine our original statement. Below, I present the original version followed by the revised version for comparison:**

...

I have attempted to **enhance our rationale based on your feedback**, aiming for a clearer connection between the educational theories we discussed and the practical application in our assignment. **Would you consider this revised approach an improvement? I am eager to hear your perspective and any further guidance you could offer to refine our understanding and application of these concepts.**"

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# Thanks for your attention!
# Any questions?
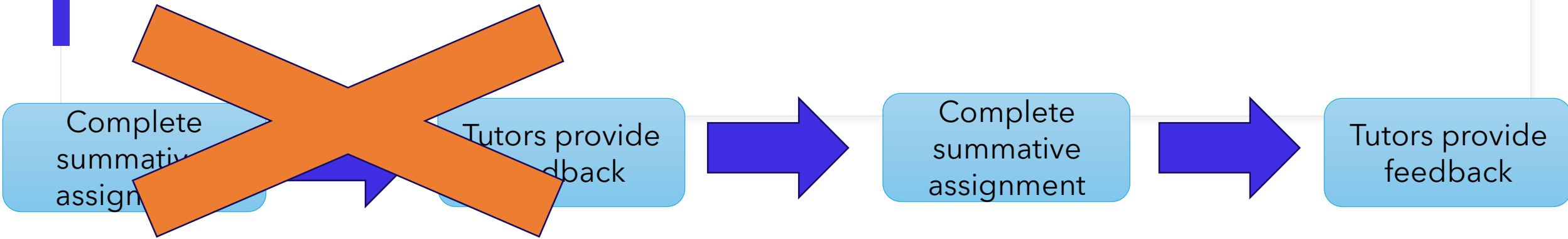
**Resource sharing (success criteria, feedback templates):**
Requests welcomed via email to Amy (A.J.F.Wallington@soton.ac.uk)

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# Workload implications

Complete summative assignment → Tutors provide feedback → Complete summative assignment → Tutors provide feedback

Evans 2013: uptake of feedback is critical, but equally key are the demands of feedback provision on instructors

- **Summative 2000-word assessment** – 180 scripts x 45 mins = **135 hours**

  **+ moderation**

- **Revised formative assessment:**
- 36 groups x 20-30 mins  = 12-18 hours x 5 weeks = 60-90 hours
- Average approx. **70-75 hours total**