Intercultural language learning in a wiki environment – student interaction and reflections on peer review

1. Introduction
With increasing use of the web, the number of activities taking place on the web for learning purposes is growing (cf. O’Dowd, 2007). One of the primary reasons is that Web 2.0 technology offers possibilities of collaboration in joint production of content such as text, images, references, which can also be applied in education. However, implementing web based technologies into institutional contexts frequently entails redesign of its use. For instance, one way of modifying the wiki concept based on collaborative production, is to apply it as a space for students where they present and refine writing assignments. The content in these assignments can then be shared and commented on by peers in an intercultural global context.

For language learning, the practice of utilizing the web for exchange interaction matches today’s demands on language learners to develop language skills and intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Guth & Helm, 2010; Kramsch, 2008; Thorne, 2003). Apart from multilingual aspects, being engaged in such exchanges also implies that learners are exposed to a diversity of cultural norms and values which might influence ways of communicating. Learning to master expressions of cultures other than one’s own is a core issue and an important aspect of learning in intercultural exchanges.

The interest in this study is student intercultural web based peer review. Within language learning, peer review where students comment and discuss each other’s texts as a source of feedback is widely applied in language education (cf. Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Also, research on what in the literature is referred to as peer review or peer response interaction in web based environments is increasing (cf. Dippold, 2009; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Web based peer review implies taking part in active dialogic action where participants interact with others and take others’ contributions into account, frequently with peers from other cultures (Dippold, 2006; Guth & Helm, 2010). This study investigates peer review practice on a wiki and the student reflections on this practice in an exchange between students at a university in Sweden and in the US.

2. Peer reviewing and intercultural interaction
Within second language writing practice and research, there are discussions about effects of peer reviewing and whether being engaged in peer commenting enhances student writing abilities (cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Megroarty & Zhu, 1997; Rollinson, 2005), and the skill of being able to critically evaluate writing (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). In their overview of feedback in language learning, Hyland and Hyland (2006) discuss the role of peers being able to give useful comments even though traditionally the teacher has been the one in charge of commenting. This particularly accounts for those trained in peer review, since in order for peer review to function careful preparation is one of the essential components. (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Min, 2006). Hyland and Hyland (2006) claim that it is important to consider Vygotsky’s (1978) construct of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggesting that “writing skills can emerge with the mediation and help of others” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 90). In this development zone, peers can share experiences around a common concept. For the purpose of this study, the ZPD concept is expanded to
embrace achievement not only with someone more competent but with equal peers with different competences (cf. Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). It is suggested in studies by e.g. Donato (1994) and Storch (2005) that in scaffolding each other, students can mutually expand their views of how their writing is understood.

A number of studies of online and web based environments investigate linguistic accuracy in peer reviewing. In other words, error correction is part of the primary concern in these investigations of students’ collaborative production in language learning. In a study of German undergraduate students by Arnold, Ducate & Kost (2009) investigating the student revision on a wiki it is suggested that students were able to fulfill the given task of creating more accurate texts. Rather than focusing on language accuracy items when giving comments, Kessler (2009) suggests that creation of meaning is something that the students place in the forefront in an online environment. In his study of pre-service non-native speaker English teachers a wiki was used as a tool for collaboration for language learning purposes. When being asked to highlight both content and language corrections the students’ feedback primarily concerned content, indicating that student orientation on communicating meaning takes precedence over linguistic features.

Several case studies bring up issues of miscommunication in intercultural language learning (e.g. Thorne, 2003; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). One such issue is when joint endeavour takes unpredictable turns for students leading to new experiences that the students claimed not to be achieved by reading their course literature, but in the meeting with other peer students (Thorne, 2003). Belz (2003) and Ware and Kramsch (2003) report how miscommunication emerged between learners of German in the US and learners of English in Germany involved in asynchronous online telecollaboration writing. The study by Ware and Kramsch (2005) was designed to examine how participants on both sides engaged with language learning online and how they evaluated their experiences in the exchange. They suggest how miscommunication is caused by various reasons, such as issues with the technology or classroom assignment, deficient language skills, lack of teacher engagement and also students not being adequately prepared for the exchange. In investigating a telecollaborative exchange, Belz (2003) found that German and American students respond differently to online assignments due to cultural differences. Since the students were not equipped with appropriate tools for communication, this resulted in a breakdown in communication. As pointed out in Belz (2003) there are typical American norms for performance of critique which “requires first praise, even in the case of unacceptable work, followed by tempered suggestions for improvement” (p. 78, from Kotthoff, 1989, p. 454). When embracing such norms, breakdown is likely avoided. It is suggested that in preparation for computer-mediated exchanges teachers must be aware of and bring attention to culturally contingent patterns of interaction (Belz, 2003).

Another example of difficulties due to different norms can be seen when investigating interaction styles of Chinese students participating in a multicultural exchange (Carson & Nelson, 1996). This study explored Chinese writers’ perceptions of how peer response group relationships are negotiated and maintained in an advanced English as a Second Language composition class. The results indicate that among the Chinese students there was a need for maintaining harmony and a positive group climate. The students often withheld comments that they thought would be hurtful to other group members since this would cause conflict and tension. Carson and Nelson (1996) conclude that the Chinese students were more focused on
social concerns than with providing their peers with suggestions.

Thorne (2003) discusses ‘cultures’ of online environments and the fact that the use of social software tools such as e-mail, chat and instant messaging are related to the cultures they are used in. In three case studies where native speakers meet non-native speakers, Thorne displays how Internet communication tools create conditions for language learning and promote linguistic and cultural relationships. The form and significance of these tools are dependent on the activities and meanings that users create with them. It should therefore not be taken for granted that such tools always have the same functions for every user.

In their study of electronic versus face-to-face peer review among second language writing students, Liu and Sadler (2003) suggest a model for conceptualizing peer reviewing. They categorize the comments made by the participants into three different modes of commenting and interaction; 1) comment area, i.e. global or local; global implying idea development, audience and purpose, and organization or writing and local implying wording, grammar, and punctuation, 2) comment type, i.e. suggestion, evaluation, alteration, or clarification, 3) comment nature, i.e. revision-oriented or non-revision-oriented comments. The results from the conceptual model suggest that there were a larger number of comments as well as revision-oriented comments in the electronic interaction group suggesting that the use of electronic means of peer reviewing may serve as an effective tool for peer response (Liu & Sadler, 2003).

In sum, prior research shows that peer reviewing in a student exchange can serve as a means of enhancing intercultural understanding and writing skills. This is also the case in online exchanges when peers with different competences and background interact, given that peer review procedures are introduced carefully prior to the exchange. There are also studies suggesting that the design of the intercultural exchange is an important aspect to take into account when investigating exchange environments. There are few studies investigating peer reviewing in relation to students’ reflections about the meaning of such interaction. Further research is needed to investigate students’ reflections on giving and receiving comments in intercultural peer reviewing contexts and how this contributes to students’ understanding of peer reviewing as a tool for text processing.

3. Purpose and research questions
The aim of this study is to scrutinize peer reviewing for text production in an intercultural web based environment. This study investigates the peer review process with non-native English speaking students at a Swedish university collaborating with native English speaking students from the US in an intercultural exchange.

The study deals with the following questions:

- What forms of peer review comments are given and received by the students?
- What are the students’ perspectives on peer reviewing?

4. Method
This section first describes the pedagogical design and context of the study. Then the data and analysis will be accounted for. The study is based on two sources of data, the students’ posted
text comments and interviews with students at the Swedish university.

4.1 Pedagogical design and study context
Framing the pedagogical idea with the exchange, the goal was for students to improve their technical writing and communication skills in English through interaction with others. The exchange took place on a web based platform, a wiki, where the students introduced themselves and shared texts. Thus, the wiki was set up as a meeting space for a number of purposes; some of the primary reasons were ease of access and openness in sharing texts. The background to the exchange is a collaboration that has been part of the course agenda for four years between an American and a Swedish university, using different virtual meeting spaces over the years, such as Google Docs (Anderson, Bergman, Bradley, Gustafsson & Matzke, 2010), Adobe Connect and Wikispaces.

The students were engaged in giving and receiving peer comments on text assignments during one term. There was a mix of students from different disciplines from the Swedish and the American university. At the Swedish university, there were 26 students, all non-native speakers of English, coming from a range of countries, only two from Sweden. All were attending different Master’s programs of engineering, participating in a technical writing course for Master’s students. They had experience in writing in English in the style of writing expected within their discipline. At the American university, there were 16 American undergraduate students, most of them within engineering. They had an interest in technical writing, attending a technical communication course.

Within their respective courses the students had a number of text assignments that they should share for feedback with fellow students, both at their own university as well as with the exchange university. The initial assignment for the students was to write a piece of text where they introduced themselves to each other and posted it on the wiki in order for the peer groups to get acquainted with each other for the exchange. Following this, on both sides the various text assignments were to be uploaded on the wiki under assigned links and according to specific deadlines. The texts were all related to the context of technical writing where the students requested peer response on drafts of text that they had produced, covering the specific assignments. The students in Sweden posted the following three assignments: 1) writing an e-mail requesting information from a company, 2) writing a problem-solution text describing a problem of free choice, how to solve it and an evaluation of the solution, and finally 3) writing the introductory section of the students’ Master’s thesis. The American students shared the following three assignments: 1) résumé (curriculum vitae) together with a letter of application for a permanent job position or internship, 2) writing a persuasive client proposal addressing a prospective client’s attention, 3) writing a feasibility report for a client who has requested assistance in making a practical decision (see Figure1).

From the Swedish side, the assignments were to be performed individually. From the American side, the résumé and letter of application were individual, whereas the proposal and feasibility report assignment were done either in pairs or threes. The American students chose their own peer partners for their peer groups. Figure 1 gives an overview of the peer reviewing geared at the students from the Swedish university; both the comments the students received and gave to the American students (see Figure 1):
Concerning the student texts, they were written in a text editor such as Microsoft Word and uploaded on the wiki for participating peer students to be able to access them. The students were asked to use the commenting function, inserting comments into the text and then uploading the various versions of commented text on the wiki. Some students also added comments in plain text in their peers’ documents as well as used the track changes function, making alterations straight into the text.

When setting up the exchange, there were a number of procedures embraced from existing exchange studies, e.g. the importance of careful planning and design of assignments for the online interaction to become meaningful and productive (cf. Belz, 2003; Lee, 2009). Apart from elaborating on the design of assignments and appointing deadlines with the students, an item that was specifically introduced before the exchange was how to approach each other in an intercultural exchange. From the Swedish perspective, this meant not being too direct, going straight to the point in giving comments to the American students, to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. Another item brought up for discussion was the necessity of being explicit in verbalizing intentions when giving comments to the peer students so that the feedback would be interpreted in an intended way. Therefore, initially, there was active teacher involvement in class in a workshop where peer response formulations were discussed prior to the exchange.

### 4.2 Data and analysis

In this study, there were six participating students from the Swedish university from five different countries; China, Ethiopia, Iran (2), Slovakia and Spain. The students taking part in the study were picked out from the list of those who had volunteered and given their consent to being interviewed.
There were two main sources of data; the student production, i.e. the given and received comments of the text assignments and interviews with student reflections on the texts, comments and peer review interaction.

For the analysis of the student production, the text assignment comments were first categorized according to Liu and Sadler’s (2003) division of type, area and nature of comments (see examples in Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Global</th>
<th>Local</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Revision-oriented</td>
<td>Non-revision – oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td>(No example for this category)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good job praising the company, but this seems very vague. If I were you I would find a newspaper or magazine to support this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>I like that you are trying to show the reader that you are enthused about the subject, but I think this is quite wordy.</td>
<td>Great job!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alteration</td>
<td>(No example for this category)</td>
<td>(No example for this category)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification</td>
<td>I am not sure if you mean this “Göteborg’s production unit”?</td>
<td>(No example for this category)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Each of the statements in the cells are examples of comments posted by the students.

Concerning the interviews, in order to catch students’ reflections of the commenting process, video recorded interviews were made individually with the students from the Swedish university. The objective with the interviews was for the students to reason around the peer review interaction. The students were to elaborate on the comments they had received as well as given in the texts. The students were interviewed twice (see Figure 1). The first round of interviews took place after half of the exchange and the second round of interviews was performed after the completion of the exchange. The same questions were asked in the first as well as in the second interview. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The reason for setting up the interviews twice was due to the long time frame that the exchange lasted of one term, capturing the student reflections while they were still topical.

The student was provided with the commented texts that the student had both given to as well

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1 Student examples are written out verbatim. No alterations to spelling and grammar have been made. Occasional language errors have thus been preserved in the student examples.
as received from peer students. The interview questions (see Appendix 1) were open-ended where the students reasoned around the comments. The interview questions were thus prompts, opening up for the student to recall the comment work procedure. All in all there were four blocks of interview questions (see Appendix 1). The first block was an opening question where the student was asked to describe general thoughts about the course and peer review procedure. The second block consisted of questions concerning the comments that the students gave. The third block included questions dealing with the comments the student received. The fourth and final block was about overall views of the peer reviewing process.

In order to analyze the interviews, they were first transcribed verbatim and tagged according to what was topicalized by the students. Having the interviews on video facilitated the transcription of the interviews since it was possible to rely on visual cues, such as gestures and orientation towards the texts and the students’ interaction with the commented texts.

Having both the student text comments and the interviews, made it possible to get two complementary sources of data, since the categorization of the text assignments gave an overview of the aspects of posted peer review and the interviews gave an insight into the student reflections of peer reviewing.

5. Results
In this section the comments that the students gave and received are mapped out in order to get a more in depth understanding of the peer reviewing process in an intercultural environment. Then, the students’ reflections on the peer review will be accounted for. From the investigation of the reflections, prominent areas that the students are engaged in will be discussed together with examples of typical instances of student contributions from the text comments and interview reflections.

5.1 Peer review comments that the students give and receive
Comments given and received in the texts are categorized according to how they are formulated. The comments are divided into the three forms of comment, type, area and nature (Liu and Sadler, 2003).

There are instances of each four types of comments all through the text assignments although some comment types are more frequent than others (see Figure 3). The extent of the comments ranges from being only a single word to a couple of sentences. The American students make more comments than the students in Sweden in all categories (see Received comments from American students in Figure 3). From the six participating students in Sweden the number of posted comments ranges from 12 from the student with the least number of comments to 31 from the most active student. The average number of comments is 17 posted comments per student.
The next figure (Figure 4) shows the distribution of comment area, i.e. whether the comment is global or local, among all 314 comments. Generally there are a greater number of global, 250 comments (80%) than local, 64 comments (20%).

The most frequent type of comment is *suggestion* with 120 comments. The suggestions are primarily *global* (111 out of the 120 suggestions). The following is an example of a global suggestion given to a problem-solution text written by a student in Sweden. The peer student suggests that the author should consider the audience when defining a problem:

*Is your audience computer scientists? Consider your audience when defining the problem. Perhaps be a little more descriptive and in depth about the problem.*

The second most common comment in total is *evaluation* with 114 comments, although for the students in Sweden this is more common (47 comments) than suggestion (see Figure 3). The American students make 67 evaluations. This type of comment is primarily related to *global* items (107 out of the 114 evaluations), consisting of an introductory comment backed up with a motivation. Here is an example of an evaluative comment given to an American student’s letter of application where the peer student from the Swedish university backs up a
positive evaluation of the idea development of the text:

Good points here. That you show that you understand the current situation and what is going on, mentioning the benefit of the study.

The next type of comment, *alteration* is exclusively local, all 48 alterations being *local*. In this comment type, a linguistic item is altered straight in the text or commented on by displaying an alternative. This type of comment is more common with the American students, who make 39 out of the total number of 48 alteration-comments than for the students from Sweden who only make 9 alteration-comments. An example of this category is from an American student pointing at a specific place in a problem-solution text where it says: “in which”, inserting the alternative word “where” as a replacement.

The rarest types of comments are *clarifications*, which are exclusively *global* questions requesting explanation of concepts in the text. Out of the 32 clarification-comments, 22 were made by the American students. The following example is from a student in Sweden requesting further explanation from the peers of two items in their feasibility report:

What tools are you referring to? How would this course benefit the students?

Concerning comment *nature*, i.e. whether the comment is revision-oriented or non-revision-oriented, the majority of comments, 282 comments (90%) were revision-oriented and 32 comments (10%) were non-revision-oriented (see Figure 5):

![Figure 5: Overall distribution of comment nature, i.e. whether the comment is revision-oriented or non-revision-oriented, among the 314 comments in the study.](image)

The non-revision-oriented comments are found within the evaluation-comment type (32 comments). The function of evaluations is to value content and in certain cases this valuation is general praise such as “Nice job”, not followed by any further recommendation or instruction. The other three comment types, however, are revision-oriented in their nature of pointing at specific items in the text.

Commonly in the texts, a global comment is introduced in a polite manner and backed up by an argumentative motivation. According to Belz (2003) the pattern of praising before
suggesting is a common strategy in American feedback. An example of how this is applied is from a student in Sweden giving an American student a suggestion in the letter of application:

You have formatted your education nicely. It is clear and direct. About the date, don’t you think it could be in the same place as other dates in your resume are? Because now it is difficult to find it at the first glance. Just a suggestion...

This type of comment highlighting something concrete. It starts with general praise about formatting and style, but then moves over to suggest an alternative way of solving a layout issue in the text: “About the date, don’t you think it could be in the same place as other dates in your resume are?”

Avoiding brief comments implies that the comments become quite elaborate and thus potentially more useful for the peer. Turning to the type of comment categorized as evaluation, a significant number of the evaluations, 83 out of 114 evaluations, are more than just an inexplicit phrase such as “Well done” or “Great start”. Also, adding to the norm of being polite and positive as a peer reviewer, the results show that 75 out of the 83 explicit evaluations include an elaborative part, encouraging the peer student with further advice.

In the analysis of the comments, there is an aspect of diversity in formulations of comments not covered by the type, area and nature category. Some comments are more explicit in guiding the students and others are more inexplicit. An example to illustrate this is the two following contrastive comments: The phrase “Perhaps this can be omitted”, when pointing at a specific sequence in the text that can be deleted is more concrete than the phrase “Check grammar”, implying that the author should revise the text from a grammatical perspective, which is more open and inexplicit. However, investigating the content in these two comments further context is needed in order to establish the intentions, since an inexplicit comment can also be helpful for the author depending on the situation. For instance, a global evaluative interjection such as “Great job” can be useful information for text development if it is pointing at something concrete that makes sense for the author in the context around this phrase. Just praising the author in general with such a comment, on the other hand, does not contribute to the development of the text as such.

The way of formulating peer review in a more explicit way is propagated quite readily among the students once the exchange starts. As the comments become more explicit, there are discussions between the two groups of students of different norms related to procedures in their respective country. The following global suggestion from a student in Sweden giving an American student a comment to the letter of application is an example of such an explicit formulation:

Great to have great references! How does “available if requested” works in the US? I am thinking this makes a bit more space for you. I don’t know...

The student opens with a compliment but continues with the question if the phrase “available if requested” can replace writing out names of references when writing a job application in an American context, since this would save up space in the letter. The student acknowledges the fact that there may be differences in ways of using certain expressions in different countries and traditions of writing. In the comment with his peer he expresses an interest in finding out more. The example suggests that the comment is made by a non-native English speaker due to the language error “How does “available if requested” works”. Likely, such a subject-verb agreement error would not be made by a native English speaker. Even though the native
speakers are not always correct, the non-native English speakers display more occasional language errors in their comment formulations.

To sum up the findings from the peer review comments, the students from the American university give twice as many comments than the students in Sweden (see Figure 3). The two most frequent types of comments, suggestion and evaluation, are significantly more common than the other two, clarification and alteration. Even though there are instances of both areas of comments in the comment types, suggestion, evaluation and clarification-comments are mainly global in nature, i.e. more content oriented, whereas alteration-comments are mainly local, i.e. more linguistically oriented. Concerning the nature of comments, most comments are revision-oriented. Highlighted in this study is also the necessity of considering the content further when investigating comments. It is possible to see that the content in the comments ranges from being inexplicit to being more explicit, which has implications of how the comments are interpreted for the writer.

5.2 Reflections on peer review practice in a wiki environment

In the interviews the students reflected on the text comments and participation in an intercultural peer reviewing exchange. Even though none of the interview questions explicitly ask about cultural items, when reflecting on the peer review situation the students return to the fact that there are cultural aspects at play in approaching ways of writing and handling feedback with native English speaking peers. The diversity in culture brings further dimensions to the feedback displayed in student comments. Thus, a noteworthy point is the difference in cultural aspects of peer review, something that permeates the whole exchange. The web based environment is also returned to as a topic of specific concern by the students. Throughout the interviews there are two prominent areas that engaged the students: considerations involved in giving comments to peer students as well as receiving comments from peer students. This is framed by the web based environment and how the students make use of the function of inserting certain comments and avoiding other.

Concerning the procedure of giving comments to peer students, the students from the Swedish university stress the fact that being engineering students they are generally not used to peer response work:

I did not have any kind of peer response in any course so this is new to me.

Since some students are unused to text review work they are unfamiliar with the situation of engaging in collaborative feedback practice. Adding the dimension of collaborating with native English speakers makes it even more challenging for them.

An aspect that causes concern in the interviews is the students’ impressions of their peer students’ comments and how to approach a peer partner. The following quote displays this initial uncertainty in how to share ideas with their native-English speaking peers:

I think I could have been more detailed with this comments. We were to make the first move and I was not sure how this move should look like. And then I received the comments from her that were rich and detailed and long and I was feeling a bit ashamed that I had written so little, perhaps I would do it if I knew it was supposed to be like that, that my comments would be more detailed.

The quote shows that the student pays attention to ways of giving peer response. The student expresses that his initial comments were not as detailed as the comments he received in return.
since he did not know what was expected of him from the start.

Even though some students express initial concern about mutual peer response, a common style of approaching fellow students is propagated quite fast among the students. Gradually, the students in Sweden get used to the style applied in the exchange with the American students. This is also shown in the comments, which become more uniform when following the progression in the written comments. In the interviews this is pointed out by the students.

Approaching a native-English speaking audience in a culturally appropriate way is something that the students in Sweden prepare for their exchange with the American peers. The students regard this preparation as essential in giving new insights into how to formulate comments for their native-speaking peers (cf. Belz, 2003; Carson & Nelson, 1996). They report that they are prepared using a style that the American students are acquainted with, toning down the directness in commenting that they are used to. Also, in order to communicate their meaning with the native English speakers the students express a need to be more explicit. The following example is a suggestion for an American student’s résumé lifted in an interview by a student in Sweden to illustrate this. In the interview the student reads out his written comment and reasons around it:

Listing your availability is helpful. You may want to consider specifically telling him how he can contact you, giving your email address or phone number. I realize that he probably will be able to see this from address on your email, but you might want to repeat it just in case it is obscured. (Student reads this comment)

The student offers a solution for being more visible for a potential employer. In the interview, the student analyzes the parts of the comment by first pointing out the fact that it is useful to mention suitable times for being contacted: “Listing your availability is helpful”. He then continues pointing out a suggestion of what the peer can do to be more visible: “specifically telling him how he can contact you”. Finally, he assures that the peer has not been neglectful in exposing the contact information: “he (the employer) probably will be able to see this”, however suggesting a repetition of the contact details somewhere else in the résumé.

Concerning the feedback that the students give, it is related to their own experience of what they have learned from previous writing contexts, which can be seen in the next quote:

I’m very used to this first line of the email or letter stating the **purpose** (emphasizing ‘purpose’) and why you are writing this. Maybe I have like received this emphasis here from the teachers and persons and business people when I talk to them. “if you write to me just tell me what you want in the beginning.” (reading quote from the comment) So this is one of the comments I have given him because until the fourth of fifth line you don’t get why he’s writing this.

The student in Sweden suggests a content alteration to an American student’s letter of application with the motivation that starting with the purpose for writing is something that catches the reader’s attention.

Throughout the commenting, the students have to make considerations of what to bring up and how, and what to be avoided. There are items that the students abstain from communicating with their American peers. One such item is the difference in style that they see in the native-speakers’ texts. The students ponder over the difficulty in making explicit comments in their peer partners’ texts due to cultural differences. An example of this is the concern by one of the students when commenting on the letter of application written by an American student:
…it was very self-centered and a bit boasty but I did not want to mention that because I didn’t know how it works in the States so I did not mention that.

In the quote the student displays an awareness of a cultural difference in style. In order to maintain a working relationship, the student chooses not to mention this difference.

The next quote is another example from a student in Sweden reasoning around the difference in style in an American student’s letter of application. He notices the difference but decides not to write a comment:

> When saying “I can bring a wealth of benefit to your company” (reading quote from the comment) I get the feeling that this reduces your chances that the guy is so complacent so self-centered. But I talked to one of my friends in the US two days ago and say that it’s ok to be pushy and a bit more proud of yourself, that you advertise yourself….When establishing a relationship it makes it hard to criticize him. I wanted to be as friendly as he was. I tried to be a little more positive.

In the interview the student reveals his personal view of the letter of application, which is not reflected in the comment given to the peer. He verifies his apprehensions by seeking external assistance online with a friend in the US, from which he relates to cultural variations in how to present yourself. The student expresses that experiencing this added to his experience of approaching his peer.

Mainly, the students withhold compromising comments that would jeopardize their relationship, an item that is also displayed in Carson and Nelson’s (1996) study. Thus, in the interviews the students underline the essence of learning how to approach others through peer work, even if they choose not to communicate all issues. The students express that the feedback procedure introduced in class before the exchange how to maintain a working relationship guided them in their comments.

When it comes to receiving comments from peer students, the students in Sweden think that that it is valuable to see how their texts are received by native English speakers. However, from comments provided by the native speakers, not all received feedback is considered useful. The next quote is an example of reasoning around feedback from an American student judged as unsuitable for a Swedish context:

> … the thing is that since the culture and the field are different they give good comments but not all of them are relevant, like for example do this or change this and it is not like that in Sweden.

Even if some peer response is considered inapplicable, the students claim that they embrace most of the received comments when revising their texts. Thus, the students are generally pleased getting comments and also with the fact that they receive more comments than they have expected.

An example to illustrate the recently gained experience of receiving peer response is the reflection that commenting patterns may not be connected to how the person writes texts. The following student in Sweden concludes this from reading his peer’s texts comparing them to what the comments look like by the same student:

> X was a bit more serious in his comments. This is not necessarily connected to how the person writes himself.

Coupled with the reflection that a person’s commenting style is different from his writing is
seeing discrepancies in approaching text, i.e. that commenting is one thing and writing another.

In the interviews the exchange environment is brought up and the difference in using a web based environment and face-to-face interaction. The students express that there are benefits attributed to both web based and campus-based peer review and the difference in meeting native English speaking students online compared to meeting their non-native speaking peer students in the classroom. They state that in the classroom they can follow-up the feedback together with their peer but at the same time it is difficult being explicit about comments when meeting someone face to face. A more elaborate justification of every aspect of a comment is expected when meeting a peer partner face-to-face who can pose follow-up questions. Also, being a messenger of critical items demands careful planning. An example of this is from one of the students in Sweden expressing this in the interview:

…because you see the person and you know him, you get to see him or her next week, you can’t give negative comments as easily

When meeting peer partners online, on the other hand, the students conclude that they are engaged in another type of feedback. Wiki based interaction being asynchronous requires more delicate elaborations of formulations in text and more explanations.

6. Discussion
The point of departure for this study is the idea that there is added value for students being engaged in peer reviewing with students from another cultural context within second language writing. The exchange environment was a very active arena where a great number of comments were given and received from both groups of students. Being engaged in intercultural peer review entails getting an insight into understanding dimensions of feedback. One such dimension is receiving feedback from someone outside of one’s own disciplinary field, getting new perspectives on texts. The variation in peer review, receiving feedback from different people, enriches the input and offers diversity to text revision. Another dimension in peer reviewing is getting used to approaching others, which may entail avoid being too direct in commenting and trying to frame a more helpful way in formulations. This was something that the non-native English speaking students from the Swedish university practiced in class before posting their comments to the native English speaking peers. These dimensions are aspects making the peer review environment a potentially rich source of learning about various aspects of peer response in technical writing.

The fact that the two most common types of text comments, suggestion and evaluation, were global rather than local, suggest that the students embraced the instructions of making elaborate comments backed up with a motivation, focusing on negotiating meaning of the content rather than a focus on linguistic aspects of writing (Kessler, 2009). In addition, the design set-up of the exchange of students having different text assignments, made the peer review given from the perspective of the text in its own right, not being compared with the students at the partner university. The exchange shows that it is neither necessary nor feasible to have the same agenda for both sides of the students. This was also one of the aims with the design, bringing students to see other sides of work.

The open character of the interview questions allowed for the students to raise items that were not explicitly asked for. One such item was the intercultural dimension of the peer review
experience. Even though cultural aspects are not mentioned explicitly in the interview questions, this is a feature that the students return to throughout their interviews. These cultural aspects are considered as resources by the students.

The students point at the essence of carefully considering how and what to share in a peer review situation when meeting partnering students online. Making use of a web based tool has different meaning for different persons, which is what Thorne (2003) discusses when tools have different cultures-of-use. Certain comments were not shared due to uncertainty in communicating them correctly and the difficulty in verbalizing them in a rightful way, such as discrepancies in style of writing a letter of application. When it comes to receiving comments from peers, the students claim that being part of an exchange is an enriching experience for their writing development, getting input from peer students.

The web based environment is the prerequisite for the exchange. The wiki was designed as a meeting space for the students to get acquainted with their peer students and also where they shared uploaded text files with peer review comments. Using a web based tool as an interactive space for collaboration facilitates for the students to be producers of text comments for their peers, inviting users to be more productive (Liu & Sadler, 2003). Asynchronous peer review requires more delicate elaborations of formulations in text and more explanations. Even though asynchronous peer review allows more time for reflection when formulating comments, these comments need to be expressed according to the discussions of how to approach a peer partner from another cultural context.

None of the students had used a wiki environment for educational purposes previously even though they were familiar with other Web 2.0 tools in their daily life. The wiki environment was appreciated as being comprehensible and user-friendly even though students mentioned minor issues such as initial problems with registration and checking carefully so that no one had deleted files or made alterations.

The students were on-task, focused on interpreting the teachers’ intentions, fulfilling the text assignments of inserting comments in Word documents and uploading them on the wiki, enabling them to be accessed by their peer students. Thus, the design of the wiki environment was not questioned by the students. Instead, they were concerned with items in the existing design solution such as the necessity of naming uploaded Word-files with appropriate labels to facilitate orientation on the web pages.

Thus, the conditions of interaction were introduced to the students who embraced the design of the wiki environment using it in a non-traditional way within an educational context, i.e. as a meeting space on the web with designated areas for introducing themselves and links to pages where they would upload versions of commented text assignments organized in a specific way on designated web pages. The wiki environment had several functions not used in the exchange, such as sharing sources and information on web pages that the students could create on their own. It was not mentioned in the interviews that the accessibility of the files for the exchange participants made it possible to see others peer groups’ comments. However, this is something that could be interesting to investigate further in future studies.

The web, with Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2004) is an area increasingly explored in learning. It is an arena that encourages sharing of content and seeking information but also reflective productive skills, writing being one of them. However, there is a challenge for learning in implementing web based technologies into institutional contexts when the “ego-less, time-less
and never finished” (Lamb, 2004) business of user interaction needs to be remodeled to fit existing institutional frames (Bonderup-Dohn, 2009; Lund, 2008). One way of modifying the application of a wiki, for instance, is to use it as a space for students to introduce themselves and share content that is to be commented on by their peers instead of engaging in collaborative writing and updating joint texts, which is the case in this study. The results in this study show that the intercultural interaction has qualities for peer reviewing with students when it is framed carefully in a specific educational design.

References


Appendix: An overview of the interview question

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<tr>
<th>Block</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Opening</strong></td>
<td>The interviewer explains that the interview has two parts. What are your thoughts about the course and peer response?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. The comments the student made</strong></td>
<td>(Questions repeated for each commented text) 1. Overall impression of the draft: What were its strengths? What were the main areas for improvement? 2. Why did you make your first comment and why did you state it in the way you did? Follow-up questions: Did you consider stating the question another way? What would you think of stating it this way? 3. Please tell me about suggestions you considered making but chose not to. 4. What did you learn about peer reviewing or your own writing as a result of your review of this student’s draft? 5. Do you have any final thoughts concerning your suggestions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. The comments the student received</strong></td>
<td>(Questions repeated for each commented text) What is your overall impression of the comments you received from the peer reviewer. What was helpful? What was not? Why? What change, if any, did you make in your draft as a result of this comment? Why? Did the reviewer provide the kind of suggestions and feedback that you had hoped for? Please explain. What did you learn about peer reviewing or your own writing as a result of this student’s suggestions concerning your draft? Do you have any final thoughts concerning the comments the student made?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. Wrap up questions for entire interview</strong></td>
<td>What are your overall thoughts about the peer reviewing with students in your own class and with students at the partner university? What were your thoughts about the online tool used? What suggestions do you have for faculty about improving peer reviewing? [Question for the second interview only] Did you approach your comments on other students’ drafts differently this time?</td>
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