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ONLINE PEER FEEDBACK IN BEGINNERS' WRITING TASKS: LESSONS LEARNED

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the body of research that aims to understand the relationship between online communication and foreign language (FL) learning, in particular when teachers seek to provide authentic opportunities for interaction for their learners. The study was motivated by efforts made in the New Zealand context to overcome the geographic limitations of interaction between FL learners and native speakers. We report on the findings of an exploratory study into an online reciprocal peer tutoring program established to enhance the FL learning of a group of beginner eleven-year old students of Spanish, with particular focus on the benefits of written corrective feedback. The project aimed to examine the processes by which students tutored each other in the online environment as they responded to each other's texts. The analysis of the students' messages focused on (1) the aspects of language corrected by the tutors, (2) the frequency with which tutors accurately identified and provided input on errors, (3) the types of feedback provided by the tutors, and (4) what the learners did with the corrections and feedback. The findings indicate that the students were willing to contribute to peer correction and used different strategies and correction techniques to foster attention to linguistic form, although they were not always capable of providing accurate feedback or metalinguistic explanations.

INTRODUCTION

In order to help students to develop their foreign language (FL) skills, language teachers frequently seek to provide their students with opportunities to engage in authentic and meaningful interactions in the FL. Both second language acquisition (SLA) research and computer mediated communication (CMC) research have shown that collaboration among learners facilitates language acquisition. Benefits of collaboration include: increasing motivation and authenticity in language learning; offering choices to students; providing feedback; and fostering a community of learning (Ortega, 2009). One aspect of collaboration to enhance linguistic development is peer feedback on second language writing. Peer feedback has been associated with gains in learner participation, communicative competence, and metacognition (Hyland, 2003). Furthermore, online communication or CMC (the terms will be used interchangeably in this article) has opened up opportunities for peer collaboration between learners of the FL and those who are first language (L1) users of the FL in order to promote the development of linguistic and intercultural competence. This article reports findings from an exploratory investigation into the potential of an online reciprocal peer tutoring program established to enhance the FL learning of a group of beginner eleven-year old students of Spanish. Its particular focus is on the processes by which students receive and provide written feedback online to peers of their same age.

LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE

Language learning online seems to offer optimal conditions for interaction, which has been found to impact linguistic development (Gass & Mackey, 2007), by engaging learners in tasks that provide opportunities for quality language input and output as well as focusing their attention on form (Mackey & Polio, 2009). Chapelle (2003) affirms that CMC has added complexity to the notions of interaction and negotiation of meaning in language learning, whereas Kern (2006) warns that since interactionist SLA theory deals only with linguistic dimensions, it does not account for social and cultural aspects of language learning. Recent studies have begun to explore the nature of online student interaction by investigating empirically the relationships among particular language outcomes, the online tools used, and the purposes informing those uses (Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2004). Other areas of research on CMC for language learning and teaching include increased student motivation (González-Lloret,

2003), student agency (Kern, 2006, Villers, Tolosa & East, 2011) and the changing roles of the teachers “who move beyond the role of the ‘omniscient informant’ to that of a facilitator and mediator” (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004, p. 249).

When comparing CMC with face to face (F2F) interactions, empirical research reports conflicting results. Some studies have found that, in CMC, students appear less anxious (Warschauer, 1996), and produce language that is more complex (Sauro & Smith, 2010), more lexically varied (Hwang, 2008) and more accurate (Salaberry, 2000). On the other hand, Sotillo (2000) found that online discussions tend to follow a traditional discourse pattern of initiation-response-feedback which may hinder the quality of interaction. Abrams (2003) compared F2F with synchronous (i.e. simultaneous) and asynchronous (i.e. delayed) CMC interactions and found increased quantity of language produced asynchronously, but no significant differences among the three groups in quality on lexical and syntactic measures. Although the quality of interaction and the emphasis on linguistic form seem to depend on the design of the task, the negotiation of meaning present in CMC interaction forces learners to pay more attention to the quality of their communication (Ortega, 2009). Ware and O’Dowd (2008) claim that the interaction patterns in F2F and CMC environments require learners to receive input, produce output and attend to feedback, each of which is fundamental to the development of grammatical competence and syntactic complexity in the target language.

Where the focus is principally on language form, it has been suggested that written online communication provides an ideal medium for students to benefit from interaction, since it allows greater opportunity to attend to and reflect on the form and content of the communication. A comparison of synchronous and asynchronous interaction among university language students suggests that asynchronous writing promoted more sustained interaction and greater syntactic complexity (Sotillo, 2000). However, Kol & Scholnik (2008) reported no significant improvements in complexity in students’ postings to a forum. In asynchronous CMC students have more time to plan, compose, revise and edit their texts as well as opportunities to read and reflect on their interlocutors’ texts (Schuetze, 2011; Warschauer, 2005). This interaction removes the barriers of time and space that characterize remote language learning (Salaberry, 1996) although at a loss to immediacy (Andrews & Haythornthwaite, 2007). Under a social interactionist view of language development, CMC provides opportunities for genuine collaboration where learners interact with experts who are L1 speakers of the target language (Kern, 2006). This contextualization of learning

gives learners the opportunity to engage in social construction of knowledge with a wider range of interlocutors (Kitade, 2008). González-Lloret (2003) found that learners' motivation increases because they perceive these interactive tasks to be more authentic. This finding resonates with Doughty and Long's (2003) assertion of the promising interdependence between technology and task-based language teaching (TBLT), where technology affords a natural medium for TBLT which, in turn, provides an ideal pedagogical framework for the use of technology.

PEER TUTORING

Peer tutoring refers to the interaction between peers for educational purposes and usually involves cognitive co-construction between a more competent peer and a less competent learner. Some authors characterize peer tutoring as asymmetrical because of the typical novice-expert relationship established (Duran & Monereo, 2005). Reciprocal tutoring, however, seems to reduce dependent or authoritarian relations by encouraging mutuality and allowing both peers to benefit from the interaction (Fantuzzo, King & Heller, 1992). In these interactions peers alternate in their roles of tutor and tutee, creating mutual assistance and social support.

In second language writing, peers engage in mutual scaffolding, helping each other to extend their writing abilities. Peer responses provide an authentic sense of audience and may promote writers' autonomy and confidence (Ware, 2004), as well as develop communicative competence and inspire more learner participation (Hyland, 2003). However, some researchers have questioned the suitability of peers to offer support to others who are in the same learning process (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994). Hyland and Hyland (2006) point to limitations in the interactions because learners may lack communication and pragmatic skills, or hold different expectations about the interactions when coming from different cultural groups. Notwithstanding these reservations, interaction in CMC environments provides a context for language learners who can engage with others who speak the target language (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Research on error correction, known as Corrective Feedback, examines the effectiveness of corrections on L2 learning and attempt to provide useful insights for teachers. Since the introduction of the typology for oral correction drawn

from studies in immersion settings by Lyster and Ranta (1997), numerous studies have investigated different aspects of corrective feedback including the effects of corrections on linguistic accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010), the types of feedback provided (Ayoun, 2001, 2004; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006), learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of corrective feedback (Weaver, 2006). There have also been critiques pointing at the limitations on the claims that such studies have made (Truscott, 1996), in particular to the long-term effectiveness of corrective feedback. More recently, the area of written feedback has received more attention with a typology proposed by Ellis (2009) and a number of studies in university settings (see Bitchener and Ferris, 2012 for a review). With a few exceptions (Choi & Li, 2012; Oliver, 1998) the studies have been carried out in adult university settings. According to Ferris (2010), there is now evidence that written corrective feedback provided under the right conditions facilitate L2 development and "help students improve the accuracy of their writing, at least for the particular features under consideration" (p. 186).

Several studies have aimed to establish correlations between language development and corrective feedback in online environments. Research mostly carried out at the university level has looked into the role of corrective feedback in developing accuracy (Blake, 2000; O'Rourke, 2005; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011). A few studies have examined the processes of feedback and correction. For example, Vinagre and Lera (2008) set up e-mail exchanges between university learners of English as FL in Spain and learners of Spanish as FL in Ireland who provided corrective feedback to each other. The authors classified the corrections in one of three categories, either feedback where the error was only identified, correction where the accurate form was provided, or remediation where the tutor provided information to the tutee on how to correct. They found that correction was mostly used for spelling and vocabulary errors, while 75% of the corrections were morphosyntactic and were treated with remediation, which they suggest seems more effective in promoting linguistic development. A similar study (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) compared weekly asynchronous discussions between learners assigned to being either e-tutors who were asked to provide peer feedback in language forms, or e-partners where feedback was optional. Analyses of the language used and the frequency and type of feedback provided indicated that all learners preferred receiving feedback, but this was only provided when required. The authors concluded that students "were not always equipped with a strong enough understanding of the structure of their native languages to provide quality metalinguistic explanations" (p. 55). They suggest that teachers need to ensure that learners have the required ability to provide adequate feedback. Finally, Thurston Duran, Cunningham, Blanch & Topping (2009) set up

reciprocal peer tutoring in a managed online environment between elementary aged learners of English as FL in Spain and learners of Spanish as FL in Scotland. Analysis of the peers' error corrections suggested that these were mainly focused on morphosyntactic aspects of the messages, with the peer support based on providing the right answer.

Other studies have examined the processes by which learners give feedback. In a two-year study of post-secondary learners of FL English and Spanish, greater structure in the peer tutoring process enhanced the nature and scope of feedback given during reciprocal peer tutoring (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). An exploratory study that compared F2F and e-feedback provided by English as a Second Language student pairs indicated that students provided balanced comments, were aware of the peer's needs and made critical comments (Guardado & Shi, 2007). Although the students preferred to confirm the peers' feedback with that of the teacher, they indicated having learned from the correction process.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study investigates the interaction between CMC and FL learning where teachers were seeking to provide authentic opportunities for online interaction. The study was motivated by efforts made in the New Zealand context to overcome the geographic limitations of interaction between FL learners and L1 speakers, as well as the challenges faced by elementary school teachers who teach a language that they are learning themselves (Scott & Butler, 2007).

An online peer tutoring project was established between eleven-year old (Year 7) students learning Spanish as FL in an intermediate school in New Zealand (n = 28) and peers of the same age learning English as FL in Colombia (n = 30). The participating school in New Zealand was selected after the Principal approached the research team and invited them to undertake research on the school's Spanish program. The school therefore volunteered to be part of the research. The overall study was framed as an exploratory pilot in which we sought to investigate the academic, social and motivational outcomes for students in the target school as a result of the online peer tutoring. Although the research team was given ample access to the groups under study, the project was constrained by the level of proficiency of the students and the language teaching approach followed by the classroom teachers.

A quasi-experimental approach was adopted, following several principles used by Thurston et al. (2009). The New Zealand students were in their second term of learning Spanish and their level of proficiency in the language was considered beginner, equivalent to Basic User level (A1) on the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001). A control group (n = 29) that did not take part in the intervention was also established. In the New Zealand school there were therefore two parallel classes that followed the same curriculum in the FL, of which one would be involved in peer tutoring relationships with the partner group in Colombia.

The study had three broad aims: (1) to measure the effects on own and second language proficiency, (2) to examine the impact on student motivation and attitudes towards foreign languages, and (3) to examine the processes by which students tutor each other in the online environment. Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used. The quantitative measures consisted of a questionnaire, a first language/English (L1) test, and a Spanish (FL) test. These were designed to measure changes in ability in language (both L1 and FL) and attitudes towards additional language learning. These measures were administered on a pre-test and post-test basis. Writing abilities in both FL and L1 were also assessed using free writing activities, administered before and after the intervention. In addition, semi-structured interviews conducted with a sub-sample of students from the experimental group aimed to explore the tutoring experience from the students' point of view.

In this article we report specifically on the benefits of peer-tutoring with regard to the error correction provided by Spanish L1 speakers to learners of Spanish as FL. The focus is therefore on the New Zealand experimental group. The following questions guided this dimension of the study:

- What aspects of language were corrected by the peer tutors?
- How frequently were errors corrected by the peer tutors?
- What types of feedback were used by the peer tutors?
- What did tutees do with the feedback they were offered?

INTERVENTION

The experimental (intervention) group in New Zealand consisted of 14 male and 15 female students, paired with students in a parallel class in Colombia. The intervention involved a reciprocal peer tutoring writing scheme in which pairs of

students responded to each other's written messages in Moodle, an online learning management system.

The students in both countries were ranked in their FL attainment based on the results in the FL pre-test. Students in both countries were paired in such a way that their level of FL was comparable (i.e., the student with the highest score in New Zealand was paired with the student with the highest score in Colombia, and so on). This pairing system was employed to make sure that each pair was suitably matched according to their language performance. The notion behind this was to ensure that all students could participate and engage comfortably without feeling insecure, inferior or inadequate (Thurston et al., 2009). The students interacted with their peers through Moodle, and were given their own log-in details to ensure that the messages exchanged were secure, and only accessible to the dyads, the teachers (New Zealand and Colombia) and the researchers.

The format and content of the online exchanges were decided between the teachers and the research team. Since the New Zealand students had only started learning the language one term before the study, the type of task and linguistic expectations of the project were restricted. Every week during an eight-week period, the students were asked to exchange messages with their peers on pre-established topics that corresponded to units that students in both countries had already studied (e.g., personal description of themselves, their family, their school, their city; favorite music; personal preferences). Each week students wrote messages that were sent to the peers, who were instructed to read them and provide feedback on the language. The messages were then sent back to the peers, who were expected to correct and send back the final versions. It was anticipated that this process of sending a message, giving feedback and making corrections was to be repeated until each student had sent five sets of messages in their FL based on the assigned topics.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze and examine the nature and scope of these peer exchanges between matched pairs, data from Moodle were captured and compiled into word processing documents. Only sets of messages that had completed the expected cycle of writing, feedback and re-writing were selected for analysis. Each message sent over the eight week period was copied without alterations or

modifications of any kind. The messages were subsequently analyzed by examining the errors, the feedback provided and the response to the feedback.

It was decided to analyze the messages only in cases where at least three exchanges had been provided as evidence of interaction. This meant that, in practice, of the 29 dyads that were established, only 18 were considered for analysis. One dyad was further eliminated because the student had used an automatic translator to write her messages, bringing the sample to 17. The dyads that were excluded had exchanged fewer than three messages, either because of absenteeism or lack of response from the peer. From those pairs included for purposes of analysis, ten dyads had exchanged three messages, four had exchanged four messages and three had exchanged all five messages.

The analysis of each message, corresponding to the four research questions, included: (1) identification of the errors in each message, (2) frequency of identification of the errors by the tutor, (3) classification of the type of feedback, and (4) uptake by the tutee. The errors identified were classified as grammatical, vocabulary or spelling. Although punctuation was initially included as a category, logistic difficulties in the keyboards of the New Zealand students made this category redundant.

FINDINGS

The students interacted online from mid October 2010 to the second week of December 2010, a total of eight weeks. Data available from Moodle recorded two types of actions from the learners: views and posts (see Table 1). There were a total of 7,755 views and 896 posts in the eight week period. The high number of views suggests that the students were interested in the project and were willing to interact with their peers. The category of posts corresponds to any written text: a message, correction, or update of the information.

Table 1. Register of activity during the interaction

Activity/ Month	Views	Posts
October	1,497	237
November	6,111	650
December	147	9
Total	7,755	896

The three message exchanges from the 17 dyads reported on here were analyzed in text form. There were a total of 2,038 words in the three messages, with an average of 37 words per message. The total number of words per message decreased from 831 in the first set of messages to 718 in the second set of messages to 489 in the last set of messages considered for analysis. These figures appear to indicate that, contrary to what was expected, the length of the messages did not increase as the students learned more Spanish. It is possible that the interest and motivation of the students in communicating with their peers declined as the weeks progressed, or that students dedicated less time to writing because the intervention took place in the last term of school and the last messages were written as the school year came to an end (which might account for the relative inactivity in December).

The first research question (what aspects of language were corrected by the peer tutors?) considered how instruction provided by the teachers to correct and provide feedback to their peers was enacted. Students were asked to read their peers' messages and provide feedback, yet they had deliberately not been given specific guidelines about the aspects they needed to attend to in their corrections (for example, correct noun-adjective agreement). Table 2 reports the total number of corrections made by the peers per category (grammar, spelling, vocabulary) across the three messages. The total number of errors identified by the peers across the three categories was 377. The errors most frequently detected were grammatical (175), followed by errors of spelling (115) and vocabulary (87). The following sentence in the first message from Dyad 4 exemplifies the three types of errors: *Mi coplianos esta es 17 de Decembere* (my birthday is December 17). The peer identified *esta es* as a grammatical error (two verbs meaning the same: *is is*), the word *coplianos* as a vocabulary error, and *Decembere* as a Spelling error.

Table 2 Errors corrected by peer

	Grammar	Spelling	Vocabulary	Total
Message 1	35	61	20	116
Message 2	69	28	42	139
Message 3	71	26	25	122
Total	175	115	87	377

To answer the second research question (how frequently were errors corrected by the peer tutors?) the researchers identified the errors and compared these with the errors noted by the students (Table 3). The speakers of Spanish as L1 provided feedback on more than half the errors from their peers' messages in all categories. Feedback on errors was highest in vocabulary (79%), followed by grammar errors (68%) and then spelling errors (56%).

Table 3. *Frequency of feedback on errors*

	Errors identified by peer			Errors identified by researcher			% of feedback		
	Gra	Spe	Voc	Gra	Spe	Voc	Gra	Spe	Voc
Mess. 1	35	61	20	61	115	25	57%	53%	80%
Mess. 2	69	28	42	101	43	54	68%	65%	78%
Mess. 3	71	26	25	96	46	31	74%	57%	81%
Total	175	115	87	258	204	110	68%	56%	79%

The third research question (what types of feedback were used by the peer tutors?) was posed with a view to classifying the category of feedback (e.g., direct error correction, note, metalinguistic feedback) provided by the peers. Results in Table 4 demonstrate that the most frequent form of feedback was direct, that is, providing the correct answer for the error identified. Other forms of feedback were used sparingly.

Table 4. *Classification of feedback provided (rank order)*

	Mes 1	Mes 2	Mes 3	Total
Provide correct answer	17	17	17	51
Comment on the content	0	1	0	0
Provide an explanation	3	1	1	5
Wrong correction provided	1	3	0	4
Error identified	1	2	0	3
Text re-written	0	1	2	3
Total	22	25	20	66

A few students provided explanations of the corrections made. The following example from Dyad 2 illustrates this category. The learner of Spanish wrote: *En mi familia esta es mi madre mi padre mi hermana mi hermano mi gato y yo* (In my family there is is [sic] my mother, my father, my sister, my brother, my cat and I). Inserted in the original sentence, the peer provided the correct plural form of the verb 'to be', put in bold the other form of the verb 'to be' which was not needed, and in green color wrote *This is not necessary* as an explanation of the grammar error, clarifying that the second verb was redundant. This resulted in the following message: *En mi familia estan es **No es necesario** mi madre, mi padre, mi hermana, mi hermano, mi gato y yo.*

The tutor in Dyad 12 offered the most complete grammatical explanation of all the messages in the study. This student demonstrated not only outstanding knowledge of the grammar of her language, but also the potential of peer tutoring in terms of providing specific instruction:

Hola [name of student]. The errors that I have highlighted belong mostly to the same category. When you are describing anything in Spanish, the adjectives need to agree (= follow the same pattern) as the nouns they are describing. So, if you are describing pelo which is masculine, your adjectives need to be masculine too: rubio, rizado, largo (remember that in Spanish we signal masculine usually ending in o and feminine ending in a (most times)).

In three instances students provided alternative wording or complete re-writes of sentences found in the original message from the peer. For example, the student in Dyad 13 described herself as "*Soy no baja y no alta*", roughly translated to "I am neither short nor tall". The tutor provided a correct alternative and rewrote the sentence: "*Soy mediana*" (I am of average height). Evidently the tutor understood what the tutee was trying to communicate and offered a stylistic alternative that would improve the initial message.

Other examples of feedback that emerged from the data revealed the willingness from some of the students to be helpful to their peer despite the fact that some of the corrections were in fact unnecessary or incorrect. For example, when the student in Dyad 10 wrote *Mi numero de telefono es ...* there were a couple of minor spelling errors (namely the accent marks in *numero* and *telefono*). However, the peer offered a vocabulary change (underlined here, highlighted in color in the original) to: *Mi numero de telefono telefónico es ...*. This correction can be deemed unnecessary because what the first student

had written was correct and comprehensible. It may have been that the tutor considered the other form more common in usage.

In several instances, the students provided erroneous corrections to their peers' messages. An illustration of a wrong correction is provided when the student in Dyad 3 used faulty spelling for her nationality: *Soy necolandesa* (I am a New Zealander, should be spelt *neocelandesa*) and her tutor attempted to provide a spelling correction yet failed to do so correctly: *Soy necolandesa, necolandeza*.

In addition to the categories of feedback identified, twelve interactions were noted where the student added a comment to the message. Most of these comments offered praise to the tutee (e.g. "good job"). Some comments alluded to the process of writing ("*I AM STILL WORKING ON THIS ENTRY*" (uppercase in the original)), while others referred to the social dimension of the interaction ("*Excellent! I like talking to you*"). Since the students did not actually 'talk' to each other, this comment seems to indicate that these students regarded the activity as highly interactive and the messages as conversations. The last message exchanged by Dyad 16 contained both praise for the peer and specific guidance in a grammatical aspect to improve: *tienes un buen español te felicito tienes que mejorar los (me) pero tienes un buen español te mando muchos saludos* (You have good Spanish, congratulations. You need to improve on the use of *me*, but you have good Spanish. Best regards).

The last research question (what did tutees do with the feedback they were offered?) was posed to explore the tutees' responses to the feedback. Analysis of the different versions of the messages indicated that the tutees were prepared to accept the corrections provided by their tutors without question. That is, the tutees did not attempt to produce new versions of the messages, but rather incorporated the feedback (most of which, as indicated above, had been direct error correction) into their work 'as is', thus leading to revised versions that were not resubmitted as new messages (with the implied invitation for the tutor to re-evaluate the work), but were rather maintained as part of the conversation thread (with the implication that that aspect of the work was now complete). That is, the dyads saw the process as being 'submit/feed back/revise' rather than 'submit/feed back/revise and re-submit'. This may have been because the tutees perceived their tutors to be the experts in the interactions and their proffered corrections could be accepted at face value, or because of the complexity of the revision process, the peers consider that the content was already communicated and nothing else needed to be added.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study sought to investigate peer feedback in beginner writing tasks in an online peer-tutoring context. The analysis of the students' messages focused on (1) the aspects of language corrected by the tutors, (2) the frequency with which the peer tutors provided feedback in comparison with the actual numbers of identified errors, (3) the types of feedback provided by the peers, and (4) what the learners did with the corrections and feedback.

The corrections made by the tutors revealed some interesting findings. As in other studies with students of different ages (Blake, 2000; Choi & Li, 2012; O'Rourke, 2005; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011), the majority of the corrections in the current study were grammatical, followed by spelling and vocabulary. The lower frequency of feedback on vocabulary errors may be attributed to the greater possibility of inference provided by the writing medium, especially in asynchronous CMC where students have more time to read and understand the message. It is also possible that tutors understood their roles as being experts in the language, thus exercising language authority and providing a correct linguistic model.

Tutors correctly identified over half of the spelling errors made, over two-thirds of the grammar errors, and over three-quarters of the vocabulary errors. Several explanations are possible for the mismatch between actual errors and frequency of corrections. First of all, time may have been a factor. Since the intervention was structured in sessions in the computer rooms where the students had to write their message and correct their peers' message, they may not have had enough time to attend to all the errors. Another possibility is that tutors may not have recognized the errors either because of lack of knowledge or because the sentence itself was incomprehensible. An alternative explanation may be that tutors chose to focus on only correcting what they perceived as the most important issues in language development. Also, the tutors may have acknowledged the efforts made by their beginner peers in conveying basic information and may have decided to focus more on understanding what was written. They may have had no major difficulties in comprehending the messages or may not have felt comfortable correcting all the errors that their peers had made. The lower detection rate for spelling errors may have been due to the realization from the Spanish L1 speakers that the New Zealand students did not have access to a keyboard with accent marks. Therefore, this finding does not necessarily indicate that the L1 speakers of Spanish did not identify the error, but it may be that they saw no reason to correct it.

The types of feedback that the students provided concur with similar findings in three comparable studies (Thurston et al., 2009; Vinagre & Lera, 2008; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). The reasons why the students focused more on providing the answer to their peers (i.e., direct error correction) than in providing explanations may lie in the fact that direct correction is easier. Alternatively, the tutors may have thought that providing the answer would be more helpful to their peers. However, the fact that few of them provided explanations may point to the fact that they may not always have been in a position to provide a metalinguistic explanation to their peer, as has been suggested by Ware and O'Dowd (2008). It may also be that students lack the pragmatic or cultural predispositions to provide effective feedback beyond direct error correction (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994).

The fact that the tutees appeared to accept their tutors' direct error correction at face value prevents any analysis of language acquisition on the part of the tutees. It also raises questions about the efficacy of peer tutoring, given that a good proportion of genuine errors were not noted, and that, on occasion, the correction itself was in error. More importantly, the lack of re-writing of the messages after the corrections points to two aspects of peer tutoring that need to be further investigated. On the one hand, both tutors and tutees need careful instruction about how to provide and receive feedback effectively. On the other hand, the teachers need to be involved in monitoring the peer exchanges with a view to providing additional feedback and it is to be hoped that the teachers will have followed up the peer feedback in ways that will have mitigated learner uptake of erroneous language, for example.

Notwithstanding the fact that some errors were not picked up and some corrections were erroneous (with implications that we discuss below), the online learning environment clearly provided a context where pupils could practice their language, alongside the opportunity to engage in authentic interaction through peer pairing. Furthermore, the peers provided a real audience for each other. Despite being at beginners' level of language development (i.e., CEF A1), the students' short messages were being read by others with genuine interest in what they had to say. The peers' reciprocal corrections reduced the usual power structure that peer work usually has. The 'experts' assessed their peers' messages knowing they were written by 'novices', and knowing they would be in a similar position with regard to feedback on their FL messages. Moreover, the interaction with experts in the target language added a level of authenticity to the learning context rarely experienced by foreign language learners in New Zealand classrooms.

To sum up, the findings of this study indicate that participants in this intervention were willing to contribute to peer correction and used different strategies and correction techniques to foster attention to linguistic form. The students also demonstrated an ability to participate autonomously and to provide their partners with corrections. Other findings suggest that, when feedback was offered, it was taken up indiscriminately, although some tutors were not always capable of providing accurate feedback or metalinguistic explanations

LESSONS LEARNED

As stated at the start of this article, this study was framed as an exploratory pilot investigation into the potential of online peer tutoring, targeted at one particular school context. Several lessons were learned by both researchers and teachers at the conclusion of the present study which will inform future research. First of all, the amount and quality of language produced by students at such an early stage of language learning may not be suitable for peer tutoring where the focus is on corrective feedback, even when there are other benefits to online peer tutoring (East, Tolosa & Villers, 2012). It may be that error correction would work more effectively once students have developed a higher level of proficiency (CEF A2 or above). Second, since students provided mainly feedback on grammatical form, it seems that they would have benefitted from more explicit instruction in, and modeling of, how to correct the formal features of the language required in each message. Third, it was found that an eight-week program, with the inevitable loss of time and commitment at the end of the school year, was not sufficient to determine the longer-term acquisitional benefits of peer tutoring. We would recommend that online peer tutoring programs be sustained for a longer period of time. This would allow for on-going social and academic interaction, as well as extended opportunities for feedback to be offered, and for writing proficiency to develop. Finally, the fact that peer tutors were willing to offer feedback was encouraging. However, the fact that some required feedback was either missing or inaccurate, together with the reality that tutees appeared to receive the feedback without question, signals a need for caution. To mitigate the risk of learners' indiscriminate uptake of feedback, we would recommend that teachers should:

1. provide training to tutors about how to give appropriate feedback, and to tutees about what to expect, and what to do, when receiving feedback.
(Direct error correction was the type of feedback most in evidence, and

this might be the most appropriate to encourage in the peer tutoring context.);

2. encourage tutors to focus their feedback on one or two specific error groups appropriate to the task(s) at hand (e.g., use of articles, gender, pronouns), making it clear that these are the only foci for attention;
3. provide training to tutors about how to notice / give feedback on these targeted language features;
4. maintain oversight of the outcomes of the peer interactions as part of their 'facilitator and mediator' role (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004), with a view to noting the quality and consistency of feedback provided, and using this as an opportunity for post-task / post-interaction focus on linguistic form. This would be in accord with Guardado and Shi's (2007) observation that students prefer to confirm the peers' feedback with that of the teacher.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study, although tentative, support previous claims about the interactive nature of computer mediated communication and the overall benefits of interactions in a foreign language. The online environment gave students the opportunity to interact with a peer who was an L1 speaker of the target language in an authentic context where they accessed language interlocutors more frequently than they would in classrooms. The interactions were, however, limited in content and scope given the level of proficiency of the students and the type of instruction received in their regular classroom. The fact that the students had only started learning Spanish meant that they did not have enough language to communicate beyond short phrases and basic sentences learned during form-focused mini-lessons with their teacher. The messages exchanged were one-way descriptive texts which did not promote collaboration as other types of tasks would provide. This may be a modification suggested to future projects. It is difficult to find comparable studies with students of this age group that allow for a broader discussion on the benefits (or otherwise) of peer tutoring experiences like the one described in this study.

Although face-to-face interaction in language learning is still essential, CMC technologies have the potential to enhance the process of second language acquisition and encourage the formation of electronic communities of learning. Bearing in mind the limitations discussed above, these authentic interactions need to be meaningfully integrated with other classroom tasks and interventions

to increase their effectiveness. In particular, teachers should structure carefully sequenced online tasks so that they build on the previous interaction. Also, teachers may need to specifically instruct their classes about how to provide effective feedback and subsequently to attend to the feedback provided, as part of both learner-learner and teacher-learner interactions.

Note

1. Indeed, evidence from interviews with a sub-set of participants (n = 9) who had been in the intervention group (Villers, Tolosa & East, 2011) indicates that peer correction was valued, and perceived as having a positive impact on proficiency (“I like being corrected”; “I felt pretty good” about being corrected; “I thought that it was good for me” to be corrected; “the corrections that he made make my Spanish better”).

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