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Let Me Learn with My Peers Online!: Foreign Language Learning Through Reciprocal Peer Tutoring

by Rayenne Dekhinet, Keith Topping, David Duran, and Silvia Blanch

As technological tools are now almost indispensable for foreign language teaching (Sotillo 2000), innovative pedagogy and methodology are required for the successful integration of computers into the foreign language curriculum. Like any other classroom tool, technology for language learning must offer opportunities to practice the language in authentic contexts and user-friendly environments. Internet technologies, because they have the potential to connect students across national and linguistic boundaries, abound with such opportunities.

In particular, the Internet and related technologies can give new power to peer-assisted learning techniques by allowing language learners to communicate with native speakers of the language they are studying. In summer 2006, two primary schools, one in Scotland and one in Spain, participated in a novel program that incorporated peer-tutoring techniques in tandem learning activities and evaluated the effect on students' writing development in their second languages. The program linked English-speaking learners of Spanish with Spanish-speaking learners of English, capitalizing upon the novelty and purposefulness of using peers in another country as an audience. This small-scale research, which is part of a bigger project, seeks to assess the pedagogical value of reciprocal peer-tutoring methodologies via the Internet as an effective and engaging language learning tool.

Background

Foreign language practice with native speakers is very expensive and complicated to arrange, a fact that has led language teachers to use interactions among peers of the same class or school as a substitute. [Peer-assisted learning](#), in the traditional foreign language classroom, operates mainly through the peer-tutoring approach. In this methodology, more proficient nonnative speakers serve as peer tutors of much less proficient nonnative speakers. In most cases, the student tutors have been asked by the teacher to instruct a peer in some task; at other times they offer such help on their own. During their tutelage, children use [foreigner talk](#). The use of foreigner talk assumes sentence and discourse levels that are simplified in structure, that allow for negotiation between interlocutors, and that change in response to the demands of the real situation and the comprehension of the less proficient interlocutor (Flanigan 1991).

Peer learning of this sort has significant potential as a pedagogical approach in foreign language education. In the primary school, for example, there is space and time for children in a class of mixed language capabilities to find interlocutors who suit them (Hickey 2007). This is particularly true with the availability of computer-mediated communication. Internet technologies can facilitate peer learning by connecting students with a wider range of peers, including those who are native speakers of the language the students are studying.

The project presented here used a variant of the e-mail dialogue journaling described by Shang (2005), but the communication was between students in different countries. This type of interaction has been called tandem language learning by Little et al. (1999), who describes its use in a college environment. Success in this approach depends on adherence to the principles of reciprocity and learner autonomy, which was a substantial feature of the current project. Reciprocity, in this context, provides pupil dyads with the opportunity to alternate between tutee and tutor roles in the context of a structured format that guides them through the learning process (Fantuzzo and Ginsburg-Block 1998). Learner autonomy establishes a break from traditional

teacher-led, one-way instruction and encourages reflective student engagement in the learning process so that students accept responsibility for their learning, take initiative in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness (Holec 1981; Little 1991). This project investigated how reciprocal peer tutoring via the Internet influenced the language learning of primary school students in both countries.

Implementation

The project aimed to provide an opportunity for tutor and tutee to assist each other in learning a foreign language. It also provided opportunities to engage in real, meaningful conversation with peers who are native speakers of the target language. The pilot project, which linked two European primary schools—one in Scotland ([Ancrum Road Primary School](#) in Dundee) and one in Catalonia ([Riera de Ribes Primary School](#) in Sant Pere de Ribes)—was implemented in summer term 2006.

The participants were 24 Spanish-speaking Catalan students learning English as a foreign language and 25 Scottish students learning Spanish as a foreign language; all students were between 10 and 11 years old and in approximately equivalent primary classes. Both groups had basic skills in their target languages, although the Catalan group had had far more exposure to English than the Scottish group had had to the Spanish language. All students were computer literate, and both schools were equipped with broadband connections and adequate computer labs ([Exhibit 1](#)). Prior to the experiment, the language teachers at each school provided lists of student participants. Students were matched into pairs randomly, regardless of abilities, producing 23 pairs and 1 triad.

Eight communicative activities were developed to meet wider classroom objectives and accommodate students' foreign language abilities ([Exhibit 2](#)). Each activity asked students to participate in an online chat or videoconference or to send an e-mail discussing specified topics. Teachers provided constructive feedback on these activities, which was useful in making amendments to produce the final versions.

The project was hosted on [Blackboard](#), the course management system used by the [University of Dundee](#). The Blackboard Web site is a highly secure environment, so every student needed a user name and a password to access his or her work. Students used discussion boards to store their interactions; these discussion boards were created for each pair and given alphabetical letter codes so that students could easily identify their own virtual spaces.

Students were trained to use the Web site, to prepare their messages, and to assist their partners. They were also taught how to provide corrections to their partners using a text-correction template created in Microsoft Word ([Exhibit 3](#)). The correction template guided students in detecting the principal mistakes and directed them to insert a brief explanation that pointed out the error without providing direct instruction ([Exhibit 4](#)). While making corrections, students were expected to provide positive and encouraging comments and make constructive suggestions.

Investigation

This study used discourse analysis and end-project interviews to evaluate the pedagogical value of online reciprocal peer tutoring for language learning.

Development of writing proficiency in the foreign language was analyzed in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity, using measurements adapted from the language-writing development system formulated by Wolfe-Quintero, Shunji, and Hae-Young (1998) ([Exhibit 5](#)). Language development was related to characteristics of a learner's output that indicated some improvement in the developmental continuum, including developmental measures, such as the number of clauses per T-unit (sentence), that are assumed

to progress in a linear fashion as language develops (Hunt 1965). Since this study focused on foreign language development as the result of students' involvement in planning, reading, writing, and correcting messages, all messages written in a foreign language by a single participant were considered for longitudinal analysis.

End-project interviews were conducted with both teachers and students in both countries ([Exhibit 6](#)). These interviews included open-ended questions intended to elicit information about learners' and teachers' experiences with and opinions on this project.

Results

Discourse analysis in this study centered primarily on writing development in Spanish as experienced by the Dundee students; interview results from both groups of students were also reviewed for qualitative assessment.

The analysis revealed students' writing development in the target languages. For example, cross-sectional comparison of the messages of a single student revealed an increase in the amount and complexity of foreign language produced ([Exhibit 7](#)). However, the linguistic analysis of twenty-four random e-mails of six students from Dundee revealed a nonlinear progression. The overall writing performance was sometimes affected by other factors, such as failing to send and receive messages because of IT problems. This meant that the overall profile was somewhat erratic ([Figure 1](#)). Despite this irregular progression of writing in the foreign language, there appears to have been a consolidation of accuracy over the weeks. Students' writing reflected the progressive acquisition of the underlying rules of Spanish grammar. By planning, focusing, and reflecting on their messages before sending them through to their peers, Scottish students strengthened their Spanish composition skills over time.

Students' writing was more fluent than accurate or complex. Fluency, as the automatic retrieval of language, increased and decreased over the weeks, but these changes in performance do not necessarily mean that students' degree of automatization of language production is affected, nor do they mean that learning is not taking place. The nature of the tasks that students were required to perform to accommodate the curriculum during the project may well be the source of their low performance on messages two and four. Describing the classroom and the school to consolidate vocabulary taught in the classroom was not of particular interest to the students.

At this stage, it is also important to remember that this intervention was relatively light; students were engaged in language activities for only eight sessions over eight weeks. Scottish pupils spent a total of just under three hours studying Spanish during the course of the study; Spanish students had slightly more time for their English studies—four hours over eight weeks. Therefore, there is a need to be cautious in drawing conclusions from this graph. Further research might bring more insights.

Nevertheless, improvement in the quantity of text produced, as well as pupils' and teachers' perceptions, show the potential of the project for language learning. Students were not only highly engaged in planning their activities, sending messages, and tutoring their peers, but were also very motivated in learning their foreign language, as they could relate it to a real and authentic audience. Indeed, students managed to send spontaneous e-mails to their peers in which they made special inquiries. These questions were mostly offered to nurture and tighten friendships, which suggests the promise of peer learning as a longer-term endeavor.

In interviews, students and teachers agreed that the project improved the writing skills of foreign language learners. As reported by the Scottish teacher, "The children's Spanish is getting better; the kids were beginning to put together more words." In the same vein, students believed that they had learned more vocabulary and grammar and reported that they felt more comfortable writing in the foreign language using

computers. They added that they were happy that they had started writing messages in their foreign languages with fewer mistakes.

The key peer-tutoring element of the project was the correction of the partner's texts. The majority of the students stated that they learned from making text corrections. In fact, the metalinguistic process of reflection stimulated by correction offered a good opportunity for learning not only the foreign language but the first language as well, as teachers and pupils pointed out ([Exhibit 8](#)). Additionally, in their tutor roles, students learned to offer help for learning; as a Scottish student put it, "We are teaching them how to speak English and they are teaching us how to speak Spanish." This user-friendly way of offering and receiving feedback was perceived in a very positive way, as reported by the Scottish teacher: "Children felt very proud to help their peers when correcting their English."

Reciprocal peer tutoring via corrections and other feedback gave the children the opportunity to develop their knowledge and become aware of learning from others, both in their own language when they corrected messages and in the second language when they received corrections. These learning opportunities allowed effective ties to develop with their partners. Although culture was not an emphasis in this project, the students did find additional learning opportunities in the exchange of cultural knowledge, which students felt they also gained from their conversations with their partners and in the development of friendships between partners. Overall, students were very positive about the possibilities of continuing communication, because they felt they had made friends: "I'd love to carry on because you make a friend," said one Catalan student. "It is just learning more Spanish and making a friend, [and] maybe [I could] go and see him one day," said a Scottish student.

Teachers also saw important benefits in the program beyond the learning advantages attributable to reciprocal peer tutoring. The project demanded authentic use of the target language and provided a real audience, as opposed to a hypothetical reader, requiring students to access more sophisticated language skills (Callison and Lamb 2004). The Catalan teacher noted that the project provided "a real way to communicate in English and that's something that usually doesn't happen in the school." Students were also motivated to learn in a structured environment that promoted high levels of engagement. The Scottish teacher, in this regard, said "I think it has been very good for their Spanish. They become more motivated. They note that they have to use it in their next message activity, so they have no time to mess about."

Students also felt very comfortable working on the computer. The ease with which the pupils used the new technologies was startling. They perceived the computer as a fast, practical, and easy tool for learning. Some of them also regarded it as an entertaining form of communication; one Catalan student reported that "it allows us to be able to communicate with people from the other side of the world. We have learnt more and enjoyed more." Some of the students expressed a preference for writing directly on the computer instead of working with a handwritten draft in the initial phases of the textual production.

Although the teachers involved shared their students' enthusiasm for the project, they also emphasized the problems that could be created by technical and coordination difficulties. In fact, coordination between the language teachers was constant. This was important in setting up a timetable for the activities, booking computer rooms, and preparing computers to run the Web site. The primary difficulties during the project were related to Internet connection problems, a lack of computers in the centers, or other technical issues. The Scottish teacher reported that "the only problem we had is with the IT support side of the project, problems to get on the site, problems to get online and to submit the work . . ." In this sense, although the teachers of both schools understood and supported the use of the new technologies as instruments of learning, they also expressed a need for more technical support, sharing the Catalan teacher's assessment: "The kind of activities that this project promotes should be more frequent in schools . . . But unfortunately schools don't have specialists that are able to deal with activities that need a high level of technological development."

Conclusion

The results of this study show how Internet technology can be leveraged with reciprocal peer tutoring to enhance language learning. The use of the computer as a means to engage students in authentic situations contributed to increased motivation and engagement in learning. Although the project was too short to allow the researchers to detect improvement in linguistic knowledge more generally, marked improvement in textual production was noted; students expressed a perception that they had learned something and a burgeoning confidence in their target language abilities. Tutoring peers also helped students improve their knowledge of their own language, in particular through the reflections made while writing corrections of their partners' texts.

The students' comments about intercultural learning merit further investigation. Although the main focus of this project was on the value of reciprocal peer tutoring for developing language skills, these kinds of activities may offer opportunities to strengthen relationships with companions in other countries. In this sense, projects such as this lead to other forms of virtual communication that improve linguistic competence and reinforce crosscultural knowledge among European citizens.

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