

Online Peer Feedback Between Colombian and New Zealand FL Beginners: A Comparison and Lessons Learned*

Retroalimentación virtual de pares entre aprendices principiantes de lengua de Colombia y Nueva Zelanda: una comparación y lecciones aprendidas

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We report on an exploratory study comparing the performance as online tutors of two groups of beginner eleven-year-old students of English in Colombia and Spanish in New Zealand. The native speaker students of the foreign language the others were learning corrected paragraphs written by their peers. The feedback provided by each group of tutors was analyzed for (1) language corrected, (2) input on errors, and (3) types of feedback provided. We found that both Colombian and New Zealand tutors willingly provided corrections to their peers and used other feedback strategies to foster attention to linguistic form. The Colombian tutors identified a higher number of errors, but the New Zealanders provided more detailed comments. We draw lessons from the exploration.

Key words: Collaborative on-line learning, foreign language learning, foreign language writing, online teaching and learning.

Éste es un estudio exploratorio en el que comparamos el desempeño como tutores-en-línea de dos grupos de niños de 11 años, principiantes en inglés en Colombia y español en Nueva Zelanda. Como nativos de la lengua extranjera que los otros aprendían, cada grupo corrigió párrafos de sus compañeros. Las correcciones se analizaron buscando (1) lenguaje corregido, (2) frecuencia y (3) tipos de correcciones. Encontramos que todos los tutores indicaron gustosamente correcciones a sus compañeros y utilizaron otras estrategias para llamar su atención hacia la forma del lenguaje. Los tutores colombianos identificaron más errores, pero los tutores neozelandeses produjeron comentarios más detallados. Concluimos extrayendo algunas lecciones de la exploración.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje de lengua extranjera, aprendizaje en colaboración en línea, enseñanza y aprendizaje en línea, escritura en lengua extranjera.

* This article extends the analysis already published in Tolosa, East, and Villers (2013), where only the feedback by the Colombian participants on the writings produced by the New Zealand ones was considered.

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Introduction

In the present article we report findings from an exploratory study of an online intervention aimed at overcoming the challenges faced by schoolteachers who have to teach a foreign language that they are learning themselves (Scott & Butler, 2007) and to foreign language (FL) learners who are limited in their possibilities of authentic interaction with native (L1) speakers. The intervention and the study originated in New Zealand and explores the ways in which two groups of beginner eleven-year old students, one of Spanish learners in Auckland, New Zealand, and one of English learners in Bogotá, Colombia, provide and receive written feedback in an online reciprocal peer tutoring environment.

Some Background Research

Providing students with opportunities to interact authentically and meaningfully in the FL language is a frequent concern of language teachers, and language learning online seems to offer optimal conditions for this kind of interaction. Furthermore, online interaction has been found to impact linguistic development (Gass & Mackey, 2007). While collaboration among learners facilitates language learning by increasing motivation and authenticity, providing feedback, and fostering communities of learning (Ortega, 2009), work online provides opportunities for quality language input and output and focuses attention on linguistic form (Mackey & Polio, 2009). Interaction in computer mediated communication (CMC) provides contextualization in learning, which gives learners the opportunity to engage in the social construction of knowledge with a wider range of interlocutors (Kitade, 2008), and specifically allows the most genuine type of collaboration where learners interact with experts who are L1 speakers of the target language (Kern, 2006; Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

Peer feedback on second language writing is collaboration which enhances linguistic development and has been associated with greater learner participation, improved communicative competence, and higher levels of metacognition (Hyland, 2003). Since its focus is principally on language form, written online communication seems to provide greater opportunity to reflect on and attend to the form and content of communication. In asynchronous virtual interaction students have more time to plan, produce, revise, and edit their texts and more possibility to read and analyze their peers' texts (Schuetze, 2011; Warschauer, 2005). This has been found by González-Lloret (2003) to increase learners' motivation as they perceive reading and writing as more authentic activities.

Peer tutoring is interaction for educational purposes between a more competent peer and a less competent learner who construct learning in collaboration. For this reason authors like Duran and Monereo (2005) have characterized peer tutoring as asymmetrical. In reciprocal tutoring, on the other hand, peers alternate in their roles of tutor and tutee, creating mutual assistance and social support. This encourages mutuality and allows both peers to benefit from the interaction, reducing dependency in the relationship (Fantuzzo, King, & Heller, 1992).

According to Ware (2004) peers working in second language writing scaffold and help each other in improving their writing skills; their mutual responses provide an authentic sense of audience, autonomy and confidence in writing. Hyland (2003) indicates that this mutuality also helps develop communicative competence and stimulates participation. However, some researchers question the ability of peers to support others who are going through the same learning process (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994) or who may lack communicative and pragmatic skills and understand interaction in culturally different ways (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Ware, 2004).

Specific research on peer-tutoring through error correction (corrective feedback) has explored the types of feedback provided (Ayoun, 2001, 2004; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006), their effectiveness on linguistic accuracy in L2 (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010), and learners' perceptions of this effectiveness (Weaver, 2006). There have also been critiques of the claims that such studies have made (Truscott, 1996), particularly of claims that corrective feedback has long-term effects. More attention has been given recently to written feedback by Ellis (2009), who proposed a typology for it, and others (see Bitchener & Ferris, 2012 for a review), who have carried out studies mostly in university settings, with a few exceptions (Choi & Li, 2012; Oliver, 1998). Some studies have established correlations between virtual corrective feedback and language learning (Blake, 2000; O'Rourke, 2005; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011). Ferris (2010) declares that studies show evidence for L2 development and improvement in writing accuracy when corrective feedback is provided under the right conditions.

There has also been interest in studying the processes by which corrections and feedback are provided. Vinagre and Lera (2008), for example, classified the corrections provided via email by university learners of English in Spain and Spanish in Ireland into three categories: identification of the error, providing the accurate form—or remediation—, and providing information on how to correct. The authors suggest that corrections are more effective for spelling and vocabulary errors, while morphosyntactic errors, which were present in 75% of the corrections, are more effectively treated with remediation for promoting linguistic development. In reciprocal peer tutoring through virtual interaction organized between children learning English in Spain and Spanish in Scotland, Thurston, Duran, Cunningham, Blanch, and Topping (2009) also found that peer corrections

were mainly morphosyntactic while peer support was based on giving the right answers.

Ware and O'Dowd (2008) compared the language used and the frequency and type of feedback provided in asynchronous discussions by learners acting as formal e-tutors or e-partners; the former provided formal correction, the latter optional feedback. They found that all learners liked receiving feedback, but they only provided it when required; they “were not always equipped with a strong enough understanding of the structure of their native languages to provide quality metalinguistic explanations” (p. 55). The findings suggest that it is necessary to ensure that learners can actually provide the required feedback.

Greater structure in the peer tutoring process can enhance the nature and scope of the feedback provided during reciprocal peer tutoring, as Ware and O'Dowd (2008) showed in a two-year study of post-secondary learners of English and Spanish. And in an exploratory study comparing face-to-face and e-feedback between English as a second language (ESL) pairs of students, the group working online showed that they were aware of the needs of their peers and made balanced, critical comments (Guardado & Shi, 2007). The participants declared that they preferred to confirm the quality of the feedback with their teacher, but that they had learned in the process.

The Intervention

For the study we report on here, online peer tutoring interaction was established between a co-ed group of 28 eleven-year old beginners (Year 7) learning Spanish as a FL in a state intermediate school in Auckland and 24 comparable peers (5th and 6th grades) learning English as an FL in a private school in Bogotá. The Auckland school volunteered for the intervention and study when the school's principal invited the research team at the University of Auckland to undertake research on the school's

Spanish program. Researchers at Universidad Nacional de Colombia were contacted to find the comparable group in Bogotá. Since most private schools in Colombia are now bilingual or becoming bilingual from preschool and many schools beginning the process are not co-ed, a school was contacted serving children who did not have a level of English at the end of primary that allowed them to enter proper immersion bilingual schools in Bogotá, for different reasons. The participating group in Bogotá consisted of 15 male and 9 female students, paired with students in a parallel class of 13 male and 15 female students in Auckland. Both groups of students were beginners in their study of their respective foreign language.

In both countries the participants were ranked in their FL attainment based on their scores on an FL pre-test; then they were suitably paired with students with similar scores. This made their level of FL comparable and ensured that all students could participate without feelings of insecurity, inferiority, or inadequacy (Thurston et al., 2009). The intervention consisted of a reciprocal peer tutoring writing scheme in which the dyads interchanged and responded to each other's paragraphs in Moodle, an online learning management system that allows secure exchange of messages and availability only to the participants in the study.

The intervention had many restrictions. The types of tasks to be used, for example, were restricted by the beginning level of proficiency of the students. And quite traditional language teaching methods used by the teachers and, in the Colombian case, big limitations of access to computers within the school also limited pedagogical possibilities. Nevertheless the students exchanged paragraphs with their peers on topics decided between the teachers and the research team for eight weeks. They used language that they had already studied in their FL classes, like personal descriptions, family and school life, their city, and their favorite music and hobbies. The

students had to read the paragraphs and send them back to their peers with linguistic feedback, so the peers could produce their final versions. This process of sending a paragraph on a topic, giving feedback, making corrections, and probably commenting again was to be repeated until each student had produced exchanges on at least five of the assigned topics.

The Study

The study was exploratory, seeking to investigate different aspects of the impact of the online peer tutoring program to inform subsequent, more focused studies. It had three general aims: (1) to examine the ways in which the students tutored each other, (2) to assess the effects of the tutoring process on L1 and FL language proficiency, and (3) to detect any changes produced in the students' motivation and attitudes towards the study of foreign languages.

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used on different types of data: First, a free writing activity was used to assess the writing skill in the FL before and after the intervention. An attitude questionnaire and an FL Spanish/English test were developed in parallel by the researchers in each country and also administered as pre- and posttests. A sub-sample of each participating group provided a semi-structured interview describing the tutoring experience from their point of view. And finally the texts interchanged by the participants in the online platform were used as data in the study.

In this article we report specifically on the performance of the two groups as tutors, with regard to the error correction provided by each group of L1 speakers for the corresponding FL learners. The following questions guided this dimension of the study:

1. What linguistic aspects were corrected by the peer tutors?
2. How frequently did they correct errors?
3. What types of feedback did they use?

To answer these questions, the data from the online platform were captured as word processing documents. Each paragraph interchanged over the eight weeks of the intervention was copied without modifications. It was decided to analyze, as evidence of interaction, only paragraphs which had been interchanged three times. This limited the amount of data analyzed, changed the number of participants in the study, and forced different decisions on data selection for the two participating groups of students.

In the case of the New Zealand data, only 17 dyads which had produced three exchanges on the first three topics were considered for analysis. From these pairs, ten had this exact number of exchanges on the three first topics, four had them on four, and three had them on all five. The dyads that were excluded had enough exchanges only on fewer than three of the five topics.

The Colombian data presented more of a challenge. Only 11 dyads produced three exchanges or more on the first topic only. Since the purpose of this part of the study was to analyze the types of corrections made by the participants and it was necessary to analyze a number of paragraphs corrected by the New Zealand participants similar to that corrected by the Colombian group, it was decided for these data to also consider paragraphs with only two exchanges.

This decision resulted in the selection of 18 dyads that had completed two exchanges or more on the three first topics assigned. From these pairs, five had exchanged three messages on the first topic and two on the others, four had exchanged four messages first and then just two on the second and third topics, two had exchanged six and nine messages on the first topic and just two on the rest, and seven had exchanged just two messages on all three topics (see Table 1). This situation indicated that the Colombian participants probably had less direction from their teachers, had preferred extended conversations at the beginning of the intervention, and had been more consistent at correcting their peers' paragraphs in Spanish than

at producing and revising their own paragraphs in English.

Table 1. Number of Dyads and Exchanges Analysed

Topic	NZ	Col	
No. of Exchanges	≥3	≥3	≥2
1	17	11	7
2	17	0	18
3	17	0	18

The chosen messages were subsequently analyzed looking for answers to the three research questions, that is, looking for types of errors identified, frequency of identification of each type, and classification of the type of feedback produced. The errors identified were classified as grammar, vocabulary, or spelling mistakes. Punctuation was initially included as a category, but difficulties in the use of the Moodle platform to make punctuation corrections clear muddled results in this category.

Findings

The students interacted online for a total of eight weeks, from mid-October to mid- December 2010. Data provided by Moodle recorded two types of actions from the participants: views and posts (see Table 2), with a total of 7,755 views and 896 posts in the eight week period. Views indicate that students were interested in the project and willing to interact with their peers. Posts correspond to paragraphs on a topic, corrections, or updates of the information.

Table 2. 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

A total of 2,038 words were written in Spanish, 37 words per message on average. The total number of words per topic in Spanish decreased from 831 on the first topic to 718 on the second one and 489 on the third one. Longer messages were found on the topics in English, even though these included a smaller total number of messages, with an average of 55 words per message. The total number of words was 2,894. Here the total number of words per topic decreased as well from 1,418 on the first one to 774 on the second one and 702 on the third one. The length of the messages did not increase as learning in Spanish or English increased. This may have been due to decreased motivation or decreased time dedicated to the intervention, as the school year came to an end.

Answers to the first research question about linguistic aspects of language corrected by the peer tutors referred to how the instructions the teachers provided on error correction and feedback were put into practice. Students had been instructed in ways to give feedback but had not been given guidelines on specific aspects of language they needed to correct, like noun-adjective agreement or verb conjugations. Table 3 presents the total number of corrections made across the three topics analyzed.

The total number of errors identified by the Colombia peers was 377 while the New Zealand peers identified 368. The errors most frequently detected by the Colombian peers were grammatical (175), while the New Zealand peers identified spelling errors the most (244). Spelling errors came in second place for the Colombian peers (115), while grammar errors were second for the New Zealanders (111). Finally we have vocabulary errors for both groups (87 and 13). Table 3 shows the figures corresponding to this research question.

The following are examples of the three types of errors: “Mi coplianos esta es 17 de Decembere” (My birthday is December 17) and “i have 11 years.” The Colombian 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 (Tolosa et al., 2013). In turn, the New Zealand peer identified *i* as a spelling error, the missing word *old* as a grammar error, and the use of the verb *have* instead of *be* as a vocabulary error.

To answer the second research question about the errors corrected, the numbers of errors identified by the students were compared with the numbers of errors identified by the researchers (Table 4). In all categories, the Colombian peer tutors identified and corrected more than 50% of the errors in their peers’ messages. The highest number of errors was vocabulary errors (79%), followed by grammar (68%) and then spelling (56%). The New Zealand peer tutors did less well in identifying grammar and vocabulary errors. Feedback was highest for them in spelling (57%), followed by grammar (45%) and then vocabulary (35%).

In answering the third research question on types of feedback, categories of feedback like direct error correction, rewrite, and explanation were identified. The corrections were counted only once per type in each message. The results in Table 5 show that the New Zealand tutors produced a larger variety of types of feedback, even though they corrected fewer errors in general. Providing the correct answer for an error identified was the most frequent form of feedback. All peer tutors used it, as shown by the numbers corresponding to the number of participating dyads. Other forms of feedback were used sparingly by the Colombian tutors. The New Zealand tutors added a good number of corrections though unnecessary corrections. Furthermore, they produced a lot of comments on the content of their peers’ paragraphs. This probably accounts for the higher total number of words on the topics initiated by the paragraphs in English.

A few tutors in both groups provided explanations of the corrections made. For example, a learner of

Table 3. Errors Corrected by Peer Tutors

	Peer tutor	Grammar	Spelling	Vocabulary	Total
Topic 1	Colombian	35	61	20	116
	NZ	39	111	5	155
Topic 2	Colombian	69	28	42	139
	NZ	38	67	2	107
Topic 3	Colombian	71	26	25	122
	NZ	34	66	6	106
Total	Colombian	175	115	87	377
	NZ	111	244	13	368

Table 4. Frequency of Feedback on Errors

	Peer tutor	Errors identified by peer			Errors identified by researcher			% of feedback		
		Gra	Spe	Voc	Gra	Spe	Voc	Gra	Spe	Voc
Topic 1	C	35	61	20	61	115	25	57%	53%	80%
	NZ	39	111	5	107	188	18	36%	59%	27%
Topic 2	C	69	28	42	101	43	54	68%	65%	78%
	NZ	38	67	2	73	107	7	52%	63%	28%
Topic 3	C	71	26	25	96	46	31	74%	57%	81%
	NZ	34	66	6	68	134	12	50%	49%	50%
Total	C	286	359	100	506	633	147	68%	56%	79%
	NZ	111	244	13	248	429	37	45%	57%	35%

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). The peer eliminated the extra form of the verb *to be* explaining the grammar error with “This is not necessary” and provided the correct form of the verb *to be* (Tolosa et al., 2013). In turn, a learner of English wrote the word *favorite* in one of her messages, and the tutor felt the need to indicate: “In New Zealand, we spell favorite as favourite.”

A Colombian tutor provided the most complete grammatical explanation in all the data, demonstrating a very good knowledge of the grammar of her language and very good tutoring skills:

Hola [name]. 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 *pele* 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). (Tolosa et al., 2013, p. 12)

Table 5. Classification of Feedback Provided

Type of correction	Peer tutor	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Total
Error identified	Colombian	1	2	0	3
	NZ	2	1	0	3
Correct answer provided	Colombian	17	17	17	51
	NZ	18	18	18	54
Comment on the content	Colombian	0	9	0	9
	NZ	12	9	6	27
Explanation provided	Colombian	3	1	1	5
	NZ	3	0	1	4
Text re-written	Colombian	0	1	2	3
	NZ	3	3	2	8
Wrong correction	Colombian	1	3	0	4
	NZ	4	2	3	9
Unnecessary correction	Colombian	1	0	0	1
	NZ	8	2	4	14
Total	Colombian	23	25	20	76
	NZ	59	41	36	119

The best explanations by the New Zealand tutors were given about the use of capital letters, which the Colombian peers almost never used: “Make sure when you say a person’s name or a new sentence you use capital letters” and “Remember capitals for people’s names and for starting sentences.”

There were a few instances in which students completely re-wrote or partially re-phrased sentences in the original paragraph. For example, a New Zealand student said “Soy no baja y no alta” (I am neither short nor tall), and the corresponding Colombian tutor re-wrote the sentence saying “Soy mediana” (I am of average height). In this way the tutor demonstrated that she understood the message and then improved it (Tolosa et al., 2013).

An example of rewriting from the English paragraphs occurred when a Colombian student wrote: “take you...i love you name my name is bad, all in Colombia so called Natalia ¿call me you photo

my email?” The New Zealand tutor surprisingly understood what she wanted to say and re-wrote the message completely in capital letters: “a better way to write it: THANK YOU. I LOVE YOUR NAME, I DON’T LIKE MY NAME. LOTS OF PEOPLE IN COLUMBIA ARE CALLED NATALIA. SEND ME A PHOTO BY EMAIL.”

In other examples the tutors showed themselves willing to help their peers, even though they produced unnecessary incorrect feedback. For example, a New Zealand student wrote “Mi numero de telefono es...” without accent marks in *número* and *teléfono* but otherwise correct. The Colombian peer offered an unnecessary vocabulary change (underlined here): “Mi numero de telefono telefónico es...” The tutor probably considered the other form more common or more sophisticated (Tolosa et al., 2013). Similarly, a Colombian student wrote in her second paragraph “IS RAP SINGER” (uppercase in the original). The New Zealand tutor provided a good correction for

the subject of the sentence, and an unnecessary vocabulary one: “he IS RAP SINGER rapper.”

Illustrations of wrong corrections also come from both groups of tutors. When a New Zealand student used the wrong spelling for her nationality in “Soy neocolandesa” (I am a New Zealander, *neozelandesa* in Spanish), her Colombian tutor tried but failed in her attempt to provide a proper correction: “Soy neocolandesa, neocolandeza” (Tolosa et al., 2013). New Zealand tutors, on the other hand, often produced wrong corrections when they did not understand what the Colombian students had tried to say. This is the case in the following two original errors: “haf the hair curli” (meaning I have curly hair) and “have a filed of basketball” (meaning My school has a basketball field). The corrections provided were “half the hair” and “filled with basketball.” It was probably easy for the English speakers not to understand these attempted sentences, as they use Spanish grammar with deleted subjects and adjectives after nouns.

Comments were included in the messages by both groups of peer tutors, although the New Zealand comments outnumbered the Colombian ones by far. A good number of comments were only social, which showed that the students considered their interaction conversation (Tolosa et al., 2013). Some peers even attempted to establish online friendships: “Excellent! I like talking to you,” said a Colombian student with good English; and his New Zealand peer answered: “I like talking to you too”. And in response to her Colombian peer asking how she was after describing her school, a New Zealand tutor responded “I’m good, I’m in 7 grade!! Your school sounds very cool. Do you facebook?” Comments from the New Zealand tutors often included praise for what their tutees said and personal information in response to the content: “wow only one mistake good work keep at it do you have a facebook?” “That was really good i like Rihanna to i like the song only girl;” “Great work my best friends are Ella, Gabrielle, Savanna, Amber, Talia, Cecilia;”

and “My school has lots of nature too. I am in 1st form or year 7 or 6th grade.”

Some comments referred to the process of writing: A Colombian student who had a higher level of English said “I AM STILL WORKING ON THIS ENTRY” (uppercase in the original), for example (Tolosa et al., 2013). Other comments indicated problems in understanding, like “I don’t understand what the blue writing says,” by a New Zealand tutor. Another New Zealand tutor tried to stimulate his Colombian tutee to write about one of the established topics: “don’t you know a celeb?”

But Table 4 only includes comments containing feedback about the language in the original paragraphs, which in turn include the ones containing praise. There were many of these: “buen trabajo” (good job) by the Colombian tutors and “Great work” by the New Zealanders. Some of the New Zealand tutors even attempted comments in Spanish: “Muy Bien ingle’s” (incorrect, but meaning “very good English”). And the most interesting comments contained both praise for the peer or social content and specific guidance in an aspect of language to improve. One of these was produced by a Colombian tutor: “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) (Tolosa et al., 2013). And several more were found in the conversations initiated with the Spanish paragraphs: “Well done very good. Not every thing is in capitals;” “Great job xxx can you please check my words that need the __ on top of it. bye;” “It’s great to get to know you and you have awesome English! Just remember that you include lower-case and upper-case.”

Discussion

The present comparative analysis of the messages produced by the students in the online peer-tutoring

context focused on the same points analyzed by Tolosa et al. (2013): the aspects of language corrected by the tutors, the frequency with which feedback was provided, and the types of feedback provided. The results corroborate discussion points raised by the previous analysis of the feedback given by the Colombian students in Tolosa et al. (2013) and also show some interesting differences.

Dealing with corroboration first, this comparative analysis showed that participants in the intervention in both countries were willing to contribute their feedback and used different strategies and correction techniques focused on linguistic form. A good number of mistakes were not identified and some tutors were not always capable of providing accurate feedback or explanations, but in general students demonstrated an ability to participate autonomously and to provide their partners with corrections.

The online learning environment also seems to have provided for practice of the foreign language and opportunities to engage in authentic interaction. The interaction with same age native “experts” in the foreign language added a level of authenticity to learning rarely experienced by foreign language learners either in Colombian or New Zealand classrooms. The peers were a real audience for each other and their short messages were read with genuine interest, despite coming from beginners. The peers’ reciprocal corrections reduced the usually vertical power structure that correction by “experts” usually produces. The “experts” assessed their novice peers’ messages knowing they would be in a similar position when their messages in the foreign language were assessed in turn.

As to the differences revealed, Tolosa et al. (2013) found that the majority of the corrections produced by the Colombian tutors on the Spanish paragraphs were grammatical, followed by spelling and vocabulary, as in other studies with students of different ages (Blake, 2000; Choi & Li, 2012; O’Rourke, 2005; Vinagre &

Muñoz, 2011). Nevertheless, the New Zealand tutors identified spelling errors the most, and then grammar and vocabulary mistakes. The very low level of English in the Colombian group may provide an explanation for this. They gave their English sentences mostly a Spanish structure without subjects and with adjectives after nouns, which may have posed a special challenge for their New Zealand tutors. The few corrections on vocabulary errors in both groups were attributed by Tolosa et al. (2013) to a greater possibility of inference in asynchronous virtual written communication, which allows extended time to read and analyze messages. But the number of vocabulary errors identified by the New Zealand tutors in the English paragraphs appears excessively small in comparison with the number of identifications by the Colombians.

This is corroborated in the next analysis. The New Zealand tutors identified only 35% of the vocabulary errors in their Colombian peers’ paragraphs in English, while the Colombians identified over three quarters of the vocabulary errors in the Spanish paragraphs. Similarly, while the Colombian tutors correctly identified over two thirds of the existing grammar errors, the New Zealand tutors only identified 45%. The two groups of tutors coincided only in identifying over half of the spelling errors made by their corresponding peers.

Several explanations are possible for the big differences in the number of errors identified by the two groups of tutors. Tolosa et al. (2013) indicate that the limited time that the New Zealand children had in their computer sessions to produce their messages and correct their peers’ may have been a factor. Nevertheless the conditions under which the Colombian tutors worked during the intervention were even less convenient: While the New Zealand school had a proper computer room with a computer for each student, the Colombian school had a computer room with only 11 working computers that had to be shared with other classes.

Another possibility is that the New Zealand tutors may not have recognized the errors because the sentences produced in English by the Colombian peers were incomprehensible. This would point again to a very low level of English in the Colombian group. Alternative explanations given by Tolosa et al. (2013) are that the New Zealand tutors chose to focus on only the most important issues in the paragraphs for them; that they may have comprehended the messages easily enough without noticing all the mistakes; that they may have chosen to focus more on the understanding than on the mistakes; that they may have wanted to give their obviously beginner peers credit for their efforts; or that they may have felt uncomfortable correcting so many mistakes. Nevertheless all these explanations apply also to the Colombian tutors as there is a general mismatch between the actual errors in both sets of paragraphs and the frequency of corrections from both groups of tutors.

As Tolosa et al. (2013) indicate, 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 preferred providing direct error correction (answers) to their peers rather than providing explanations may lie in the fact that the former is easier. Alternatively, the tutors may have thought that providing the answer would be more helpful. However, it is also possible that only a few of them provided explanations because they were not always in a position to provide one, 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).

A final finding can be added which is not related directly to the research questions explored in the study. It relates to the tutees' responses to the feedback they received. Analysis of the different versions of the

messages initiated with the Spanish paragraphs and the difficulty found within the ones initiated with the English paragraphs to select a sample of topics with three exchanges indicates that the tutees accepted the corrections provided by their tutors without question. They did not attempt to produce new versions of the messages, but rather considered the work finished. This may have been because tutors were perceived as experts with a final say on their paragraphs, or because they found the revision process too complex.

Again as Tolosa et al. (2013) indicate, this makes it impossible to answer the research question about language learning in the participants. It also indicates that there are two variables to control in future research on peer tutoring: first, both tutors and tutees may need more instructions on how to provide feedback and what to do with the feedback received; and second, the teachers definitely need to monitor the peer exchanges and provide additional feedback. The teachers' follow up may prevent students from learning mistakes from erroneous corrections, for example, or allow for better exploitation of unnecessary ones. And, more interestingly, it may help learners acquire skills in providing metalinguistic explanations in their mother tongue, thus contributing to L1 development.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned throughout the present study, some of them already derived from the previous study by Tolosa et al. (2013), may inform future research. The most important lesson is that an eight week peer tutoring program at the end of the school year is not enough to really produce and impact on the learning of the foreign language or on first language development. For writing proficiency to develop, online peer tutoring programs should probably be sustained for longer periods of time to allow for continuous social and academic interaction, as well as for extended opportunities for feedback. Online peer tutoring evidenced benefits of other kinds as other

studies have shown (East, Tolosa, & Villers, 2012), but real learning probably needs a lot more time, especially at an early stage of language learning, as was the case in the present study.

Second, since students provided mainly grammatical feedback, it seems that they needed more explicit instruction on how to detect and correct formal features of their mother language. This connects to a third lesson: The fact that some required feedback was either missing or inaccurate, together with the fact that tutees appeared to receive the feedback without question, points to the danger of learning mistakes. So besides recommending the training of tutors on how to give feedback, it would be important to train tutees on what to expect and what to do with the feedback. This can probably be more effective if both tutors and tutees focus on one or two specific error groups that can occur in the task(s) at hand.

Fourth, in accord with Guardado and Shi's (2007) observation that students prefer to confirm the peers' feedback with that of the teacher, teachers should maintain oversight of the process and outcomes of the peer interactions, intervening to ensure the quality and consistency of the feedback provided and using this intervention to direct further instruction and training in linguistic form. This was even more necessary at the very beginning level of the participants in the present study, because the fact that the students had only started learning their FL meant that they did not have enough language to communicate beyond basic sentences.

And finally, the messages exchanged were one-way descriptive texts. This did not promote richer social collaboration as other types of tasks would provide. A modification suggested for future projects, then, may be to organize the peer-tutoring experience around a variety of more interactive types of tasks which allow for richer language learning that better exploits the advantages of the social environment naturally created in the online environment.

It would be important to continue exploring online peer tutoring between FL learners and L1 learners, especially at basic education levels. It is difficult to find studies that are comparable to the present one and with students of this age group that allow for a broader discussion on the benefits (or lack thereof) of peer tutoring experiences like the one described in this study.

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