

Catch my errors if you can: The relative value of peer editing in the language classroom

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Abstract

Even though peer review enjoys sound theoretical support, classroom research has not always provided a clear picture of its effectiveness, particularly when it comes to form-focused editing. In addition to yielding conflicting findings with respect to the number of corrections students make based on peer feedback (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Paulus, 1999; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1998), several gaps in the literature remain unaddressed, particularly in terms of error detection rates. This study sought to determine to what extent learners are able to (a) detect errors during peer editing, (b) provide each other with correct information, and (c) incorporate peer-provided suggestions in subsequent individual writing tasks. Participants were 20 undergraduate students enrolled in an intermediate Spanish course. They individually wrote a story based on pictures, exchanged papers with a partner, and provided each other with feedback on lexical, grammatical, and orthographic issues. The learners' audio-recorded interactions and the narratives produced by the learners during and after the peer-editing session were analyzed. Results indicate that even though learners detect a small proportion of errors, the majority of corrections were accurate and were incorporated in writing tasks completed immediately after the peer editing session, as well as two weeks later.

Keywords: peer feedback; second language writing; focus on form; error detection

Introduction

The importance of writing for language development extends beyond written communication skills. One of the benefits of writing, as Williams (2012) points out, is that it may help enhance the three main cognitive functions of output proposed by Swain (1985): realizing what they do not know or only know partially, experimenting with language and testing hypotheses, and promoting conscious reflection on language use. Research has consistently shown that writing tasks may be more effective at drawing the learners' attention

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to form than purely oral tasks (Adams, 2006; Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008; Cumming, 1990; Williams, 2008). As originally proposed, Swain's output hypothesis did not state that the benefits of output were exclusive to collaborative settings. However, Swain (2000) underscored the benefits of collaborative dialogue. As learners work together to solve their linguistic quandaries and provide each other with feedback, they are co-constructing knowledge that may in turn "become a tool for their further individual use of their second language" (Swain, 2000, p. 104). Peer collaboration may be implemented at various points during the writing process: in the beginning as pre-task planning or brainstorming, throughout the entire process as collaborative drafting, or toward the end as peer response, which is the focus of this study.

Defined broadly, "peer response is the use of learners as sources of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other's drafts in both written and oral formats" (Hansen & Liu, 2005, p. 1). Although peer feedback can involve comments on several different aspects of writing, such as organization, development of ideas, and cohesion), the objective of the current study is to examine only form-focused peer editing, in which comments are provided with the intent of reducing the number of errors in a classmate's paper (i.e., increasing linguistic accuracy).

Review of literature

Benefits and drawbacks of peer review

Peer editing offers several unique benefits for language development. First, considering that peers of similar proficiency are the ones detecting issues and providing suggestions, the corrections might be at the right level, thus likely to be retained and incorporated in subsequent drafts. Second, it may enhance the learners' ability to evaluate their own work. As students read what their partner wrote, they might turn their attention to form, and as they suggest changes and explain those revisions to their partners, they consolidate their own knowledge. In turn, this heightened awareness may enhance their own writing (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Rouhi, Dibah, & Mohebbi, 2020).

Despite these benefits, some educators are hesitant to incorporate form-focused peer feedback in their classes due to some of its drawbacks. Students might not always notice errors, and even if they do, they might be unable to provide corrections, or they might not feel comfortable correcting their peers. Diab (2010) reported, for instance, that both the experimental and control groups "had difficulty noticing and correcting" errors related to the target structures (p. 91). However, given that error detection was not the focus of the study, Diab (2010) did not provide statistical analysis of the proportion of errors that were detected and successfully edited.

Another concern related to peer feedback is that learners might suggest unnecessary revisions or provide each other with inaccurate information. Although inaccurate resolutions do occur, research so far has suggested that the incidence of incorrect feedback provided by peers is relatively low. For instance, Villamil and de Guerrero (1998) found that only 7% of the repairs in students' final papers were inaccurate after exchanging feedback.

Incorporation of peer corrections

One of the main concerns of research on peer review has been its impact on revision (i.e., what proportion of peer comments is incorporated in revised drafts). Some researchers found positive effects for peer revision, as measured by the number of corrections students made based on peer feedback. Mendonça and Johnson (1994) examined the rate of

incorporation of peer feedback among 12 advanced learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) enrolled in a college writing course. Students wrote academic essays on topics of their choice that were related to their fields of study. Overall, 53% of peer-suggested revisions were incorporated, although the authors did not distinguish between content-related and language-related revisions. In Villamil and de Guerrero's (1998) study, on the other hand, revisions were classified by their focus. Participants were 14 ESL college students who wrote a narrative and a persuasive essays as part of the writing course they were taking. The results showed that 74% of revisions could be traced to peer feedback, and most of the revisions revolved around grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Although these findings are encouraging, Villamil and de Guerrero (1998) note that "other rhetorical and grammatical problems or errors may have remained unattended in the final drafts" (p. 501). Without data on the proportion of issues that were and were not successfully addressed, the picture of the effectiveness of peer editing remains incomplete.

Other studies have revealed a relatively low proportion of revisions that could be directly attributed to peer comments. Connor and Asenavage (1994) examined the source of revisions made by a group of eight college students enrolled in an ESL writing course. They found that the majority of changes could be traced to teacher comments or self-revision, especially when it came to grammar and mechanics. Only 7% of revisions in the second draft and 2% in the third draft were peer-provided suggestions. Connor and Asenavage (1994) do not dismiss peer feedback entirely. Instead, they caution practitioners from expecting "too much from peer response groups without understanding how effective collaboration works" (p. 267). In a similar study, Paulus (1999) investigated the sources of revisions made among 11 ESL college students enrolled in an academic writing course. Peer feedback accounted for 32% of revisions from the first to the second draft, and only 1% of revisions from the second to the third draft. Out of all the peer-provided suggestions, 38% of them focused on changes that included issues with grammar, spelling and mechanics, as well as paraphrasing suggestions, which do not necessarily involve errors.

In addition to yielding conflicting results, research to date has not yet provided answers to several questions regarding the effectiveness of peer editing. First, no studies to date have investigated to what extent learners are able to detect errors related to linguistic form in the first place. In other words, out of all the errors in a peer's draft, how many of them are addressed and how many go unnoticed? Second, incorporation of feedback has been limited primarily to revised drafts, which learners complete at home. It would be helpful to determine the rate of retention of peer-provided information in subsequent writing tasks without any external assistance. Third, rather than treating language-related issues as one broad category, a more fine-grained look at the linguistic focus of the revisions suggested and incorporated is also warranted. Furthermore, most previous studies have involved ESL students enrolled in composition courses. It is also important to understand the value of peer editing in other instructional contexts.

Research questions

This study aims to shed light on the effectiveness of form-focused peer editing in the world language classroom guided by the following the research questions:

1. What proportion of errors do second language learners of Spanish detect during peer editing, and what is the linguistic focus of errors detected: lexical, grammatical, or orthographic?
2. What proportion of detected errors is corrected accurately, what proportion of detected errors remains unresolved, and what proportion of suggestions entail inaccurate information?

3. What proportion of peer corrections is retained and incorporated in subsequent individual writing tasks?

Method

Participants

A total of 20 undergraduate students participated in all sessions of this study.¹ They were monolingually-raised native speakers of English, born and schooled in the United States. All had started studying Spanish as an additional language after the age of 10 (average age of first exposure: 12). They had taken an average of four years of Spanish in high school, and none of them had spent more than two weeks in a Spanish-speaking country. They were enrolled in a fifth-semester Spanish grammar review course. When the study was conducted, the course was a prerequisite for upper-level content courses (i.e., one of the core language courses required for Spanish majors and minors). During class, students typically engage in pair or group tasks, including editing activities; therefore, participants were familiar with what they were asked to do in the current study, including fictional past narration tasks.² Given that it is a multi-section course, participants were not necessarily classmates: they were taking the same course but likely on different days and times. Students may have had different instructors, but all sections of the course use the same book, syllabus, calendar, activities, and assessments. The researcher was not the instructor of any of the participants.

Data collection procedure

Approximately two weeks before the first session of the study, participants completed the language background questionnaire online from home and signed up for the instructional session (i.e., writing followed by peer editing), which took place outside of class. Students were given 20 minutes to write a story in Spanish in the past, based on the wordless picture story *A boy, a dog, a frog, and a friend* by Mercer Mayer (1971). Using a wordless picture story rather than an open-ended prompt, such as the ones used in other peer feedback studies allows for a more reliable comparison in terms of the content and length of the drafts, as well as the general orientation to form during the peer editing portion.³

After writing individually, students engaged in the peer editing portion of the session, which was not timed. First, they were paired up randomly and told to exchange papers with their partner. Then, they were provided with a red pen to make it easier to distinguish the original draft from suggested revisions, and they were given the following instructions:

Underline or circle anything you think your partner should revise. You can also underline things you're not sure about (maybe you don't know if something is wrong, but you don't understand it). Don't provide corrections in writing. You will have a chance to talk to your partner about the things you marked. As you read your partner's draft, be sure to check for the following things:

- **Vocab:** Is everything in Spanish? Any words that should be changed?
1. Students participated voluntarily in exchange for extra credit. Students who wanted the extra credit but did not want to participate in the study were given an alternative assignment.
 2. A reviewer pointed out that past narration is a function associated with the advanced level according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. The course is not proficiency-based, and therefore the activities done in class do not necessarily correspond to functions associated with ACTFL proficiency levels.
 3. If students are telling the same story, they will likely be producing very similar language, although some variation is inevitable. With an open-ended prompt, the content is less predictable: students might express very different ideas.

- Grammar: Are verbs conjugated correctly? Do nouns agree in number and gender with adjectives and articles?
- Spelling: Any words misspelled? Any accents missing?

Once they were finished reading and marking their partner's draft, participants were told to return the paper to the original author and explain what changes they thought were necessary or ask questions to gain clarity. Students were free to choose whether to communicate in English or Spanish as they discussed the feedback. Each student made changes on their own draft, using red ink, as needed. Once all revisions had been made, the researcher collected all the written narratives, provided learners with more paper, and instructed them to write the same story again, but without assistance from their partners and without access to their first draft. The same procedure was done two weeks later, when participants were given copies of the same wordless picture story and were asked to write the story once again, individually and without access to previously written drafts.

Data coding and analysis

Research questions were addressed by analyzing the texts and the audio-recorded interactions during the peer editing session. First, all the errors within each original draft were identified, tallied, and coded according to linguistic focus:

- Morphosyntactic errors were those related to inflectional and derivational morphology, as well as other grammatical structures such as determiners, prepositions, and pronouns.
- Lexical errors involved issues regarding word choice, word meaning, and semantic distinctions (e.g., *ser/estar*).
- Orthographic errors revolved around spelling and accent placement.

Then, using information from the interaction between learners, the issues discussed were coded first by detection (whether an error was properly identified or not). When the issue discussed was indeed an error in the original draft, and thus coded as detected, the suggestion provided by the editor was coded by resolution: correct, incorrect, or unresolved. An example of a case in which a morphosyntactic error was identified and correctly resolved occurred when one student had written *nadie no quiso* [nobody didn't want], their partner circled the word *no*, and explained that they should just say *nadie quiso* [nobody wanted]. In the case of inaccurate resolutions, the editor was able to detect a problem, but the information provided was not correct. For example, a student circled the words *fue debajo* (literally he went underneath, where the student was trying to say he fell) and told their partner that the word for it in Spanish was *casar*, which actually means to marry. Therefore, it was coded as a detected lexical error with an incorrect resolution. In some cases, learners detected an issue but did not know how to resolve it. For instance, a student wrote the word "tail" in English, their partner circled it and told them it should be changed but was not sure how. Given that no changes were made, it was coded as a detected lexical error that was unresolved.

When the peer editor suggested changing accurate forms in an inaccurate way, it was coded as a miscorrection. For example, one student had originally written *inmediatamente* [immediately], and their partner told them that the word *inmediatamente* was misspelled, even though it was not, and told them to change it to *enmediatamente*. In another instance, a learner suggested changing *sentado* [sitting - adjective], which was correct, to *sentando* [sitting - gerund], which introduced a new error in their partner's draft.

To answer the third research question about incorporation of corrections in subsequent individual drafts, each accurate resolution was traced in the texts written immediately after and two weeks later, and the following coding scheme was applied:

- If a learner had correctly used the form provided by their editing partner, it was coded as incorporated (INC).
- If a learner had demonstrated the need to use the form but had not used it accurately, it was coded as not incorporated (NI).
- If a learner had circumvented the need to use the form, it was coded as not attempted (NA). Most of these were cases of omission or rewording of certain parts of the story.

For example, during peer editing, one learner suggested that their partner change the word “frog” in English to *rana*, which was correct. In the immediate posttest, the learner did, but in the delayed posttest, they wrote *rata* (in English, rat). Therefore, it was coded as INC for the immediate posttest, and NI for the delayed posttest.

The author and a research assistant independently coded the randomly selected drafts and audio-recorded interactions from 2 students. Overall, inter-rater agreement was high: over 85% in all of the coding categories. Initial inter-rater reliability was high; nevertheless, for the cases in which the independent coding decisions did not match, both raters discussed them until they arrived at 100% agreement for all of the coding categories.

Results

Detection rate and focus of errors

There were a total of 766 errors in the 20 original drafts. Out of those, 156 (20.4%) were detected and 610 (79.6%) went undetected. There was considerable variation in the rate of detection: the maximum was 40.9% and the minimum was 5.6%. In other words, some students detected a much greater proportion of errors than others. With respect to the linguistic focus of errors detected, 66 of the 156 corrections (42.3%) focused on morphosyntactic issues, 68 (43.6%) revolved around lexical issues, and 22 (14.1%) were orthographic in nature.

Resolution of detected errors and miscorrections

The 156 detected errors were coded by resolution and tallied: 103 (66%) were correctly resolved, 9 (5.8%) were resolved in an inaccurate way, and 44 (28.2%) were left unresolved. Cases of miscorrections were tallied separately given that they did not involve a properly detected error in the first place. There were only a total of 10 instances in which the peer editor suggested changing something that was correct into an inaccurate form.

Incorporation of information in posttests

The 103 correct resolutions were traced into the drafts written immediately after the peer editing session (immediate posttest) and the one written two weeks later (delayed posttest). They were tallied according to the three categories in the coding scheme outlined above: incorporated (INC), not incorporated (NI), or not attempted (NA). The graph on the next page (Figure 1) summarizes the rate of incorporation of peer-provided information in each of the two posttests.

Overall, the rate of incorporation was high: 67% in the immediate posttest and 48% in the delayed posttest. The decline over time was to be expected, particularly considering the greater number of “NA” cases: it would have been impossible for learners to recreate verbatim what they had written two weeks earlier from memory alone, so the wording of a few parts of the story naturally changed.

Incorporation of information from the 10 cases of miscorrections and the 9 inaccurate resolutions was analyzed separately. Results showed that most were either not incorporated (36.8%) or not attempted (47.3%) in the immediate posttest, and even less frequently in the delayed posttest, with only 2 out of 19 (10.5%) cases of incorrect information retained after two weeks.

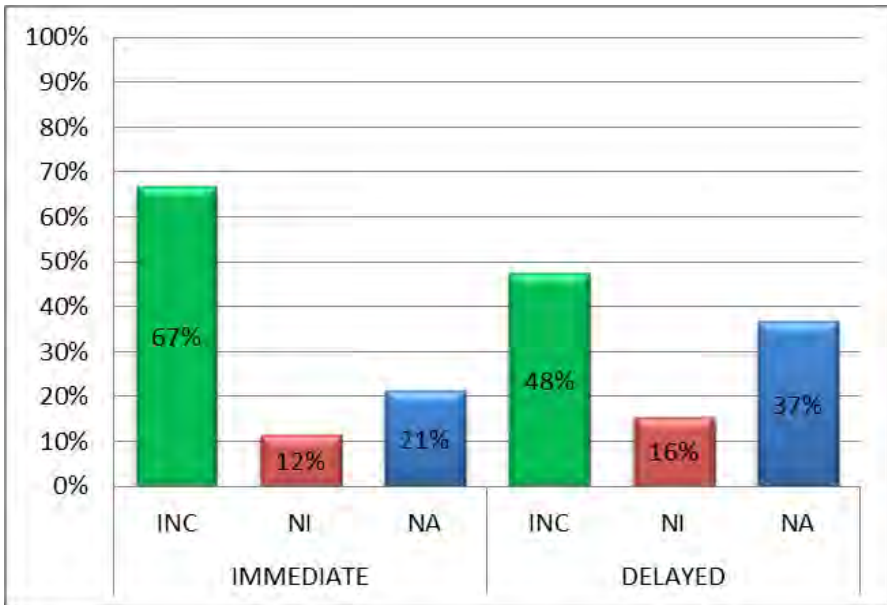


Figure 1. Proportion of peer-provided corrections that were incorporated, not incorporated, or not attempted in each of the two posttests

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Discussion

This study aimed to shed light on error detection during peer editing and the subsequent incorporation of those corrections, revealing some negative and positive aspects of this practice. First, a small proportion of errors was detected by learners. The average was 20%, and although some students detected more errors than others, none of the participants detected more than half of the errors within their partner's draft. To a certain extent, these results parallel some of the findings in learner-learner interaction studies, Fujii and Mackey (2009) reported that learners provided feedback to their partners in less than 13% of instances of inaccurate utterances. It also confirms the concerns expressed by Diab (2010): participants in this study also appeared to struggle to notice errors in their partners' drafts.

With respect to the linguistic focus of the errors detected, results showed that the majority were morphosyntactic and lexical issues, as opposed to matters related to spelling. The proportion of grammar and vocabulary errors detected was almost identical: 42% and 44% respectively. Although previous studies on learner-learner interaction have claimed that learner-initiated attention to form is largely limited to lexical issues (Fujii & Mackey, 2009; Williams, 1999; Zhao & Bitchener, 2007), this finding is in line with several other studies that reported high proportions of both lexical and grammatical issues when learners are engaged in a writing task (Adams, 2007; Leaser, 2004; Ross-Feldman, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Furthermore, in this study, they were explicitly instructed to focus on grammar structures, and they were also enrolled in a grammar review course. The fact

that spelling was not the focus of most corrections is also in line with previous interaction studies, even those involving a written task. For example, Henshaw and Hetrovicz (2021) found that only 8% of language-related issues discussed as learners wrote a story together revolved around orthography.

Although it is perhaps unsurprising that the error detection rate was fairly low, it is important not to rush to the conclusion that learners were unable to detect errors. It is indeed possible that some errors were not marked because the reviewer did not notice anything inaccurate that needed revision. However, another plausible explanation may lie in how confident they felt in being able to suggest a targetlike correction. In other words, is the low detection rate due to their inability to *notice* an issue, or rather to their ability to *correct* it? Students may have noticed other errors but did not point them out knowing they would not be able to help their partner in successfully resolving them. The high rate of targetlike corrections (66%) provides support for this possibility. Only less than a third of issues were left unresolved, and the occurrence of incorrect information in the form of either non-targetlike resolutions or miscorrections was extremely low and similar to Villamil and de Guerrero's (1998) findings. Of course, another possible explanation for the low detection rates may have to do with the affective side of peer editing. It is possible that some students did not feel comfortable pointing out too many errors on their partner's draft, and therefore were careful in selecting only a few to discuss. Future research should explore this possibility through think alouds, for instance, where students verbalize their thought process as they edit a classmate's paper.

A large proportion of targetlike corrections provided by peers was incorporated in the immediate and delayed post-treatment writing tasks (67% and 48% respectively), which once again echoes what Villamil and de Guerrero (1998) found. High retention rates may be attributed to the types of corrections and help provided. As noted before, peer feedback may be more readily accepted and understood by learners, given that it is coming from someone of similar proficiency. In fact, in several instances, learners engaged in co-constructing resolutions, as in the example below. In this instance, the peer editor points out an issue with the verb *fue* (preterit form of the verb *ser* in Spanish), and then the pair engages in a discussion of the contrast between *ser* and *estar* (two verbs that mean "to be" in Spanish), as well as preterit versus imperfect:

Peer editor: *fue bien* is a feeling, so... you need *era*

Author: *pero era es ser* [but *era* is *ser*]

Peer editor: Oh, you're right. So...

Author: *Estuve?* [was - preterit]

Peer editor: *Estaba? Estaba! Porque es no pretérito, imperfecto... porque es un tiempo más largo* [Was? Was! Because it's not preterite, imperfect... because it's a longer time]

Author: Oh, yeah.

Pedagogical Implications

The main pedagogical implication of the current study is that educators need to have realistic expectations when it comes to the effectiveness of peer editing. The results showed that students were very selective in which issues they pointed out. When editing a classmate's paper, it is possible that learners only react to an error when they know what the target form is, and it could also be the case that they may want to avoid making their partner feel bad by circling every error they notice. Therefore, the seemingly low rate of error detec-

tion might not actually be a drawback of peer editing, but rather a natural way of providing feedback. After all, when it comes to instructor-provided feedback on form, it would not be considered effective or appropriate to mark every single error on a student's paper. In other words, both students and instructors intentionally choose not to point out some errors, and that does not diminish the value of the feedback provided. In fact, this study confirmed many positive aspects of peer editing: learners assume an active role in their learning by providing each other with feedback that is not only correct but also at the right level, as evidenced by the high rates of retention of peer-provided information, even two weeks after.

With respect to the other common pedagogical concern surrounding peer editing, namely that students will provide each other with incorrect information, this study confirmed that it happens very infrequently (19 cases out of 156), and the rate of retention of inaccurate information is very low. The fact that most miscorrections and non-targetlike resolutions were either not incorporated or not attempted suggests that students are quite judicious in accepting peer feedback. One might argue that these instances could help students solidify their own knowledge about the target language. That being said, the findings presented here do not imply that peer feedback is an adequate "substitute" for teacher feedback. Instructor guidance is still paramount, both in terms of fostering growth by supplementing peer comments, as well as in reassuring learners of the accuracy of peer feedback, which would in turn foster trust and self-confidence.

Limitations and directions for further research

This small-scale study has contributed to expanding our understanding of certain aspects of peer editing, but more research is certainly warranted given some of its limitations. First, learners were instructed to mark any and all errors related to vocabulary, morphosyntax, and spelling, as opposed to focusing only on certain features (e.g., gender agreement). Previous studies have suggested that corrections targeting just a few structures may be more effective than "a scattershot approach" (Polio, 2012, p. 384). Furthermore, students received no training with respect to how they should provide feedback, and as Chang (2016) points out, "training is believed to be essential in the success of peer review" (p. 89). Future studies should investigate whether error detection increases when students are first trained to focus on specific linguistic forms. It would also be useful to see whether error detection rates change after multiple peer editing sessions.

A factor that was not explored in the current study but which is certainly important to consider is the proficiency level of the students. The writing proficiency level of the participants in this study was not documented. On the one hand, the fact that pairs were formed without controlling for proficiency differences gives the study ecological validity (i.e., in many classrooms, teachers do not use proficiency test data to form pairs). On the other hand, it would be worthwhile to explore if there is a correlation between error detection rates and the proficiency level of the peer editor. It is also possible that the proficiency level of the student receiving the feedback could affect retention rates. Another factor that may have influenced both the number of corrections provided as well as the willingness to accept peer feedback is the relationship between students. Another limitation of the current research design is that there is no way of knowing whether any of the students who served as each other's peer editors knew each other or had had any prior experiences collaborating outside of this study. Future research should shed light on the extent to which familiarity or friendship between students affects the effectiveness of peer editing.

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