

E-partners and E-tutors: Telecollaboration as an Effective Means of Grammar Instruction

Priority Research Grant
2005-2006 Effective Grammar Instruction

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1. Statement of research issue and relationship to current research priority

“[Telecollaboration] is the chance to practice your grammar, practice your writing, without it being such a dead-set grade. . . . When you just write, you can look at it, and see what mistakes you’ve made, then after you think you’ve corrected it, you can send it [to your online partner]. . . . you can note those things that you did wrong—those mistakes—beforehand which is really nice.”

Andrew, like many students who have in recent years participated in online language exchanges as part of a growing trend in second and foreign language courses, comments in an interview on the potential for such long-distance online collaboration (telecollaboration) to help improve his target language skills. Unfortunately for Andrew and his peers, their online partners are very rarely trained as language *teachers*, and as a result, online partnerships often end without providing students with the level of linguistic feedback they might have otherwise anticipated at the outset (Ware, 2003, 2005). Despite the overwhelmingly positive findings emerging from studies on cross-linguistic and cross-cultural partnerships online (Belz, 2002, 2003; Kern, 1995, 996; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; O’Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2003, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, forthcoming), surprisingly little research has been conducted on how such uses of online interaction might promote an area of language learning highly valued by Andrew and many of his peers: grammatical competence.

In this project, we propose a study that directly addresses this gap in the research base by examining the effectiveness of online tutors (e-tutors) and online partners (e-partners) in promoting the teaching and learning of grammar embedded in online interactional discourse. Using qualitative and quantitative methods in a study design that matches 120 students from Spain and the United States in an international telecollaborative project, we will examine the effectiveness of two methods of form-focused instruction: (1) *planned focus-on-form* and (2) *incidental focus-on-form*. In both methods, EFL students in Spain will interact with pre-service ESL and EFL teachers in the United States using real-time (synchronous) and delayed time (asynchronous) online writing. The *e-tutor group* will be assigned to the *planned focus-on-form* (Ellis, 2001, p. 20) condition, in which U.S. students will act as tutors who pre-select language forms that are then practiced with the EFL students in online conversations. The *e-partner group* will be assigned to the *incidental focus-on-form* (Ellis, 2001, p. 22) condition, in

which both sides of the exchange partners will attend to form in their online discussions as it arises in the natural course of conversation.

This exploration of the effectiveness of international telecollaboration as a viable means of effective grammar instruction can make an important contribution to current teaching practices and to the small, but growing, research base on technology-mediated forms of grammar instruction through online conversations (cf. Lee, 2004; Levy & Kennedy, 2004). Currently, there is little empirical evidence about the potential for telecollaboration as a viable option for promoting the development of grammar, particularly for adult EFL and ESL students. Our mixed method study will document the extent to which two different implementations of form-focused-instruction can support participants' growth in language awareness and proficiency in grammar.

2. Theoretical background

International online exchanges promote many of the goals of language study, including oral and written language development (Kern, 1996; Sotillo, 2000), cross-cultural understanding (Belz, 2002, 2003; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005), and textual analysis (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001). General trends across these studies include findings of increased motivation (O'Dowd, 2003), greater target language output (Kern, 1996; Warschauer, 1996), and enrichment of traditional print materials. Recently, researchers have begun to examine more specific aspects of technology-enhanced learning, including its usefulness for particular forms of linguistic development and for promoting cross-cultural learning (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, forthcoming). As a result of these available studies, we know a great deal about what can promote language production and cultural understanding in online learning; successful exchanges are largely the result of carefully prepared syllabi, well-constructed course assignments, selections of linguistically appropriate and culturally complex texts, and opportunities to examine and discuss examples of online writing (Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd, 2003; Salaberry, 2000).

What is less well understood, however, is the extent to which international telecollaboration is a viable means for promoting effective grammar instruction. Efforts to bring together speakers and learners of multiple different languages into an online tandem network (Brammerts, 2001) has successfully matched language learners write in both their native and target languages (Appel & Mullen, 2000), but little research has been conducted on the role of grammar instruction in such partnerships (cf. Brammerts, 1995). One of the shortcomings in these autonomous online tutoring scenarios is the limited amount of knowledge partners have about grammar or pedagogy. Thus, even when participant motivation is high, the pedagogical expertise that partners have to scaffold and facilitate each other's learning in productive ways is most often missing in such autonomous learning situations.

We are proposing a study that addresses the teaching and learning of grammar in telecollaboration by examining online conversations in which students apply two

different types of form-focused instruction (FFI: cf. Doughty, 2001; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001a, 2001b; Long, 1991). Online partners will learn and apply concepts widely used in FFI such as noticing (Schmidt, 2001), uptake (Ellis et al, 2001a), and output (Swain, 2000). A handful of studies have begun this endeavor in foreign language education research (cf. Klapper & Rees, 2003; Lee, 2004; Levi & Kennedy, 2004), but little has been done in the areas of EFL and ESL in online interaction (see, however, Kahmi-Stein, 2000 for a web-based project in a methods course). From a technology standpoint, Douglas (2000) has recently examined several software programs that help learners notice linguistic form, but there is a need to examine grammar instruction as embedded in ongoing discourse in interactional contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 1997; McCarthy & Hughes, 1998). In response to this need in the research base, we will examine the viability of international online partnership as effective means of grammar instruction using two different types of FFI: planned focus on form and incidental focus on form.

3. Research methodology

Research questions. We will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the effectiveness of two different approaches to online partnerships between a) native English-speaking teachers enrolled in Masters level education courses in the United States and b) native Spanish-speaking EFL students enrolled in teacher preparation courses in Spain. The following three research questions will guide our inquiry:

- 1) Which of the two approaches to grammar instruction (*planned focus-on-form* or *incidental focus-on-form*) produces a greater number of focus-on-form episodes (FFE) and increased uptake by EFL students?
- 2) Which of the two approaches is more effective at increasing teachers' and students' language awareness, as measured by a debriefing questionnaire and by a think-aloud protocol in which teachers and students comment on a selection of form-focused episodes?
- 3) How successful are the two approaches to grammar instruction, as measured by participant satisfaction and participation?

Sites and participants. To answer these questions, we will follow two different cohorts of 60 participants each semester across a two-semester period starting in January 2006 and ending in December 2006 (for a total sample size of 120 students). O'Dowd will teach 2 courses of 20 EFL students each semester (40 students each semester for a total of 80 students) at the Universidad de León in Spain. Ware will teach a graduate course "Methods in Language Teaching" each semester to 2 cohorts of 20 native English-speaking students who are pursuing certification as ESL and EFL teachers at Southern Methodist University in the United States (total of 40 students). Each of Ware's students will be randomly assigned to two students (one from each of O'Dowd's courses) and will communicate in two separate online partnerships with each EFL student in Spain.

Study design. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: 60 to *planned focus on form* and 60 to *incidental focus on form* (see Table 1). Each course will have an equal number of students in each condition, which will minimize conflating variables such as differences in class atmosphere, differing levels of English proficiency, and individual variation in experience with technology-mediated learning. Online pairs assigned to the *planned focus on form* condition will be provided with pre-selected language forms that they then practice in their online conversations. Online pairs assigned to the *incidental focus on form* condition will attend to form as it arises in the natural course of conversation and will use their own judgment about when and how to provide or elicit feedback on grammar.

Table 1: Study Design

	<i>Planned Focus-on-Form</i>	<i>Incidental Focus-on-Form</i>
<i>Spring 2006</i>	10 Pre-service teachers 20 EFL students	10 Pre-service teachers 20 EFL students
<i>Fall 2006</i>	10 Pre-service teachers 20 EFL students	10 Pre-service teachers 20 EFL students
<i>Total</i>	60 participants	60 participants

We will hold several factors constant: 1) randomized assignment of participants; 2) type of interactional platform (Moodle, an open source interactional platform that supports asynchronous and synchronous conversations); 3) balance of asynchronous (delayed time) and synchronous (real time) writing; 4) use of English as the language of interaction; 5) supervising instructors for the courses; and 6) discussion prompts. For both conditions, instructors will provide students with explicit instruction on what each of the two conditions involves, which will ensure that participants understand their randomly assigned roles as either e-tutors or as e-partners in one of the two conditions. The instructors will remain peripherally involved by helping students provide or utilize feedback when such aid is solicited.

Data analysis and interpretation. Each of the three research questions will be addressed using the following data collection and analysis techniques. Given the difficulty of measuring growth of students' acquisition of grammar forms using a standardized measure in focus-on-form studies (see discussion in Ellis, 2001), we will operationalize measures of students' language awareness and ability to apply that knowledge using multiple measures (White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991).

- 1) To assess which of the 2 approaches produces a greater number of focus-on-form episodes (FFE), we will use a coding system from Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen (2001a) that identifies the parameters and characteristics of FFEs, including type, linguistic focus, source, complexity, directness, response, and uptake (see also Loewen, 2003). Two coders will be trained to code at a rater reliability of 90% or greater and will code all FFEs and their characteristics. Raw counts and percentages will be analyzed using Pearson chi-squares tests.
- 2) To examine which of the 2 approaches is more effective at increasing teachers' and students' language awareness, we will use a pre/post questionnaire and a think-aloud protocol. The questionnaire will ask participants to comment on the

characteristics of FFEs and will be aligned with the definitions used in the coding scheme. The think-aloud protocol will be designed using a standardized selection of three FFEs. Participants will think aloud as they construct a written response, and transcripts of these think-aloud sessions will be rated holistically on a scale of 1-6 by EFL teachers trained to assess the level of language awareness demonstrated during the think-aloud sessions.

- 3) To determine the success of each of the 2 different approaches to grammar instruction as measured by student satisfaction and participation, we will draw on (1) student satisfaction survey data, (2) focal group interviews using structured protocols, and (3) descriptive statistics that analyze the number, frequency, and length of all online interactions among e-tutors and e-partners.

4. Statement of implications of research for theory, policy, and/or practice

One of the most salient features of telecollaboration is the opportunity it provides for students to gain better awareness of the target culture while using the target language to interact with native language speakers. As a result, language researchers have understandably been drawn to many of the unique aspects of telecollaboration: the authenticity of online cultural texts (Kramsch, A' Ness, & Lam, 2000), the immediacy of accessing a wide range of classroom material, and the availability of native-speaking language partners (Furstenberg, et. al., 2001; Kern, 1996; O'Dowd, 2003; Warschauer, 1996). We believe that this current research on telecollaboration, often grounded in sociocognitive and sociocultural approaches to language learning (Lantolf, 2000), holds a valuable place in the field of language study; however, we also recognize a strong need for empirical work that addresses how such online collaborative work can promote grammar teaching and learning.

Understanding the effectiveness of telecollaboration for grammar instruction is also important from a pedagogical perspective for adult ESL and EFL students who often face a range of time constraints, logistical factors, and transportation difficulties when pursuing formal language instruction. Many of these same factors are also barriers for teachers pursuing degrees in language teaching or TESOL certification. We believe that online collaborative partnerships can provide a valuable means for meeting the needs of both students and teachers in alleviating these constraints. Through e-tutoring and e-partnering, ESL and EFL instructors can develop considerable expertise with approaches to identifying and correcting grammar in student writing while still under the guidance of a trained instructor.