

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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Countries in which research was conducted:

Chile
Russia
Spain
USA

TIRF Research Priority

In response to the TIRF priority on the effectiveness of technology in promoting grammar instruction for adult learners, we designed a research project that examined the extent to which telecollaboration (online partnerships between distally located language learners) could promote effective teaching and learning of grammar as it is embedded in online written discourse. Prior to our research with TIRF funding, very little empirical work had been conducted on the teaching and learning of grammar in telecollaboration, despite the overwhelmingly positive findings emerging from studies examining cultural issues in telecollaboration (Belz, 2002; Kern, 1995, 1996; O'Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005). Specifically, our research investigated the following questions: 1) which of two mainstream approaches to grammar instruction (planned focus-on-form or incidental focus-on-form) would produce a greater number of focus-on-form episodes (FFE) in asynchronous telecollaboration; 2) which would be more effective at increasing participants' language awareness, and 3) how successful would each be as measured by participant satisfaction? We projected that our findings would primarily help practitioners and policy-makers make stronger instructional decisions about when and how to integrate telecollaboration into classroom instruction and into the institutional coursework cycle. Secondarily, we anticipated raising greater awareness of and interest in the potential benefits of online partnerships for promoting attention to grammar.

Study Design

Our study was conducted in two phases and included a total of 227 participants in seven independent telecollaborative partnerships in four different countries. In the pilot phase in the spring of 2006, we matched post-secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Spain with post-secondary student tutors in the United States. Half of the students were randomly assigned to the "planned focus-on-form" condition, in which they received weekly feedback on their language use. The other half were assigned to the "incidental focus-on-form" condition, in which they only received feedback on their language use if they requested it or if it naturally occurred in the course of their online conversations. Findings from this smaller study then shaped the development of phase II, in which we expanded the number of participants and sites. In the second phase during the summer and fall semesters of 2006 and the current spring semester of 2007, we matched language tutors and practicing ESL teachers with post-secondary EFL and ESL students in four different countries: Chile, Russia, Spain and the United States. Half of the partnerships used the "planned focus-on-form" approach to grammar instruction, and half used the "incidental focus-on-form" approach. The language levels of the university EFL learners in six of the seven partnerships was middle-intermediate to low-advanced; the community college adult ESL learners were at the beginning level. Such breadth was useful in addressing the diverse levels found among adult learners. Also, because the nature of telecollaboration is to involve learners globally, our choice to conduct telecollaborative projects in four countries better enabled us to look for general trends across multiple types of partnerships, rather than constraining our work to just one partnership.

Findings

Findings from the pilot study with 23 students indicated strongly that the planned focus-on-form condition produced significantly more form-focused episodes. The online writing for those matched in the "planned" condition focused on grammar for 13.5% of the total writing, while those in the "incidental" condition focused on grammar for only 3% of the total writing.

Second, we found that students in both groups indicated a strong preference to be matched with partners who would provide feedback on their language use. Focal group interviews and surveys revealed that students who did not receive language-related feedback were frustrated by the lack of attention to form. Based on these preliminary findings, we designed six more online partnerships (with 204 participants) to replicate the study on a larger scale. We again found that the “planned” condition generated a strikingly higher number of form-focused episodes. In comparing two similar classroom partnerships, we found that learners in the planned condition spent 14.1% of the total writing on language form, compared with a negligible less than 1% in the incidental focus on form condition. We found that partners tended to use three main feedback strategies: rewording the language learner’s original message into “clearer English”; providing multiple elaborating examples to illustrate subtleties in usage; and teaching grammar mini-lessons on language aspects with which they felt comfortable. Online tutors also worked to keep the discussions from turning into a primary focus on grammar by using affective strategies such as praise and mitigation.

Our findings provide educators with new answers to questions about the role of telecollaboration in promoting a focus on grammar in adult EFL and ESL instruction. First, our study shows that instructors who prefer to include a grammar focus as part of the online exchange need to explicitly integrate a planned focus on form into the telecollaborative project. Students across all asynchronous writing exchanges did not focus on language unless directly asked to do so. Second, our study indicates that students have a strong preference for participating in telecollaboration and a mild preference for including a focus on grammar. In a Likert survey distributed to learners in all partnerships, students indicated that telecollaboration should be included in all language classes (average 4.43 on a scale of 5), that they would willingly participate again (average 4.33 on a scale of 5), and that a focus on grammar should be integrated (average 3.78 on a scale of 5). Averages of the responses to the question about grammar did not differ based on condition. Third, our findings indicate that providing quality language feedback to learners is not an easy task for language teachers. Practicing teachers and potential teachers will therefore need to have opportunities to learn various strategies for providing quality feedback online; for example, they need to learn to embed feedback into a larger focus on communicative fluency and cultural awareness, to integrate affective strategies into their feedback, to teach their students metalinguistic strategies, to do background research that leads to more effective advice, to be very clear about the logistical aspects of the exchange, and to understand the limitations of telecollaboration.

Conclusion

Understanding the effectiveness of telecollaboration for grammar instruction is 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. Based on our findings, we believe that online telecollaborative partnerships can provide a valuable means for meeting the needs of both students and teachers in alleviating these constraints. Through telecollaboration, ESL and EFL instructors can develop considerable expertise with approaches to grammar instruction, and ESL and EFL students can be provided with invaluable resource-efficient means of strengthening their written and communicative English.

Appendix

Peer-Reviewed Article

Ware, P.D. & O'Dowd, R. (under revision). Peer feedback on language form in telecollaboration. Accept with revisions with *Language Learning and Technology*.

Book Chapter

Ware, P.D., & Pérez-Cañado, M.L. (forthcoming). Grammar and feedback: Turning to language form in telecollaboration. To be published by *Multilingual Matters*.

Conference Presentations

Ware, P.D. (2007, March). TIRF research on grammar instruction for adults. Panel organized for the International TESOL conference. Seattle, WA.

Ware, P.D. (2007, March). E-partners and e-tutors: Telecollaboration as an effective means of grammar instruction. Paper to be presented at the International TESOL conference. Seattle, WA.

O'Dowd, R., & Ware, P. D. (2006, September). Focus on form in telecollaboration: Using online exchanges for language learning. EuroCALL International Conference. Granada, Spain.

Ware, P.D. (2006, May). Integrating online exchanges for promoting linguistic development. Keynote speaker at the European Association for Computer-Assisted Language Learning Telecollaboration Conference. León, Spain.

Ware, P.D. (2006, March). Examining effective grammar instruction in telecollaboration. Paper presented at the International TESOL conference. Tampa, Florida.