DO SECONDARY SECOND LANGUAGE STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM E-MAIL TANDEM PARTNER FEEDBACK?

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that investigated the degree to which secondary second language students used the feedback provided by their tandem partners. A group of French-speaking ESL students in a secondary school in Quebec communicated with a group of English-speaking FSL students in a secondary school in Ontario by e-mail. Following the principles of online tandem learning (Brammerts, 1996 [1]; Little et al., 1999 [2]), students were asked to use their first language (L1) and second language (L2) in equal proportion and to correct each other's mistakes. The impact of the feedback provided by the tandem partners on the students' revisions was measured by comparing the first drafts of the reports, the feedback provided by their tandem partners, and the revised drafts of their reports, and from answers to the end-of-project questionnaire. Additional qualitative data were obtained from personal interviews with selected students and from personal e-mail communication with the ESL and FSL teachers. The findings revealed that a high percentage of students incorporated their partners' corrections within their work. In addition, it was found that the nature of the task (i.e., revising their reports using their tandem partners' feedback) promoted the incorporation of tandem partner feedback.

Keywords: Electronic Tandem Learning, Peer Feedback, Revision.

1   INTRODUCTION

Research in the area of electronic tandem learning (e.g., Appel, 1997 [3]; Dodd, 2001 [4]; Kötter, 2002 [5]; Little & Brammerts, 1996 [6]; Little et al., 1999 [7]; O'Rourke, 2005 [8]; Schwienhorst, 1998 [9]) has revealed some potential benefits to using tandem e-mail exchanges in the language classroom including increased exposure to comprehensible input, increased opportunities for peer feedback, and increased production of 'pushed' output. These studies have also argued that compared to other situations in which learners and native speakers communicate (e.g., Lee, 2004 [10]; Sotillo, 2005 [11]), tandem partnerships allow both partners to take the role of "learner" and thus have equal opportunities to benefit from the exchange. However, research examining the impact of tandem partner feedback on the students' final drafts is still scarce and incomplete (e.g., Greenfield, 2003 [12]; Little et al., 1999 [13]). In addition, very few studies (e.g., Dodd, 2001 [14]; Greenfield, 2003 [15]) have been conducted on secondary second language (L2) learners. This paper reports on data that form part of a larger study examining the nature of tandem e-mail exchanges between English as a second language (ESL) and French as a second language (FSL) secondary school students within a sociocultural perspective (Priego, 2007 [16]). The data analysis reported here seeks to investigate the degree to which the ESL and FSL high school students participating in this study used the feedback provided by their tandem partners to revise their reports.

2   METHODOLOGY

2.1   Research questions

The following two research questions were posed:

1) What types of revisions are made by ESL and FSL students?
2) When revising their reports, do ESL and FSL students use the feedback provided by their e-mail tandem partners?

2.2 Participants

This study involved one group of 30 French-speaking ESL students in a secondary school (Secondary 4) in Québec, two groups of English-speaking FSL students (total 30) in a secondary school (Grade 11) in Ontario, and their L2 teachers. Both groups consisted of the same number of boys (n=14) and girls (n=16) aged 15 to 17. The average age of the ESL and FSL students was 15.6 and 16.4, respectively. All ESL students and their parents were native French speakers. The two FSL classes consisted of 25 students born in Canada, four in India, and one in Jamaica. Of these, five students had grown up in an environment in which the first language they learned was not English. However, English was their parents' mother tongue in 50% of the cases. The number of years that students had been studying in an English-speaking school ranged from 9 to 14 years.

2.3 E-mail tandem project design

Following recommendations made in similar previous studies (e.g., Greenfield, 2003 [17]; Pérez, 2003 [18]; Warschauer, 1996 [19]), this e-mail tandem project was integrated into the students' regular class activities in order to ensure student accountability. In addition, in order to sustain students' motivation, the e-mail project consisted of a series of tasks (Appel & Gilabert, 2002 [20]; Barson et al., 1993 [21]; Hedderich, 1997 [22]; Müller-Hartmann, 2000 [23]; Ushioda, 2000 [24]). The joint reading of three articles taken from newspapers and magazines of interest to teenagers formed the basis for the e-mail discussions. For each article, students were required to complete a *reader response form* in which they identified several points they found to be of interest. They were also asked to give their opinion about the article, and to illustrate their point of view with examples from their personal experience. Furthermore, they were also required to draft several questions which they would ask their partners in order to ascertain their opinion about the topic. Students then sent their partners an e-mail using their reader response forms. Following the discussion of each topic, students were instructed to write a *report* (a minimum of half a page) in which they compared and contrasted their opinions with those of their tandem partner regarding the topic they had read about in their L2. They then sent this report (Draft 1) by e-mail to their partners and asked them to correct it. Next, students were instructed to rewrite their reports, using the feedback provided by their tandem partners, and to make any other changes they deemed appropriate. This final draft (Draft 2) was to be presented using the Report form in the students' binders.

Following the principles of tandem learning (Appel, 1997 [25]; Brammerts, 1996 [26]; Little & Brammerts, 1996 [27]), students were instructed to compose their e-mails both in their target language (L2) and in their first language (L1)[1]. However, an adjustment to the traditional 50/50 use of the students' first language and target language was made. As a result, students were asked to write about the L2 text they had read, to give their opinion and ask for their partners' opinions about the article's topic in their L2, and to respond to their tandem partners' questions in their L1. In this way, students could more easily use the input provided by their partners to write their reports in their L2. Students were also explicitly instructed to correct the mistakes made by their tandem partners in previous correspondence. Students could use their L1 or their L2 when correcting their partners' mistakes. Following the suggestion given by DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001) [28] and Schwienhorst (2002) [29], after students had corrected their partners' first e-mail, the L2 teacher used printouts of selected students' e-mails as a training tool in order to sensitize them about effective feedback strategies.

3 DATA ANALYSIS

Data for analysis were gathered from five sources: (1) a comparison of the first draft pertaining to a report sent by e-mail and the final draft written on the report form; (2) a comparison of the feedback section in the e-mails and Draft 2; (3) answers to the end-of-project questionnaire; (4) personal interviews with selected students, and (5) personal communication by e-mail with the FSL teacher.

Report data for analysis were selected if they met the following requirements: 1) Draft 1 of the report had been sent by e-mail to the tandem partner; 2) the report had been corrected by the partner; 3) Draft 2 had been written on the Report form (in the student's binder). Fifteen ESL students and 9 FSL students met these requirements. In addition, it was found that 5 of the 16 FSL students who had not

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[1] For the purpose of this study, L1 will be used to refer to the language of schooling (i.e., English for the FSL students and French for the ESL students).

sent any of the three reports had used the Report forms in their binders to revise their opinion pieces on the topics they had read about. These data were included within this analysis for two reasons. First of all, they were considered to be valuable information in terms of the degree to which these students tried to use the corrections made by their partners to improve their opinion pieces. Second, these opinion pieces met the requirements of having been sent by e-mail, of having been corrected by their partners, and of having been revised on the report forms using the feedback provided. It is important to mention that students were expected to write reports of a minimum of half a page. E-mails containing their opinion pieces were expected to be longer. Note also that not all the students included in the analyses revised the same number of reports. Consequently, for the analysis of reports, no statistical analyses were performed to determine if there were significant differences between the two groups.

As a first level of analysis, the *types of revisions* made from Draft 1 to Draft 2 were identified. Following Mendonça and Johnson (1994) [30], the letters R (revised) and NR (not revised) were placed next to the parts that were modified and the parts that were not modified, respectively. Types of revisions were then coded using a taxonomy adapted from Faigley and Witte's (1981) [31] taxonomy of revisions. Faigley and Witte's taxonomy of revisions was chosen because it provides a sufficiently wide range of types of revisions with a limited number of categories. Their taxonomy categorizes revisions in two types: surface changes and meaning changes. Surface changes made to a text are those that do not bring new or delete old information from the text, but only alter the surface structure. Surface changes are divided into two categories: formal changes, which are copyediting or proofreading changes in areas such as spelling, tense, and punctuation, and meaning-preserving changes, which paraphrase existing concepts in a text but do not alter the essential meaning from one version to the next. Meaning changes are those that affect the information present in the text, by adding, deleting, or rearranging the ideas. Meaning changes are also divided into two types, both of which affect the text on a global level. Microstructure changes are those that alter the information structure but do not affect the overall gist or direction of the text. Macrostructure changes are major changes that affect the overall meaning. For the present study, Faigley and Witte's scheme was adapted as follows:

a) Definitions of categories were adapted to the data of the present study drawing on Connor and Asenavage (1994) [32], Hall (1990) [33], and Paulus' (1999) [34] taxonomies of revisions.

b) Other sub-categories were added using Villamil and De Guerrero's (1998) [35] scheme of "descriptors of language aspects" (negation; use of articles; use of prepositions; use of pronouns; number) to better account for the difficulties of second language learners.

c) One category was added for the revisions in French (Gender).

d) One definition was complemented based on my own database (Substitutions – as a meaning-preserving change).

The final taxonomy was derived as a result of a reiterative verification of the coding scheme for my own database. In order to determine reliability, after all the revisions had been coded using the adapted taxonomy, two raters (a native English speaker for the reports in English and a native French speaker for the reports in French) were asked to code 80% of the revisions independently; the remaining 20% of the items had been used for a training session with the researcher. Results of the analysis revealed a 92 % rate of agreement for the revisions coded in the ESL students' reports and an 89 % rate of agreement for the revisions coded in the FSL students' reports. Discrepancies were resolved by mutual consent after discussion with both raters. Following this procedure, the revisions in each category were counted.

After having categorized the types of revisions, the *impact of the feedback provided by the tandem partners* on the students' revisions was measured by comparing the first drafts of the reports, the feedback provided by their tandem partners, and the revised drafts of their reports so as to identify the *source of revision* (i.e., using tandem partner's feedback or self-revisions). Then, in order to evaluate if the students had *used the feedback provided by their tandem partners*, the total number of feedback points received and the total feedback points incorporated were identified by comparing the feedback section in the e-mails and Draft 2. Finally, instances of "*faulty corrections*" (Rothschild & Kingenberg, 1990) [36] also termed "false repairs" (Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998) [37] or "inaccurate corrections" (Little et al., 1999) [38] were also detected. In the present study, "faulty corrections" refer to tandem partners providing incorrect feedback.

In order to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the answers to the end-of-project questionnaire given by the two groups, a Fisher's exact test was performed on Likert scale ratings (*Yes / No / I can't say*). The responses of the ESL and FSL case study students to the open-ended question: "Did you use your partner's feedback to revise your reports?" were transcribed. Finally, personal communication by e-mail with the FSL teacher was analyzed for the purpose of investigating why some students did not revise their reports.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 What types of revisions are made by ESL and FSL students?

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of types of revisions made by both groups of students. As shown in this Table, the 15 ESL students included in this analysis made a total of 129 revisions to their reports, the majority of which were *surface revisions* (91.5% or 118/ 129). Of these latter, 47.3% (61/129) were *formal changes* and 44.2% (57/129) were *meaning-preserving*. Approximately 14% of the *formal changes* involved spelling, capitalization and punctuation (13.9% or 18/129), 10.1% (13/129) verb forms and 7.8% (10/129) number. Almost 30% of the *meaning-preserving changes* were substitutions (29.5% or 38/129) and 7.8% were deletions (10/129). Only 8.5% (11/129) of the changes were *meaning changes*, categorized as either *microstructure revisions*, which accounted for 3.8% (5/129), or *macrostructure revisions*, which accounted for 4.7% (6/129).

The 14 FSL students made a total of 135 revisions to their reports. Of these revisions, all but one (99.3% or 134/135) were considered *surface revisions*. Of these, 73.3 % (99/135) were *formal changes* and 26% (35/135) were *meaning-preserving changes*. Twenty percent of the *formal changes* made by the FSL students involved spelling, capitalization and punctuation (27/135), 12.6% prepositions (17/135), 11.9% verb forms (16/135), 10.4% gender (14/135) and 9.6% articles (13/135). Almost 18% of the *meaning-preserving changes* were in the area of substitutions (17.8% or 24/ 135). Only 1 (0.7%) change was a *meaning revision* at the *microstructure* level.

Table 1. **Analysis of reports: Types of revisions**

Types of revisions	ESL students (*N=15*)	FSL students (*N=14*)
I. Surface revisions	**118 (91.5 %)**	**134 (99.3%)**
A. Formal	61 (47.3 %)	99 (73.3%)
Spelling; capitalization; punctuation	18 (13.9%)	27 (20%)
Abbreviations; contractions	1 (0.8%)	3 (2.2%)
Verb forms	13 (10.1%)	16 (11.9%)
Negation	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)
Use of articles	7 (5.4%)	13 (9.6%)
Use of prepositions	5 (3.9%)	17 (12.6%)
Use of pronouns	6 (4.7%)	3 (2.2%)
Number	10 (7.8%)	6 (4.4%)
Gender	0 (0%)	14 (10.4%)
B. Meaning-preserving	57 (44.2 %)	35 (26%)
Additions	5 (3.9%)	6 (4.4%)
Deletions	10 (7.8%)	2 (1.5%)
Substitutions	38 (29.5%)	24 (17.8%)
Permutations	3 (2.3%)	3 (2.2%)
Distributions	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)
II. Meaning revisions	**11 (8.5 %)**	**1 (0.7%)**
A. Microstructure	5 (3.8 %)	1 (0.7%)
Additions	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)
Deletions	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)
Substitutions	3 (2.3%)	1 (0.7%)
B. Macrostructure	6 (4.7 %)	0 (0%)
Additions	2 (1.6%)	0 (0%)
Deletions	2 (1.6%)	0 (0%)
Substitutions	2 (1.6%)	0 (0%)
Total revisions	**129 (100%)**	**135 (100%)**

These findings are consistent with previous research on revision (Paulus, 1999 [39]; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998 [40]) that has concluded that L2 students tend to concentrate more on surface revisions. In their study, Villamil and De Guerrero (1998) [41] found that a third of the revisions in both modes were grammatical while organization was the least attended to. Similarly, in a study conducted by Paulus (1999) [42] that analyzed the revisions made by university ESL students to their essays using Faigley and Witte's (1981) [43] taxonomy of revisions, the researcher found that 62.5% of the revisions made by the students were surface changes.

4.2 When revising their reports, do ESL and FSL students use the feedback provided by their e-mail tandem partners?

Findings showed that the majority of the revisions made by both groups of students resulted from tandem partner feedback (see Table 2). Tandem partner feedback influenced 76% of the total number of revisions (98/129) made by the ESL students and 81.5% (110/135) made by the FSL students. The analysis also revealed that 72.9% (94/118) of the surface revisions made by the ESL students and 80.7% (109/134) of those by the FSL students were in response to the feedback received from their tandem partners. It was also found that 24% of the revisions (31/129) made by the ESL students, and 18.5% of the revisions (25/135) made by the FSL students were self-revisions. The majority of these self-revisions (24/31) in the case of the ESL students and the totality (25/25) in the case of the FSL students were at the *surface* level.

Table 2. Analysis of reports: Source of revisions

	Types of revisions				Total	
	Surface changes		Meaning changes			
Source of revision	ESL students	FSL students	ESL students	FSL students	ESL students	FSL students
Tandem partner's feedback	94 (72.9 %)	109 (80.7%)	4 (3.1 %)	1 (0.7%)	**98** **(76%)**	**110** **(81.5%)**
Self-revisions	24 (18.6 %)	25 (18.5%)	7 (5.4 %)	0 (0%)	**31** **(24%)**	**25** **(18.5%)**
Total	**118** **(91.5 %)**	**134** **(99.3%)**	**11** **(8.5 %)**	**1** **(0.7%)**	**129** **(100%)**	**135** **(100%)**

As shown in Table 3, a total of 108 feedback points were provided by the Anglophone students. Of the 108 feedback points, ESL students incorporated most of them (90.7% or 98/108). The majority of these corrections (95.4% or 103/108) were identified as surface corrections. Of the 103 surface corrections, ESL students incorporated 94 (91.2%). The ESL students only received 5 (4.6%) corrections at the *meaning* level, of which they successfully incorporated 4 (80%). Only 8 corrections (7.4%) were not incorporated in their revised drafts and two (1.9%) were unsuccessfully incorporated.

The Francophone students provided a total of 148 feedback points to their FSL partners who incorporated 74.3% (110/148). All but one (99.3%) of these 148 feedback points were coded as surface changes. Of the 147 surface corrections received, FSL students incorporated 109 (74.1%). The one meaning change received was also incorporated. It is interesting to note that contrary to the ESL group, who incorporated most of the feedback received (90.7%); the FSL students did not incorporate 25% (37/148) of the corrections provided by their Francophone partners.

As in the present study, Mendonça and Johnson (1994) [44] found that in 53% of the cases, students incorporated their peers' suggestions, in 10% of the cases they did not incorporate suggested changes, and in 37% of the cases they made changes that were not mentioned by their partners. Another study by Villamil and De Guerrero (1998) [45] found that 74% of the revisions made during peer sessions were incorporated in the final versions, 8% were further revised and 18% were not incorporated.

Table 3. Analysis of reports: Use of feedback provided by tandem partners to revise their reports

Type of revision	Use of feedback							
	ESL students (*n*=15)				FSL students (*n*=14)			
	Total feedback points received	Incorporated	Unsuccessful attempts to incorporate	Not revised	Total feedback points received	Incorporated	Unsuccessful attempts to incorporate	Not revised
Surface changes	103 (95.4%)	94 (91.2%)	1 (1%)	8 (7.8%)	147 (99.3%)	109 (74.1%)	1 (0.7%)	37 (25.2%)
Meaning changes	5 (4.6%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	108 (100%)	98 (90.7%)	2 (1.9%)	8 (7.4%)	148 (100%)	110 (74.3%)	1 (0.7%)	37 (25%)

Finally, although most corrections were found to be accurate, a few faulty corrections were also detected in the feedback given by both groups on their partners' reports. ESL students provided a total of 8 faulty corrections to their tandem partners. The same number of faulty corrections was also detected in the feedback provided by the FSL students. In both cases, all but one were in the area of formal changes. In addition, further analysis of e-mails revealed that while Anglophone students displayed an excellent command of written language, Francophone students' e-mails often contained flawed input. Because of the limitations of this research, whether or not the errors made by the Francophone students when writing in their L1 had an impact on the way FSL students viewed their Francophone partners as "experts of their L1" remains unknown.

In order to complement the data obtained from the analysis of reports, some of the questions included in the end-of project questionnaire aimed to investigate the students' perceptions regarding the use they made of the feedback provided by their tandem partners. As can be seen in Table 4, the analysis of the questionnaires revealed a significant difference (*p*<0.005) in the degree to which both groups reported having used the feedback received from their partners to revise their reports. Twenty (66.7%) ESL students reported having used the feedback received from their partners to revise their reports, while only 7 (24.1%) FSL students reported having done so. One FSL student did not respond to this question. These findings are consistent with the analysis of the report data.

Table 4. End-of-project questionnaire: Use of feedback provided to revise their reports

When my partner gave me feedback,	ESL students (n=30)			FSL students (n=29)			*p*
	No	**Yes**	**I can't remember**	**No**	**Yes**	**I can't remember**	
In general, I used it to revise my reports (*Draft 2*).	6 (20%)	20 (66.7%)	4 (13.3%)	17 (58.6%)	7 (24.1%)	*5 (17.2%)*	0.0030*

* *p*<0.005

The information gained from the interviews with selected FSL students provided some information as to why some of them did not revise their reports. As shown in Fig. 1, three FSL students did not consider it necessary to rewrite their reports because their partners had merely limited their corrections to spelling or typing errors. In certain instances, the errors were perceived as performance errors.

Researcher: *"Did you use your partner's feedback to revise your reports?"*

*"*No, because he did correct me, but it was typos or it was things I already knew, like I made a random error, so there wasn't too much that was really complex." (FSL 13, interview)

"No, because many of the corrections were spelling errors." (FSL 14, interview)

"Well, most of what I did is because of being lazy, like on that computer specially when I type emails to my friends in French, and I don't use accents, and I explained that to him: I'm sorry, the computer is not writing any accents right now or I'm just too lazy to look at the codes, but he always told me: "watch out your accents"...and he wrote over my whole email adding all the accents and I went: "but I'm not writing any accents!!" (FSL 26, interview)

Fig. 1. Interviews with FSL students: Use of feedback to revise reports

Data from personal communication by e-mail with the FSL teacher not only corroborated that one of the reasons for students not having written or revised their reports was due to their tandem partners' lack of responses but also that some of them had lost interest in the tasks related to the project due to their partners' lack of investment:

> *Mes étudiants trouvent qu'ils font plus d'effort que leurs partenaires. Par exemple, ils trouvent difficile à comparer des opinions si leurs partenaires n'ont pas répondu à leurs questions, etc. Ils sont découragés quand ils font des corrections mais ils n'en reçoivent pas.* (FSL teacher, personal communication by e-mail, December 14, 2004)

In other words, the relative lack of revising activity on the part of the FSL students was less due to their unwillingness to participate, and more due to difficulties pertaining to productive exchanges with their tandem partners.

5   CONCLUSION

This study investigated the degree to which secondary school students used the feedback provided by their tandem partners. The findings revealed that a high percentage of students incorporated their partners' corrections and thus underscored the effectiveness of tandem partner feedback in revision. It was also found that the nature of the task (i.e., revising their reports using their tandem partners' feedback) promoted the incorporation of tandem partner feedback. It is important to mention that although a number of studies in the area of online tandem learning (e.g., Appel, 1997 [46]; Kötter, 2002 [47]; Little et al., 1999 [48]) have evaluated students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of feedback provided by their partners, to the author's knowledge, no previous research has investigated the degree to which tandem partner feedback was used to revise their drafts.

When taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that, similarly to L2 adult students (e.g., Mendonça and Johnson, 1994 [49]; Villamil and De Guerrero, 1998 [50]), the high school students in this study were capable of giving each other feedback, on the one hand, and of successfully using it to revise their pieces of writing, on the other. Despite the limitations in terms of the small sample size, the findings from the present study have several important implications for second language writing and for the application of e-mail tandem projects to second language learning. First, the main pedagogical implications of this study arise from the findings concerning the capacity of secondary school students to provide feedback to each other. Interpreted within a sociocultural perspective, these findings emphasize the usefulness of e-mail tandem collaboration between ESL and FSL secondary school students to provide opportunities whereby learners can mutually provide scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976 [51]) and thus assist each other in achieving task goals and in developing their L2 writing skills. Second, the results of this study also yield some insights into the impact that tandem partner feedback has on the final draft produced by a student. As such, it supports the claim that e-mail tandem learning is a valuable tool in L2 instruction.

Several recommendations can be made for future research to further investigate the effectiveness of using e-mail tandem exchanges for enhancing second language writing, particularly in the context of secondary school second language learners. Firstly, in this study it was found that the ESL students incorporated 91% of the corrections provided by their tandem partners, while the FSL students incorporated 74%. Although the findings are meaningful because they demonstrate that tandem

partner feedback is provided to and used by secondary students, the study does not address whether the feedback and students' use of it to revise their drafts led to L2 development. Future studies might also investigate if having students revise their drafts using their tandem partners' feedback develops their ability to revise their writing without receiving additional input from their classmates or teachers. Secondly, when comparing both groups, the data submitted for analysis revealed that the ESL students incorporated the feedback provided by their tandem partners to a greater extent than the FSL students. Due to the nature of the present study, the reasons why fewer FSL students did so could not be determined. Finally, additional studies could examine the impact that the errors made by the students in their L1 had on the way their tandem partners perceive them as "experts" of their first language and, in particular, address how this affects the incorporation of the feedback received in their revisions.

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