

# Corrective feedback in telecollaborative L2 learning settings: Reflections on symmetry and interaction

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*The potential for network-based exchange by bringing together native speakers (NS) and nonnative speakers (NNS) or facilitating tutor-learner distance interaction is being explored in the fields of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and telecollaboration (Belz, 2002). Among telecollaborative studies in foreign language education, we will focus on those which address provision of corrective feedback to foreign language learners during peer and tutor-learner online exchange through asynchronous and synchronous learning environments. Corrective feedback will be explored in conjunction with two strongly interrelated dimensions: symmetry and interaction. Under symmetry we will address questions such as: Does symmetry or asymmetry of status influence delivery of certain types of feedback (i.e. focus on form)? To what extent does the degree of symmetry affect feedback provision? Under interaction we will focus on error correction integrated into the flow of online communication. How do proficient users (native speakers or language teachers) deal with corrective feedback whilst attempting to sustain the flow of communication? What kinds of solutions do they come up with in order to include error correction practices in the conversational continuum online? A review of the studies reporting and analyzing error correction practices in L2 telecollaborative settings is provided here in an attempt to emphasize the dynamic nature of this interactional phenomenon and to open discussions for facilitating the implementation of error correction strategies in online foreign language environments.*

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## Introduction

Human interaction and learning through network technologies go hand in hand with research advancements in the field of web-based foreign language education. Under this general term we bring together research in the fields of Network-based Language Teaching (**NBLT**), Computer-Mediated Communication (**CMC**) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (**CALL**) research. Numerous studies explore the potential of network-based exchanges from various dimensions: intercultural, multimodal, interactional, sociocultural (for some insightful reviews see Kern *et al.*, 2004; Felix, 2005a; Kern, 2006). Belz (2002) coined the term *telecollaboration* to define the field of inquiry referring to “the application of *global* communication networks in foreign language education (...) [T]his type of learning environment consists of pairs or groups of distally-located students embedded in different sociocultural contexts and institutional settings” (p. 61). Among telecollaborative studies in foreign language education, we will focus on those which raise the issue of error correction and provision of corrective feedback to foreign language learners during **NS-NNS** and **NNS-NNS** online exchange. Form-focused exchange and opportunities for reflection on language form is defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997) as “the provision of corrective feedback that encourages self-repair involving accuracy and precision and not merely comprehensibility” (p. 42). For complete reviews of the debate on opportunities for modified output and negotiation of form in **CMC** contexts, see Pelletierri (2000), Lee (2006) and Thorne (2008).

For the needs of our analysis, under provision of corrective feedback, we include error noticing and correction strategies and more importantly focus on language form and incentives to produce L2 modified output. This field of inquiry has been little documented (for a synthesis see Ware & Warschauer, 2006) as there is a lack of substantial data for strategies, methods and pedagogical frameworks facilitating focus on language form through telecollaboration. All studies reported in our article can be considered as exploratory, pioneering telecollaborative projects whose design, implementation and research methodology differ substantially. Therefore, far from any generalization of results, the purpose of our study is to approach globally this original field of inquiry by looking into the variety (and heterogeneity) of telecollaborative settings in which corrective feedback provision may occur.

Corrective feedback will be explored in conjunction with two strongly interrelated dimensions: symmetry and interaction. Interaction between peers displaying symmetrical features will be juxtaposed against primarily asymmetrical interactional situations. To what extent does the degree of symmetry affect feedback provision? Does (a)symmetry of status influence delivery of certain types of feedback (i.e. focus on form)? Under interaction we will focus on error correction integrated in the flow of online communication. How do proficient users (native speakers or language teachers) deal with corrective feedback whilst attempting to sustain the flow of communication? What kind of solutions do they come up with in order to include error correction practices in the conversational continuum online? A review of the studies reporting and analyzing error correction practices in L2 telecollaborative settings is provided here in an attempt to emphasize the dynamic nature of this interactional phenomenon and to open discussion for facilitating the implementation of error correction strategies in online foreign language environments.

Firstly we will address the dimension of symmetry by discussing the larger field of telecollaboration and then focus on situations pertaining specifically to L2 learning.

## Symmetry in telecollaboration

According to a socioconstructivist perspective, human interaction and collaboration can be beneficial when differences exist with respect to general intellectual or developmental levels of individuals exchanging or working together (see the discussion of the Zone of Proximal Development (**ZPD**) by Vygotsky (1978) and scaffolding processes (Wertsch, 1991; Pea, 2004)). Socio-cognitive conflicts, seen as a source of fruitful interaction among peers, arise from a certain degree of asymmetry. Ideally, different levels of skills enhance processes such as clarifications and adjustments and facilitate self- and peer-regulation mechanisms that empower collective learning processes and may result in joint knowledge construction (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995).

In the area of telecollaboration, several studies explore the notion of symmetry, which is considered as a key dimension of human interaction and negotiation mediated by computer tools. In the field of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (**CSCL**), which is the reference research field exploring all aspects of human activity interaction through computers, symmetry is closely related to tasks and actions humans collectively undertake through artifacts. Baker (2002) notes:

[The] degree of symmetry refers to the extent to which, for a given continuous sequence of interaction, the responsibilities of partners in the group for achieving subtasks of cooperative problem-solving are the same or different, as manifested by verbal and non-verbal communicative and non-communicative acts intended to achieve cooperative problem-solving, in relation to material resources (p. 591).

Other **CSCL** studies tend to distinguish various forms of symmetry in terms of action, knowledge (or skills) and status. According to Dillenbourg (1999), *symmetry of action* refers to task distribution and types of actions allocated to participants (division of subtasks, control, coordination tasks, etc.). *Symmetry of knowledge* (or skills or development) draws on the level of knowledge (or skills or development) that participants possess. Finally, *symmetry of status* refers to status with respect to expertise (tutoring, teaching, coaching, etc.) Although space does not allow an exhaustive analysis of symmetry in telecollaboration, we should not neglect the gradual aspect of symmetry (asymmetrical towards symmetrical situations and vice versa) or the nature of tasks foreseen, which is crucial in symmetrical interactional situations (i.e. top-down tasks increasing asymmetrical exchange). In addition, one form of symmetry does not signify symmetry in another form. For example, two learners may have a similar degree of expertise but different viewpoints of the tasks.

Do these three forms of symmetry – action, knowledge (or skills) and status – also apply to online foreign language contexts? Action in terms of language learning is interaction and communication, both considered fundamental in language acquisition. There is no need to mention literature on pragmatics and sociolinguistics together with a vision of learning as a highly inter-actional and culturally embedded phenomenon. Therefore, a debate on symmetry and/or asymmetry of action in L2 learning would be a truism: (inter) action and learning are so intrinsically related that they form a dynamic, single entity.

Next, symmetry of knowledge, according to Dillenbourg (1999), corresponds to equal (or non-equal in case of asymmetry) communicative skills of the target language. It is not clear, however, whether asymmetry of knowledge leads to development of L2 skills, and if so, in which circumstances. Both directions will be briefly discussed hereafter.

From a sociocultural approach, a certain degree of asymmetry of knowledge is desirable

(or even needed) for scaffolding processes to take place. One can briefly refer to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (**ZPD**), defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86, cited in Foster & Ohta, 2005, p. 414). In this type of novice-expert interaction, asymmetry of knowledge is considered fruitful for enabling the less competent individual to benefit from the expert's assistance (the same approach applies to collective learning situations involving groups of novices and more knowledgeable individuals). Scaffolding processes in L2 contexts have been documented, amongst others by Ohta (2000), Kinginger (2002) and Meskill (2005). Looking more closely at situations of corrective feedback provision in **CMC** settings, Heift and Caws (2000) investigated peers (same class learners) interacting on a written assignment. They concluded that "collaboration in a synchronous writing environment is also fostered when less knowledgeable students work with more knowledgeable peers – the instructor intervenes less, and students produce less off-topic discussion than in equally knowledgeable groups." In this case, asymmetry of knowledge has been beneficial in collective writing for language learning.

However, symmetry of knowledge can also lead to development of L2 skills. For instance, Morris (2005) examines delivery of corrective feedback in computer-mediated conversations of same class peers. Although no clear indication is given as to the precise communicative skills of learners prior to the task (i.e. according to placement tests or proficiency exams), it is believed that participants, by the fact that they attended the same class, would not have considerable discrepancies in terms of L2 skills. The author provides evidence of error noticing and corrective practices that occurred between peers with symmetrical skills (L2 knowledge).

This short review on symmetry and asymmetry of knowledge in telecollaborative L2 situations is certainly not sufficient and more in-depth analysis is required. The degree of symmetry and asymmetry and the implications for L2 learning in telecollaborative contexts needs to be further developed in as much as the findings do not provide a clear picture of the implications of symmetry of knowledge in telecollaborative L2 settings. At this point we would call for further investigation of this valuable parameter as this feature goes beyond the limits and the scope of the current study.

Finally, symmetry of status is also hypothesized to affect online interaction and provision of corrective feedback and it is reflected in two types of situation. Symmetry of status applies to peer interaction as interlocutors have the same status of language learners. Asymmetry of status occurs in situations where language learners exchange with more proficient L2 users. Below we will attempt to examine to what extent symmetry or asymmetry of status is influential in interactional L2 situations and especially error correction practices online.

### *Symmetry of status in telecollaborative L2 learning settings: Peer feedback*

Peer interaction, by putting learners in a symmetrical situation with regards status, has become a trend in foreign language acquisition, be it in classroom or network-based learning settings. This involves the pairing of individuals who work in small groups (usually dyads) where each participant learns each other's language.

A type of peer learning is tandem learning, or tele-tandem in its electronic variation (Brammerts, 1996), in which symmetry of status is fundamental. As Little (2001) puts it

[I]n tandem language learning settings, interlocutors with different mother tongues work together in order to learn each other's language, learn more about each other's character and culture and perhaps exchange additional knowledge (p. 31).

According to the principles of reciprocity and autonomy, partners benefit equally from collaborating with native speakers of their target language and they spend equal amounts of time using each of the two languages (Little, 2001, p. 32). Interlocutors play the role of L2 learners and native speakers, through producing L2 output as well as guiding their interlocutors' learning process without involvement of language teachers. Guidelines for feedback (focus on form and corrective strategies, time, amount, types of feedback, etc.) are not provided since partners are native speakers and not language teachers. The degree, form and direction of corrective feedback are subject to negotiation between partners and advice is given only if learners request it.

The ability of native peers to provide effective form-focused feedback to L2 partners, both in terms of approach and method, is an aspect of the tandem interactional process that will be discussed hereafter. The question is the following: Does the reciprocal approach of tandem learning (and correction) guarantee provision of sufficient error noticing incidents and opportunities for L2 focus on linguistic form?

Kötter (2003) examines German and American students exchanging through a **MOO** ("**MUD**, object oriented" text-based virtual environment) twice a week for 3 months. The author demonstrates that error correction occurred infrequently and that symmetry of status played a crucial role in delivery of specific error correction types. As Kötter claims,

[L]ack of comprehension checks in the **MOO** data might be that they tried to maintain a positive face vis-à-vis their peers. In other words, they may have feared that a more extensive use of confirmation and comprehension checks would have made them appear as overly teacher-like" (Kötter, 2003, p. 158).

According to Kötter, symmetrical exchange has not been independent of the quantity and use of specific error correction types.

O'Rourke (2005) reports in his study involving Irish and German students interacting through a **MOO** over 9 weeks that interlocutors did not show "any tendency to focus on normal aspects of problematic utterances in resolving communication difficulties. Rather they remain focused on global meaning, and in cases in which they are specific, it is mostly in relation to words" (p. 458). Interestingly, O'Rourke identifies two sources of focus on meaning, rather than focus on form (FonF): the nature of the exchange (tandem learning) and the written character of interaction. The synchronous communication tool requiring rapid and direct exchanges in order to sustain the flow of communication is argued to have an effect on reduced time for negotiation and form-focused exchange. On the other hand, it is claimed that peers' imbalance of L2 skills resulted in imbalanced benefit from the interaction. More opportunities for L2 input and output in English arose for German students (more competent in L2) where Irish students (less competent speakers of German) benefited less from opportunities for modified input and pushed output. The author argues that "a significant gap in proficiency, and the attendant lingua franca effect, substantially alters the linguistic, pedagogical and affective nature of a tandem exchange" (O'Rourke, 2005, p. 458).

O'Rourke's conclusion on peers' primary focus on meaning and certain disregard of focus on language form confirms outcomes of another study bringing together **US** learners of Spanish with Chilean and Spanish students learning English (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008).

During the second phase of the project the authors run a quasi-experimental protocol putting forward two modes of interaction. In the first mode, called e-tutoring, interlocutors were explicitly asked to provide corrective feedback and suggestions for language improvement to their partners. In the second mode (e-partnering), peers were not explicitly encouraged (or trained) to comment on their partners' input. Although groups of peers were not identical in both interactional modes (in the e-tutoring mode **US** and Spanish students were involved whilst in the e-partnering mode **US** and Chilean peers took part), the authors point out interesting aspects for corrective feedback provision. They conclude that error correction has been rarely practiced in the e-partnering mode since it has not been required by the project coordinators. Borrowing Swain and Lapkin's definition of Language Related Episodes (**LREs**) as "any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others" (Swain & Lapkin as cited in Ware & O'Dowd, 2008, p. 47), they observe that **LREs** during the e-partnering mode occurred very infrequently (0.003% of words related to **LREs** in comparison to 14.7% for the e-tutoring mode).

At this point it is worth linking theoretical assumptions (Brammerts, 1996; Little, 2001) and empirical data (Kötter, 2003; O'Rourke, 2005; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) on error correction in reciprocal learning settings. It seems that a complex situation emerges when learners benefit from peer feedback and are asked to provide feedback in return.

Feedback provision by itself is considered a delicate issue for language learners, regarding symmetry of status. In Ware and O'Dowd's case (2008), **US** students who were asked to provide corrective feedback to their peers (Spanish learners of English) were "initially hesitant to write commentaries about their partner's language use", for the reason that evaluative feedback remains the role of a course instructor (p. 52). In other words, symmetry of status would not "allow" them to fully carry out a task that was, in their view, a teacher's responsibility. The same problem of not fully undertaking the role of a language expert (when it is seen as the teacher's task to correct learners' utterances) has been documented by Schwienhorst (2000, cited by Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) and is confirmed by Okuyama (2005, see below). In both cases, **L2** experts felt uncomfortable providing feedback on erroneous utterances. Similarly, Kötter (2003) referring to the complete absence of repetitions in the **MOO** corpus, argues that "at least part of the reason why there were so few recasts in the tandem data was that repetitions as well as recasts are often indicative of a teacher-learner relationship rather than a balanced relationship between the (tandem) partners because they imply that the person who uses them is more knowledgeable or more proficient than the other participants in a conversation". In Kötter's example, too, the symmetrical nature of the exchange has been perceived as an obstacle in provision of at least one type of feedback. Moreover, another type of finding that underlines the slightly inhibiting character of requesting the provision of corrective feedback from language learners is low numbers of error correction incidents and a lack of focus on form identified by Kötter (2003) and O'Rourke (2005). A variety of factors is acknowledged to influence a lack of regular feedback provision, as, for example the lack of specific guidelines for error correction (i.e., peers weren't given precise indications regarding amount, type of feedback and corrective strategies), the nature of **CMC** (O'Rourke, 2005; Kötter, 2003) and cultural issues (Okuyama, 2005; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008).

However, according to findings stemming from these studies, lack of rigorous error noticing and correction was not related to the nature of interaction which emerged in peer exchanges. In other words, even if provision of corrective feedback was not always

systematic and focus on form was not dealt with on a regular basis, there is no clear indication that tandem learning led to looser communication or that online interaction was influenced by the lack of sustainable, regular feedback. On the contrary, participants in the aforementioned studies seemed to have positive (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008) and very positive (Kötter, 2003) encounters in the online peer learning experience and appreciated interacting with peers on a symmetrical basis of status. From the viewpoint of motivation, very good results have been reported in peer interaction too (Leahy, 2001).

A subsequent question would be the following: as much as peers favored interacting with peers through online symmetrical exchange, is the request for feedback provision in tandem learning a task which is not clearly adapted to this type of exchange, since it is not fully undertaken by peers? In other words, is the task of delivering corrective feedback and, especially, paying attention to focus on form, a too-demanding assignment for language learners who are not trained in feedback provision? From this point of view, the nature of tasks seems crucial regarding interaction and delivery of feedback. As this feature concerns asymmetrical expert-novice learning settings as well, it would be preferable to deal with this question in relation to both contexts. Implications for task design in both situations will be discussed below.

### Asymmetry of status: Tutor-learner feedback

In this section we will discuss interaction between language learners and more proficient L2 users who play the role of tutors (or experts) in target languages in a non-reciprocal mode. Asymmetrical (with regard to status) tutor-learner interaction – or expert-novice exchange, in Lee's terms (2006, 2008) – occurs in learning contexts where tutors are provided with minimum training in error noticing and correction and provision of feedback is unidirectional, in contrast to bidirectional peer learning situations. On the one hand, there are individuals or (groups of) foreign language learners, and on the other, tutors (or group of tutors) eliciting L2 learning online. The category of tutors corresponds to various profiles: foreign language teachers, both pre-service and in-service (Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Lee, 2006, 2008; Mangenot & Zourou, 2007) and native speakers or highly competent L2 speakers with no teaching experience to whom guidelines for error noticing and correction have been given (Okuyama, 2005; Sotillo, 2005; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008, for the e-tutoring condition, although reciprocal). Partners' roles are made explicit (usually by project coordinators or CALL researchers involved in these telecollaborative projects) and tutors are engaged in regular feedback provision. Some examples of this type of telecollaborative learning setting are provided hereafter.

Lee (2006) reports on synchronous interaction between native teachers and nonnative learners of Spanish working on two tasks: an open-ended question and a goal-oriented activity. She demonstrates provision of authentic language discourse, especially new lexical items and correct grammatical structures through recasts and modifications. Most importantly, the author argues that negotiation of meaning and form in the immediacy of ongoing dialogue is not reliable evidence for L2 learning. The author argues that “[although] feedback had a positive effect on drawing learners' attention to form which led to repair of error, successful uptake, does not guarantee second language acquisition” (p. 147).

Mangenot and Zourou (2007) also avoid explicitly linking provision of corrective feedback with specific effect in development of L2 skills. According to the authors who clearly adopt a systemic approach to investigate provision of corrective feedback through

telecollaboration, parameters influencing this phenomenon are numerous and so closely interrelated that an experimental approach alone, providing evidence from pre-test and post-test L2 skills, would not be sufficient to explore this complex computer-mediated interpersonal situation. In their exploratory study, master's students teaching French as a foreign language tutored Spanish learners of French through an asynchronous learning environment (Moodle). This semester-long tutoring experience consisted of designing and delivering pedagogical tasks for the target group, supporting Spanish students whilst they were fulfilling these tasks, and more generally communicating asynchronously with the distance learners. Tutoring activities were part of their professional training (as future language teachers of French) and this experience has been argued to be beneficial for reflecting on technological, pedagogical and socioaffective aspects of designing pedagogical tasks and providing corrective feedback online.

Sottillo (2005) analyzed a synchronous exchange corpus of **NS** tutors and highly competent **NNS** interlocutors interacting with learners of English through Yahoo! instant messenger. Tutors, both **NS** and **NNS** were future **ESL** teachers and exchanged with learners of English during three to five 45-minute sessions. Communication was engaged on communicative and problem-solving activities. One of the most interesting findings was that highly proficient **NNSs** proceeded more frequently to error correction practices and **NNS-NNS** exchange was more fruitful in error correction episodes (**ECs**). Consequently, in comparison with the **NS-NNS** dyads, opportunities for error correction were more numerous in **NNS-NNS** interactions, where more direct strategies were employed (rather than indirect strategies used by **NS** tutors). Finally, more learner-initiated **ECs** occurred during **NNS-NNS** synchronous exchange, leading to a higher frequency of successful uptake.

Okuyama (2005) asserts tutoring skills as the key element in tutor-learner exchange and corrective feedback provision. In her study of a Japanese-**US** telecollaborative context, corrective feedback was provided by two **NSs** without teaching experience and by a language teacher. The author concludes in these terms:

[E]xplicit error corrections and recasts by **NS** interlocutors or more advanced learners occurred only infrequently. (...) In this study, two **NS** interlocutors did not have much experience with L2 learners of varying levels. According to the chat transcripts, they were not usually adept at noticing typical L2 errors and providing corrective feedback to the learners. Their reservation about offering constant error correction might have been culturally derived, too (...) One of them confided that she did not feel quite right about correcting American students' errors and that she was not even sure how to do so (p.16).

Obviously the author challenges the role of tasks and specific guidelines regarding delivery of corrective feedback to language learners. These parameters are indeed fundamental in both peer learning and novice-expert learning contexts and will be discussed hereafter.

### **Symmetry and asymmetry of status and implications for task design and training in peer and tutor-learner interaction**

Starting from asymmetrical tutor-learner exchange, it is worth discussing two dimensions of delivery of feedback in relation to tasks and guidelines for feedback provision. First, partners' roles are explicitly defined and error correction is seen as part of the pedagogical framework that has been mutually agreed upon. Therefore, L2 experts carry out their tutoring tasks in a better-defined learning context than in a symmetrical situation where

peers may feel uncomfortable with error correcting provision and also as a result of a lack of pedagogical training. Second, corrective feedback is provided in a unidirectional mode and attention is drawn to single learners (or a group of) in contrast to the reciprocal approach of peer learning where imbalances of quantity of feedback and opportunities for L2 learning may occur.

However, the degree of pedagogical skills in error correction and the guidelines provided to tutors for delivery of error correction are crucial factors in tutor-learner interaction. Matching L2 learners with language tutors (proficient users or professional teachers) does not automatically guarantee regularity and quality of corrective feedback. Attention should be given to teacher training issues, i.e. guidelines for ample negotiation of meaning, modification of L2 output and providing focus on form (e.g., drawing the learner's attention to linguistic forms) through meaningful, interpersonal communication (Okuyama, 2005). Accordingly, developing pedagogical skills for language teachers engaged in online exchange and telecollaboration represents a key challenge in the field of teacher training. Well beyond technical skills, what seems crucial is the joint development of various skills (technological, sociocultural, pedagogical and intercultural) in online tutoring practices (Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Develotte, Mangenot, & Zourou, 2005; Hauck & Stickler, 2006). There is thus a substantial field of inquiry related to the identification and development of tutoring skills in online pedagogical settings.

Although in tutor-learner interaction training of tutors in error noticing and provision is seen as a natural step in the development and improvement of feedback provision strategies, especially when tutors are future language teachers (for a concrete example, see Lee, 2008), providing pedagogical training to learners on type, strategies and the amount of corrective feedback requested to deliver to their peers can be in opposition to the peer learning approach.

For instance, the tandem learning approach is explicitly oriented towards a lack of teacher intervention in favor of a symmetrical – regarding status – exchange between peers who share the same objective (learning each other's language). Pioneers of the tandem learning approach claim that:

[I]t is essential that it is always the learner who decides the direction and shape of the interaction by taking most of the discourse initiatives; for in this way his or her learning remains the centre of concern and the native speaker cannot slip into the role of (untrained) teacher (...). When feedback is sought by the learner rather than volunteered by the native speaker, it should have to do with aspects of the target language the learner wants to hear about rather than aspects the native speaker (rightly or wrongly) considers important (Little, 2001, p. 32).

A number of issues derive from this citation. Firstly, by asserting that “the native speaker cannot slip into the role of the teacher”, isn't Little's approach opposed to the request to deliver high level tutoring tasks (i.e., error noticing and correction and focus on form) by language learners? By acknowledging that learners are not trained to provide corrective feedback, isn't pedagogical training in feedback provision contrary to this symmetrical approach? Secondly, does the view that “when feedback is sought by the learner (...) it should have to do with aspects of the target language *the learner wants to hear about* rather than aspects the native speaker considers important” not contradict guidelines given to native speakers for the corrective strategies *they (native speakers) have to provide*?

We argue that the task of error correction seems somewhat artificial in tandem learning

situations which, precisely, avoid interference of teachers in the learning process through the valorization of symmetrical, peer interaction. As a matter of fact, the peer's role is to facilitate exchange, to provide a less threatening environment for development of L2 skills and to offer the socio-affective opportunities for learning to expand. If tandem learning represents an interactional, flexible, less face-threatening learning context, error correction, being by definition a teacher-driven process, can hardly adapt to tandem learning situations and worse, can lead to a certain "depreciation" of this "naturalistic" learning setting through a lack of sustainable and regular corrective practices. On the contrary, the true potential of symmetrical language learning situations is the opportunity for genuine interaction and reciprocal exchange among language learners. We believe requesting that native peers comment and focus on form through peer interaction goes beyond the aims of peer learning. More precisely, it introduces a feature (provision of corrective feedback) that occurs normally in asymmetrical contexts and thus jeopardizes the symmetrical interaction at play. Our point is that peer interaction is an extremely rich learning process that need not be biased by devices and tasks not directly related to peers' skills.

One can claim that due to the lack of sustainable and regular feedback in peer learning situations, participants should receive more training in corrective feedback as far as they are conferred the role of tutor in their respective L1. However, this approach is in opposition to the peer learning and tandem learning approaches (see Little above) that explicitly stress the symmetrical character of exchanges. If regularity and sustainability of feedback is to be sought, then language learners might be better paired with language tutors (see above). On the contrary, the true originality of peer interaction is based on the genuine conversation that can emerge from peers. Online peer exchange can be extremely fruitful on various levels: intercultural, (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2001; O'Dowd, 2003; Ware & Kramsch, 2005), linguistic (Belz, 2003; Ware & Pérez Cañado, 2007), and multimodal (Felix, 2005b; Ciekanski & Chanier, 2008; Lamy, 2007). In some settings, the corrective dimension of peer interaction is completely absent in favor of fluid, straightforward exchange in peers' L1, as is the case in the *Cultura* project (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2001). Even though objectives in tele-collaboration vary from setting to setting, we believe that genuine interpersonal communication and exposure to target language are unique phenomena that merit being further explored in relation to what peers can truly cope with.

## Interaction

Embedding focus on form through error correction in peer and tutor-learner telecollaborative settings will be discussed in this section. Two aspects of this phenomenon will be approached. The first refers to fostering online interaction whilst providing corrective feedback. How do proficient users (native speakers or tutors) deal with provision of corrective feedback whilst attempting to sustain the flow of communication? Is the symmetry or asymmetry of status influential in online interaction? Secondly, we will look at examples of embedding error correction in conversational practices. What kind of solutions do interlocutors come up with in order to include error correction practices in the conversational continuum online? In more general terms, is sustainability of smooth online interaction compatible with error noticing and correction?

### *Fostering online interaction whilst providing corrective feedback*

CMC studies have provided several examples of online conversational practices in which interlocutors attempt to sustain the flow of interaction by avoiding face-threatening situations (Herring, 1996; Lai & Zhao, 2006). Maintenance of conversational flow and the fear of interrupting or of being interrupted are aspects of the computer mediated interactional phenomenon that deserve to be explored in relation to error correction. Firstly, it seems that error noticing and correction is considered a delicate task by more proficient users involved in interactional corrective feedback (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Okuyama, 2005). Seen as a task employed mainly in formal learning contexts, proficient users (native speakers or FL teachers) often employ strategies to go beyond the discrepancy in target language skills that provision of corrective feedback could possibly aggravate between interlocutors.

According to existing literature, proficient interlocutors draw on code switching (non-target language use) and various affective moves as a means to overcome the lack of social presence imposed by online distance interaction and to sustain communication whilst diminishing the teacher-like role that provision of corrective feedback requires. Code switching in corrective feedback techniques has been documented by Kötter (2003) in tandem learning and Zourou (2006) in tutor-learner interaction. In the first study, Kötter argues that although interlocutors did not receive any firm instructions about how and when to borrow items from their L1,

... several German students repeatedly switched to English [partners' L1] because they seem to have felt that they would "lose" their partners if they continued to use their target language and thus to avoid a breakdown in the conversation. In contrast, many Americans sometimes reverted to English because they apparently felt that they were unable to express a certain idea in their foreign language (p. 161).

Sustaining the flow of communication and fostering interaction with L2 learners has also been documented by Zourou (2006) who examined two functions of the use of learners' L1 by language tutors in asynchronous tutor-learner interaction. The first is used to establish comparisons and borrow lexical items in order to facilitate L2 development. In the following example, Bernard, a French tutor, responds to Marc, an Australian learner of French:

Bonjour Marc (...) je ne joue pas de la guitare. Je ne sais pas jouer de la musique, mais j'aime beaucoup la musique. Tu as fait quelques petites erreurs (...) J'aime guitare = **j'aime la guitare** (I like the guitar) ou **j'aime jouer de la guitare** (I like playing the guitar) [Bernard]. (Zourou, 2006, p. 276). [Episode 1]

The second function of learners' L1 use is related to affective factors such as avoiding the disappointment or discouragement that the development of L2 interlanguage and lack of face-to-face communication may provoke. In the extract below, Laura, a French tutor, finishes her message (written in French) with a postscript in English, the learners' L1:

p/s: don't worry about making mistakes, that's what we call learning! a bientôt :) [Laura] (Zourou, 2006, p. 277). [Episode 2]

Affective factors influencing interaction and especially attempts to diminish the sociocognitive load to which L2 partners are presumably exposed has been documented by Dejean-Thircuir and Mangenot (2006). In their study of French tutors assisting Australian intermediate learners of French through an asynchronous environment, the authors stress the

importance of encouragement to pursue development of L2 skills. More importantly, the authors emphasize the challenge for tutors of having to achieve a suitable balance between corrective feedback provision and, on the other hand, informal and spontaneous exchange, often facilitated by learners' L1 use. In order to overcome the sociocognitive deficit that the gap in target language skills and absence of face-to-face interaction may aggravate, the authors describe the twofold role of tutors as peers (adopting a symmetrical, friendly approach to interaction, exploiting similarities in age and personal interests) and as language tutors (having to cope with language tutoring tasks online).

Moreover, avoiding communication breakdowns and face-threatening situations is an aspect of the CMC phenomenon that can be influential in quantity of corrective feedback. It is hypothesized that interlocutors, in order to sustain the flow of communication, avoid interactional situations that may trigger misinterpretations or challenge the maintenance of smooth interaction (Kötter, 2003, p. 162 and Lai and Zhao, 2006). However, these findings are based on hypotheses and there is no clear picture as to why or to what degree interlocutors restrain themselves from noticing and correcting error for fear of jeopardizing smooth interaction or producing a face-threatening incident. It would be very useful, using findings on (real) error correction and negotiation incidents, to explore the relation between, on one hand, provision of feedback and negotiation of form, and on the other hand, interactional and interpersonal phenomena which seem influential in this type of situation. What is crucial in this respect is to consider negotiation and feedback as highly interactional and contextualized processes. Accordingly, Foster and Ohta (2005) and Smith (2005, 2008) clearly go beyond the underlying assumption in negotiation research that negotiation increases the possibility that the language used in the process of interaction will be of benefit to the learner in the development of the L2. The authors demonstrate that opportunities for negotiation of meaning through interactional modifications are not always a reliable indicator of negotiation processes. Similarly, Smith (2005) concludes that:

[T]here is no relationship between degree of uptake (none, unsuccessful, and successful) and the acquisition of target lexical items. These results suggest a possible diminished role for uptake in SLA in a CMC environment. The pedagogical application of these findings includes a word of caution to classroom teachers to adjust their expectations about the relationship between learner uptake and acquisition. In attempting to explain the acquisition of target vocabulary items during task-based CMC interaction, teachers should focus on the nuances of negotiated interaction as well as more subtle indications of acquisition rather than learner uptake *per se* (p. 33).

More focus on negotiation and feedback provision as dynamic processes is required, together with evidence of identified incidents.

### *Embedding error noticing into conversation*

Although a substantial body of literature addresses error noticing and correction in CMC contexts, there is a lack of practical advice as to ways to implement corrective feedback in the conversational flow of communication. To the best of our knowledge, suggestions on the exploitation of CMC exchange under the dual function of promoting L2 fluency and providing feedback on linguistic accuracy and complexity have only been documented by Ware and Pérez Cañado (2007). The authors examine types of communicative language functions that can facilitate achievement of linguistic gains. They also suggest implications

for setting up communicative activities focusing on language form and requesting help on linguistic issues. Attention here is drawn to corrective feedback as a means to focus on linguistic form. What seems crucial is the attempt to situate peer feedback on form within a telecollaborative setting, beyond simple exchange. The question is: What kinds of solutions do interlocutors come up with in order to entrench corrective feedback in the conversational continuum online? In more general terms, is sustainability of smooth online interaction (and avoidance of communication breakdown) compatible with error noticing and correction?

Merging error correction with conversational moves has been documented by Mangenot and Zourou (2007) in a French-Spanish telecollaborative setting aimed at French L2 learning. In the following example, the French tutor comments (represented here *thus*) on the learner's output (represented here **thus**) on a task requiring answers to a list of questions on a French film (*thus*). The tutor's feedback consists of a focus on linguistic form through provision of correct forms (correction underlined, i.e., Question 3, 5 and 9) and of various communicative functions.

<p><b>Sur le film</b> - regardez l'affiche du film <i>Elisa</i> : <i>[fournie sous forme d'image]</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. D'après vous, de quoi parle ce film ? <b>je crois que le film parle de la vie d'une femme.</b></li> <li>2. Qui sont les personnages principaux ? <b>ELISA</b> oui et Gerard Depardieu c'est un ACTEUR et pas un personnage.</li> <li>3. Pensez-vous qu'il y a une histoire d'amour dans ce film ? <b>oui, bien sure / <u>sûr</u> !</b></li> <li>4. Comment se finit l'histoire ? <b>je ne sais pas, mais je crois que pas très bien. Pourquoi?...;-)</b></li> <li>5. Avez-vous envie de la voir ? <b>OUI!!! Je crois qu'elle / <u>il</u> est très bien. Effectivement, selon moi au moins...</b></li> <li>6. Aimez-vous regarder des films ? <b>OUI, BEAUCOUP. C'est un des mes hobbies. Super ! moi aussi !</b></li> <li>7. Vous préférez lire un bon livre ou voir un bon film ? <b>Je ne peux pas choisir parce que j'aime BEAUCOUP les deux choses; lo mismo para mi</b></li> <li>8. Citez des titres de films qui vous ont marqués... <b>AMÉLIE il est vraiment très bien !</b></li> <li>9. Quels réalisateurs préférez-vous ? <b>ça m'est égal, je n'ai pas un réalisateur préféré.</b></li> <li>10. Pour plus de renseignements sur l'actualité du cinéma, allez voir le site <a href="http://www.festival-cannes.com">www.festival-cannes.com</a> Qu'est-ce que tu as pensé du site ?</li> </ol>
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Figure 1: Embedding error correction and interactional moves [Episode 3].

The tutor's feedback serves different functions: an assessment of the learner's output (line 2: "Gerard Depardieu is an **ACTOR** and not a film character"), encouraging discussion by asking additional questions (line 4: "why [do you think that the story ends badly]?"), line 10: "what was your impression of the website?"), validation (line 2: "yes") and personal judgements (line 6: "Great! I like watching movies, too!" line 5, "yes, at least for me too" line 8: "[Amélie] is a great film indeed"). Line 7 ("I like reading books and watching movies, too") written in the non-target (L1) language encompasses an affective function whilst strengthening the friendly-like exchange, beyond the predefined tutor-learner exchange framework.

Mangenot and Zourou (2007) provide additional examples of merging focus on form and focus on meaning in single messages by tutors in their attempt to sustain online interaction and focus on linguistic form. However, data driven from empirical research provides little evidence on ways to engage in ongoing feedback provision through online interaction. More importantly, studies addressing corrective practices embedded in the interactional

continuum seem to move from focus on quantity of L2 modified output, to more systemic approaches emphasizing the broader collective learning process at stake. Increasing attention is being given to computer mediational aspects during online exchange, which play a crucial role in interaction and negotiation. Seen from a sociocultural perspective that stresses the non-neutrality of tools employed by individuals or groups of individuals, online interaction (and consequently error correction feedback) cannot be seen as a purely interpersonal situation where computer tools are peripheral. In the example above, the material (written digital support with editing and highlighting possibilities) allowed corrective practices (and, accordingly, pedagogical solutions) that otherwise would not occur. Tool affordances, seen at the same time by Norman (1999) as opportunities and constraints for human action, are influential in interactional processes such as error correction practices. Affordances in **CMC** are further discussed by Smith (2005, 2008), O'Rourke (2008) and Zourou (2008).

## Conclusion

Our synthesis of existing literature on symmetry and interaction related to provision of corrective feedback through telecollaboration has offered an overview of this multi-faceted computer-mediated interactional phenomenon and, rather than providing clear-cut answers, attempted to illustrate that error correction goes beyond discussion of these two closely related dimensions. Management of symmetry and asymmetry of status and management of interaction in both tutor-learner and peer online learning settings are complex, interconnected phenomena that a single contribution can hardly embrace. Far from any generalization, there are three issues that are worthy of further analysis and documentation.

First, in asymmetrical tutor-learner interaction, where partners' roles and tasks are clearly defined, pedagogical skills in error noticing and correction are crucial. Further investigation into the types, modalities, strategies and amount of corrective feedback in relation to the maintenance of smooth interaction is needed in order to develop a better understanding of the interactional processes of feedback delivery in **CMC** settings. We stressed the importance of exploring the tutoring skills required in online exchange involving language teachers. Telecollaborative projects that include pre-service language teachers (ex. Graduate or Master's students) and L2 language learners constitute original settings in which teachers are trained in online pedagogy through a situated learning approach. Language learners can also benefit from regular and sustainable feedback on meaning and form in as much as this type of setting focuses exclusively on the development of learners' L2 skills.

Second, if symmetry of status offers a less face-threatening context for peer exchange, where less formal interaction occurs, error correction and especially focus on linguistic form seems to be a task that language learners cannot carry out fully. Moreover, asking language learners to provide feedback can seem artificial if we look more closely at Ware and O'Dowd's study (2008). In the e-partnering mode (no request for feedback), scores of error noticing and correction are extremely low in comparison to the e-tutoring mode (where learners have been asked to correct their peers). This means that, from our point of view, in natural contexts as the e-partnering modality is, without any experimental constraints, learners are engaged in sustainable online interaction but they do not feel they should provide feedback. It seems thus that communication with peers occurs naturally and simply and doesn't mean correcting peers' language erroneous utterances. We should

not forget that the request for provision of corrective feedback in peer interaction is a condition introduced mainly by researchers in peer learning situations. Corrective practices would otherwise be extremely rare, as shown in the example of e-partnering provided by Ware and O'Dowd. We believe that peer interaction is fundamental in learning as well as in telecollaboration and thus more attention should be given to the tasks that participants can truly undertake or at the tasks that they are prepared to carry out fully. If, however, corrective feedback is sought during peer interaction aiming at L2 learning, this should happen on a more informal manner, according to the "naturalistic" symmetrical setting. In this case, analysis should focus on opportunities for collaborative learning and L2 scaffolding, not necessarily on error correction incidents nor the amount of corrective feedback.

Finally, corrective feedback needs to be examined as a highly interactional phenomenon that is collectively constructed. Interaction and provision of corrective feedback are dynamically interrelated and influenced by a variety of parameters such as socio-affective factors (learners' L1 use is a typical example of how interaction and corrective feedback are embedded), tool mediation (the nature of tool facilitating exchanges – asynchronous or synchronous – tool use) and broader sociocultural aspects. In the case of symmetrical tandem learning, neglecting aspects such as the non-formal type of exchange, the lack of specific guidelines for error noticing and correction and the absence of peers' training in feedback provision, threatens to shift attention to a "slice" of the interactional phenomenon (i.e., the amount of feedback of negotiation incidents), which detracts from the richness of symmetrical language learning situations that only a systemic approach (van Lier, 2004) would valorize.

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