The interplay between instruction, group composition and interaction in collaborative revision – examples from L2-research

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In collaborative problem-solving quite a number of factors are at play on the individual, the collaborative and the contextual level. The benefits of collaborative learning and problem-solving may in fact depend on a delicate and complex interaction between these factors (Hogan & Tudge, 1999; Dillenbourg, 1999).

In writing classes, quite often teachers have students revise each other’s writing because from collaboratively revising peers’ written work, students learn more in terms of declarative knowledge about what good writing is. Moreover, students’ own writing would improve in quality on the basis of this knowledge (Boscolo & Ascolti, 2004; Rijlaarsdam & Couzijn, 2000; Zammuner, 1995). Another advantage of collaborative revision is the fact that students can pool resources and together can come up with more discrepancies and incongruities in each other’s writing than a lone student (Stoddard & MacArthur, 1993; Storch, 2005).

However, there are also quite a few disadvantages often reported on by teachers (i.e., students’ reluctance and/or inability to criticize each other’s work) and the same complex set of individual, collaborative and contextual factors may determine the effectiveness of collaborative revision.

In this talk we will report on a series of studies we conducted to closely scrutinize and disentangle the effect of a number of different factors at play in L2 collaborative revision. The studies are relatively large-scale experimental studies with undergraduates, both Business and Linguistics undergraduates. The factors studied are instruction, pair composition and interaction.

The main focus in all of the experimental studies is the effect of instruction and support (scaffolding). Numerous researchers stress that for collaborative revision to be effective, students need to be supported, instructed and/or trained (Liu & Hansen, 2002; Min, 2005; Zhu, 1995). From seminal reviews and state-of-the-art research on writing instruction cognitive strategy instruction and modelling emerge as effective instructional methods to improve students’ writing and revision skills (Graham & Perin, 2007; Rijlaarsdam et al., 2008). That is why in the studies different forms of strategy instruction in collaborative revision were implemented to determine the impact of each separate approach. One of the instructional methods always tested was modelling. Its effect on revision skill (learning) and writing (transfer) was explored for different types of L2 writers and different ability dyads.

That the effect of the instructional method may differ for different types of dyads may be deduced from research which shows that group composition plays a crucial role in collaboration (Webb, Nemer, & Zuniga, 2002). However, also in collaborative revision and writing group composition may have a significant impact. Hence, a second factor which is
being investigated is the effect of pair composition and the interaction between instruction and pair composition.

To completely understand why some pairs revise more and better than other dyads, one should also analyse interaction processes within the different groups. That is why, in a last instance, we will also shed light on the role that interaction processes play when students revise collaboratively. We will show how quantitative product results (revision, writing) in our studies were combined with qualitative analyses of revision and interaction processes in dyads (data triangulation).

Our presentation will be divided into three parts: a first section presents and summarizes the theoretical framework the series of studies that we conducted are based upon. In a second section we describe the set-up and design of a number of studies. In the final part, the main findings are explained by drawing on the larger theoretical framework. Additionally, in that final section we also elaborate on implications for both educational and research practice.

References


