Effective Instructional Strategies in Collaborative Revision in EFL: Two Empirical Studies

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Various methods have been suggested to teach novice revisers to improve their revision and writing skills such as peer interaction and collaborative revision, and strategy instruction. One form of strategy instruction which has proven to be particularly effective as far as learning-to-write and learning-to-revise is concerned is observational learning (Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, & Van den Bergh, 2002). The research reported on in this paper, conducted in the context of a PhD study, combines insights from research on these various instructional methods. Its main purpose was to investigate the more effective instructional method to improve both revision and writing skills of foreign language learners of English. Two major research questions were investigated. A first question studies the impact of different instructional strategies and of their combination on the quality of individually and collaboratively revised texts (= Research Question 1). A second research question explores what the more effective instructional method is to have a transfer effect from revising other students’ writing to writing one’s own text (= Research Question 2). Apart from answering these two questions for the average student, we also explored the effect of the instructional strategies on both below- and above-average writers and on different types of ability dyads in terms of writing proficiency.
Methodology

The two research questions were explored in two relatively large-scale semi-experimental studies with undergraduate foreign language learners. In the two studies different forms of strategy instruction were implemented in collaborative revision to determine the impact of each separate approach. Central to the two studies under review are observation and practising (so-called ‘learning-by-doing’) to instruct a revision strategy. In the experimental design of both studies based on Schunk and Zimmerman’s Cognitive Model of Sequential Skill Acquisition (1997), each condition has two distinct phases: an instruction phase and an emulation phase. In the Instruction phase students were instructed in the use of a revision strategy in different ways. Either students watched a mastery peer dyad model the use of the revision strategy (= Observation) by applying it to a formal business letter containing higher-order errors on the structural and content level or they practised the revision strategy themselves by applying it to the same business letter (= Practising) with or without the use of a procedural facilitator. This first instruction phase was followed by an Emulation phase during which students exercised the strategy either in dyads or individually (cf. Van Steendam, Rijlaarsdam, Sercu, & Van den Bergh, 2010). Ultimately then, by contrasting different conditions in both studies, we were able to test the impact of experimental variables such as Observation versus Practising and Individual versus Dyad, on revision skill (cf. Van Steendam et al., 2010).

In both studies, near transfer to writing was measured by administering students an individual writing post-test after the experimental intervention. Through analysing this post-test we wanted to test which of the conditions was more effective in bringing about a transfer effect from revising other students’ writing to writing one’s own text.

In each study the impact of the instructional strategies was thus tested on two dependent variables: (1) revision quality comprising the detection, diagnosis and revision of structural and content problems (= Learning variable) and (2) writing quality including both holistic and primary-trait scores (= Transfer variable).

The written genre subject to both studies is a formal business letter. The studies combine both product and process measures (log files of revision and writing processes and of collaborative processes) and data are analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Product measures have been analysed using multilevel analyses. The analysis of process measures is ongoing at the moment of writing.

Results

Research Question 1: Effect of instructional methods on Learning variable. Salient results for revision quality reported in Van Steendam et al. (2010) mainly showed a statistically significant interaction effect: the effect of instruction depends on the setting of a subsequent exercising or emulation session and the effect of emulation type depends on the preceding instruction type. Observation is a powerful...