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CHAPTER 2.01.15. 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 (Schunk & Zimmerman, 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 et al., 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 analyzing 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 on 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 instructional method if the consequent emulation is a collaborative undertaking. However, a more traditional practice-only treatment proves to be as productive if followed by individual emulation (Van Steendam et al., 2010). Dyadic practising turns out to be least effective as preparation for collaborative revision. Additionally, analyses revealed a statistically significant interaction effect between instruction and pair composition. Pair composition moderates the effect of observation: homogeneous

dyads in terms of writing proficiency seem to profit more from observation than from practising, whereas weak, heterogeneous dyads made up of two initially weak writers benefit significantly more from dyadic practising (Van Steendam, 2008).

Research Question 2: Effect on instructional methods on Transfer variable. The second research question investigates what the more optimal implementation of learning-to-write through learning-to-revise is. Both experimental studies show that revision of other students' texts is a powerful pedagogical method in writing instruction as students in all experimental conditions in both studies progressed significantly from pre- to post-test writing. Additionally, salient results showed statistically significant interaction effects between learner characteristics such as writing proficiency and instructional effectiveness: especially initially stronger writers benefited significantly more from observation than their counterparts in a practising condition irrespective of the fact if they revised collaboratively or individually. Initially more proficient writers write significantly more structured and reader-oriented letters after having observed a collaborative revision model. Observation thus seems to be a powerful instructional strategy for stronger writers to induce a transfer effect from revising the content and structure of other students' writing to generating and structuring one's own text. That observation of an expert peer model has a positive impact on text quality for stronger writers confirms prior research by Braaksma et al. (2002).

Conclusion

The studies conducted enabled us to look at issues which have remained relatively unexplored in research on strategy instruction and observational learning:

- 1) the dichotomy individual versus collaborative revision and the effect of observation on collaborative revision;
- 2) “the combination ... of different instructional components ... of highly-effective strategy instruction packages”, in this case of observation or practicing followed by collaborative or individual emulation in revision (Van Steendam et al., 2010, p. 319) and
- 3) the more optimal implementation of learning-to-write through learning-to-revise.

These issues were investigated with 4) foreign language learners, a target group which has not been studied frequently in research on cognitive strategy instruction in writing and on observational learning. The results further attest to the importance of differentiation in writing instruction for different types of learners (cf. Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, & Van den Bergh, 2008). One of the more salient findings is the interaction between pair composition and instructional strategy as few studies in collaborative writing and revision study the interaction between pair composition and instruction.

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