

Investigating Research

Dissertation Research Proposal: Dialogue and Students' Writing Development

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Introduction

The aim of the dissertation is to explore the nature of dialogue and its contributions to writing development. Through my experience of teaching and learning, I believe that it is effective for a writer to discuss their writing with someone else. I have practised 'Writing Workshops' (e.g. Fletcher and Portalupi 2001), where students are allowed to choose by themselves what to write and how to write and are encouraged to talk and share their ideas with peers. As I found this practice to be very effective in engaging students in writing, I have consequently set up a 'writing centre' (e.g. North 1984) at International Christian University High School, which I work for in Japan. Here, students are able to discuss their writing with tutors who are university students. Through three years of operation from May 2010 to March 2012, according to the questionnaires, student users learned or became aware of what they wanted to write, how to write, and how the audience would respond to their writing. At the same time, they were happy to be treated as independent writers (Nakajima 2013). I believe that in dialogue, whether it is a peer review of a Writing Workshop in the classroom or a session with a tutor at the writing centre, a writer can make their ideas clear and decide what to (or not to) write and how to present it by receiving feedback and being asked questions .

With the aim above, I would like to address the following questions: (1) How does a writer respond to feedback and make decisions in dialogue with a feedback provider?; (2) Do the status of the feedback provider and the type of the writing assignment make any difference to dialogue?; (3) What elements make dialogue effective?

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in dialogue in the classroom. Various practices have been implemented, including Writing Workshops, Philosophy for Children (P4C) (e.g. Lipman et al. 1980; Trickey and Topping 2004), Thinking Together Project ("Thinking Together" n.d.), communities of inquiry (Wells 2000) and dialogic instruction in classrooms of science and other subjects (e.g. Mason 2001; Rivard and Straw 2000; Wells and Arauz 2006). According to Howe and Abedin (2013), there have been a considerable number of researches into dialogue; in particular, student-student dialogue has been a popular topic in the last two decade.

Here I would review some empirical studies on the dialogue regarding writing and revision, which is also referred to as writing conferences. Each study

focused on the dialogue between a student writer and different feedback providers such as a teacher, peer students and tutors at a writing centre.

Goldstein and Conrad (1990) noted that dynamic interaction is one of the advantages of writing conferences and analysed the relationship between what was discussed in conference and what was revised in the subsequent draft. The sampling was purposeful sampling (Creswell 2013: 154) to include one teacher and three students as relevant subjects. Data was collected from conferences recorded by a teacher with students' permission and also from copied drafts.

The authors analysed ten transcribed conferences looking for recurring patterns and identified seven discourse features; episodes, discourse structure, topic nomination, invited nomination, turns, questions and negotiation. After finishing the analysis, the authors went through it once independently and once together to establish the reliability of coding (Dowling and Brown 2010: 24). The frequency of the six features, omitting episodes, was counted, and the relationship between conferences and revisions was considered.

As a result, the authors found that the negotiation of meaning, which may reflect students' engagement in conferences, might play an important role in revision, as the topic negotiated during sessions was more likely to be incorporated in subsequent revision and ultimately made the writing better. This pattern was found first in the qualitative analysis and then confirmed by quantitative counting, although the sample size was too small to employ a quantitative method alone.

Regarding writing conferences, peer review is also popular. Guerrero & Villami (2000) observed two ESL students discuss a draft written by one of them. Again, the subjects were sought purposefully and the data was collected from two revision sessions that were part of the normal routine of activities in the course. The writer's first draft and the final draft were also collected. 'Microgenetic analysis' was employed; that is, each of 16 episodes in the transcribed sessions were scrutinised closely to consider moment-to-moment changes in behaviour and the scaffolding mechanisms employed by the students while helping each other. The authors addressed elaborated description (Dowling and Brown 2010: 26), with plenty of excerpts from each episode to establish the validity and reliability of analysis. They consequently found that the reader offered a number of examples of scaffolding behaviour and so did the writer, and as the reader and writer constructed an intersubjectivity, so the writer became more self-regulated. The authors suggested that in peer review the writer and the reader activate the zone of proximal development of each other and both benefit from the dialogue.

A writing centre tutor as a feedback provider is very unique in school or university. He or she is neither a professional educator nor a peer with the same status as students, although peer tutors are employed in a number of universities in the United States. Student-tutor sessions are often examined in order to reveal what is going on during sessions or what kind of interaction is more effective than others. As part of a larger project, Williams (2004) attempted to explore the connection between what happens during sessions and how students revise their drafts. Four tutors, who are native English speakers, and five student writers, who spoke other languages than English,

were involved in the study. The writers were all freshmen and the tutors were one senior and three first-year graduate students. Collected data includes several different materials such as interviews, tutoring sessions, first and revised drafts. This extensive data set should enable the researcher to grasp the whole picture of the interaction in the session.

Coding procedures were established as the follows: quantitative draft-to-draft changes were identified by counting words; the two drafts were rated on a scale of A-F by ten raters to indicate the change in draft quality as a whole; and the transcripts were coded focusing on notations and solutions of problems. Williams found that the response or commitment of student was predictive of the impact on revision and that scaffolding moves by the tutor were effective in revision. These findings are in line with other research on peer and student-teacher dialogue. What is surprising is that the revision did not always lead to higher-rated essays, despite the student making an effort towards better writing. However, as the author noted, there might be a problem of research design, in that the raters marked three randomly given drafts rather than both drafts of a given paper and the reliability of rating was not fully established.

There are only few studies that compare interactions with the different participants. Yang et al. (2006) conducted a comparative research of peer and teacher feedback in an EFL writing class in China and found different impacts for each. For subjects, the study employed two whole classes taught by the teacher researcher; one class (44 students) was for teacher feedback and one class (38 students) was for peer feedback. Here they employed a quasi-experimental design (Dowling and Brown 2010: 47).

Six students from each class were chosen for case study. Data was collected from first and second drafts, feedback on the first drafts, the questionnaire and the teacher researcher's field notes. Teacher feedback was written on the drafts, whereas peer feedback was given in one-to-one oral conversation using the peers' first language, Chinese. The different forms of feedback mean their failure in control of variables, which made comparisons difficult and weakened the potential for generalisation of the results, even though such forms might be more natural in the teaching context (Dowling and Brown 2010: 49). The study would have been more persuasive if the authors had included their justification for this choice.

Whole class data was analysed quantitatively to consider improvement in the quality of the writing and students' perception of feedback. For these, the study used grades scored by the teacher researcher and another independent rater and questionnaires completed by students. Case study data was coded and analysed to identify possible feedback points, successful revisions, and changes between drafts. The study concluded that feedback was more valued by students and incorporated in revision but it happened at surface level, whereas peer feedback was more likely to lead to meaning-change revisions and writers' autonomy.

These studies all include various sources of data and approaches to analysis, succeeding in methodological triangulation (Dowling and Brown 2010: 7). Some of the studies employed quantitative approach to identify the extent to which discussions contributed to revision and improvement of writing. However,

the quantitative approach did not suit the studies which included only a small number of subjects (Dowling and Brown 2010: 45). Insightful findings, such as the attitude change in writers and readers, came from qualitative analysis, and from some quantitatively presented figures that were based on qualitative coding.

In the literature, many studies have been carried out in second language education at university level, while a smaller number of studies have focused on the writing conferences of high school students. As there are few writing centres at high school, especially in Japan, no research has been found that examined writing sessions at a high school writing centre. There has been little discussion about the relationships between the nature of dialogue, the status of the feedback provider or the genres of writing. It would be worth studying these topics.

Research design

General approach

I would choose a qualitative approach to explore the nature of dialogue and its contributions to writing development, by examining a limited amount of data closely. There seems to be no theoretical framework or hypothesis to apply to my setting and the purpose of the study. Therefore the grounded theory approach introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) will be employed to generate a theory from the data of actual discussions between a student writer and a feedback provider, aiming to understand how students and feedback providers experience the process of dialogue on writing (Creswell 2013: 88).

Sampling

The sampling strategy would be theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967), one of the approaches called purposeful sampling (Creswell 2013: 154). The purpose of the study is to explore the nature of discussion between a student writer and a feedback provider. Therefore, subjects who are involved in such discussions will be sought. Student writers who are involved in discussion on their writing with their peers, teachers or tutors will be included. Student writers will seek the peer students, teachers and tutors as feedback providers and they will also be included as participants.

The number of student writers would be three to five. An announcement has been made through posters and the students have been invited to participate in the study. I will attempt to include students who are writing assignments about two or three different subjects. The feedback provider would include peer students, teachers and tutors, two to three of each. Some of the students may have sessions with different feedback providers on the same assignment. Students who are willing to participate will contact the coordinator, one of my colleagues at the school, and inform her of the date and time of the session.

All the students and teachers will be recruited from International Christian University High School (ICUHS), Tokyo, Japan. This is a private coeducation high school and it accepts a large number of students who have lived and been educated abroad before coming back to Japan. Hence, the level of language (mainly Japanese and English) might differ from student to student. The age of students who participate in the study will range from 16 to 18.

All the tutors will be recruited from the writing centre at ICUHS. It is located in the school and all the students are encouraged, not required, to bring their writing of any kind from any phase of the writing process. Each one-to-one session lasts about 20 minutes. Students are invited to book an appointment either lunchtime or after school, but they can drop in if the session slot is available. The tutors are undergraduate or postgraduate students of International Christian University, to which ICUHS is affiliated. The age of the tutors will range from 22 to 34. How old the tutor is and how much older he or she is than the student should be taken into account, since it might influence the relationship between a student writer and a tutor.

The sample size might be too small for grounded theory approach, in which it was recommended to include 20 to 30 individuals or more (Creswell 2013: 157). However, time constraints would make it difficult to include more than ten participants. I would rather limit the number of subjects and examine the data more deeply.

Data collection

Data collection will be implemented at ICUHS. It includes recorded sessions, unstructured interviews, and first and revised drafts. The coordinator or the participants themselves will audiotape the session, which will last about 20 minutes. The digital files of the recorded sessions will be transmitted via the Internet to me, and I will transcribe them. Notes taken during the session, first drafts and revised drafts will be collected with the student writers' permission. We will hopefully collect the records on two different assignments or more from each type of session (peer, tutor and teacher).

Unstructured interviews will be conducted by me on Skype on the other day. In the unstructured interviews, although there would be some agenda to address the questions that have arisen out of the initial data analysis, the questions will be open and the format will be flexible, to observe the interviewees' perception and the meaning they have made in the sessions (Dowling and Brown 2010: 78). Each interview will last about 30 minutes and will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Transcriptions will be shown to the participants and some comments and corrections by them might be provided. For instance, unclear words, actions during silences and the intentions of the utterances might be annotated upon the transcripts. Of course there could be a limitation and distortion of human memory, thus this annotation would be used as a supplementary source.

I would attempt to reduce the intervention and to keep the situations as natural as possible. However, as long as the participants might be influenced by the fact that the sessions and interviews will be recorded, the Hawthorne effect

should be taken into account (Dowling and Brown 2010: 46). Sessions at the writing centre are usually recorded with students' permission for the purpose of training tutors, which may reduce such effect on repeated users.

Data analysis

Data analysis procedures of this study will refer to the grounded theory method based on Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). First, transcribed sessions and interviews will be coded and compared to identify the features of dialogue and broad categories. A considerable number of codes will be generated from several different perspectives.

For example, the student writers' requirements vary. Some are coded in relation to simple editing such as reducing word counts and checking grammar. Others are coded in relation to the structure of writing, which include logical structure and narrative structure as different elements. The tutors' responses to these also vary in contents and functions. An utterance can be given more than one code and the codes can overlap. In this way, the transcripts will be coded line by line and initially these aspects of utterances will be differentiated. This is called 'open coding'(Strauss and Corbin 1998) and will be continued until new code no longer emerges from the data.

Then the number of codes will be reduced and a main category or categories may be defined. The relationships between categories will be also sought, as more data is collected alongside. Although theoretical sampling might be difficult to implement, interviews with participants may be conducted for further inquiries. Additionally, relevant literature would be collected. Memo writing and coding and comparing will be repeated until the categories are saturated. After that, a substantive theory will be generated.

Ethical issues

Overall, the standard of Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association will be followed (BSA 2004). The ethical review form has been completed and approved by the Institute of Education.

I have obtained informed consent from every participant and the principal of ICUHS as the gatekeeper. They were provided with a description of this study and encouraged to ask questions. They signed the consent form only after understanding the purpose and the procedures of the study, and the freedom to withdraw. If another participant takes part, the consent will be obtained through the same process. The consent will be maintained throughout the research process. Thus, when further sampling or data collection is implemented, the consent of the participants will be confirmed at that time.

The participants' anonymity will be assured and any information that can identify them will never be written in the text. Data will be transmitted and stored securely, and kept confidential.

Difficulties

There are some prospective difficulties in this study. It is about the mortality of the subjects (Dowling and Brown 2010: 148). In this study I intend to

collect data from sessions with different types of feedback providers and different types of assignments. However, since the implementation relies on the subjects' consent, the range of sampling could be narrowed if they would not wish to have some kinds of sessions. In fact, while I have collected a few tutor sessions, I have not collected any peer session, nor any teacher session. This is because the student writers were unwilling to have sessions with their peers and teachers. There might be cultural factors that affect this tendency, which can be a subject to examine.

Moreover, it is possible that some of the participants would like to withdraw from the study in the early stages. In these cases, comparison between different conditions would be impossible and the exploration would focus more on a small number of data in detail. As this is not an experimental study, it might be difficult to realise the proposed plan perfectly. However, the maximum effort to achieve it will be made.

Contributions

The research will contribute to the writing education at the high school. The significance of teaching writing in secondary education in Japan is increasing these days, as there is a growing number of entrance examinations to universities that require writing essays. It is also important to nurture students' ability in writing before they join in the academic community or work in society. However, there is little consensus regarding how writing should be taught and what methods would be effective.

An investigating of the dialogic interaction between student writers and feedback providers could reveal the way in which student writers do or do not develop as effective writers. Teachers will be able to improve their own instructions and conferences by understanding the nature and effects of dialogue. More successful tutor training and more useful guidance to peer learning would be possible as well. Also, comparison of different feedback providers would provide new knowledge on writing education. Educators will be able to decide how to incorporate teachers' instruction with activities with the peers and sessions at a writing centre outside the classroom.

Additionally, writing centres at high school in Japan are very rare and the writing centre that will be examined in this study is perhaps the only one that is regularly operated in the country. Writing centres are more popular in the United States and in higher education in many countries. Therefore, if the study on the writing centre could reveal whether and how it is effective for high school students to develop as a writer, other schools and educators would be able to learn from the results.

At the same time, the research would hopefully contribute to academic development. If the study could reveal the nature of writing development and the relationships between speaking and writing, it would be a significant contribution to the research on literacy. The writing centre accepts all kinds of writing; not only academic writing such as reports in certain subjects, but also creative writing such as stories and poems. This study intends to include such a wide range of writing. Hence, it may make some contributions to understanding the genres of writing.

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