



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures)

# Reflective practices in collaborative writing of primary school students



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Collaborative writing  
Reflective practices  
Metatalk  
Conversation analysis

## ABSTRACT

In this study we explore how reflective practices function in the process of collaborative writing of primary school students, performing writing tasks in the context of inquiry learning. Previous research has established that reflecting on the writing process and use of metalanguage are significant for developing writing proficiency. The Conversation Analysis-informed exploration displayed different practices. First, students reflect on appropriateness, in terms of redundancy, relevance and style, when accounting for the rejection of a proposal. Second, students reflect on correctness of spelling, punctuation and grammar, which becomes observable in recruitments, instructions and corrections. The findings suggest that students share a strong orientation to certain writing norms that are merely made relevant in a responsive manner.

## 1. Introduction

Collaborative writing has shown to be beneficial for developing writing proficiency of individual students. Writing in small groups or dyads helps learners to emulate and learn from each other's writing and regulation processes, may stimulate conceptual learning, and encourages critical reflection and a heightened sense of audience awareness (Klein, 2014; Nykopp, Marttunen, & Laurinen, 2014; van Steendam, 2016). Hence, joint writing tasks may stimulate the progression from a novice to a skilled writer, which has been characterized by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) as the transition from a knowledge-telling to a knowledge-transforming approach to writing: "the development of the ability to write [...] as involving moving the student from a natural oral conversationalist to a communicator who could generate a largely shared meaning in the absence of immediate audience" (Parr & Wilkinson, 2016, 217). The writing process of a skillful writer, can be characterized as a form of knowledge transforming, solving conceptual, metacognitive and rhetorical problems (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Deane et al., 2008; Galbraith, 2009; Hayes, 2006) and as a recursive cognitive process consisting of planning, translating and revising (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Hayes, 1996, 2006). Writing thus always requires decision-making about language and communication of meaning (Myhill & Jones, 2015) and accordingly, Chen and Myhill (2016) refer to writing as an act of selecting, shaping, reflecting and revising, thus being a form of metalinguistic activity. Analysis of the different foci in the interaction of young students writing together, demonstrates this cyclical and iterative processes of planning, writing and revising: creative content generation, planning of content, reviewing the generated content, transcription of generated content and process-orientated thinking (Rojas-Drummond, Littleton, Hernández, & Zúñiga, 2010; Rojas-Drummond, Albarrán, & Littleton, 2008; Vass, 2007). When students reflect on generated ideas, the emergence of new thoughts for text content is triggered, resulting in very short iterative cycles, as was observed by Vass, Littleton, Miell, and Jones (2008).

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To become a skilled writer, children need to reflect on both the writing process and the written text: “Many studies on written composition assume there is an interrelation between the act of writing and conscious knowledge and control of the text production and verbal processes” (Camps & Milian, 2000:3). This implies that talking about writing, both concerning process and (intended) product, is a key factor in growth of writing proficiency. However, despite the importance of this aspect of writing, little research has been conducted on how metatalk (Parr & Wilkinson, 2016) may appear in the interaction of primary school students writing together, when no teacher is involved. This paper aims to explore how reflective practices function in naturally occurring peer interaction, in the context of collaborative writing events.

## 2. Background

To date, writing research from a socio-cognitive perspective on the analysis of metadiscourse, investigates spoken and written communication about language and language use in various contexts and with different methods (Grésillon & Perrin, 2014). Studies that were carried out in school contexts, focus for instance on products of reflective writing tasks to conceptualize student perceptions of writing in science education (Levin & Wagner, 2006), or reflections on the composition process, with use of stimulated recall interviews with students (Myhill, 2009). Empirical data on how collaborative writing can be favorable for developing writing skills, including consideration of the role of metatalk, is provided extensively in the context of Second Language learners writing together (Fernández Dobao, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2016; Storch, 2005; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). Studies that analyse verbal metatalk in the context of writing activities in regular school contexts, have primarily focused on guided teacher-student interaction, with a strong focus on teacher talk (Dolz & Erard, 2000; D’warte, 2012; Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson, 2012; Myhill, Jones, & Watson, 2013; Jesson, Fontich, & Myhill, 2016; Myhill et al., 2016), and on metalinguistic (Myhill & Jones, 2015) aspects of writing. The studies demonstrate that teachers’ linguistic knowledge and their management of metalinguistic conversations are favorable factors in developing writing proficiency. However, the studies do not address in detail how children verbalize their reflections on the necessary choices they have to make as a writer.

Interaction about language use is commonly characterized as metadiscourse (Hyland, 1998, 2017; Ifantidou, 2005; Latawiec, 2012), metatalk (Dolz & Erard, 2000) or metalanguage (Jesson et al., 2016; Myhill & Jones, 2015). Parr and Wilkinson (2016) define ‘meta-talk’, being talk about writing, as a mechanism for deepening thinking about writing. Jesson et al. (2016) explore from a theoretical angle how metatalk related to writing, is a tool for learning about writing, and in particular for developing thinking about shaping meaning in writing. Drawing on Vygotsky (1986) theory of concept formation, grammatical terms are considered as scientific concepts: “For the student learning to write, metalinguistic concepts arguably increasingly function as scientific concepts as the student develops an understanding of the meanings in use, generalize their core features and develops systems of relationships between these concepts through mediated use” (Jesson et al., 2016:158). Likewise, the authors regard specific understandings, such as drafting, genres or reader awareness, also in the context of culturally-shaped ways of talking about writing.

Myhill et al. (2013) demonstrate that grammatical pedagogical content knowledge of teachers, allows them to foster the ability of students to discuss and talk about language in precision. The authors claim that metatalk creates a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2006, 2013) in which co-construction of knowledge can be considered as emerging from the process of participating. According to Wegerif, ‘dialogic’ assumes that meaning is never singular but always emerges in the play of different voices in dialogue together. Consistent with this idea, Jesson et al. (2016) consider a dialogic space in terms of different sources of dialogic talk which may inform development in writing: textual sources (concerning the multi-vocal nature of texts), the social interactions about text and writing in the classroom context, and the individual voices of students, talking about and reflecting on their writing (Jesson et al., 2016).

Camps, Guasch, Milian, and Ribas (2000) assert that a student must have adequate knowledge and be able to use specific terms to refer to the linguistic concepts, in order to engage in explicit metalinguistic activity in social interaction. Chen and Myhill (2016) comply with this idea, claiming that “metalinguistic understanding involves both recognizing and identifying patterns of language use, and being able to apply that understanding to regulate one’s own language use and language choices” (Chen & Myhill, 2016:101). Nevertheless, Jesson et al. (2016) contend that the learning of concepts and procedures is not a pre-condition for engaging in reflective actions, but rather a consequence of it when these actions are shaped within a dialogic space. The focus of attention of recent studies on writing instruction is the role of such meta-reflections on writing choices from teachers and students, on the subject of different grammatical levels of narratives (Love & Sandiford, 2016), and metalinguistic knowledge. Myhill and Newman (2016) conducted an intervention study with instructional teacher materials that focused on metalinguistic discussion in the context of writing lessons. Observations focused on how the teachers’ input linked grammar and writing and fostered high quality talk, and on how student responded in these conversations. The study showed that teachers were particularly modelling metatalk through signaling explicit connections between grammar and writing, and paying attention to writer choices and reader awareness. Yet, the teachers were not able to create dialogic spaces to enhance the students’ own capacity to think reflect on their writing. The researchers consequently claim that teachers should learn how to adopt more open dialogic discourse roles.

Summarizing, metadiscursive activities are acknowledged to be conducive for learning to write, and according to Jesson et al. (2016), dialogic space (Wegerif, 2013) can be considered to function as sites for learning about using language for writing. Dialogue is not only a tool for reasoning, but a desirable pedagogical outcome in itself (Parr & Wilkinson, 2016). In collaborative writing, these dialogic spaces may occur in peer dialogue (Mercer & Littleton, 2013; Rojas-Drummond et al., 2010). However, little is currently known about the occurrence and function of reflective practices, regarding both text content and linguistic issues, in naturally occurring peer interaction of young writers during joint text production. Our paper will address this issue, from a socio-cognitive perspective on writing (Donahue & Lillis, 2014), based on data from primary school students writing various texts in the context of inquiry learning.

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