



# Nature and function of proposals in collaborative writing of primary school students

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## ABSTRACT

The nature and function of proposals in collaborative writing of primary school students was studied from a sociocultural, interactional perspective, using data from 33 writing events in the context of inquiry learning. Five main targets of proposals were identified: content, procedure, translation, text structure and layout. We demonstrate how proposals are designed in different declarative and interrogative constructions. The objective of a proposal appears to be related to both the syntactical design, and the ways in which participants respond to proposals. Proposals for content and translation generate extensive discourse, in contrast to procedural proposals. Writing down the agreed words or sentences occurs in various sequential positions and consequently performs a different function in the joint construction of text. The results enhance our understanding of how primary school students collaboratively write texts.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Rojas-Drummond, Littleton, Hernández, and Zúñiga (2010), writing is a sociocultural process, with learning taking place in specific cultural contexts and institutional settings. From a sociocultural point of view, education and cognitive development are considered as cultural processes, whereby knowledge and meanings are ‘co-constructed’ in the classroom, as joint interactional accomplishments, that cannot be separated from the cultural practices of a community (Tynjälä, Mason, & Lonka, 2001), that are shaped by cultural and historical factors (Littleton & Mercer, 2010). Analyzing peer interaction of primary school students (aged 8–12 years old) who are writing together, may consequently contribute to understanding how students participate in this learning process. “Ethnographic observations involve an approach that focuses on understanding what members need to know, do, predict and interpret in order to participate in the construction of ongoing events of life within a social group, through which cultural knowledge is developed” (Freebody, 2003:76).

Collaborative writing is a form of cooperation in which participants work in pairs or small groups to produce a jointly written

text, sharing responsibility for the whole process and the final product (Saunders, 1989). To generate ideas for the text, expression of task relevant knowledge (Fischer, Bruhn, Grasel, & Mandl, 2002) is required and when a participant contributes an idea, he expects a response from his co-authors (Nykopp, Marttunen, & Laurinen, 2014). In the course of writing together, participants discuss the relationship between ideas for content and react on each other’s suggestions and explanations (Vass, Littleton, Miell, & Jones, 2008). In the same manner, participants handle issues regarding procedural aspects and linguistic issues (Storch, 2005), like formulation, writing conventions and text structure. Writing in small groups or dyads may consequently promote writing skills, conceptual comprehension, understanding of content knowledge and reflective thinking (Nykopp et al., 2014). What becomes clear from these studies, is that collaborative writing may be considered to be primarily a process of joint decision-making. Creating one text together requires participants to take numerous shared decisions. And although extensive research has been carried out on the content and coordination of the talk during writing together, less attention was paid to interactional practices students display as they negotiate for consensus (Siitonen & Wahlberg, 2015). Such negotiations are generally provoked by a proposal (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1987) that is expressed by one of the participants. Thus, studying how students proffer and handle proposals to take shared decisions may generate insightful knowledge on collaborative writing, that can be deployed to optimize conditions for this activity. This paper reports on a study on the nature

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and function of proposals in collaborative writing, informed by Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) which has enabled us to analyze interaction in great detail. Before proceeding to our research, we will provide a theoretical background on both collaborative writing and on proposals in the next section.

## 2. Background

Processes and products of collaborative writing have been studied from different theoretical backgrounds, related to learning-to-write, including writing in a second language, and writing-to-learn in environments with and without computer support for writing (Nykopp et al., 2014; Van Steendam, 2016). Both qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted on writers collaborating to produce text, using a variety of methodological approaches. In a review, Van Steendam (2016) reports that the majority of these studies has shown beneficial effects of learning to write and writing to learn collaboratively. Writing together helps learners to learn from each other's writing and regulation process, and encourages critical reflection, the pooling of resources and a heightened sense of audience awareness, which all may have a positive effect on individual writing. Studies on peer interaction in collaborative writing were conducted from two main perspectives: learning to write and writing to learn.

Studies on collaborative writing from the perspective of learning to write, focus on the cognitive perspective of writing as a process consisting of three recursive phases of planning, translating and revising (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Hayes, 1996, 2011), and models of writing as a form of solving conceptual, metacognitive and rhetorical problems (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Galbraith, 2009; Hayes, 2006). A significant amount of these studies was conducted in the context of second language learning of adults and focus on self-directed or other-directed speech, interaction patterns, the role of peer feedback, attitudes and perceptions of collaborative writing or on comparison of individuals and pairs on text accuracy (Nykopp et al., 2014; Van Steendam, 2016). Storch (2005) studied adult L2 students writing together and distinguished task clarification, generating ideas, language related interaction, structure, interpreting given information and reading/re-reading as different activities that were determined by examining the conversation of the students. These descriptions resemble the so-called episodes, consisting of specific activities (by the authors referred to as speech turns), that Marttunen and Laurinen (2012) observed in L1 collaborative writing of university students: steering the group's performance, planning the text, writing and revising the text, topic-related discussion, evaluation, and off-task discussion. Quite similar conversational topics were found in data of primary school children writing together (L1 writing). Vass (2007) distinguished five different foci in the interaction of young writers in primary school. Four were centred around the text: creative content generation, planning of content, reviewing the generated content and transcription of generated content. The fifth focus, labelled process-orientated thinking, is related to practical aspects of the writing together, for instance management issues, strategies for collaboration, or the use of technical equipment. An earlier study on collaborative writing of primary school children was conducted by Saunders (1989), who studied different tasks for collaborative writing and focused on the interactive structure, labelled as roles and responsibilities the students assume as co-writers, in relation to the writing task. Vass et al. (2008) studied the discourse of collaborative creative writing, and focused on the role of emotions in creative content generation, where among an analysis of overlaps and interruptions in turn-taking. In all studies mentioned above, writers use pen and paper to write their text. A few other studies focused on peer interaction in collaborative writing with use of a

computer. Rojas-Drummond, Albarrán, and Littleton (2008) expose the cyclical and iterative processes involved in children's collaborative planning, writing and revising their stories, in the context of creating multimodal productions from texts. The interplay between talking, writing and computer devices was studied by Gardner and Levy (2010) who analyzed the temporal synchrony and 'matching points' between talking and writing, in the collaborative writing of a multimodal text for a website. The researchers were able to display different patterns in the coordination of talk and action, in which the computer was regarded as a participant in the interaction.

The second line of research on peer interaction in collaborative writing is related to studies on writing to learn (Klein, 2014; Van Steendam, 2016). Chen (2011) studied 5th graders in a science classroom from a knowledge building perspective, in different conditions of using talk and writing: separately, in sequence or simultaneously (see also Rivard & Straw, 2000). The conversation and written arguments were analyzed from the perspective of cognitive processes, using categories such as express, report, share, describe, elaborate, organize, compare, integrate and defend. Overall, studies that focus on the role of knowledge building discourse in the context of collaborative writing, are strongly rooted in the tradition of sociocultural research on learning (Littleton & Mercer, 2010; Tynjälä et al., 2001). From this viewpoint, peer interaction in collaborative writing is mainly analyzed from the perspective of writing as a mediational tool for learning, drawing on the methodology of sociocultural discourse analysis (Mercer, 2004). Characteristics of the interaction are defined in terms of social modes of talking, like cumulative or exploratory talk (Thompson & Wittek, 2016), co-construction and collaborative creativity (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2008) and dialogical interactions (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2010). Rojas-Drummond et al. (2016) studied talking, reading and writing of primary school children, and found that the student's ability to co-construct knowledge and produce a coherent synthesized summary piece of writing, was highly dependent on their ability to talk and think together. The students worked together in small groups to write an integrative summary of three related textual sources. The analysis of the discourse distinguished different episodes of talk, including: inviting elaboration of reasoning, expressing or inviting ideas, reflecting on dialogue or activity, positioning and coordination, and making reasoning explicit.

Analysis of the interaction in all studies mentioned above, focuses on roles of participants and on content and function of discourse, but do not clarify how the students negotiate for consensus on fundamental issues regarding procedure, text content and linguistic issues. In conversation, such negotiations generally start with a proposal, being an initiating action that involves the speaker attempting to bring about some future action, event or situation (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1987). After a proposal is uttered by the first speaker, a recipient can accept or decline the proposal, or ask for clarification (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1987; Siitonen & Wahlberg, 2015; Yasui, 2013). The recipient needs to deal with the contents of a proposal and also with his willingness to accept it (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1987; Stevanovic, 2012; Stevanovic & Svennevig, 2015). Participants thus orient to two sets of deontic rights: the right to propose and the right to accept and/or reject the proposal. Once a proposal is accepted, the participants may discuss further details or the ability to perform the idea (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1987). Acceptance can be expressed both verbally and non-verbally, and with or without adding something to the initial proposal (Yasui, 2013). When a second speaker declines a proposal he may proffer an alternative (counterproposal). The ways in which participants handle proposals, have consequences for the sequential organization of the talk.

Several studies have been carried out to examine design and sequential characteristics of proposals in interaction (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1987; Siitonen & Wahlberg, 2015; Zinken

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