Applying dynamic assessment principles to online peer revisions in written English for specific purposes

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to explore the extent of the applicability of dynamic assessment with respect to peer written student online revisions. More specifically, it observes how groups of Swedish computer engineering students learning English for Specific Purposes engage in cooperative interactions and negotiations with their peers as they work together towards the revision of a written report. Using Google Drive as a means to engage in their report writing assignment in groups of three, students also discussed their text with another group in a peer response activity through comment insertions. Following a discussion of the progressive scale used to provide assistance, learners' turns during corrections and revisions of linguistic, structural, and content features are analysed. Finally, implications for peer revisions and provision of feedback according to learners' developmental level are discussed in relation to the outcomes of the study.

Keywords: online peer revision, dynamic assessment, interaction, negotiation, text revision.

1. Introduction

Lundstrom and Baker (2009) maintain that students who review other students' texts gain as much from peer response activities as students who merely receive comments from their teachers. As such, student feedback under dynamic assessment principles should provide a practical framework for offering learners the appropriate amount of explanations they need as well as assisting them in peer reviewing on all text levels: language, content and structure. Corrective feedback

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in an interactionist, as opposed to interventionist, approach to dynamic assessment is generally provided on a scale ranging from implicit to explicit guidance, the aim being to co-construct knowledge through cooperative interactions and negotiations between learners and correctors (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004). Dynamic assessment, in that case, reveals both the actual and emerging development of the learners, in other words, their zone of proximal development, as well as helps promote their ongoing progress through tailored mediated assistance. Although Villamil and De Guerrero (2006) pointed out that mediation is not only limited to that of teachers but also applies to that of peers (p. 25), little research has as of yet studied peer revisions under dynamic assessment principles.

2. Methodology

2.1. Educational settings

The students in this study took part in an English for Specific Purposes course where one of the main tasks was writing a technical report on a chosen topic in groups. This study focuses on one of the course elements, a peer response activity where students participate in improving the argumentation of their group reports, producing clear and logic structures in English. All in all, there were 29 groups of students with two to three persons in each group.

With a view of improving learners' writing, text owners were asked to invite a peer group on Google Drive to discuss the form and content of their document by means of text highlighting and comment insertion. Peers were given a set of guidelines to help them provide gradual corrective feedback ranging from implicit to explicit (taken from Thouësny, 2011, pp. 90-91, adapted from Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994, p. 471).

Concerning ethical considerations, data was only gathered from persons over the age of 18. The participants gave their informed consent outlining their rights and obligations. Further, they were informed about the project goals and how the data will be used. In addition, their names and usernames will be protected at all times.

2.2. Data collection

The peer response activities took place within a brief period of time of less than two weeks. The existing 29 groups were first searched for (a) peer in-text editing by manually scanning the revision history of the document and (b) peer interventions and interactions by considering all inserted comments. Comment

blocs, representing an entire discussion on one specific item from either text owners and/or peers occurring in the document, were codified so as to identify the ones containing interactions and interventions from both text owners and peers. Out of the 29 existing groups, 22 participated in the peer response activity; 3 peer groups were investigated in-depth since they were particularly active with 129 inserted comments by the text owners and 36 peer group comments all in all. The comments were investigated from the perspective of the interaction in the 36 comments between text owners and responding peer group.

2.3. Data analysis

Through a sociocultural lens, and more specifically, a microgenetic approach, we explored the students' language revisions to determine the extent to which text owners' and peers' turns appeared to be in line with dynamic assessment principles. The microgenetic approach is characterised by three key properties: (a) observation of the entire period of a change from beginning to end, (b) high density of observation during that change, and (c) analysis of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the change in question (Siegler & Crowley, 1991, p. 606).

The data was analysed from two angles. Firstly, we observed learners' turns and categorised them in accordance with Liu and Sadler's (2003) grid of distribution, in which feedback is classified with respect to (1) area, i.e. global and local, (2) nature, i.e. revision-oriented and non-revision-oriented, and (3) type, i.e. evaluation, clarification, suggestion, and alteration (p. 202). Additionally, all peers' interactions were labelled from L1 to L4 depending on the amount of assistance that was provided, where a level 1 indicates a 'very implicit' move and a level 4 denotes a 'very explicit' comment.

Secondly, we performed a text analysis of peers' comments, investigating the content of the comments more in-depth from the perspective of how the peer recommendations were picked up by the text owners.
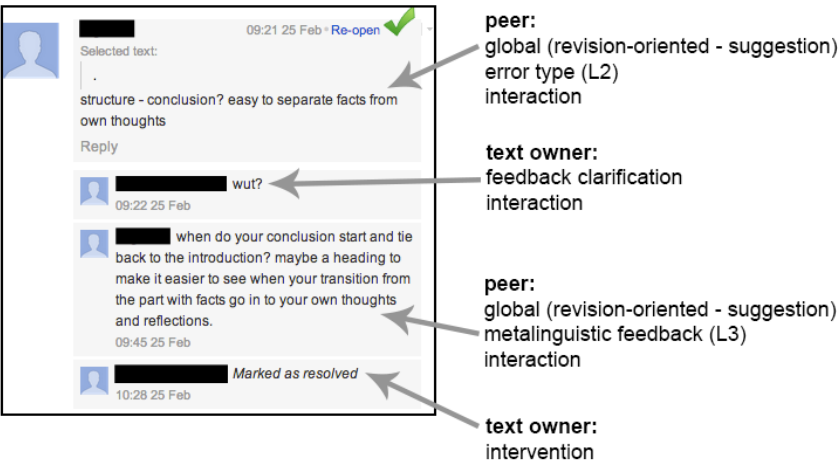
3. Results and discussion

3.1. Progressive scale of assistance

Results show that peers never intervened at the most implicit level of assistance (L1). In other words, they did not highlight words in text without providing any further information. Findings also indicate that peers rarely provided assistance on a progressive scale: 33 over 36 interactions were never followed by the next

step of support as defined in the regulatory scale. Most of these interactions (85%) started at L3 or L4, where peers either provided explanations on how to improve the identified issue or gave the correct answer directly, respectively. The remaining 15% were offered at L2, which designates that peers provided the error type the most. Within all these instances of corrective feedback, 3 of them were followed by the next step of mediated assistance (L2->L3, L2->L3, and L3->L4). Figure 1 illustrates a mediated progression of assistance ranging from L2 to L3.

Figure 1. Mediated assistance ranging from L2 (providing peers with error type) to L3 (providing explanation for improvement)

The above discussion took place between peers and text owners during a period of one day. After providing a comment (L2) that was not properly grasped by the text owners, the peer group expanded their explanations (L3). From the screen capture, the thread was marked as resolved by the text owners. However, the analysis of the revision history demonstrated that text owners also intervened and modified their text accordingly.

The students (a) mostly gave metalinguistic feedback and direct correct answers and (b) did not comply with the principles of dynamic assessment when dispensing feedback to their fellow students. One of the reasons for the former might be related to the difficulty of identifying and stating error types. While some of them are easily noticeable, others, such as misplaced modifiers or coordination errors might be considered more difficult to classify. One explanation for the latter might be related to the fact that students had neither expertise nor experience in dynamic assessment.

Yet, the students did collaborate on the revision of their texts. All peer interactions triggered at least one response from text owners, and we counted 66% of them with a minimum of 2 responses.

3.2. Text analysis of peers' comments

When analysing the content of the comment turns, adapting Liu and Sadler's (2003) framework, the comments were mainly of revision-oriented nature and only three comments were non-revision oriented. In other words, the comments were geared at concrete text improvement.

Out of the 36 peer comment turns, a majority were local (Liu & Sadler, 2003). However, even if pointing at a specific item in the text, such comments were geared at improving the text, for example: "consider removing to increase flow", when pointing at a comma in the text. The global comments were more comprehensive, for example: "The subtitle does not directly refer to anything in the text". Such a comment requires quite extensive text elaboration.

From a peer response perspective, certain aspects of the text were commented, but far from everything in the text. This connects to the purpose of peer response work for writing development. Even if not all errors are covered, it is suggested that feedback that is timely and relevant can motivate learners (Nix & Wyllie, 2011). Peer work was taking place, since it was possible to see that the peers addressed themselves as "we" even if only one of the peer persons posted a specific comment; it was still a joint endeavour to comment the other text.

4. Conclusions

Our preliminary study shows that peer reviewing in a web-based environment such as Google Drive supports text development. Thus, there are implications that peer revision related to providing and receiving feedback is an enriching activity. This type of collaborative writing with technology offers a way of achieving an insight into text from different perspectives, both from the partners engaged in the writing process and from the joint construction of meaning (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007).

This study leads to the idea that applying principles of dynamic assessment in peer review is not as straightforward as it might appear. Peers did not offer corrective feedback ranging from implicit to explicit. They rather provided metalinguistic feedback or correct answers as one standalone interaction. Their interactions, in

any case, generated interventions and interactions from their student counterparts, all directed to the improvement of their writing.

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