Cognitive-cooperative strategies in the writing classroom

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The experience gained in classroom writing, in particular the development of teaching and learning modules of writing for the elementary education offered by some Valparaíso, Chile, schools, from a rather individual perspective and with group activities, encouraged our reasearch team to enrich this material with a cooperative method, which would be incorporated, from the very first moment, into the writing process.

A cooperative method assumes stimulation of the sense of school community, in which all students must interact with one another (i.e., peers interacting with peers), committing themselves to their learning as well as that of the others. That is, the student writers conceive of their writing as a cooperative act in a dialog with others who have talked or written about the topic, or consulting their peers, or in teacher-student conferences.

With the purpose of testing if this method is feasible, first the principles which underpin it were analyzed in depth; second, a teaching/learning module was developed for a cooperative context; and third, such a module was experimentally applied to a group of sixth-grade students (10-12-year-old children). In this last stage, an experimental group, who worked cooperatively, and a control group, who worked individually but who carried out the same tasks designed for the module, had to be selected. In this paper, only the first two stages will be dealt with, since the application stage is being revised.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research calls for the definition of a number of theoretical positions, which account for the incorporation of a cooperative method in the teaching of writing.

Writing as an interactive act

Producing texts means generating meanings, not only, however, as a cognitive effort, where intellectual processes play their role, but also how these processes are given in context. Writers compose pieces of writing for possible readers in an interaction which embraces the whole process. The written text, then, is not a faithful copy of the writer's first mental representation; it will reveal more than what the writer wanted to mean or, sometimes, it will not be able to grasp it entirely. Both the writer and the reader converge into a text which mediates them and, in that act, both concur with their cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective categories. It is an interactive perspective of writing, a setting which admits the contextual pressure and potential, and explains how the writer negotiates it when s/he faces the cognitive processes involved in his/her task, individually as well as with his/her peers.

An effort to represent both the cognitive process in writing and the interaction present in this act can be found in the Flower & Hayes (1981) model, which Flower (1989, 1993) completed with a cognitive and social reference framework. An interactive writing model, based on the work of these authors, attempts to represent the cognitive processes, recursive in nature, which the writer follows as his/her writing is being developed; i.e., *planning, translation* or *production, revision,* and *monitoring* or constant control of the stages. *Planning* involves the generation of ideas, their organization and the formulation of partial goals about the the procedure and the content which are present during the composing process. *Translation* consists in translating the 'drafts' generated during the planning stage in visible language and made comprehensible to the reader. After this process, *revision* is carried out by means of reviews and corrections of what has been produced, of both its deep and surface aspects, not only with self-evaluative but also cooperative purposes, subjecting this production to the judgement of peers and to that of experts.

The processes described above can only be triggered in response to a *rhetorical situation*; that is, certain conditions into which the writing task is inserted and where it is essential to determine the theme or topic, the audience or addressee (reader or readers), and purpose or communicative intention of the piece of writing.

Writing in the cooperative learning setting

Formulating a cooperative method to develop writing means basing it on transactional psycholinguistic principles, whose objective is to enable the students, through their interaction in small groups and guided by a teacher, to produce written texts.

John Dewey (1929) points out that every breakthrough in art, politics, and science lies in the effort of multiple contributions which socially converge into a given historical moment. In this sense, no individual creates or works by him/herself but as an agent of a social milieu. According to Dewey, the findings of scientists are the products of a cooperative action among the individuals who share a common objective and, therefore, go through a collective self-perception process.

Cooperative learning can be defined as a number of interactive strategies which stem from the organization of structured groups, where each learner is resposible for his/her knowledge and is motivated to encourage his/her peers' learning (Kessler, 1992). The building of a favorable setting in the classroom, when modifying routine practices, contributes to stimulating social learning. Class meetings are more relaxed and student participation is increased. Such a setting lessens conflictive instances because it generates dialog and sharing mechanisms; it dynamizes routine and dissolves socioeconomic, ideological and/or ethno-social clashes.

Cooperative work can be defined as a classroom strategy intended to increase motivation and information retention, with the purpose of fostering in the learners a favorable image of themselves as protagonists of their own learning, providing them with tools for developing critical thinking and problem-solving, and enhancing their social skills through interaction. In cooperating, mutual benefit is sought and rewards are shared, and the idea of solidarity, agreement and interdependence among people underlies.

Writing, in cooperative learning settings, should then follow the assumptions of this type of learning, which allows for the reconciliation of those derived from an interactive concept of such a skill. This concept lies far away from monologic writing, which not only constrains the contribution of the search for a common response, but also it constrains the connection that must be found between reading and writing, as two inseparable aspects in the construction of a written text.

COOPERATIVE WRITING MODULE

A. READING STAGE

This stage consists of reading about the topic in groups of five students (Slavin, 1986), with the purpose of acquiring previous knowledge. The teacher thereby hands out different texts, which were published in the local press.

Phase1 Individual reading of the assigned texts within the original groups.

Phase 2 Meeting of students having the same fragment; that is, meeting of those students to whom the same number was assigned, with the purpose of interpreting the texts. The teacher interferes in each group and gives information for the correct interpretation of the texts.

Phase 3 Each member of the original group shares the interpretation of each fragment with the other members of the group, with the purpose of grasping the whole text.

Phase4 Reading check, applying open-ended questions on the topic, the previous knowledge of the topic, the intention or purpose, and the audience.

B. WRITING STAGE

Writing about the topic read in *A* within the same groups of five students already formed, where each member performs a specific role (Dansereau, 1987). The teacher hands out the writing task which the students must carry out.

Phase 1 Each member reflects upon the writing task in terms of the theme, the audience and the purpose, and students 1 and 2 communicate their comments to the rest. Students 3, 4 and 5 listen to the proposal and contribute to it if their own reflections differ from what has been said. The teacher checks if the interpretations are right. If they are, the teacher then briefs the students on the idea-generation phase. If the interpretations are not correct, s/he will lead the students to find the right way.

Phase 2 The members generate ideas concerning the assigned theme. Prior to this, the teacher asks for a list of all ideas and have the students rank them according to their significance. The member having an idea presents it to the rest and writes it down. The remaining members consider it and suggest others, either new ones or ones related to the first idea, or ones related to the new ideas suggested, thus enriching the list.

Phase 3 The groups select from the list the ideas which are relevant to the theme, the audience and the purpose.

Phase 4 The teacher revises the resulting list. S/he makes a chart where the idea proposed and its relevance will be recorded. After that, the teacher asks the groups to organize the ideas contained in that list, according to structuring techniques, such as diagrams, plans, concept networks, semantic maps, content tables, or other techniques.

Phase 5 The teacher analyzes the techniques employed and if these do not match, s/he prompts the students to make the pertinent corrections. If they do, each group then decides upon how the selected structuring technique is going to be realized; that is, the kinds and number of paragraphs, the title, topic sentences, writing development, transitional expressions, etc.

Phase 6 Writing the first draft of the text. One member writes the ideas, without losing sight of the decisions made in the previous phases. The version of each group is formed by the contributions of each member.

Phase 7 The teacher requests of each group to revise their first versions and asks one student of each group to read their own versions aloud to ascertain whether it matches with the assigned writing task, with the structuring requirements every piece of writing should meet, and with conventions such as punctuation and spelling. Each group will apply an assessment guideline to the version they come up with and, according to the results, the group begins to write a new version, which may have as many corrections as necessary, until a satisfactory final version is produced.

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