Children's writing

A holistic view of the young learner has been increasingly emphasized by educational psychologists (Bobbit Nolen, 2020). However, the writing research has focused mostly on variables such as writing knowledge. Montessori learning environments afford unique conditions for approaching the whole child. In this study, I conceptualized children's writing experiences as a complex dynamic system (CDS), comprised of a wide range of interacting components. Using CDS theory tools (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2016), we investigated how writing-related values, beliefs, and knowledge interacted and shaped the experiences of a single child writer. Equipped with multiple positionalities (Montessori educator, parent, and researcher), we followed a 9-year-old in his writing journey in his heritage language (HL; French) over a span of 6 months and 36 writing sessions in a Montessori home schooling environment. Figure 1 illustrates the wide range of variables we captured and the multiple theoretical frameworks we used to define each of them.

Research Questions

1. What are a heritage language learner's experiences in a set of writing sessions?
2. How do the writing experiences of the participant change over time?

Methods

This longitudinal single case study design used a mixed method with multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources: writing samples, learner surveys, interviews, instructor observations and researcher memos. Participant-reported ratings of writing-related values, beliefs, knowledge and subcomponents were plotted across the 36 data points. Time plots of accuracy (error-free verb forms) and fluency (average sentence length (Wolfe-Quinten et al., 1988)) illustrated trajectories of change. Analyzing the participant’s semi-structured interviews using a grounded theory approach consisting of multiple systematic and comparative rounds of coding, memoing and thematic analysis. The CDS conceptual and analytical tools such as interconnectedness, complexity, adaptive and self-organizing processes were the appropriate to capture writing experiences over time.

Results

The participant moved fluidly between two levels of experience: (1) the macrolevel of writing as a stable, positive higher (“I only paid attention to spelling”) and (2) the microlevel of writing each task characterized by situated lower-level fluctuations (“I wasn’t really excited; “It was hard; “I liked it; “It was easy”). The most visible progression over time was in the participant’s strategic knowledge, and more specifically in his reports of planning, monitoring, and evaluating his writing. The dramatic variability observed in the beginning sessions stabilized at the highest level and remained so until the end of the study frame. This stabilization may be the result of a direct explicit instruction of strategies for improvement in spelling and elaboration. Metacognitive and metalinguistic knowledge (awareness of form/mapping) and mechanisms that allowed the writer to adopt tradeoff strategies in writing (“I only paid attention to spelling”).

Discussion

While traditional group-based research generalized results on children’s writing based on averaging their experiences, behaviors and outcomes, this study took an in-depth look at a wide range of variables. Using a CDS lens, I discuss the fluctuation in values, beliefs and knowledge and their subcomponents as evidence of developmental insights into the complex repertoire of feelings and behaviors. The main finding was the child’s awareness of the two levels of experience: the local tasks and the global perception of writing as an important experience with associated values.

Accuracy and Fluency Trajectories

The accuracy and fluency scores of the writing samples mattered in the learner’s reports, therefore, in his writing experiences. As a general perception, the learner thought that his accuracy and fluency scores were always great because he believed that the writing tasks were for practice and errors were necessary to learn more through corrective feedback.

Figure 1: The theoretical frameworks used to articulate the writing components and subcomponents.

Figure 2: A Complex and Dynamic Model for the Writing Experiences of One Learner.

The numeric data represented by time plots show how the subcomponents of value, beliefs and knowledge behaved across the 36 writing tasks.

Key References