

Mutual Feedback Exchange and Peer Assessment During Text Revision in Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT: *This contribution aims to highlight how text revision in primary schools, using collaborative approaches, may be an opportunity for promoting the development of peer assessment skills through mutual feedback exchange. Based upon the analysis of practices relating to text composition (audio and video recorded) collected by undergraduates in Primary Education Sciences (University of Milan-Bicocca) in contexts where writing is considered a socio-cultural practice, it has clearly emerged that both teachers and pupils can play a role in text revision, although it is a complex process. In order for this to happen, however, some conditions must be met. Firstly, there must be a climate based upon dialogue and collaboration within the class. Secondly, collective revision situations must be encouraged, during which the teacher works with the pupils to identify, in a given text, what can be corrected, how it can be corrected and what strategies must be implemented. Finally, multiple collaborative teaching situations should be designed. Text revision must therefore become a fully-fledged teaching subject, useful for developing evaluative literacy.*

KEYWORDS: *Text revision, Primary school, Assessment for learning, Peer review, peer feedback.*

Introduction

For more than forty years, in Italy, the role of formative assessment has been identified as a tool in the teaching-learning process for regulating teaching and supporting pupil learning (Vannini, 2019). The *Indicazioni Nazionali* for the curriculum of nursery schools and the first cycle of education (2012, 19) emphasise that «assessment precedes, accompanies and follows curricular paths. [...] It has a pre-eminent training function, accompanying learning processes and stimulating continuous improvement». However, there is currently strong resistance from teachers to change their assessment practices to promote evaluative literacy that does not identify assessment as the final act of learning. This is precisely the background – resistant to change – to the new Order on periodic and final assessment in primary schools (M.O. 172/2020), which strongly ratifies the concept of formative assessment and assessment for learning (which appear to be used as synonyms in the Ministerial text). It

is a strong legislative act, in the Italian school context, which represents the first step in seeking to dismantle years of purely summative assessment practices.

In the national and international context, the debate around assessment for learning has significantly expanded, identifying assessment as an integral part of the teaching-learning process in a circular relationship (Doria, Grion, 2020) which also encompasses the responsible involvement of the pupil in his/her own learning, the objectives to be achieved and the criteria with which he/she will be assessed by the teacher. In order for pupils to play an active role in assessment processes, the teacher must not be the sole holder of the power of assessment; instead, there must be joint participation between all persons involved in the teaching-learning process (Dann, 2018). Furthermore, pupils must be educated in this assessment role, involving them in understanding and defining the assessment criteria and in situations where they can express evaluative judgments about themselves and the work of their peers (Doria, Grion, 2020).

In this context, feedback represents the glue in the circular teaching-learning process, being a 'device' that «allows pupils to recognise the success of their performance, or the error, and thus correctly to resume their own learning path towards the set objective» (Grion, Restiglian, 2019, 22). Furthermore, as highlighted by the relevant literature, peer feedback plays an important role in learning and responsibility processes for pupils (Boud, Soler, 2016; Topping, 2017; Grion *et al.*, 2017) and presents many advantages, as opposed to feedback provided by the teacher (Nicol, 2013). As emphasised by Nuzzo (2019), peer feedback is less formal than that provided by the teacher and, therefore, more comprehensible and negotiable: while a teacher's feedback can be accepted passively as it comes from an authoritative source or contains corrections whose nature the pupil does not understand, feedback received from a peer is provided in a very similar language to the pupil's own, encouraging the latter to ask for clarifications. Moreover, in providing feedback, students can improve their own self-correction skills. While several pieces of research emphasise the importance of giving and receiving feedback for the development of an evaluative culture (Crion, 2012; Topping, 2017; De Martino, 2017), there are fewer papers that highlight the advantages of peer assessment within primary schools, along with the teaching practices that facilitate the development of peer feedback (Giovannini, Boni, 2010; Restiglian, Grion, 2019). As emphasised by the research, text revision is an effective practice for creating opportunities for pupils to express evaluative judgments on the work of their peers, based upon established criteria, constructing and providing feedback. However, text revision is a very complex process, particularly for inexperienced writers such as primary school pupils (Bereiter, Scardamalia, 1995). Revision is actually based upon a difficult operating procedure, requiring the activation of a multi-stage process that includes the re-reading and critical assessment of what has been written, the

identification of problems, the diagnosis of causes and the production of valid alternatives (Della Casa, 1994). The verification and self-assessment operations required during revision therefore involve meta-linguistic reflection and meta-learning processes that are not easily activated for some primary school pupils, particularly those at the beginning of their school career. Precisely due to this complexity, inexpert writers, when carrying out revision, often neglect semantic, organisational and pragmatic aspects found in the deeper dimensions of the text. Their revision is characterised by superficial interventions (editing) on spelling, grammar and punctuation (Mandelli, Roviola, 1997). In order for pupils to learn to provide effective feedback, revision must therefore become a fully-fledged teaching subject in order to reflect on who must correct, what must be corrected and what strategies must be implemented.

1. Purpose and methodology

The purpose of this work is to identify the characteristics of the learning environment for the development of assessment literacy and the promotion of peer feedback through text revision practices.

The data reported here were obtained from direct observation of teaching-learning practices on written composition carried out by primary school teachers. The observed contexts share an idea of the teaching-learning process that can be attributed to a mainly socio-constructivist approach in which writing is considered a socio-cultural practice. In these situations, opportunities for textual composition are offered from the first year class, even if the children do not yet possess conventional writing. Pupils are asked to write texts collectively, in small groups, in pairs or individually, for a precise purpose and recipient. Such practices are widely documented in Primary Education Sciences theses at the University of Milan-Bicocca. The observation and discussion protocols reported within the theses were analysed through a coding process: initially, significant units of text were identified in relation to the research objectives. Thereafter, synthetic descriptions of the previously selected parts were constructed only then to identify the recurring concepts and to attribute labels (Mortari, 2010).

2. Characteristics of the learning context

From the analysis of the observation and discussion protocols and coherently with the research on text revision, some characteristics emerge of the learning context which are fundamental for the development of peer feedback and evaluative literacy.

2.1. The class climate

When pupils review a peer's text and develop feedback, whether formative or summative, they necessarily express a judgment on the peer's production. When pupils are at the start of their school career, the teacher must guide this process, creating – primarily – a relational and emotional climate in which this judgment is not seen as a devaluing criticism but as a suggestion for improving the text. From the analysed protocols, it emerges that an effective climate for the production of peer feedback is based upon sharing a certain idea of the role of error in the learning process. In all observed contexts, error is not considered an element that must be eliminated as a problem and a deviation from the norm, but one that should be valued as it manifests a particular way of thinking and provides necessary indications to understand the pupil's cognitive process. This is a constructivist view of error which creates a climate of acceptance and collaboration. In this perspective, each text produced is not considered to be definitive, correct or incorrect, but simply improvable. The revision carried out by pupils on a peer's text is not considered a 'hunt for errors' in a competitive climate but a responsible and collective action to provide suggestions for improvement. Consider this situation in a first-year class.

Manuel and Edoardo (authors of the text being corrected) appear to be offended as their peers are saying that there is something wrong with their story.

T¹: We have to find a way to make the reader see who 'everybody' is. The story by Manuel and his group is now no longer just theirs.

N: It has now become everyone's.

T: The classmates are not trying to ruin the story but to make it better.

K: And to fix the things that don't work very well, those that aren't understood.

This discussion excerpt clearly shows that it is necessary to work on the class climate and to lay the foundations to achieve the successful collective revision and feedback exchange. Some pupils will of course be reluctant to change their text as this means losing part of their work. The teacher's role then becomes fundamental in explaining the role of the peers with respect to the revision (to improve the text and not to ruin it). Furthermore, the conditions are created for everyone to take responsibility for the text as if they were its authors, as confirmed by N. who says: «(The story) has now become everyone's». Pupils are therefore activated as resources – to the benefit of each other – in the teaching-learning process and are intentionally trained to make evaluative judgments through a critical discussion about the error.

2.2. The teacher as a model

¹ From now on, the letter T refers to the teacher's interventions.

When we talk about peer assessment and feedback, one of the issues that most concerns researchers relates to the capacity of students to make assessments that are reliable and useful for the recipients (Liu, Carless, 2006). Such concern grows in parallel with the age of the students: the younger they are, the more likely it is that their judgments will not be so effective in helping their classmates to progress. Furthermore, as stated previously, revision is a very complex cognitive process in which pupils must consider and control many aspects of the text, be clear about the purpose of what is written, the recipient, etc. How is it possible, then, to educate pupils who are so young to provide feedback that is not superficial?

The analysed observation and discussion protocols reveal that another essential characteristic of the learning environment is the role played by the teacher, who must act as a model by way of group work on the blackboard. The teacher must discuss together with the pupils what it means to revise a text, demonstrate what needs to be done in order to correct the work of a classmate and identify the strategies to be used. In this way, when pupils revise a text – their own or someone else’s – they will know what to do thanks to the tools they have constructed collectively.

T: We are no longer working in small groups now but in large groups, that is, we are all working together. Look what I have brought you. This is a poster on which I have transcribed a text, which I chose from reading your workbooks, and we will try to improve it together.

Firstly, we have to focus on the information in the text and how its sentences are organised; don’t worry about spelling errors as there are none, I’ve already corrected them. I’ve chosen one of the texts that you wrote about the chestnut festival. I chose this text not because it was the best, but because it seemed the most useful for this task. I found many things that we can reflect upon.

[The teacher reads the text aloud]

F: It’s my text.

T: Yes, F. it’s yours. Don’t worry if we pick it apart a bit now

F: No, no.

T: Now, let’s start to look at what is missing, what should be changed and, in general, what can be improved to enhance the text. Do you want me to re-read it?

M: No, I already have something to say. I think it is lacking in emotions.

T: The emotions of the writer you mean?

M: Yes, the female writer. F. is a female.

T: Well, yes, of course. I’ll note here at the side the things you tell me and then we’ll try to find a solution for each one.

This example clearly shows that the teacher is acting as a model, guiding these second year pupils in the revision. The teacher explains and displays all steps that are needed: to understand what is missing, what should be changed and what can be done to enhance the text. Furthermore, the teacher shows them what steps to take in order to carry

out the revision: «I'll note here at the side the things you tell me and then we'll try to find a solution for each one». It is not sufficient merely to identify the errors but it is also essential to try and find a solution. Thanks to this step, the task of revision does not become a hunt for errors but is aimed at improving the text collectively, developing the necessary skills to formulate evaluative judgments. Furthermore, in order to develop the capacity to provide constructive peer feedback, the teacher uses a very effective strategy, presenting to the pupils the text to be revised without spelling errors. As this is a second year class, it is entirely normal that there will be many spelling problems and that the pupils, during the correction, will focus mainly on these, implementing a 'cosmetic' and superficial revision (Della Casa, 1994; Mandelli, Roviola, 1997). However, if the aim is to develop, from early childhood, assessment capacity through text revision practices, skills aimed at correcting and assessing more profound aspects of the text, such as coherence, cohesion, pertinence of the text to the purpose, etc. must be encouraged. In this way, pupils are educated to construct more complex and formative feedback for the recipient.

Finally, the lengthy work carried out by the teacher with the entire class, acting as a model, must be aimed at formalising and systematising what has been done through the construction of guidebooks and questions, which will differ depending on the text type. Given that these tools are the result of the work carried out by each teacher with the pupils, there is no common model; some take the form of a guidebook indicating the stages to be completed during the revision process, others are formulated through questions, while others contain assessment criteria established with the students.

T: Before asking you to start your work, I repeat once again the strategic points to assist in the overall revision:

1. Firstly, read the whole text, from start to finish, without stopping
2. Read it again from the start, focusing on each paragraph more analytically
3. Apply the correction procedure to each of the identified elements (deletions, replacements, additions, reformulations, movements, etc...)
4. After reading the text paragraph by paragraph, ask yourself if improvements can be made
5. Re-read it all again from the start for editing.

In this guide constructed in a fourth year class, point three indicates the different interventions identified and applied by pupils during the collective revision; in addition to the deletion of words or sentences, which is quite simple, some pupils attempted more complex interventions such as, for example, reformulation or movement of parts of the text. This requires more complex skills as it involves controlling broader elements of the text than just individual words.

While the indication 'read and re-read' the text is contained in all analysed instruments, the other points differ based upon the age of the pupils and the type of text in question.

T: Now, before we start to work alone in small groups, let's re-read the poster that we have created together entitled: 'What have we done to fix the initial story?' so that you can remember the steps better. These are the phases we identified

- Read the whole story
- Re-read it carefully
- Find the beginning, the middle and the end to be sure that it is a story
- Understand the problem of the characters
- Remove the useless parts that 'have nothing to do with it'
- Adjust the story to resolve the problem, asking yourself: 'Is it clear what I have written? Does the story resolve the problem of the protagonists?'
- Add new parts, if they are needed.
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In this second guide, created by some second year pupils, the steps identified are inevitably more general, given the age of the children; the importance given to the 'problem of the characters or protagonists' and to the breakdown of the text into the beginning, middle and end stems from the fact that the pupils revised narrative texts.

The effectiveness and variety of these instruments derives from the fact that they are constructed together with the pupils, based upon their texts, to make the students increasingly independent in the revision and assessment process.

2.3. The design of collaborative teaching situations

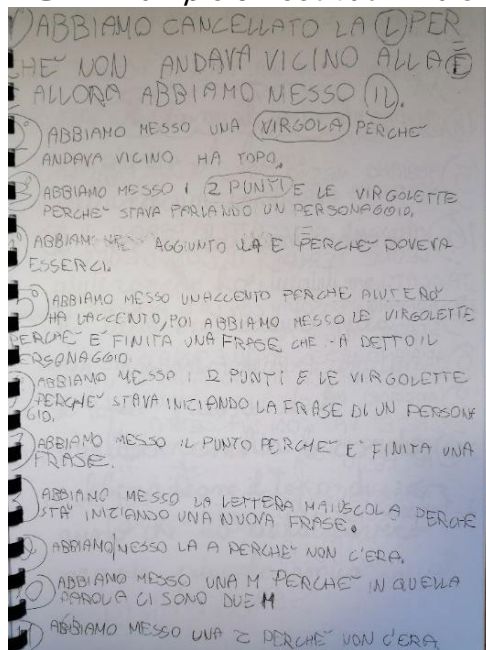
The third and final characteristic of the learning environment identified by the analysis of the observation and discussion protocols consists of the design of multiple collaborative teaching situations to educate pupils in writing feedback. The described and analysed practices clearly reveal the absence of a single model or teaching-learning method for the promotion of feedback. In the observed school contexts, the development of evaluative literacy through revision is an integral part of daily teaching and is encouraged through different situations. As previously described, these practices are based upon encouraging a collaborative, non-judgmental climate focused upon dialogue, with the teacher acting as a model. Thanks to the collective revisions led by the teacher and the instruments created (guidebooks, assessment criteria) pupils can start to attempt to give and receive feedback. In particular, all observed practices promote collaborative learning situations: in small groups, pairs, open classes or peer tutoring.

In line with a reflective approach to the revision process, to encourage the development of arguments with respect to the potential criticalities

of a text, it is essential for pupils to talk to each other so that, through this exchange, they can grasp the different methods of explanations and justifications (Teruggi, 2019).

Collaborative learning situations are particularly useful for lightening the cognitive load required by text revision. In each class, those situations vary depending on the type of text, the reason why it was produced, the class climate, and the age of the children. In the examples given here, the design of teaching situations differs not only in the collaborative method but also in the choice of different instruments and strategies to promote feedback exchange.

FIG. 1. Example of feedback in a small group. Second year class.

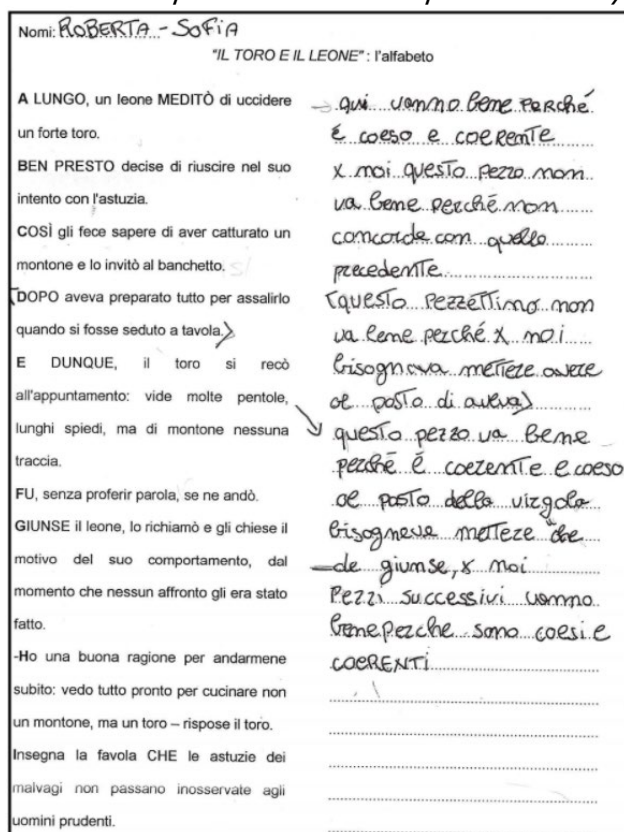


In this first example, the students are revising a peer's text in small groups. As can be seen from the interventions: «We added a colon and question marks because a character was speaking»; «we added a capital letter because it was the start of a new sentence», the feedback consists of a text correction with an explanation of the reasons. Although it is not actual formative feedback that allows the peer to reflect on his/her text in order to improve it, it can be considered an initial attempt at peer correction, preliminary to the development of a peer review. Although the pupils are in a second year class and therefore still very young, it is important to note both the quantity of the corrections identified and the effort to motivate the reason for them. Training such small children to provide explanations that are understandable to their peers is a preparatory exercise for playing the active role that is fundamental to the production of evaluative judgments.

While these pupils, from their earliest years, take part in peer revision and assessment practices, as their age and writing skills increase, their feedback becomes more articulated and refers to specific aspects of the

text. Furthermore, in correcting and in formulating feedback, the assessment criteria developed collectively by the whole class are considered.

FIG. 2. Example of feedback in pairs. Fourth year class.

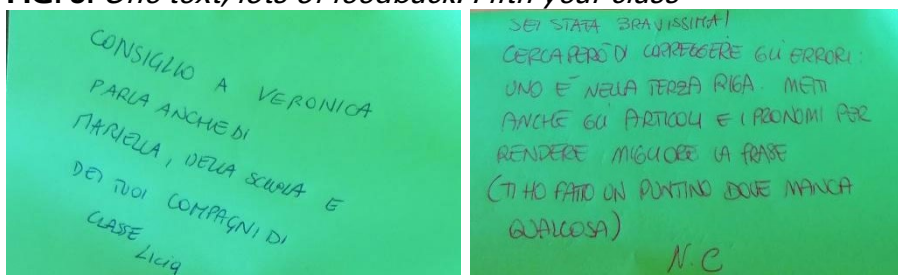


This pair of pupils is revising a peer's text (on the left of the sheet). Considering the criteria previously identified (in particular, coherence and cohesion), they identify both the parts that are, according to them, correct and those that should be improved. Compared to the previous feedback, it is definitely more selective, contextualised and balanced (Nicol, 2009) while the suggestions regarding how the peer can improve the text are weak.

While, in the examples described above, the author of the text received feedback from a group or from a pair of classmates, situations have also been analysed in which the author of the text receives numerous pieces of feedback from peers. Fig. 3 shows the post-it notes that peers attach to a classmate's text: the teacher's strategy is to stick the texts to the classroom walls and let classmates freely attach their feedback. The benefit of this teaching situation is that each author receives multiple critical and improving comments on his/her text.

By combining the content of the different post-it notes, articulated feedback is provided which touches upon the different elements of the text. In addition to positive reinforcement, some suggestions are given on the aspects to be improved and to be expanded and indications are given to identify errors.

FIG. 3. *One text, lots of feedback. Fifth year class*



Concluding remarks

From this analysis, it can be seen that text revision can be a teaching situation favourable to promoting evaluative literacy through the formulation of peer feedback. From the earliest years of primary school, text revision has been considered a teaching subject and offered on an ongoing basis. The analysed observation and discussion protocols have highlighted that a climate based upon dialogue and collaboration is a common characteristic of the observed practices. A climate was created in which pupils could see that the teacher was not the only person holding the power to correct and evaluate but that each of them could play an active role in the revision and evaluation process. The acceptance of evaluative judgments made by peers was based upon the realisation that revision is a recursive practice and that any text can always be improved thanks to peer suggestions. However, in order to be able to produce complete and effective feedback for the recipient, a lengthy process must be followed in which the teacher acts as a model to demonstrate what it means to revise a text, how the revision can be done, and which instruments and strategies can be used. Furthermore, collaborative situations (in pairs, small groups, tutoring) were found to be particularly effective as they reduced the cognitive load required by revision, allowing for active negotiation and explanation of opinions. Text revision allowed pupils to talk to each other in order to establish the quality of a text and to construct joint assessment criteria. Furthermore, it gave the children the opportunity to train themselves in identifying what can be improved in a text and how to do it: these are fundamental experiences for developing evaluative skills that are required when providing feedback. Thanks to these contextual characteristics, text revision was carried out even with pupils in the first years of primary school, despite them being at the start of the acquisition process of the written language and not yet autonomous in text composition. All analysed practices, despite their diversity, considered writing to be a socio-cultural practice in which pupils were given the opportunity to write for a clear and explicit purpose and for different recipients.

The limitation of the presented work consists of the absence of a research design defined in advance aimed at identifying the effectiveness

of the text revision on the development of peer assessment and feedback literacy. Furthermore, no tools were designed to identify the advantages of the feedback for those who produced it, how it affected the improvement of the texts (their own and others) and self-assessment. This work must therefore be considered a reflection on practices, useful for identifying the characteristics of the learning environment that are necessary to develop evaluative literacy. It is a preparatory work for constructing a qualitative research design and instruments capable of identifying the effectiveness of these practices starting from primary school. To that end, the work presented here has shown that it would be beneficial to merge research on assessment and research on text composition: knowledge of the cognitive processes involved in revision, the difficulties encountered by pupils and the strategies used for promoting effective revision can guide the definition of a future research design on the promotion of feedback literacy.

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