Mobilising memory resources to solve language problems in English project work

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Abstract

Memory plays an inextricable role in developing our knowledge and achieving new insights, yet the social meaning-making practices through which we draw on various memory resources have been excluded from dominant research paradigms on memory (e.g. cognitive psychology). Rather than seeing memory as an individual mental process of encoding, storing and retrieving information, here we emphasise the dialogical “action-basis” of remembering (Linell 2009: 242), situated in discourse and subject to the contingencies of the interactional organisation of social practices.

In this study we investigate how pupils mobilise the memory resources at their disposal to solve language problems in English project work, more specifically those they experience when composing a text in a second language. These resources are distributed among peers and external artefacts (artificial memory systems) (Säljö 2011: 24).

Our data consists of video recordings of 4 pairs or groups (of grade 8 & 9 pupils) doing collaborative English project work in two Swedish secondary schools. Using ethnomethodological conversation analysis (taking in multimodal aspects of interaction), our analyses have revealed that pupils draw on a range of internal and external memory resources to collaboratively solve specific language problems as diverse as testing the sound of language items (audio memory) and using an online dictionary. However, activating previous knowledge is rarely sufficient, since using language items requires a fine-tuned sensitivity to new contexts of use. Yet it is the collaborative discursive reassembling of remembered – but socially distributed – knowledge, often with the help of externalised memory sources, which affords opportunities for new insights and learning.

References