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Helping Students Revise Their Papers

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Abstract

Revision is a natural part of the writing process. Writers think over what they have produced and revise in an effort to express more clearly what they want to convey ***to*** *their readers. Studies have shown that unskilled writers like most students have limited revision strategies and therefore need training to expand these strategies. However, when writing teachers have a limited view of revision in that they focus only on the correction of local level errors, they will be unable* ***to*** *give students the necessary training. This paper strongly recommends the need* ***for teachers*** *to help students improve their revision strategies. For teachers to be able* ***to help****, they will have to reshape their perceptions of writing and revision and* ***to*** *re-evaluate their teaching goals. Only then will they be able to provide their students the necessary classroom* ***environment for strategy training****. Feedback being an important factor in improving student papers, the paper also presents different ways of appropriating feedback. The article ends by inviting teachers to engage in research that would lend insights on have different ways of providing feedback can best succeed in helping students improve their drafts.*

At the tertiary level, students write different compositions, reports, critical analyses, reaction papers, term papers, case analyses and eventually a thesis. Being able to come up with well-thought-out papers that meet academic expectations often hinges on the ability of students to revise or improve

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their papers not only in terms of grammar and mechanics but more important in terms of idea development and substance. This paper will discuss the importance of teaching revision as part of writing instruction by appealing to the nature of writing as a cognitive process and as a means of communication. It will also argue for the need to help students expand their revision strategies based on research findings about the difference in the way skilled and unskilled writers write and revise and about teacher practices that tend to discourage students from making significant revisions in their drafts. Finally, for teachers who may not have been updated in current trends in language teaching, the paper will suggest some areas where they might need to reshape their perceptions about writing and revision and present different ESL (English as a Second Language) practices in providing feedback as a way of helping students expand their revising strategies.

Revision as a Natural Part of the Writing Process

The Importance of revision and the need to help students improve their ability to revise compositions issues from the nature of writing as a complex cognitive process. Hayes and Flower (1977) describe writing as a problem-solving and decision-making process. Writers are constantly making decisions - what the goal or goals are, what ideas to use, how to structure these ideas, how to capture them through language, what word to use, how to keep text consistent with goals, etc. - in an effort make a number of connections involving meaning, language, rhetorical purpose, context and the intended audience. The network of problems and options with which writers have to deal requires them to process and reprocess or think and rethink over what they have written. Zamel (1983:165) also describes writing as "a non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning". These descriptions of writing underscore the none visible aspects of writing which may be as much a problem for writers as dealing with the visible aspects.

In an effort to approximate meaning, writers use three subprocesses - planning, translating, and reviewing (Hayes and Flower (1983). Planning involves goal formulation, generation of ideas and structuring these ideas according to some plan which is used to control the process of actual text production or translating. As writers write, they constantly do review through evaluation and revision. Accordingly, writers use these subprocesses recursively rather than in a linear manner; that is, when deploying any of these subprocesses, they necessarily have to

consult the other subprocesses. For example, when writers review and revise what they have produced, they also have to use their planning and translating strategies.

At the heart of the recursive nature of writing is revision, making it a very natural part of the writing process. Revision can take place at anytime in the process. Although it usually refers to the visible act of introducing changes in the written text (additions, substitutions, deletions and reorderings), it encompasses a much broader view that involves mental planning and evaluation in the light of various constraints that go with the writing task. As writers face problems and make decisions in order to approximate meaning, they have to revise along the way.

Hence, revision is crucial to the building of meaning and consequently the shape of the final product. In fact, it is claimed that as writers write, evaluate and revise what they have written, their understanding of what they want to say emerges, not before it (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1986). Writers do not really know what they are writing until they have written it. They produce text and as they interact with it, they formulate and reformulate and eventually transform whay they have written.

From a pragmatic point of view, why we might ask do writers deliberately revise their texts? Real writing is done for communication purposes. In other words, writing occurs within a communicative context; there is a purpose for writing and there is an audience to address. The context may dictate the form and the genre of the text. These are some of the constraints that go with writing and the nature of revision introduced to text will depend on writers' representation of these constraints. Any conflict arising between text and these constraints will require revision. Thus, an important aspect of revision involves shaping the text to suit the intended audience. In real writing, there is a writer-audience relationship. To meet the expectations of the audience, writers make sure that the audience gets the message; hence, the need for revision. The process of revision allows for the transformation of writer-based texts to reader-based texts (Hayes and Flower, 1977).

The Need to Teach Revising

Although revision is a natural part of the writing process, the ability to control it (and that holds true for the other subprocesses) and use it productively is not automatic. Like any complex mental behavior, it develops through time and practice. What has been described so far applies to expert writing and not nec-

essarily to student writing. For students, being able to use effectively their writing strategies, specifically their revision strategies, will require a lot of practice and training.

Research shows that expert and student writers, regardless of whether they are writing in the first language or in the second language, differ in their ability to use their writing process and their revision strategies (Sommers, 1980; Zamel, 1983). Skilled writers have higher level revision strategies in that they are able to introduce changes that help shape meaning and content. When reviewing and revising, skilled writers give primary attention to content or building meaning at the initial stages of writing, and editing, that aspect of revision involving the correction of surface level features like grammar and mechanics, is postponed to the last stages. On the other hand, unskilled writers have lower revision strategies in that they attend more to cosmetic changes and to features relating to grammar and mechanics (Sommers, 1980). They tend to make revisions only during the first drafting and their revisions, which are usually limited to word and sentence level revisions, often interfere with their writing process.

Through training, writers develop and expand their revision strategies by introducing additions, substitutions, delections and reordering not only on the word or sentence levels but on the paragraph and text levels as well (Sommer, 1980). In this way, they are able to introduce global changes that improve the overall text. However, adequate training does not seem to be available to students when teachers limit revision to surface level corrections only (Zamel, 1985). This practice may be attributed to the influence of Audiolingualism, an approach to language teaching which failed to recognize the cognitive aspect of writing. Learners taught under this approach were expected to come up with a good product right from the start. In their attempt to help students improve their drafts, teachers conscientiously corrected every possible grammar and mechanical errors in their students' drafts, resulting in a practice referred to as the "red-ink syndrome". Many studies have shown the futility of this practice (Zamel, 1985). In spite of teachers' corrections, students continue to commit errors and their drafts do not improve. A damaging effect of this "red-ink syndrome" is its effect on students' view of writing. They think that good writing should come from one instance of drafting and when they are unable to do this, they think that it is because they are not born writers. They fail to see that good writing results from a "messy process" (Chenoweth, 1987) of seeing and reseeing their drafts and producing multidrafts. Shaugnessy (1977) claims that this seems to be the best kept secret in school - which explains why students seem to be satisfied with simply polishing and rewriting their first drafts

before handing them in to their teachers.

Strategy training in revision is consistent with the process-view of learning which sees leaning not so much as a terminal behavior but as a transitional one (Widdowson, 1987). Learners learn when they know how to learn and they can do this if they are given responsibility in exercising initiative, creativity and opportunity to participate in decision-making, relating to the learning process. In the case of writing, learners learn to take initiative and responsibility if they are challenged to expand their revision strategies so that they include additions, deletions, substitutions and reorderings that transform their texts on the global level.

Clearly, there is a need to train students in revising and improving their papers. But how much better their training will be if they get help not only in their writing classes but in other classes where writing is required. Somehow I do this in my other classes. When papers in my TESL and literature classes lack substance or fail to satisfy the requirements of a writing task, I return the papers and ask students to improve. Even papers written by my masteral students are not exempted. Of course, it means more responsibilities on my part and delay in my timetable, but what better way to impress in them the fact that through revision, they can understand better their topic and probe more deeply into it. The results are usually much improved papers and much better grades. Thus, instead of simply being satisfied with papers and giving them barely passing marks or even complaining that students do not know how to write, teachers in non-writing classes can render their students better service by asking them to improve their papers and even pointing out specific areas where improvements are needed.

Reshaping Teachers' Perceptions

Whether students learn and how long they will learn will depend on, among other things, the kind of assistance given by their teachers. Underlying this kind of assistance is a belief system that their teachers hold. For teachers who may have overlooked the process view of writing or who have had a limited view of revision, teaching students how to revise should begin with reshaping their perceptions about the nature of writing and revision. Writing is a means of communication and crucial to the communication process is the ability to say something. But that "something" is formed as a result of complex mental operations. Therefore, teachers have to move beyond just viewing student writing as a display of linguistic skills (White and Arndt, 1993) or as a mere product and to realize that it is a process negotiated in the minds of students.

Since most writing teachers also teach other subjects like literature, it is well for teachers to consider the cognitive nature of writing when requiring papers in their non-writing classes. For example, in literature classes where papers of tentimes involve the reading of literary text prior to writing, asking students to submit their papers within a week or less or asking them to submit too many reports reflects a teacher's lack of awareness of the complexity of writing. In the first place, students have to read literary texts before writing a critical analysis or a reaction paper. Reading literary texts is a cognitively demanding task, too, and takes time.

In connection with reshaping perceptions, it is also important for teachers to reorient their views about errors. Studies on interlanguage (the learner's developing language) show that most errors are developmental and are a natural part of the learning process (Selinker, 1972). Given their limited linguistic repertoire, learners will necessarily commit errors in their effort to negotiate meaning and to test their hypotheses about the language they are acquiring. Thus, it may be necessary at times to overlook learner errors in order to allow meaning to emerge. Helping students develop their ideas means that teachers have to unlearn the habit of immediately correcting errors and learn to focus on the more important concerns of idea development in their students' papers. Zamel (1985) observed that despite the general move away from focus on form to focus on content and communication, teachers continue to correct as many student errors as they can find. My own experience shows that dropping this habit of "error hunting" requires conscious effort and will take some time, even years. This may be true for those who, like me, have been trained during the golden days of audiolingualism. The temptation to backslide is often strong when errors involved are those areas often stressed in language classes: agreement between verb and subject and consistency in tense. But if it is true that the "good" teacher is one who is constantly learning, then it will be worth all the effort for writing teachers to discard old habits if this will enable them to address better students' needs.

For teachers who have become sticklers for neatness, it may be necessary for them to develop some tolerance for erasures, cancellations and smudges in student papers. Overly concern for neatness interferes with the writing process, hence, students should be encouraged to "dirty" their papers if only to make them better. Perhaps as a result of teacher influence, many students in their concern for neatness submit typewritten reports and term papers without proofreading them. Teachers should remind students to take a final stock of their papers by correcting obvious unintentional mistakes and to impress in them the idea that a "dirtied" but comprehensible paper shows more respect for readers than a very neat paper

riddled with omissions, misspellings, typographical errors and very obvious grammatical errors. But, of course, they can give this advice if they themselves learn to put less value on neatness.

Finally, teachers have to reorient their views on what constitutes learning. In considering the possible goals of teaching writing, Leki (1990:58) presents the following questions:

1. Does L2 writing need to be error free or merely free of global errors that impede understanding?
2. Is a legitimate goal of L2 students' writing that it be clear though perhaps prosaic or must these students develop a vivid and varied style?
3. Have we done our job when our L2 students can produce formally correct writing, or should we aim primarily at helping our students grow intellectually as they struggle with the import of their ideas?
4. To what extent do we need to consider our students' varied purposes in learning to write in the second language?

These questions invite teachers to evaluate their goals in teaching writing. In a way, they challenge teachers to view their goals not only in terms of the tangible effects on student papers but also in terms of those intangible effects on the process of cognition. In truth, revision requiring students to rethink may not always result in the kind of improvement that we expect (Beach, 1979). Hence, as to whether it translates in real improvements in students' papers may sometimes be less important than the writer's ability to control "personal choices and the opportunity to discover personal meanings" (Knoblauch and Brannon in Leki, 1990:59).

Teacher Roles

A change in orientation implies a change in teacher roles. As teachers try to discard the habit of error hunting, they will necessarily have to move beyond seeing their role as "judge[s] of linguistic forms" (White and Arndt, 1991) and to consider their role as facilitators of students' learning processes. In the process approach to teaching writing, the teacher helps create "a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment within which students, with ample time and minimal interference, can work through their composing processes" (Silva, 1990:15). In this environment, the teacher helps students develop viable strategies not only for getting started and for drafting but also for revising.

An important role which the teacher has to take is to be a "real reader". The real reader responds to writing as a form of communication, agreeing or disagree to ideas and questioning or commenting where ideas are illogical or unclear, as one would in real communication. The real reader focuses on meaning rather than on form. When students realize that their teachers are interested in what they are saying, their commitment to writing deepens. Furthermore, when they know that their teachers are there not to hunt for errors but to help them clarify better what they want to say, their anxieties about writing are reduced and they cease to see revision as "a form of punishment". One time I received an unsigned note from one of my students stating that for the first time she liked revising her papers because she was not made to feed ashamed of her errors. Not a few students have articulated similar statements in their writing journals. What greater reward can a teacher have than to know that a significant change like this is occurring in her students.

Reflecting on the Process of Revision

One of the successful ways of motivating students is to make them understand why they have to revise. Experience will tell us that students will involve themselves more deeply when they know what they can get from an activity. Thus, it is important to impress students on the importance of revision and what it can do to their compositions.

Helping students appreciate the value of revision may require a discussion of the nature of writing. One activity which usually fascinates students and which I do at the first part of my writing classes is "taking a glimpse" at the writing process as suggested by Arndt and White (1993). In this activity, students are asked to write fast on a familiar topic for about 10-15 minutes. The students' drafts are then inspected and displayed if only to show that some papers are clattered with erasures and changes and that many papers may be disorganized. This is then followed by a reflection of the mental behavior of students before, during and after they wrote. The purpose is for them to understand the nature of writing as a rethinking process involving constant revision and to realize that they have within themselves the unique power to recreate meaning and transform their drafts.

Teacher Feedback to Student Drafts

Providing feedback in the form of comments and suggestions has been a traditional practice in writing instruction. In the process approach to writing, providing feedback to student papers serves two purposes: to promote a writer-reader relationship, thereby creating at least the semblance of a communicative act, and to help students improve their drafts. At the early stages of writing, giving reader-response, that is, a response similar to those that we make in oral communication, is encouraged. Comments like "I certainly agree with you on this point" or "How lucky for you to experience this" are examples of reader-responses. Comments that point out the strengths of the paper are also very much in order. Examples are statements like "You state this very clearly", "This point is well illustrated" and "Good. This is a word we learned in our past lesson. I'm glad you used it".

Given the general guideline that revision should concentrate primarily on global matters or on content and organization at the first stages of writing and to postpone editing only to the last stage, it follows that teacher feedback to help students improve their papers follow this order. Feedback may directly or indirectly invite students to revise. Statements like "Please elaborate on this statement" or "Reduce the introductory paragraphs to about 50 words only", tell students exactly what to revise and are examples of direct suggestions. Such statements as "What do you mean by this", "Don't you think you are contradicting yourself here" and "Why do you say this" invite students to review and think over what they have written and are indirect suggestions. In giving feedback to problems of grammar, asking students to correct every grammar error may prove frustrating. It has been repeatedly shown that learner errors continue to persist despite well-meaning intentions of teachers to help their students by asking them to correct every error. The recommendation then is to focus on one or two grammar features only at a time.

Teacher feedback for revision purposes can be appropriated in three ways: teacher's written comment, teacher-student dialogue using a self-monitoring technique, and teacher-student conference.

Teacher's Written Comments. By writing comments and suggestions on the margins or after the text, teachers are able to provide feedback to the papers of all students. Perhaps the most important guideline is for teachers to write clearly and legibly if they want their students to take their suggestions seriously. Some teachers have shifted to the use of blue pens or pencils, perhaps as a way of

getting out of the so-called "red-ink syndrome".

Use of the Self-Monitoring Technique. Another procedure involves the use of a self-monitoring technique which allows for some form of dialogue between teacher and individual students. Charles (1990), who suggested the technique, used it with adult L2 writers working within an English for Academic Purposes context. In order to get the kind of feedback they need to confront their writing problems, students annotate their drafts with questions or statements that show the areas where they need help. The basic procedure is as follows:

Step 1	Students draft and monitor their texts, then they write their comments and querries on problem areas where they need help.
Step 2	Teacher responds in writing to monitored comments, including other areas which may cause dissatisfaction to the reader.
Step 3	Students respond to teacher comments, rewrite their drafts, monitor again their drafts, and write their querries.
Step 4	Teacher responds to the students' comments.

Whether the procedure stops at this point or continue so that the student will write two or more drafts will depend on the shape the draft has taken, the nature of the paper and the availability of time.

Teacher-Student Conferencing. A very effective way of providing student feedback, and perhaps the most ideal (Charles, 1990) is through conferencing. Instead of writing on the students' drafts, teacher engages each student in a one-to-one conference and the student has the advantage of asking for clarification and soliciting help about his writing problems. Unfortunately, conferencing is not readily available to most students, considering the constraints that it imposes on the teacher. This procedure can be used with "special students", meaning the very poor and very good writers and for those who "dare" to consult their teachers.

Peer Feedback or Peer Conferencing

Instead of the teacher giving feedback to student papers, students may work in pairs or in small groups and provide comments and suggestions to each other's papers. For students, use of peer feedback enables them to receive immediate feedback on their papers; for the teacher, this procedure enables her to attend to more important matters in line with her role as facilitator and coach. Peer feed-

back has great potential in helping students develop their cognitive, social and communication skills, and if done successfully, will prove to be more productive than teacher feedback. But a warning is given to the teacher who will use this for the first time. Expecting immediate results especially from students who are doing the activity for the first time may be unrealistic and can lead to disappointment. Doing peer feedback requires a complex of skills in different dimensions - communicative, cognitive and socio-affective. Crucial to success are socio-affective factors which have to be dealt with before students can even learn to be comfortable with themselves and with working with peers. A more thorough discussion of peer feedback is made in another article in this issue.

Using a Revision Guideline

At an advanced stage or for advanced learners, teachers may opt not to intervene in students' drafts but to ask students to revise their papers on their own, using a revision guideline. An example of this guideline is one found in **Writing: Processes and Intentions,** By Gebhard and Rodrigues (1989: 105-6). The guideline is a series of questions addressed to the writer and can be adapted to the level of students. A shortened version of the guideline is presented below:

A. Consider what a reader's response to your paper might be
your feeling after reading the paper, what you like in it, what disappoints you, possible gaps in your thought processes, any confusing parts

B. Review the overall organization of your paper
check opening, unifying idea and its relevance to the assignment, order of presentation, check conclusion

C. Consider the tone of your paper
evidence of writer's interest in the subject matter, the kind of audience that would be interested

D. Analyze your paragraph organization
relevance of each paragraph to the main idea, adequacy of support for generalization and assertions, use of transitions and sentence openers, documentation

E. Check mechanics and grammatical construction
use of trite, clumsy and wordy expressions, variety of active or colorful words, variety in sentence length, grammar and mechanical errors

Doing Revision within Process Writing

Teaching students to do revision means asking students to engage in process writing which involves the production of multi-drafts, which may require at least three class sessions and even more. The writing sessions may not necessarily involve consecutive days. Each session in devoted to the writing of one draft:

First Session:	Pre-writing and first drafting
Second Session:	Improving content and organization and second drafting
Third Session:	Improving the grammar and mechanics and third drafting

A sequence of writing tasks within process writing is proposed by White and Arndt (1993:7) and is reproduced below. The sequence accommodates the different ways of appropriating feedback to students' papers. If students go through all these tasks in class at least once in a semester, they will at least have realized what it takes to come up with their best drafts.

Discussion (class, small, pair)
Brainstorming/making notes/asking questions
Rough Draft
Preliminary self-evaluation
Arranging information/asking questions
First Draft
Group/peer response and evaluation
Conference
Second Draft
Self-evaluation/editing/proofreading
Finished Draft
Final responding to draft

Conclusion

This paper strongly recommends the need to help students improve their revision strategies as a way of improving their writing. For teachers of writing, it will mean reshaping their perceptions about writing and revision and re-evaluating their teaching goals and classroom practices. Most of the classroom practices discussed in the paper are departures from what usually are used in many writing classrooms and should be additions to teachers' repertoire of teaching strategies. But whatever teachers choose to use in their writing classrooms, it is hoped that it emanates from a genuine desire to help students improve their writing, even if it means more responsibilitieson their part.

As an ending to this paper, I wish to address Filipino teachers and students who might want to do research. Although the practical suggestions have been made by ESL practitioneers and were used in many classrooms, how they actually affect classroom learning and to what extent they improve students' writing are far from clear. Moreover, although some studies have been done in some areas, most were done in foreign soil and were limited in scope. Hence, while teachers are invited to try the suggestions in their own classrooms, they are also invited to do research in order to determine to what extent they improve learning and under what conditions they succeed, especially in Philippine classrooms.

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