Reexamining Revision with a Particular Focus
on the Function of ‘Reading’

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to reexamine the nature of revision with a particular reference to the relationship between revision and ‘reading’ (reading that is conducted in the writing process). Recent process-oriented writing research has assumed that the manner of conducting revision differentiates the skilled from the less skilled writer, and this difference gives rise to the differing quality of written product. However, the problem is that why this difference occurs has not been made clear. In this study, it is assumed that the function of ‘reading’ is the crucial factor which affects the quality of revision to a great extent. Then the study was implemented to scrutinize how ‘reading’ works in the writing process. As a result of text analysis, it became clear that the essays produced without ‘reading,’ especially macro-level ‘reading,’ have certain characteristics compared to the essays produced under the normal condition. Specifically, (1) dispersion of focus, (2) lack of transition markers, (3) digression within a paragraph, and (4) repetitious use of words were observed. Therefore, it appears that the degree of success in ‘reading’ is one of the main causes determining the quality of revision.

1. Introduction

It has been the mainstream of writing research to focus on the writing process, not on the product. This trend derives from criticisms of previous studies, which focused on the product and were unable to answer the question as to how people actually write. Recent research on the writing process has made clear that there are differences between the skilled and the less skilled writers’ manners of conducting revision (e.g., Raimes, 1983). Following this, various attempts have
been made to investigate what strategies the writer uses and to determine how to teach these strategies (e.g., Sommers, 1980, 1982). It is true that the insights gained from these studies have practical implications for today's writing instruction. However, there is a neglected essential; the role of 'reading' in the writing process. Writing is different from face-to-face communication in that there is no audience in front of the writer. Instead, he/she writes the text with due consideration for the readers' background knowledge, expectations, and so forth. In other words, the writer plays the role of reader by him/herself and 'rereads' the text critically (Murray, 1982). The writer then revises based on his/her evaluation of the text. Focusing on the role of this 'reading,' it is legitimate to reexamine the nature of revision with a particular focus on the relationship between revision and 'reading.'

2. Previous Studies on Revision

Much writing research has been conducted to show factors contained in the writing process. Rohman et al. (1965), for instance, claim that writing is a linear process in which the writer proceeds with prewriting, writing, and rewriting in a straightforward manner. However, this model is criticized by many researchers since it cannot explain the substantive nature of the writing process. Later, Flower & Hayes (1981) and others advocate a recursive and dynamic model. These explorations elucidate various factors in the writing process. Among them, there is a widely accepted premise that the quality of revision is one of the critical factors which decide the differences between the skilled and the less skilled writers (e.g., Brockman, 1999). Specifically, it is proved that the skilled writer revises the text from a global viewpoint (e.g., content and organization), while the less skilled writer mistakes revision for editing and only revises the text locally (e.g., spelling and grammar). These findings have been applied to practical writing instruction, notably in the process approach (e.g., White & Arndt, 1991). In this approach, teaching procedures are divided into three stages (i.e., prewriting, writing, and revision), and the learner is encouraged to revise the text at the stage when the rudimental drafts are written. This approach seems beneficial in that it helps the learner realize what the writing process is. However, revision cannot be treated in such a simple way. Fitzgerald (1987) defines revision as follows;

Revision means making any changes at any point in the writing process. It involves identifying discrepancies between intended and instantiated text, deciding what could or should be changed in the text and how to make desired changes, and operating, that is, making the desired changes. Changes may or may not affect meaning of the text, and they may be major or minor. Also, changes may be made in the writer's mind before being instantiated in written text, at the time text is first written, and/or after text is first written (p.484).

The important thing is that revision can occur "at any point" in the writing process. This is
consistent with the keywords in Flower & Hayes' (1981) model, "recursive" and "dynamic." If this nature of revision is taken into account, it is clear that revision cannot be confined to, as it were, the revision stage. Regarded in this light, seemingly improved process approach is still similar to the criticized Rohman's (1965) staged model. This confined assumption of revision in the process approach corresponds with the methodologies adopted in the previous studies. In most of them, there is a tendency to (1) have the subject revise the draft after being given feedback by the peer or teacher (e.g., Urzua, 1987), or (2) have the subject revise the other's text (e.g., Hayes et al., 1987). This means that there is a time gap between when the text is actually written and when it is revised, and that little attention is paid towards the actual on-line revision which is conducted during the writing process. In order to evaluate the nature and importance of revision appropriately, then, it is prerequisite to examine on-line revision.

3. Metacognitive Monitoring 'Reading'

Previous studies focus on the differences of revision between the skilled and the less skilled writers, but they do not mention why these differences exist. Here, Scardamalia & Bereiter's (1987) C.D.O (Compare, Diagnose, and Operate) model, which deals with the on-line revision process, gives a hint. As this model indicates, in the revision process, the writer starts by comparing (Compare) and diagnosing (Diagnose) differences between his/her intention and the emerging text. Then he/she decides what should be revised and conducts revision (Operate). When he/she conducts comparison and diagnosis, he/she has to 'read' in a different manner from normal reading. This 'reading' triggered by metacognitive monitoring (i.e., metacognition) plays an important role in the revision process (i.e., cognition).

Recently, the relationship between metacognition and cognition has been frequently mentioned in the area of reading research (e.g., Kimura, 1999). However, in writing research, the nature of this relationship has not yet been definitively described (Cf. El-Hindi, 1997). Hence, the definition of metacognitive monitoring should be indicated first. According to Uchida (1990), it can be defined as the function which checks the whole writing process and examines whether the process is proceeding towards the appropriate goals. By using this function, the writer is able to tell if something is wrong and to retrieve necessary information. Accordingly, he/she will reread and rewrite what has been written. Discovering the errors by rereading and correcting them (i.e., rewriting) are not limited to the word level such as vocabulary. It also covers more macro-level functions such as rewriting or the addition of new sentences (p.164-5).

As is clear from her definition 'reading' triggered by metacognitive monitoring exerts a great influence on the quality of revision and of written product. The problem is that conducting this 'reading' is not an easy task for the writer. There are two main reasons. First, Kroll (1978) explains this difficulty by utilizing Piaget's notion of the transfer from an egocentric to a centered state. She points out that the less skilled writer cannot reread the text from the reader's point of view,
since he/she is in the egocentric state. As a result, the produced text becomes an egocentric and elusive one for the reader. Once he/she proceeds to the decentered state, however, he/she can conduct 'reading' effectively and produce better writing. This notion is similar to that of "writer-based prose" and "reader-based prose" as described by Flower (1979, p. 27). Put simply, the writer has difficulty in conducting 'reading' because he/she has "privileged access" (Hayes et al., 1987, p. 286). This means that the writer knows his/her own process and product excessively, and this becomes an obstacle. Secondly, Hayes et al. (1987) posits that 'reading' is different from reading in that it requires (1) identification and characterization of the problems in the text, (2) correction of the identified problems, and (3) organization of the text by adjusting to the intended reader's knowledge. Because of these requirements, it is quite a burdensome task even for the skilled writer to conduct 'reading' and revision.

These studies show that 'reading' and revision are closely related. Namely, effective revision can not be conducted without effective 'reading.' However, little research has mentioned this relationship and how 'reading' works in the on-line revision process. Thus, it is indispensable to explore how 'reading' works before considering the importance of revision.

4. Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how on-line revision works, focusing on the function of 'reading.' There are several methodologies such as think-aloud technique (Ozawa, 2000), in which on-line process is explored from the protocols. In this study, on the other hand, the text itself is the object of analysis.

4.1. Procedure

The subjects were twelve graduate students and eight undergraduate students. First, they were asked to write an argumentative essay (Condition A). Then they were given twenty slips of paper stapled together into a booklet. They were instructed to write one sentence on each paper, and proceed to write the next sentence on the next paper. Once they finished writing each sentence, they were not allowed to reread the previous sentences (Condition B). By this technique, 'reading' of the essays produced under Condition B was restricted to the sentence-level (i.e., macro-level reading was suppressed). Ten topics were shown to the subjects, and they could choose whichever they liked. Each essay was evaluated by two trained raters in terms of five categories in Jacobs et al (1981); content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Finally, three subjects who scored high in the first essay (Masashi, Hitomi, and Kenji) were selected and their essays produced under each condition (Appendix) were compared descriptively. Since 'reading' and revision are closely related, it can be assumed that the essay, in which 'reading' does not work, has a different quality from the normal essay. By comparing this difference, it is expected that the function of 'reading' will become clear.

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4.2. Analysis

The average scores marked by two raters are shown in Table 1 and topics chosen by each subject in Table 2. In addition to the scores, which indicate the difference between condition A and B, the difference which appeared in the texts will be analyzed according to the five categories; content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Masashi</th>
<th>Hitomi</th>
<th>Kenji</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Use</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masashi</td>
<td>School uniforms</td>
<td>Money is the most important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitomi</td>
<td>School lunch or lunch box</td>
<td>Traveling alone or in a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenji</td>
<td>Money is the most important</td>
<td>Traveling alone or in a group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, as far as content is concerned, the degree to which the content of the essay conforms to the chosen topic is an important criterion. One of the most striking differences between each condition was in degree of focus. Under the condition A, for instance, Masashi objected to school uniforms for three reasons; (1) financial problem, (2) uniformity, and (3) cleanliness. In contrast, under the condition B, he first asserted that “money is important, but not the most important.” However, focus was dispersed. Specifically, he moved the focus to the problem of morality and concluded that morality leads to a peaceful society.

Kenji’s essays showed the same tendency. Under the condition A, he explained narratively why money is not the most important issue for two viewpoints; (1) the story of people’s mutual cooperation when the Hanshin earthquake occurred and (2) the story of a wife who lost everything in the fire and who was depressed not because she lost money but she lost her memorial photographs. In contrast, under the condition B, he said that he preferred traveling in a small group because he could obtain useful advice (1) when he faced trouble and (2) when he considered where to go. Then he stated that it was good to obtain others’ advice. In addition to the redundancy of these two viewpoints, his concluding sentence, “To avoid the selfish action, I think it is better to travel in a group than to do alone” was not relevant.

Secondly, regarding organization, various devices should be adopted in order to attain
coherence between and within paragraphs. There were two primary characteristic differences between the essays produced under the two conditions. They were (1) lack (or inappropriate use) of transition markers and (2) digression within paragraphs. As to transition markers, for instance, Masashi and Kenji used markers such as "first," "second," and "third" to make the logical development coherent under the condition A. In contrast, under the condition B, they did not use these markers and, as a result, their essays became incoherent. As to the digression within paragraphs, which had a common feature as content, paragraphs tended to display dispersed focus. For instance, under the condition A, Kenji consistently focused on and developed one point (e.g., the story of the Hanshin earthquake in the second paragraph) in each paragraph. In contrast, under the condition B, the focus of each paragraph was dispersed. As is stated in the category of content, his preference for traveling in a group was described by two points (i.e., he could obtain advice (1) when he faced trouble and (2) when he considered where to go). However, these two points, especially the latter point, were irrelevantly developed in each paragraph. The merit of obtaining advice in considering where to go turned into the criticism of selfishness, and the focus became dispersed within the paragraph.

Thirdly, regarding vocabulary, it was assumed that there would not be any remarkable differences between the two conditions, since sentence-level (i.e., micro-level) 'reading' could be conducted even under the condition B. However, a difference was found in the variety of vocabulary. In writing, the writer normally substitutes one word for another (e.g., a pronoun for a noun) except when he/she repeats it as a keyword. For instance, Hitomi replaced the word "well-nourished" with "good for nutrition" and "well-balanced" under the condition A. In contrast, under the condition B, she started her essay with, "I prefer traveling alone to in a group. I have traveled alone and in a group but I think traveling alone is better. When I travel alone..." This repetitious use of words was one of the characteristics pertaining to the essays under the condition B.

Above-mentioned transition markers showed the same tendency as well. For instance, Masashi used transition markers such as "however," "first," "second," "finally," "therefore," "because," and "so" under the condition A. This is considered as the evidence of his efforts to make them variable. In contrast, under the condition B, he used fewer markers such as "however," "therefore," and "in fact." As is clear from these examples, the essay produced under the condition B had a tendency to be repetitious and redundant.

Fourthly, in language use, grammatical knowledge such as sentence construction and agreement of the subject and the verb is required. In this study, the subjects had a tendency to use the same constructions repeatedly. For instance, Masashi attached "for example" near the end of the sentence listing examples, as in "School uniforms have many kinds of them, for example summer uniforms and winter uniforms." This construction was used in both essays, though in the essay produced under the condition B he used it excessively. As for other grammatical items, there was a difference when the grammatical knowledge was required globally (i.e., more than the intersentential level). For instance, under the condition A, Hitomi substituted the word with a pronoun:
Nowadays there are many mothers who have their own job. They are very hard to cope with.... (Bold added).

In contrast, below is an example from her essay under the condition B.

During traveling in a group, I have to worry traveling companion. Sometimes I have a quarrel and fall out with them (Bold added).

In this example, she could not replace “traveling companion” with a proper singular pronoun. Although there are some exceptions, the same tendency can be observed in comparing other grammatical elements in pairs of essays produced under each condition.

Finally, mechanics relates to the skill used in editing rather than revision. Writers must correct surface forms such as spelling. Since this is conducted at the sentence level, there was not any significant difference between essays produced under the two conditions.

4.3. Discussion

As a whole, there are problems such as dispersion of focus, lack of transition elements, digression within a paragraph, and repetitious use of words under the condition B. From these features, it can be concluded that the writer revises the text globally by conducting macro-level ‘reading.’ An interesting result is concerning the language use. From the standpoint of grammatical knowledge, language use depends on whether or not the writer has the knowledge (Cf., Itagaki & Macmanus, 1998), and was assumed not to be affected by the condition. However, there were several significant differences. This can be explained if the nature of macro-level ‘reading’ is taken into account. That is, there is no difference between the conditions when grammatical knowledge is required locally (i.e., intra-sentence level). There is a difference, however, when it is required globally (i.e., inter-sentence level). By the evaluation of this macro-level ‘reading,’ the writer attempts to avoid redundant expressions and make his/her language diverse.

This study shows that ‘reading’ plays an important role in the revision process. This ‘reading’ is triggered by metacognitive monitoring and internal revision is conducted even if it does not appear as the actual revision behavior. Even though the function of this ‘reading’ is taken into account, however, the essays produced under the condition A were far from complete and various errors remained. This is due in part to the writer’s level of grammatical knowledge and in part to the characteristic difficulty of conducting ‘reading.’ In other words, the writer knows his/her writing too well, and does not realize what kind of ‘reading’ is necessary in the writing process.
5. Implications for Future Research and Practical Instruction

In this study, we probed the assumed relationship between revision and 'reading,' and examined how 'reading' works in the writing process. For the purpose, then, the means of analyzing the text as a whole rather than analyzing traces of revision was adopted. This is because, as Shwartz (1983) claims, it is quite a difficult task for the researcher to differentiate the skilled from the less skilled writer solely from the number or kinds of revision (Cf. Faigley & Witte, 1981). There is much previous research which categorizes and analyzes the traces of revision. However, some writers conduct internal revision by 'reading' even if this revision does not appear as traces in the text. In addition, since each revised text element has different importance and shows a different level of skill, it is inappropriate to give equal weight to each revision. Accordingly, it is assumed that not only 'reading' but the several other factors affect the quality of revision. Thus these factors should be explored and treated carefully in future studies. Another implication concerns the possibility of generalization. In this study, the function of 'reading' was explored from the texts produced by three high-scored subjects. This is because, as Chi et al. (1988) states, metacognitive monitoring is actively used by the skilled writer. Thus it was assumed that the function of 'reading' appeared more eminently in the texts produced by the high-scored writers. However, the number of data is limited and can not be generalized. Hence, the further collection of data will be the task for future study as well.

Regarding the implications for practical instruction, one of primary goals of teaching writing is to foster the autonomous writer who can revise and write well-written essays. The results of this study suggest two strategies that might be employed. First, the learner should be taught to diagnose his / her own writing process. As Shwartz (1983) claims, every writer has a “revision profile,” and there is not any absolute strategy which every writer can adopt successfully. Because of this consideration, attention has recently been given to the use of “learning logs” (e.g., Smith, 1996). Once the learner recognizes his/her own process, he/she will be able to utilize appropriate strategies to make up for the weak points in the process. Secondly, time to 'read' the text should be allotted in the course of writing instruction. As is clear from this study, revision cannot be conducted until 'reading' for diagnosis is done. Hence, it is haphazard only to put undue emphasis on teaching the learner to revise the text several times. It is more important to show the learner how 'reading' works and encourages him/her to 'read' effectively.

References


Appendix. Writing Samples

Money is the most important (Kenji)
I don't think money is the most important. From my experience or the story I have heard, I learned that money is not the most important. The following sentences are my opinion.

First, I experienced the Hanshin Earthquake when I was a junior high school student. The neighboring houses were almost all damaged. My house was all damaged, too. Fortunately, the garage of my house was not damaged so my family lived there with my neighboring family whose house was all damaged. We did what we could do for not only for himself or herself but also all. Through the life, I learned how important the help each other is.

Second, this is the story I heard. A fire broke out in a certain house. All of the things in the house was burned. There was no left at all. Later the wife said "It is very sad that we lost everything. But the worst is that we lost our photos. Not money."

Thus, there are many things that are more important than money, I think. We can earn money, but we can't get the help from others easily and we can't go back when we were children.

Traveling alone or in a group (Kenji)
I prefer traveling in a group to alone. However, the group is very small group. Anyway, I don't like traveling alone. Because I can't consult or talk if there were no friends. I can't do if there were only people whom I am not acquainted. I want to consult and talk to my friends openly when I meet the troubles. Maybe there are many troubles in travel. I want advice or help when I meet troubles. Besides, before traveling, it is very good to search where we go with friends. Because we can share the areas where we want to go and need to search. It is very troublesome and takes a long time if one person do it by himself or herself. What's more, we can get other friends' opinion or advice. If there is only one person, he or she can't get other opinions. So he or she can do only what he or she think it is good. However, it maybe not good because it sometimes maybe bad from the views of the others. I think it is good to mix the opinions and decide what to do. To avoid the selfish action, I think it is better to travel in a group than to do alone.