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Revision Strategies of Deaf Student Writers

Sue Livingston, Ph.D.

Deaf high school students at different schools shared second drafts of their own narratives via an electronic bulletin board after conferencing with their respective teachers. This article characterizes the kinds of questions teachers asked during the conferences and the kinds of revisions the students made between first and second drafts. Results indicate that teachers most often ask questions that require student to provide more information; yet these questions do not affect revision as much as questions which require students to rephrase specific language. Students typically either added or substituted words or phrases that showed both similarities to and differences from the revision patterns of inexperienced writers with normal hearing. In the majority of cases, trained readers rated the deaf students' revised drafts better than their first attempts, signifying the central role revision plays in the composition process.

When deaf students revise a piece of writing, what do they actually do? Although much research has focused on error analyses of final written products (Taylor, 1969; Kretschmer, 1972; Charrow, 1976; Ivimey, 1976; Quigley, et al, 1976), studies of the revision strategies of deaf student writers do not exist, even though research with experienced hearing writers suggests revision plays a central role in the composition process. Knoblauch and Brannon (1984), for example, assert that it is during revision that a writer returns to what was written to re-think or re-see original thoughts and, that "deeper intellectual penetration of a subject through additional composing . . . inspire new organizing principles and lines of reasoning (p. 131)." Through substantive revision—which "does not mean copy-editing or, in general, making a given text more presentable—new learning is likely to occur and competence most likely to develop (p.131)." Donald Murray (1978) goes so far as to say that "writing is rewriting (p. 85)."

Investigating what mature hearing writers do when they

revise, Sommers (1978) determined that they make substantive revisions that create changes in large units of discourse. Experienced writers adopt a holistic perspective of revision by asking themselves "what does my essay as a whole need . . . this sense, however, is constantly in flux as ideas are developed and modified; it is constantly 'reviewed' in relation to the parts. As ideas change, revision becomes an attempt to make their writing consonant with that changing vision (Sommers, 1980, p. 386)."

The revision strategies of inexperienced student writers with normal hearing, however, paint a different picture. In Bridwell's (1980) and Sommers' (1980) studies of high school students' and college freshmen's revision patterns, the students typically made surface grammatical and word level changes reflecting concern for grammatical correctness and word choice appropriateness over concern for the reviewing of ideas as manifest in the reformulation of chunks of text.

This current article describes the kinds of revisions inexperienced deaf student writers make—some initiated by teacher comments and others initiated by the students themselves—and reveals whether, in fact, these revisions create better final drafts. Additionally, in an effort to characterize

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patterns of revision that appear to transcend the mode of the writer's dominant language, similarities and differences between the revision strategies of deaf and hearing inexperienced writers are described.

Methodology

High school seniors, 16 to 21 years of age, in five English classes at five schools or programs for deaf students (22 students total) were invited to exchange personal or fictional narratives on topics of their own choosing. Each wrote one story a month, for three months. Every month, these stories were sent to an electronic bulletin board via telecommunications equipment installed in each classroom.

To prepare a story, students formulated a first draft, then met individually with their teachers. These conferences were held exclusively in writing to provide a record of the interaction. Teachers were instructed to pose meaning-based questions—questions designed to clarify ideas rather than to elicit grammatical corrections. Students then prepared a second draft of their story knowing this draft would be “published” for their peers to read and respond to.

Methods of Analysis

With copies of all first and last drafts as well as transcripts of all writing conferences, the researcher categorized all teacher questions into six types and tallied the number of each type that were asked and noted which types most often prompted students to revise their work. She then adapted Bridwell's (1980) and Sommers' (1980) schemes for classifying the revisions of inexperienced hearing high school and college freshman writers, respectively. Any changes from Draft 1 to Draft 2 or subsequent drafts were categorized into one of four operations—deletion, substitution, addition or reordering—and then according to the syntactic level of the revision—either word, phrase, sentence or consecutive sentence level.

In addition, a separate category for all surface feature or grammatical revisions was included. These revisions were either deletions, substitutions, additions or reorderings of specific grammatical forms which did not alter the writer's meaning.

Frequency of occurrence counts were performed for each category of revision for each story each month and a total number of revisions score for each story was tallied and subdivided into teacher-initiated and student-initiated revisions. Percentages of revisions within each operation at each syntactic level were then tallied for each month's stories. From these monthly data, the total number of revisions for the three-month project was calculated, as was the total number and percentage of revisions within each operation and at each syntactic level.

Two trained readers then holistically scored drafts 1 and 2 of each student's story for each month. Without knowing which was Draft 1 or Draft 2, the readers selected the better version, based on criteria considered characteristic of effective, mature writing. These criteria were adapted from Graves (1983) and Kirby and Liner (1981) and appear below:

Sense of Audience: Additional information which provided needed explanation for a reader was given.

Logical Entailment: Logical connections between sentences, phrases or ideas were made.

Word Choice: Words selected were more:

1. *semantically accurate*—words or phrases were used according to their conventional meaning.
2. *varied*—synonyms were substituted for words that were repeated.
3. *specific*—words were replaced with other words which refined a student's idea.

Language Forms:

1. *Sentence Complexity*—simple sentences were conjoined; sentences contained clauses; and subordination was evident.
2. *Grammatical Forms*—pronouns substituted for nouns; changes in verb tense were made; prepositions were used accurately; and sentence constituents (subjects, verbs, objects) were added.

Because this study emphasized the reviewing/re-formulating of ideas, readers placed more importance on meaning-related criteria than to those dealing specifically with language forms.

Once holistic scores were obtained, the researcher looked back to the revision history of the writers to compare and describe the effect that number and type of revisions had on last drafts rated “better” and, likewise, the effect that these revisions had on final drafts which were not rated better.

Results

Teacher's Response to Student's Writing

When teachers asked students about their first drafts, their questions could be categorized into one of six functional types. These six were: **Type I**, which requested clarification of stated, but unclear, aspects of the story; **Type II**, which requested more specific information to fill gaps and thereby offer a more complete explanation; **Type III**, which invited student to go beyond the story to address feelings or connect related experiences; **Type IV**, which directly suggested what students should or should not write; **Type V**, for which answers were already provided in prior drafts; **Type VI**, which were vague (a) or difficult to answer, due to, perhaps, lack of information on the student's part(b).

Most frequently, teachers asked Type II questions, with which they requested students to provide more specific information to fill gaps and offer a more complete explanation. Types III and I followed, with teachers asking these types of questions with almost identical frequency. Types IV, V and VI were rarely asked.

Apparently teachers needed to find out specific information that provided more context and, thereby, a fuller, more integrated understanding of their students' intentions. Teachers additionally tried to expand their student's thinking about issues raised in their writing and also found it necessary to clarify the basic meanings their students were attempting to convey.

Interestingly, even though teachers asked Type II questions most often, Type I questions had more influence on students in revising their work. Their influence was second only to Type IV questions, which one would expect to wield more influence, as they suggested specific revisions. Students would likely consider the teacher's agenda more important than their own (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982). That Type I questions, which

Table 1

Percent of Total, Student, And Teacher-Initiated Revision Frequencies By Operation And Level (Total Number Revision = 699)

Level	Operation												Percent of Total Revisions		
	Deletion			Substitution			Addition			Reordering			By Level		
	Total	SI ^a	TI ^b	Total	SI	TI	Total	SI	TI	Total	SI	TI	Total	SI	TI
Word	5.1	5.0	.1	12.5	11.5	1.0	10.1	9.7	.4	.3	.3	0	28.0	26.5	1.5
Phrase	4.4	4.4	0	13.0	11.9	1.1	17.6	14.2	3.4	.9	.9	0	35.9	31.3	4.6
Sentence	4.0	3.3	.7	7.9	5.9	2.0	12.3	7.3	5.0	.4	.4	0	24.6	16.9	7.7
Consec															
Sentences	1.3	1.3	0	3.1	2.0	1.1	5.9	3.0	2.9	.7	.7	0	11.0	7.0	4.0
Percent of Total Revisions By Operation	14.8	14.0	.8	36.5	31.2	5.3	45.9	34.2	11.7	2.3	2.3	0			

^aSI=Student-Initiated Revisions^bTI=Teacher-Initiated Revisions

asked students to clarify specific language, heavily impacted on revision might indicate that these questions were perhaps the least difficult, i.e., the students knew what they intended to say and needed therefore only to try rephrasing it. Students might be less willing to act on questions requiring the re-viewing or additional formulating such as that necessitated by Types II and III questions, a strategy apparently not exclusive to deaf student writers:

This is not a matter simply of laziness. The resistance is normal, arising out of the anxiety that even experienced writers feel at having to reduce an achieved coherence . . . to the chaos of fragments and undeveloped insights from which they started (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984, p. 130).

It is possible, also, that students viewed Type I questions as signals to correct their work and felt most comfortable doing the kinds of revisions called for by those questions.

Revision Strategies of the Writers

In all, students made 699 revisions during this study. Of these, 574 were student-initiated and 125 were teacher-initiated. Table 1 categorizes these revisions according to operating (reading across the columns) and level (reading down the columns). The most frequently used operations were addition and substitution, in that order; they also represented both the most frequently self-initiated revisions and, likewise, the most frequently teacher-initiated revisions. That teacher-initiated revisions were most frequently additions and substitutions reflects the finding that the questions teachers asked which most frequently prompted revisions were those which asked students to clarify their texts either by adding to it or by rephrasing existing text.

Table 1 also reveals that, of the four possible levels of revision, students revised most often at phrase, word and then sentence, then phrase and consecutive sentence levels, reflect-

ing, perhaps, their attempt to influence the re-viewing of larger thoughts.

Table 2 presents the percentages of surface-level revisions made during the course of this project. All were student-initiated revisions reflecting the emerging abilities of the students to monitor their own use of English grammar. Substitutions of verb and pronoun forms, as illustrated in Table 2, occurred most often.

Effect of Revisions in Creating Better Last Drafts

Of the final drafts written in January, 72.7 percent were judged superior to preceding drafts. In February, the number fell to 58.3 percent, then soared to 85.7 percent in March. Over time, more students produced examples of better writing as judged by trained readers. To investigate the role that revision played in these ratings, revision histories of last drafts which were selected as the better pieces of writing were compared with revision histories of last drafts which were not selected as the better pieces of writing. These comparisons offered a description of the revisions that produce more successful writing as judged by trained readers.

In the majority of cases, those last drafts selected to be the better drafts were products of more revisions, more revision types (categories of revisions), more surface revisions, more addition and substitution revisions and more teacher-initiated revisions. It is important to note, however, that more frequently revised drafts did not necessarily mean that those drafts were *always* perceived as better. Some students who revised less frequently in general for a particular draft when compared with another month's efforts received a better score for the less frequently revised draft. What this means is that, although more revisions in most cases did create better pieces of writing, such was not always the case. In Bridwell's (1980) research, for example, the students who revised most exten-

Table 2

Percent of Surface Level Revision Frequencies (Total Number Revisions = 699)		Percent of Revision Frequency
Preposition	Deletion	.1
	Substitution	1.0
	Addition	.3
Verb	Deletion	.1
	Substitution ^a	2.4
	Addition	.3
Pronoun	Deletion	.1
	Substitution ^b	1.9
	Addition	.1
Plural Marker Addition		.3
Plural Marker Deletion		.1
Conjunction Substitution		.1
Determiner Addition		.7
Subject of Sentence Addition		.4
Noun for Pronoun Substitution		1.1
Subject-Verb Reversal		.1
Percent Total		9.1

^aVerb substitutions were either verb form substitutions e.g. *was* for *were*, or verb tense substitutions e.g. *walked* or *walk*.

^bPronoun substitutions were either pronoun form substitutions e.g. *my* for *me*, or pronoun for noun substitutions e.g. *she* for *girl*.

sively received a wide range of quality ratings. Onore (1983) also reports that more is not necessarily better since the art of revising is in fact the act of reconceptualizing discourse in ways writers may not feel secure in doing. "To reconceptualize their discourses in ways that these writers may not have anticipated nor feel secure in attempting to engage in will lead to multi-leveled difficulties . . . to expect that risk-taking and improvement can occur simultaneously is unrealistic and inappropriate (Onore, 1983). Nevertheless, for this study, more revisions did coincide with holistic ratings of better, corroborating prior research with hearing students which indicate that the willingness to change what has been written in first drafts is "one of the major differences between writers of highly rated essays and the writers of poorer essays (Bridwell, p. 217)."

Similarities/Differences Between The Revision Strategies of Deaf and Hearing Inexperienced Writers

Revision appears to play a crucial role in both deaf and hearing students' composition processes. In the majority of cases, students who revised the most produced better work than did

non-revisers regardless of hearing status. In addition, there was some similarity in the syntactic level of revisions performed. Much like Sommer's inexperienced hearing writers (1980), deaf student writers did not see the need to re-view major chunks of text, as evidenced by their preference to revise at phrase and word levels as opposed to sentence or consecutive sentence levels. Hearing and deaf writers do appear to differ, however, in their use of specific operations and the degree to which they revise at the surface level. Whereas the deaf students in this study revised primarily through addition and substitution, Sommers' hearing writers revised primarily through substitution and deletion. The fact that, unlike Sommers' subjects, who wrote assigned essays for their teachers without the opportunity to hear the concerns of a questioning reader, the students in this study wrote primarily to their own choosing for an audience of their peers after conferencing with their teachers might explain this difference. In other words, they perhaps were more "inspired," as Sommers might say, to revise via addition strategies to ensure that their meaning was being conveyed more fully to their peers. With respect to surface level revisions, while hearing high school students revised most frequently at the surface level (Bridwell, 1980), this was not true for the deaf students in this study; only 9.1 percent of the 699 revisions were surface revisions. Because the teachers in this study attended to the meaning their students were attempting to convey, while Bridwell's subjects received no response to their writing at all, it is possible that students in this study focused on making their meaning clearer instead of focusing on surface grammatical concerns. It seems more likely, however, that deaf students, being less knowledgeable about the surface conventions of English, are also less proficient with their use.

Conclusion

When teachers responded to first drafts of either personal or fictional narratives written by the students in this study, their questions most frequently revealed their need for more information to help them understand their students' intended meanings more fully. Questions which spurred students to revise their work most often, however, were those which requested they rephrase problematic language. Teacher requests for specific language re-phrasing were heeded more often than requests for additional text, reflecting the student's desire to "restrict revision to changes that minimally affect the plan (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984, p. 130)." This is understandable, as stepping outside one's writing to reconcile a reader's understanding with one's expressed and intended meanings is a much more difficult and, most likely, unfamiliar task.

The majority of student-initiated revisions were, in fact, additions (followed by substitutions), indicating the students' abilities to extend text on their own at phrase and word levels. Most often, the more students revised their work, the more likely it was to be judged a better piece of writing by trained readers. Additionally, because the percentage of last drafts judged better increased over time, it can be deduced that students improved their writing with continued practice with revising their work. This supports the theory that revision plays a central role in the learning, teaching and act of writing.

Interestingly, although there were some differences observed in the specific kinds of revisions deaf inexperienced

writers made when compared with hearing peers, (deaf students tended to make more additions, while hearing students tended to make more deletions) these were attributed to the design of the study and to the deaf students' obvious insufficient access to English, respectively. The noted similarities, however, (revision at lower phrase and word levels; the beneficial effects of revision in general) suggest that these strategies are independent of the modality of a writer's primary language and may have more to do with inexperience with writing and the nature of the composing process, respectively, than hearing status. That is, inexperienced writers "may lack sophistication as writers, but they do not lack competence as composers (Knoblauch and Brannon, 1984 p. 112)"—whether or not they can hear. And it is most likely that though continued opportunities to revise written work for meaningful purposes, both groups of writers will eventually gain this needed sophistication.

Implications for Teacher Education

Results of this study show that while teachers primarily ask students to provide more basic information and to clarify their language use, these questions typically are sentence-specific instead of discourse-based. Several stories written for this project, had no clear purpose but rather than addressing this issue, teachers instead chose to ask questions pertaining to specific sentences in the unclear text. What might be a more productive course of action would be for teachers to simply ask their students to explain what happened in their story, conveying to them that a sense of story is missing while simultaneously affording them the opportunity to step back and view again the story as a whole unit. Asking students to consider the forest, not the individual trees, may facilitate revisions which tie a piece together rather than patch up parts. As Sommers (1980) states with respect to hearing student writers, "the students do not have strategies for handling the whole essay. They lack procedures or heuristics to help them reorder lines of reasoning or ask questions about their purposes and readers (p. 380)."

Additionally, rather than holding a written conference with students about their stories, some teachers chose to comment directly on a student's first draft. This prevented students from responding to their teachers' questions and created a situation whereby students would revise their drafts without the chance to respond to the teacher. In several cases, it was obvious from the students' revisions that they had not understood the teachers' questions. This resulted in students second-guessing their teachers, creating even more problematic second drafts which could have been avoided had some conferencing transpired prior to the students' writing of their second drafts.

The culprit in these instances appeared to be questions beginning with "Do you mean. . . ." Not understanding what followed, students tended to copy the clause after "Do you mean." Without a chance to respond to questions such as these students do not re-think their intentions and teacher response is of little value.

Finally, teachers who commented directly on student papers rather than holding conferences could not resist the temptation to correct grammar on first drafts. Most often, students mimicked the correction onto subsequent drafts, but in many instances, the error was carried over into subsequent drafts. Essentially, the attempt at correction on the part of the teachers

was not understood by the students and therefore ignored.

It is not being said here that grammar should not be corrected. What is being said is that:

We need to develop an appropriate level of response for commenting on a first draft, and to differentiate that from the level suitable to a second or third draft. Our comments need to be suited to the draft we are reading. In a first or second draft, we need to respond as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning of the text. Comments should point to breaks in logic, disruptions in meaning, or missing information. Our goal in commenting on early drafts should be to engage students with the issues they are considering and help them clarify their purposes and reasons in writing their specific text (Sommer, 1982, p. 155)."

Then "by probing, challenging, raising questions, and pinpointing ambiguities, we can help students understand that meaning-level issues are to be addressed first. This understanding is especially crucial in the ESL writing classroom, where students may be convinced that accuracy and correctness are of primary importance and where, because of their concern with language and their inexperience with writing, they may be trying to attend to all of the various demands of composing simultaneously (Zamel, 1985, p. 96)."

It seems "cost effective," then, to wait until later drafts to edit grammar. It is at that point, when ideas have been formulated as best possible, that the job will be less difficult and thereby more understandable to our students.

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