

# FROM ERROR CORRECTION TO MEANING MAKING: RECONSTRUCTING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF REVISION

By

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## ABSTRACT

*For most students, revision is viewed as a punishment for not writing well enough. However, what if students' negative perceptions of revision shifted to view revision as an opportunity to better develop the meaning and message of texts. Revision, like all processes in writing, is complex, cognitively demanding, and requires students to be able to detect, identify, and correctly change specific errors made during the initial writing process. The real question becomes, how can teachers modify teaching strategies to reshape students' perceptions of revising while also making students more effective and independent at revising writing? This research analysis focuses on answering this question by first examining the literature on how the misconceptions about revision were shaped and reinforced and then by examining research-based strategies that help to reframe students' perceptions of revision while shaping them into independent and effective revisers.*

*Keywords: Writing, Revision, Student Perceptions, Teaching Strategies.*

## INTRODUCTION

Christina had worked diligently on a research paper for her eighth grade language arts class. She spent a couple hours each night working to synthesize information and cite evidence correctly, and was fairly confident she would receive an A or at least a B+ on the paper. However, when her teacher handed back the paper, it was covered with red ink and indecipherable comments. On the bottom of the paper, Christina saw C- and was devastated. Later, students were offered the opportunity to improve the grade received by revising the papers based on the corrections marked. Christina could not imagine having to trudge through the sea of red to rewrite the paper, because the process was painful enough the first time.

This scenario occurs frequently in today's English language arts classrooms, as students' writing assignments are returned covered with red ink and teacher feedback; students are told to rewrite the paper based on the suggested corrections. However, after a paper has been marked and graded, students often struggle to make revisions based on teacher identified errors. In some cases,

feedback can be ineffective and adversely affect students' perceptions of the revision process, as according to Huang (2015), "Research shows that, such feedback often fails to improve learner texts partly due to communication problems in the way feedback is given" (p. 1).

For most students, revision is viewed as a punishment for not writing well enough, rather than as an opportunity to better develop the meaning and message of texts (Lindemann, 2001).

Like all processes in writing, revision is very complex, cognitively demanding, and requires students to be able to detect, identify, and correctly change specific errors made during the initial writing process (Almargot and Chanquoy, 2001; Bartlett, 1982). In order to move through each of these steps, the writer must have the necessary strategies and skills to complete each one accurately. Broad research suggests, teachers should provide students with a spectrum of strategies and skills that address a wide range of errors, but this is where the problem lies. Literacy experts have long supported teaching grammar skills within

the real context of writing, and Huang (2015) agrees. Huang suggests that, teaching revision strategies combined with teacher feedback is more effective for student growth in both writing as well as in revision.

Another critical aspect of this issue is the increased difficulty of writing and revision for students with home languages that do not closely resemble academic language. Students with diverse home languages will typically have more obstacles and greater barriers to the writing and revision process, because of variations in grammar patterns, limited knowledge of, and access to, a broad academic lexicon, and the ability to effectively code-switch between academic and home languages (Zwiers, 2007). Therefore, linguistic diversity is an essential consideration.

There are many reasons current strategies that teachers use, such as the scenario described, do not fully help students become effective and independent at revising to make meaningful changes to their texts. Feedback is good, but without providing specific strategies for appropriate correction, teachers tends to reinforce revision as punitive while also framing revision as the correction of surface-level errors such as mechanics when revision should, realistically, include both surface-level and global changes (Bamberg, 2012; Lindemann, 2001; Sommers, 1980).

The real question becomes, how can teachers modify teaching strategies to reshape students' perceptions of revising while also making students more effective and independent revisers? This research analysis focuses on answering this question by first examining the literature on how the misconceptions about revision were shaped and reinforced and then by examining research-based strategies that help to reframe students' perceptions of revision while shaping them into independent, effective revisers.

### 1. Literature Review

To fully understand revision in its current form, it is important to briefly explore revision from a historical perspective. In language, revision has origins in the practice of classical Ancient Greek rhetoric, and many early cultures focused on spoken rather than written language (Lindemann, 2001,

p. 45). In his teachings on rhetoric, Aristotle focused on the importance of invention rather than revision. Aristotle acknowledged that polishing sentences and shifting the arrangement of words and sentence order could make discourse more effective, but as Sommers (1980) points out, in speech, revision is almost impossible (Bamberg, 2012, p. 80). Therefore, classical rhetoricians usually did not place emphasis on revision. If revision was addressed, it was at the sentence or word-level, thus began the narrow view of revision as surface-level correction (Bamberg, 2012; Sommers, 1980).

Ancient rhetorician, Quintilian, was one of the first teachers to directly emphasize grammar in both writing and speech to his rhetoric students. Quintilian taught his students, "rules for proper word order, agreement, and word choice..." (Lindemann, 2001, p. 44). After students mastered grammar, they were able to begin learning the art of effective rhetoric, both written and spoken. Quintilian's practice of having students master grammar before they learned to write or speak well, is still reflected in many modern classrooms and contributes to the idea of revision as editing grammar and errors in mechanic (Lindemann, 2001; Bamberg, 2012).

The narrow view of revision as surface-level editing was strengthened in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when classical rhetoric was altered to best fit the needs of the Christian Church. In the classical rhetoric of Ancient Greece and Rome, rhetoricians viewed the process of invention as most important, but Renaissance scholars did not believe that, invention was necessary to their writing because they already had biblical truths. Since, God had already invented everything, scholars only needed a way to effectively deliver divine truths to the people (Bamberg, 2012; Lindemann, 2001). Therefore, most writing focused on style and the art of persuasion. According to Bamberg (2012), rhetoricians during this time became concerned with how to dress thought through the use of flowery language, metaphors, anaphora, and parallelism in order to convince new Christians of biblical truths (p. 80). The focus on style limited revision to simply changing words to make writing sound more convincing and on correcting grammatical errors (Lindemann, 2001, p. 46).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the universities in the United States

shifted from a focus on teaching classical languages and rhetoric to teaching classes that would be practical for new professionals. This new focus prompted universities to emphasize the importance of producing coherent English composition. In 1874, Harvard began administering an entrance exam that required all incoming students to, "write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression" (Bizzell, Herzberg, and Reynolds, 2000, p. 4). Over half of Harvard's students failed the exam, which prompted the university to alter its curriculum to include composition classes and remedial writing instruction for all incoming freshman. The structure of the composition classes implemented at Harvard required students to write several essays, which the professor marked for grammatical errors and then required students to correct the errors (Bamberg, 2012, pp. 80-81). This historic model of revision reflects the current-traditional approach applied in broadly in domestic classrooms, which only strengthened the view of revision as grammatical error correction (Bamberg, 2012).

In the 1960s, writing began to be viewed as a process. This movement, often referred to as the, process movement, finally emphasized revision as an integral part of writing (Clark, 2012). Initially, writing was viewed as a linear process starting with prewriting, then drafting, revision, and then editing. This linear view continued to frame revision as an afterthought, since, it was one of the last steps in the writing process (Sommers, 1980).

However, by the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, writing scholars rejected the linear model for writing and replaced it with a recursive model in which revising, drafting, and invention could be revisited at any time during the process (Almargot and Chanquoy, 2001; Bamberg, 2012; Flower and Hayes, 1981). Several scholars created theories and processes for revision. Most notably, Flower and Hayes created increasingly detailed models of the revision process (Almargot and Chanquoy, 2001). In the Flower and Hayes models, authors asserted that, revision could occur at any time throughout the writing process and consisted of two sub-processes: reading and editing. Reading allows the writer to detect errors, and editing requires writers to access specific strategies to remedy the errors (Hayes and Flower, 1980; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Hayes and Flower,

1983).

Another notable scholar who provided fresh ideas related to revision was Donald Murray. Murray (1978) coined the terms internal revision and external revision. He defined internal revision as, "everything writers do to discover and develop what they have to say" (Murray, 1978, pp. 87). On the other hand, external revision was another word for proofreading, which Murray (1978) classified as the antiquated approach to revision, but cited both as necessary parts of the revision process. This view of internal and external revision helped to highlight the importance of meaning discovery as part of the revising process.

While the shift in the 1970s and 1980s was helpful in emphasizing the importance of revision, the majority of early research suggested that students viewed revision as error correction and that teachers continued to reinforce this view. Janet Emig (1971) conducted a study on 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and found that, many of the students in the study were directed to rewrite papers that were marked for grammatical errors. Similarly, Monahan (1984) found that, almost 80 percent of teachers in his study had students rewrite second drafts grounded in a grammar-based checklist. In that study on differences in revisions between expert and student writers, Nancy Sommers (1980) said, "... it is not that students are unwilling to revise, but they do what they have been taught to do..." (p. 103).

Not only did early research indicate that teachers were mainly focused on correcting grammatical errors during revision, but it also indicated that this focus was directly reflected in the revision behaviors of students. Sommers (1980) study found that, expert writers seek to create meaning when they are revising while more novice writing students take a thesaurus approach to revising. Instead of looking for ways to enhance clarity of the meaning, novices look for better words or phrases to make their writing sound better. In another study conducted in 1980, Birdwell compared successful 12<sup>th</sup> grade writers with struggling 12<sup>th</sup> grade writers. Birdwell (1980) found that the more successful writers made more changes in meaning between drafts; where for struggling writers, over half of all of the revisions were focused at the surface and word levels, and the revisions that were made did little to shape or enhance the meaning of the text.

## 2. Analysis and Discussion

Although revision is now taught as an integral part of the writing process, students continue to view revision as punitive error correction (Bamberg, 2012; Lindemann, 2001). In order to change this view, educators must first refrain from certain assumptions about the way revision is taught. Beach (1976) found that the majority of students' perceptions on revision were a direct reflection of what students were taught about how to revise. Sommers (1980) observed that, student writers lacked specific strategies to address big picture issues in their writing, because the focus of instruction targeted surface-level corrections such as subject-verb agreement and verb tense shifts. Therefore, teachers may also have some confusion as to what effective revision truly entails. Lindemann (2001) discussed the confusion between editing and revising stating, "When we want students to polish a text, to clean up misspellings, to change punctuation, to straighten out grammatical problems; we're asking them to edit, not revise their work. Editing usually takes place during one of the later cycles" (p. 191). Lindemann further clarifies that, revision is a process that should occur recursively and focus on matching the author's intended meaning with what is actually on paper (Lindemann, 2001).

## 3. Effective Strategies to Improve Meaning Making

One of the most effective ways to help students view revision as a meaning-making process instead of as editing is through modeling and direct instruction (Bamberg, 2012; Graham and Harris, 1994; Harris, Graham, and Mason, 2003; Lindemann, 2001). In order to reframe revision, the focus of instruction shifts to teaching students strategies that focus on global or comprehensive revisions that affect meaning instead of surface-level editing. Lindemann (2001) suggested instruction that provides direct modeling or a think aloud that makes visible the teacher's personal revision processes, so that students see how their own teachers grapple with revision. According to Lindemann (2001), "Students need to see what rewriting looks like with all its false starts, messy pages, and momentary indecisions" (p. 195). Further, Lindemann states that modeling revision, "is especially crucial for students who believe that writing is a magic talent peculiar to English teachers and novelists" (2001, p. 195). Making the revision

process visible can help students to see that, revision is a difficult task for experienced writers as well as novices.

Direct modeling of revision strategies also assists students in developing metacognitive strategies, such as self-monitoring, which is essential to all stages of the writing process (Myhill and Jones, 2007). Showing students how the more experienced adult writer thinks during the revision process helps students better understand the types of questions they need to ask themselves during revision that will lead to more comprehensible papers and revisions that are complete in making meaning (Beal, Garrod, Bonitatibus, 1990). Although, modeling metacognition and revision strategies for students is beneficial, research suggests that revising skills are advanced over time, and expertise develops when students have multiple opportunities to practice and develop skills in correlation with instruction and feedback from a competent mentor. Therefore, students will need practice and feedback applying revising strategies and will likely struggle to make global revisions consistently until skills are fully internalized (Myhill and Jones, 2007).

In addition to modeling, students also need explicit strategies that help them revise writing for meaning. Often, students realize that something is off in their writing, but lack the know-how to identify and correct errors; likely, this is because they have not learned appropriate strategies to analyze and make such corrections (Limpo, Alves, and Fidalgo, 2014). According to a detailed model of revision created by Hayes et al. (1987), writers choose to revise a flaw only if they have knowledge of how to remedy the problem. As the research has suggested, teaching strategies that promote critical analysis of writing enhances students' ability to become more adept at revision.

When teaching rewriting, Lindemann (2001) suggests several direct revision strategies that teachers can use in classrooms to encourage and target meaning-based revisions. One of the suggested strategies is to have students outline a draft of an essay. Creating an outline of the draft helps students look more deeply at the work and "identify not only structural problems but also decisions about purpose and audience" (Lindemann, 2001, p. 199). Further, Lindemann (2001) explains that outlines also reveal where there are organizational problems, where the

audience might get confused, where more details are needed, and where details should be taken out or rearranged.

Another suggested strategy is the use of templates or sentence frames to evaluate work in progress. Bamberg (2012) reviews the use of these templates as outlined in Graff and Birkenstien's (2006) text called, *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. Templates, or sentence frames, help students focus on both what is being said and how it is being said. An example of such a template would be to have students agree with an idea using, "She argues \_\_\_\_\_, and I agree because \_\_\_\_\_" (Graff and Birkenstien, 2006 in Bamberg, 2012, p. 90). Templates provide scaffolded support to help students to recognize when reasoning is weak or when meaning needs clarification.

In addition to critical analysis strategies, all students must develop a broad vocabulary in order to both understand and express meaning in language. For students who speak vernacular forms of English this can be particularly challenging (Zwiers, 2007). Students need access to academic language to convey intended meaning; therefore, adding supplemental strategies to increase word knowledge and expand academic language provides needed support to enhance expressive meaning making. Rebecca Wheeler's (2008) work on code-switching in the classroom teaches students meta cognitive processes to help students think about their writing more deeply transcribing language from informal communication to a more formal academic communication style to achieve meaning-making within a specific academic context. One strategy Wheeler (2008) applies is an interactive process between teacher and students, where students apply scientific inquiry to written sentences. Wheeler requires students to examine a sentence, look for patterns, and determine meaning. Students then compare and complete a contrastive analysis to scrutinize writing patterns between the vernacular language and formal English. Students are taught to actively engage in metacognition to analyze the needs of the setting and choose the most appropriate language style and pattern for the time, place, audience, and purpose to which they are writing in order to best

communicate the intended meaning and nuances within an academic context. To further extend students' vocabularies and support students in the writing process, word substitutions are purposefully discussed to help students broaden and develop academic language that optimizes meaning-making in their writing.

Peer response groups are another way to encourage meaning-based revision in the classroom (Bamberg, 2012). When student writers read their own writing, it is likely that they are hearing and reading what they intended to write, which may or may not be actually reflected on the paper (Almargot and Chanquoy, 2001). This is where peer response groups can be advantageous. With careful preparation and support, teachers can use peer response groups to help students turn what they intended to write into what they actually write.

In order to ensure that peer response groups are effective, educators should provide specific criteria for each session (Lindemann, 2001). This could include a peer response sheet or modeling a specific strategy to use during the peer response such as the "doubting and believing game," detailed in Elbow and Belanoff's (1989) text *Sharing and Responding*. Implementing strategies and setting criteria for peer response groups that project and frame revision as meaning making allows students to begin reframing their own perceptions of revision.

Teacher feedback is an effective strategy when dialogue is added as a critical component. Teacher feedback with dialogue takes a writer's workshop approach and deviates somewhat from more traditional models that rely on red ink to highlight surface-level errors. Feedback that focuses on surface-level errors adds to the view of revision as error correction in the minds of students (Emig, 1971; Monahan, 1984). As Huang (2015) suggests, students often disregard teacher feedback, because students either do not know how to use it or are unmotivated to do so. Teacher feedback can, nonetheless, be used as a tool in encouraging students to revise for meaning when coupled with the opportunity for dialogue about the feedback (Bamberg, 2012; Huang, 2015). Teacher-student conferences or a writer's workshop approach used during the composition process are one way to accomplish this (Atwell, 1987). These conferences should take place after

the student has written a first or second draft and not after they have submitted a final product (Almargot and Chanquoy, 2001; Lindemann, 2001; Huang, 2015; Murray, 1985). During the conferences, the teacher should provide comments that help motivate students to revise such as, "I am wondering what you mean by this. What are some steps that you could take to clarify the meaning for your reader?" These types of open-ended inquiry techniques encourage revision whereas generalized comments such as, "These paragraphs don't make sense," will only leave students feeling more lost and less motivated to revise (Huang, 2015; Murray, 1985).

Conferences should also allow students to shape their own learning through authentic dialogue with the teacher about the feedback provided. Research that was designed to track the development of revision processes in 381 fourth through ninth grade students (Limpo, Alves, and Fidalgo, 2013) found that students were better at correcting versus detecting both surface-level and meaning-based errors in their papers. Specific teacher feedback with dialogue provides scaffolding by addressing error detection in early drafts. In conferences, students engage in a conversation about teacher-detected errors and discuss ways to remedy the errors. This type of dialogue not only helps students to make meaning-based revisions, but also helps students develop metacognitive strategies to guide self-regulation during future writing.

Changing student perceptions of revision as punitive error correction activity starts with the teacher. Teachers can provide students with direct instruction and modeling of revision strategies that demonstrate, how revision can be used to shape the meaning of a text. After direct instruction and modeling, it is important to allow students to drive their own learning by engaging in dialogue with students about teacher feedback on drafts and by participation in peer response groups where students learn from each other. If students are continually receiving the message that revision is an opportunity to shape meaning instead of revision as proofreading, students can complete secondary school as more competent revisers and, in turn, more competent writers and communicators.

Revision is a significant aspect of creating clear,

meaningful communication. This is significant, because according to a survey of "four hundred hiring executives of major corporations," three of the skills that students entering today's 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce are most lacking include oral and written communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving, and teamwork and collaboration (Trilling and Fadel, 2009, p. 7). Teaching revision, as discussed in this paper, creates opportunities for students to develop these skills. According to the P21 framework, there are three large categories that encompass 21<sup>st</sup> century skills: learning and innovation, digital literacy, and career and life skills (Trilling and Fadel, 2009, pp.175-176). Each of these skills can be directly addressed and practiced through the teaching of revision.

Learning and innovation skills include the ability to critically think and solve problems, the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively, and the ability to be creative and innovative (Trilling and Fadel, p. 49). When revising, students must practice critical thinking and creativity when they are deciding which strategy to use to correct errors. Teachers can also provide a framework for critical thinking by posing open-ended questions in teacher-student conferences, so that eventually, students will be able to construct their own questions, engage in a high level of critical thinking, and self-monitor during revision.

Teaching students how to be good at revision through collaborative work in peer response groups gives students opportunities to practice effective written and oral communication, and to be able to offer helpful feedback and receive clarity on ideas. Teachers can support effective communication within the groups by providing students with models and supports such as peer response rubrics that facilitate discussion of potential changes that need to be made. Students then use the suggestions communicated to them in their groups to make modifications to their writing which will, hopefully, produce a more effective piece.

Some additional ways that teachers can support communication, and other important skills, is by allowing students to collaborate and revise each other's work online. One way to do this would be to allow students to publish their work on a wiki. A wiki is a free tool that teachers can easily setup for their classrooms. Gibbons (2010), a

Kentucky high school teacher, used wik is for the students in half of his class, while the other students were instructed to write papers the traditional way. Gibbons found that the students, who were able to make revisions on the wiki, made more substantial revisions and that these revisions were more concentrated on content changes versus grammatical changes. Similarly, in a study of writing in a service-learning college course, Maloy, Edwards, and Evans also cite the use of wik is as an effective tool in increasing both revision quality and audience perception (2014). Using technological tools such as wikis in aiding revision allows for students not only to develop their skills in communication and collaboration under the learning and innovation category, but also their Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills.

## Conclusion

When educators reflect on practice, many have been culpable in framing revision as an editing activity instead of a meaning-making activity. Revision and editing are two separate processes and that too often are rolled into one category and placed at the end of the writing process. However, teaching writing is much more complex than simply teaching writing as steps one, two, and three.

As experienced educators can attest, teaching writing is difficult, and perhaps one of the most difficult tasks for students in the writing process is revision. Analysis of extensive research demonstrates under current models, when students make revisions they believe this aspect of writing "doesn't matter" because when revisions are made, they are related to mechanics and grammar versus improving actual communication of ideas. Communicating this notion and implementing effective teaching strategies that support students' internalized development of revision that supports meaning-making is essential.

While comprehensive research offers no single definitive answer on how to improve student revision practices, it does provide insights into why students view revision negatively and what strategies teachers can use to change this view. This research clearly demonstrates the importance of using a combination of both direct instruction, teacher feedback with dialogue, and student-

centered learning activities to promote effective revision practices.

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