

A Study on the Revision Behavior of Chinese College Students in English Writing

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Abstract: This study investigates the revision behaviour of Chinese college students in English writing at different levels. Both surface and text-based changes made in the texts have been analysed, and reasons for different revisions in texts have been discussed.

Keywords: Revision behavior; Chinese college students; English writing

In the paper, the author reviews the article Analyzing Revision from Faigley and Witte (1981), and then evaluates the study in terms of their contributions in the context of second language writing. Meanwhile, the author analyzes and concludes the revision behavior of Chinese college students and difficulties students encounter when they write in English.

1. The Review and Evaluation of Analyzing Revision

The work Analyzing Revision has two main parts. In the first part, Faigley and Witte described their taxonomy for analyzing revision. Before they classified the categories of revisions, other scholars concluded various types of revisions. For instance, Wallace Hildick (1965) created “tidying up changes” and “structural alterations” which included six kinds of revision, such as correcting grammatical errors and changing sentence structures (Fitzgerald, 1987). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (1977) once classified the revisions into nine categories, such as organizational changes, stylistic changes and holistic changes (Faigley and Witte, 1981).

However, these classifications were not reliable since Faigley and Witte (1981) commented that these classifications lacked well-developed theoretical bases and some categories overlap. Therefore, they presented their revision system, which based on the effects of revision changes on meaning. They divided the revision changes into two main groups: surface changes and the text-based changes. The former one meant the revision changes would not alter the meaning of the work; while the later one were changes that would bring new information, or remove old information from work.

Surface changes then were categorized as formal changes and meaning-preserving changes. Formal changes were normally some copy-editing operations such as changes of spelling, tense and punctuation. While meaning-preserving changes, as Faigley and Witte (1981) described, were changes that rewrote the words, phrase and sentences but did not change the meanings of the text. Meaning-preserving changes comprised additions, deletions, substitutions, permutations, distributions and consolidations.

In contrast, the text-based changes affected the concepts in the text, which had two subcategories, microstructure changes and macrostructure changes. Microstructure changes were meaning changes that would not alter the summary of the text, while macrostructure changes were major revision changes which affected the gist or summary of the text. Both microstructure changes and macrostructure changes had six operations: additions, deletions, substitutions, permutations, distributions and consolidations.

After Faigley and Witte had designed their revision system, they conducted two research to test the reliability of their taxonomy. From their two research, they concluded that the advanced writers revised more on meaning changes while inexperienced writers focused more on surface revisions. Besides, they also found that the number of changes could not determine the quality of writing. If changes could make texts achieve writing purpose, these changes were regarded as successful revisions. In addition, successful revision was associated with the writers' planning and reviewing ability, and those revising

strategies could be taught to novice writers.

The contribution of Analyzing Revision to writing research could be concluded as follow. First, as Fitzgerald (1987) described, their taxonomy of revisions was the first taxonomy which considered the changes of semantic structure of the text. They distinguished the category of changes such as surface changes and meaning changes. Meanwhile, their taxonomy for analysing revision provided a framework for other research to study revision changes. For example, Dix (2006) did a research about primary fluent English writers' revising habits in New Zealand, and she intended to know what changes students made in their essays and why they made these changes. In addition, Faigley and Witte also discussed the individual variation in making changes in writing. They found that the changes not only associated with the writing ability (planning and reviewing) of writers but also relating to individual difference such as age or occupation. Therefore, their founding provided advice for following studies.

2. The Revision Behaviour of Chinese College Students

This study investigated the revision behaviour of Chinese college students in English writing. The researcher employed the taxonomy of revision change from Faigley and Witte (1981) as the framework to analyse the different type of changes students made in their essays. She collected one essay from each subject and then analysed both surface and text-based changes made in the texts.

There were 15 participants in the study who had been chosen from 100 students in college English course. They had different English writing proficiency. Five of them were advanced writers who had passed CET-6 exam, and five of them were less advanced writers who had passed CET-4 exam, and the rest five were less intermediate writers who have not passed CET-4 exam.

2.1 Research Questions

There were two research questions in the study. First, when did the students usually revise their writing? Second, which revision changes did they normally make in their work?

2.2 Research Procedure

The participants were asked to write one essay around 200 to 250 words. The topic was: introducing an important family member. In addition, the writing process of participants has been observed and their writing time and their revising process have been noted down.

2.3 Results of Revision Changes

The number of changes they made in the essays has been calculated. The less advanced English writers who made 10 changes in average were the most frequent revisers of the participants, while the advanced English writers made changes around 5 times in about 200 words. The less intermediate writers made about 7 changes in their works. The result also indicated that the number of changes in writing was not necessarily related to students' writing ability.

Then the type of changes has been investigated. The most frequent changes they made were meaning-preserving changes, and only two of them made microstructure changes, while nobody produced macrostructure changes in the work. To be specific, the advanced English writer Hu, for instance, she made one formal change and four meaning-preserving changes in her work. The formal change she made was punctuation correction. She substituted “-” for “;” between two sentences since she thought the two sentences should be connected. Using the punctuation “-” could make the meaning of these sentences more coherent. Four meaning-preserving changes she made were adding adverbs in sentences, such as adding “incredible” “necessarily” in her text. The adding adverbs could help her make emphasis in sentences.

The less advanced English writer Zhao, she made two formal changes, eight meaning-preserving changes and one microstructure change. The one formal change she made was to correct spelling, and the other one was to change abbreviation. She made eight meaning-preserving changes, seven of them were to substitute words such as substituting “enjoy” for “likes to”, “pursue” for “follow”, “inspire” for “tell” and so on. Another meaning-preserving change was addition, which she added an adjective to make the description of her father more vivid and precise. The less advanced writer in this study seemed to think more about the word choice since she wanted her work be attractive to readers by using various expressions.

The less intermediate English writer Li, she made formal change only once and meaning-preserving five times. The formal change in her revision was tense change from “study” to “studying”. Five meaning-preserving changes were one addition change and four substitution changes. She added “include himself” in the end of one sentence to make the sentence more precise. And she replaced several expressions, such as replacing “and” with “not only...but also”, “such as” with “for example” and so on. She also made one microstructure change in the writing where she deleted one sentence which was not necessary in the paragraph. Less intermediate writer was careful about grammar in her work and she also thought about showing diverse use of vocabularies.

The results showed some similarity to the research of Faigley and Witte (1981) that the most frequent changes was meaning-preserving changes. However, there were also some results different from Faigley's and Witte's research. For example, in their study, expert writers made couple of text-based changes, while in this research, advanced writers did not make any meaning changes. Meanwhile, in their study, advanced student writers made more correction in text-based changes than inexperienced student writers. However, in this research, the less advanced writers made less text-based than the less intermediate writer. The researcher thought the topic of the writing may lead to the result. Since the topic was quite simple, participants would not make many changes in their writing. Especially, the requirement of the word count was only 200-250 words so that participants could not show some big changes such as meaning changes in their writing.

2.4 Results of Revising Habits

The researcher observed the writing process of fifteen participants and found that they showed different writing habits, and took three students as the example. First, the advanced writer (He) spent around 30 minutes finishing her article, and she took some time to think about the essay before starting to write. She thought about the structure careful and noted down the plan of the essay in the draft. Meanwhile, when she planed her essay, she changed the structure provided by the researcher. She structured the work in another way which she thought it was more logical. The long-time planning in the work may contribute to the result that there was no revision in text-based changes. When she started to write, she wrote slow and careful so that she did not correct any spelling mistakes. She checked the spelling and punctuation, and added some adverbs in her writing after finishing the writing

The less advanced writer (Zhuang) spent the minimum time of the three people, and she took about 20 minutes to finish the writing. She followed the structure provided by the researcher, so she did not make any revision related to the changes of gist in writing. When she got the topic she immediately started to write, and she wrote quickly, and she made a spelling error in her work. She usually looked back when she moved forward, so she revised several times when she was writing, and many changes she made at that time were meaning-preserving changes such as deletions and substitutions. When finishing writing, she checked the article once and only corrected one spelling error.

The less intermediate writer (Li) spent about 25 minutes completing the essay. She also adopted the structure given by the researcher, so she did not make any big changes to it. She did not start immediately when she knew the topic but considered for a while. She did not write quickly, so she did not correct many spelling mistakes in the work. Normally she paused when she finished one paragraph, and she thought about the content should be written in the following part. She did not revise many times in her writing processing, but spent more time to make changes when she finished all her work.

From the observation, students with different writing ability had different writing and revising habits. The advanced writers tended to spend more time in planning so that they made relatively less revision in works, especially less text-based changes. Meanwhile, all participants made changes in their writing process which manifested that the writer was not a linear process with a plan-write-revise sequence. In contrast, writing was a recursive process that writers usually looked back when they moved forward.

3. Discussion

From the study, it is found that students with different English writing ability showed different revising performance in their work. They may focus on the different category of revision, for example, the advanced writers focused on meaning expression, while the less intermediate writers paid close attention to grammar. Meanwhile, Participants also made changes in different time. The advanced writers preferred to spend more time planning than revising, while less advanced writers and less intermediate writers tended to revise when they were writing. Also, the education background played an important role in participants' revising process. The participant who was educated about the revision in the class revised more comprehensive and efficient in writing, while the participant who lacked the knowledge of revision could only make the limited revision. Therefore, the researcher believed that it was necessary to teach students the knowledge of revision in English writing class, which could help students know the detailed information of revision and improve their writing performance. In addition, as second language learners, Chinese college students face many difficulties in English writing. The first major problem is relating to the language knowledge. Many times, they know how to express in the mother tongue, but they find it difficult to find the appropriate counterpart in English. Therefore, how to use accurate English expression in writing is a challenge to many Chinese college students. Meanwhile, the lacking knowledge of writing is another barrier to them in English writing because sometimes their articles are not coherent and logical. Thus, it was necessary to teach students the English writing knowledge.

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