ONE THEME AND THREE VARIATIONS: REWRITING A TEXT IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT: University students of English as a foreign language were asked to produce three versions of the same writing assignment, while answering questions on their personal view of the writing process. The results showed that the students improved most in style, producing more concise and comprehensible text in the final versions. Least improvement was found in grammar. The conclusion is that although students do not spontaneously revise their own writing, they know how to do it in terms of strategies. What they sometimes lack is linguistic knowledge or appropriate tools. What they know they use, including their conceptual world and their vision of coherence, of a more complex nature than grammar knowledge.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the strategies used by foreign language students when revising their own text in a rewriting task. Foreign language subjects have been chosen on the assumption that their problems in a writing task can be characterized not so much for being different from native language problems but mainly for being more complex, due to the subject's lack of proficiency in the language. The more intensive use of compensatory strategies to make up for language deficiency in a foreign language situation turns the writing task into a proving ground for these strategies. Students, writing in a language they are less familiar with, have to revise more, overcome more obstacles, make the most of their own resources, thus probably demonstrating a greater variety of strategies than when writing in their native language.

Revision as chimera

Self-editing and revision in student writing have usually been seen as a chimera, both in first and foreign language teaching. Many explanations have been offered

for the difficulty in leading the students to revise their own texts, including a wrong concept of revision held by the students, difficulty in detecting problems in their own text, and a passive resistance to modify what has already been written.

The vast majority of students seems to view editing as a resource to be used when something goes wrong in their first attempt to write, usually involving superficial aspects at the syntax or spelling level. They seem to confuse revision with correction and, if forced to revise their text, they may end up with a cosmetic treatment, seeing no need to rewrite it (Sommers, 1982). Revision is not seen by the students as something central to the writing process, a tool by which ideas are developed and refined, and meaning is constructed, but just as a last reading to see if a word was misspelled or a grammar point overlooked (Lehr, 1995). Investigations conducted with both primary and secondary students (Applebee et al., 1986) as well as university students (Yoder, 1993) have shown that revision is done mainly to correct superficial problems in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Students would seldom make global changes in their texts, rewriting major parts, deleting or inserting ideas. When revision is not seen as an integral part of the text construction, but as a correction mechanism for something that was defectively constructed, the students' attitude towards it is negative and their main concern is to avoid it.

The students may also be unable to detect errors, either because they do not see them or because they are not linguistically aware of them. It may be then an attentional problem or, mainly in a foreign language situation, lack of linguistic competence. Plumb et al. (1994) claimed, based on their findings, that the students' inability to detect the errors (processing-deficit hypothesis) was more frequent than the knowledge on how to solve them (knowledge-deficit hypothesis).

Finally, there is the students' passive resistance to revise their texts. Several studies (Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Leki, 1990) have shown that students do not spontaneously reformulate what they have already written, in spite of teachers' annotations and suggestions on the margins. Most of the time the teachers' notes are not even read by the students.

Strategies for promoting revision

The literature on revision shows that there are many suggestions on how to help students revise their texts. Among these, the following should be highlighted: teacher's feedback, use of appropriate instruments, and collaborative projects.

Teacher's feedback, among all instruments, is the one that has produced the least impact on students' writing. Different studies (Andrasick, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990) have demonstrated that corrections and comments made by the teacher on the students' text only improve their writing when the text returns to the teacher after feedback. If the text does not return, teacher's corrections and comments are usually ignored and the students will probably repeat the same errors in their future compositions. The writing process in this case seems to be seen by the students as a cycle that ends when the teacher corrects and grades the

compositions.

The use of appropriate instruments, which make up a set of resources controlled by the student, seems to offer a higher level of autonomy in the revision process. These resources may be in a self-access room, in a writing lab, or on a simple editing desk, available to the students for the writing of their compositions (Powers, 1995; Yoe, 1992). They may include: different types of dictionaries, preferably learning dictionaries, with numerous examples of language in use; reference grammars with the topics organized in alphabetical order to facilitate search by the student; list of false cognates that tend to be used incorrectly by speakers of a given native language; checklists with the errors commonly made by the students; specific revision strategies for each kind of text and each part of the text such as sentence and paragraph and each type of problem (spelling, punctuation, agreement, abstract/ concrete, use of details), etc. The examples below, extracted from the On-Line Writing Lab, give an idea of what can be included in such a checklist:

1. *What does my reader want or need to know to enable him or her to understand my message?*
2. *What purpose does this communication serve for my reader?*
3. *Have I included ONLY the material essential to my reader's purpose and understanding? Or am I boring or distracting my reader with unessential and/or obvious information?*
4. *What do I want my reader to do when he or she finishes reading my letter or report?*
5. *Have I used ONLY the essential words to get my message across to my reader?*
6. *Have I used too many words to express simple, unimportant, or obvious ideas?*
7. *Have I used abstract words instead of more vivid and convincing concrete words?*
8. *Have I included transactions which will show my reader the relationships between my sentences and paragraphs?*
9. *Does one paragraph logically follow the preceding paragraph and lead into the one which follows?*

(On-Line Writing Lab, 1995)

Collaborative projects (MacDonald, 1993; Irby, 95; Mendonça, & Johnson, 1994; Gehrke, 1993) involve groups of students, playing the roles of both writers and readers. It is believed that when the text is written, read, and revised both by students as writers and students as readers, the student learns how to respond to the reader's demands. In the negotiation process that is established between writer and reader, the writer no longer writes for himself or herself but for the other, beginning the learning process towards audience awareness. When the student writer understands that the reader is not captivated only by grammatical correction but mainly by content, he or she will feel the need to consider more global issues, with an emphasis on the production of meaning.

Do students know how to revise?

What investigations on revision show is that students tend to see writing as a one step process, in which the text, once put on paper, is no longer modified. Even with the use of word processors, where it is extremely easy to introduce changes in the text, revisions remain scarce (Hawisher, 1986; Kurth, 1986; Daiute, 1986). Left on their own, students will not spontaneously revise their writing, either with the presence of a computer or other resources such as dictionaries or grammars. Better results were obtained with the use of teacher's comments on the student's text when it returns to the teacher and in collaborative projects, where students write and read each other's texts. To the extent, however, that revision is imposed by teacher's initiative or done by a peer through pedagogical procedures, which is teacher-initiated, it is not, strictly speaking, self-editing.

The unanswered question is whether or not students are able to revise their own texts. It seems that the literature on revision does not clarify the difference between not doing and being unable to do. We know that students do not spontaneously revise their writing, but we do not know whether they are really unable to do it. Not revising is different from being unable to revise. It is possible that the same students, who do not revise their texts, would know how to do it if they were in a situation in which self-editing would somehow be unavoidable.

This is the question addressed by this investigation: whether or not students are able to self-edit. Although the literature defines editing as a more superficial process, as opposed to revision, which is more globally oriented, I use editing and revision interchangeably here — both not as a simple reading of the text to check grammar errors, but also as a global process in which substantial changes may be introduced in the text. Self-editing then, as defined here, may affect words, sentences, paragraphs, and the whole text, through deletions, insertions and text movements. I am solely concerned here with changes made by the students themselves, without any assistance from a peer or the teacher.

Some of the specific questions addressed here include: Are students able to autonomously revise their texts? If they are, which aspects will they emphasize? Spelling? Vocabulary? Syntax? Style? Content?

The main hypothesis is that, given the necessary conditions, students are able to revise their own texts. This revision will not affect grammatical issues (e.g., spelling, agreement) as much as issues of style, including lexical selection — replacing, for example, vague words for more precise ones — and syntactic construction — concatenating, for example, simple sentences into compound sentences through cohesive mechanisms. These changes will not make the text more correct in terms of grammar but more coherent, expressing the relation between ideas more efficiently. The students will not write incorrectly the first time and then write correctly. The hypothesis is that they will try to write correctly in the first version, whether succeeding or not. What they will try to improve in later versions is the expression of their ideas, probably making them clearer as they rewrite.

To collect the data, different procedures were tried, including the use of a word

processor, which was rejected because some of the subjects turned out to be less familiar than expected with the editing commands of the program. Eventually we settled on pencil and paper, having the students rewriting the same composition three times in the classroom. We tried to secure their motivation and commitment not only by an initial talk on the importance of their collaboration for our project, but also by the way the sessions were conducted, making editing materials available to the students and incorporating the activity in the curriculum, including it as part of their grade for the semester. We did not interfere with students' autonomy and initiative, letting them work by themselves all the time. The condition provided for revision was then mainly the rewriting of the text. It is probable that the students, on realizing that they had to rewrite the text in each session anyway, ended up by introducing the changes which in their opinions could improve it.

Methods

The subjects used in this study were 15 undergraduate students from a public university in Southern Brazil. They belonged to two different classes in the foreign languages program, 6 of them in the second semester, regarded here as intermediate students, and 9 in the sixth semester, regarded here as advanced students.

The criterion for the selection of these 15 subjects, from an initial group of 33 students, was the fact that they were present in all sessions of the experiment. They are probably more interested than the rest of the students but this should not affect the results, since intrinsic motivation was not a relevant variable in the study. As agreed with each classroom teacher, the compositions written by the students were graded and included in their evaluation for the semester, but only the data of these 15 students, who took part in all tasks, are analyzed here.

Out of these 15 students only 1 was a male. They were all adults, between 22 and 30 years (mean = 27), 2 already had a BA (1 in Portuguese and 1 in nursing), 10 were majoring in translation, 4 in TEFL, and 1 in both.

The writing sessions were conducted in three normal class periods in each group. For both groups the procedure was the same.

In the first session, it was explained to them that they were going to write a text in English, about one page and a half, under the title "Windows 95 and me" expressing their personal opinion about the role of technology in their future profession, either as a translator or as a teacher. The text they would produce, or part of it, would be selected and put on the Internet, where it could be read by people from all over the world (a potential of 40 million readers at the time of the experiment). The text would be evaluated both by the researcher and the classroom teacher, considering originality, organization, grammatical accuracy, and sense of audience. It was emphasized that this audience really existed and that they were interested not in technical aspects but originality of opinion.

After this introduction, a survey was conducted trying to collect data on the subjects' writing strategies and previous knowledge on the topic through a questionnaire and a multiple choice test respectively. Finally they were asked to write the first version of their text. To do that each student received a notebook and a green pen. Grammar and dictionaries (of the monolingual, bilingual, and learning types) were made available. The subjects were also told that they could use any material, as long as they worked by themselves, and that the researcher was available for the clarification of any doubts they might have, which would also be provided individually so as not to interfere with what the others were doing.

From the materials brought in by the researcher, only the bilingual dictionaries were used.   The doubts they had were all concerned with vocabulary (e.g., "how do you say 'to have an impact on' in English").   There were no restrictions of time and the students handed in the notebooks as they finished their texts.

In the second session, a week later, the notebooks were returned, with a pen, but black this time. They were asked to reread what they had written in the previous session and do the following about their own text: (1) list what they thought were positive aspects; (2) list two aspects which they thought could be improved; (3) divide the text into parts and mark each of these pats; (4) conduct a commented revision of each paragraph, telling if they would change something, what they would change and why; (5) rewrite the text, changing what they thought should be changed. Once again it was emphasized that their text was being addressed to a diversified audience, but mainly interested in the opinions they might had concerning Windows 95, in particular, and the role of technology in their future profession in general. As in the first session, there was no time restriction and the students handed in their notebooks as they finished rewriting their texts.

For the third session, after another week, the students were asked to produce the third and final version of their text, using a blue pen now. Once again they were reminded that their text would be evaluated in terms of the reader it was addressed to, originality, organization, and grammatical accuracy, with equal weight for each of these parts. The procedure was the same as in previous sessions, with the same material available and no time limitation.

Results

The main objective of this analysis is to try to find out which beliefs these language students have about the writing process. We also want to find out how much these beliefs are reflected in what they really do when they write. Considering that they are university students in a letters course, and, consequently, exposed, for many years, to their teachers' discourse about how a written text should be produced, there is always the possibility that they may say what they think should be said and then act in a different way when asked to write. This investigation will try to measure both aspects.

What the students said

Let's first analyze the concepts the subjects said they had on the writing process. The instruments used to collect these data were the questionnaire, administered in the first session, and the comments the students wrote in Portuguese on their English text, in the second and third sessions.   The questionnaire on writing strategies shows the following results:

The majority of the students (73%) stated that they make up their thoughts as they write the words on the page. Most of the time they do not have the sentence finished in their minds when they start writing it. This seems to indicate that reading and rereading their own text helps them in their writing and rewriting.

The subjects main written production has been class assignments (80%), business letters coming in second, which seems to indicate that some students are already working. Among the resources, which are regarded as the most helpful in a writing task, the dictionary was the most frequently quoted (80%).   When asked to compare the writing problems in Portuguese as a native language to English as a foreign language, the students said that in English their main concern is grammar (93%), while in Portuguese they are more concerned with style (47%). In terms of time assignment to different parts of a writing task, in an ideal situation, the students said they would spend 44% of the time reading about the topic, 25% reflecting on the topic and organizing its parts, 23% writing the text, and 8% revising it.

The revision is thus seen as a minor activity, which is done when the text is already written. The majority of the subjects (73%) define revision as a rereading of the text to check grammar. Some of them (13%) see revision as a way to adjust cohesive devices.

As to aspects which are regarded as the most important in textual production, the students were divided between creativity (20%), organization(40%), and grammatical accuracy (40%). Creativity, however, was regarded as more important only by the weaker students; the more advanced students chose grammatical accuracy as the most important aspect. In other words, the more advanced the students the more concerned they are with the superficial aspects of writing ($r = .5$). There is a general belief that the teacher can help more with grammar (90%), very little in organization (10%) and nothing in terms of creativity. To improve on creativity and make the text more interesting, the students quoted as possible strategies: using one's experience, having original ideas and style, daring in one's writing, having sense of humor, using imagination, and taking a stand on the theme. To improve organization, the most frequently quoted strategy was making an outline of the text to be written. To achieve grammatical accuracy, they quoted using dictionaries and grammars. The greatest challenge in producing a text, in their opinion, was showing interesting things to the reader and imparting a sense of authority in one's writing, giving the impression that the author is well informed. A good command of the topic, including the ability to provide interesting details, facts

and examples was the main ingredient to good writing.

Some quantitative data

The 45 texts produced by the 15 students in the three versions were analyzed both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Quantitatively, we tried to describe the changes that had occurred between versions, that is, what was added, what was deleted, and mainly what was internally modified in each text. Qualitatively, we tried to assess not only to what extent the changes introduced by the subjects contributed to improve the quality of the text, but also what they really wrote on the suggested topic, how they organized themselves and what viewpoint they adopted.
A statistical analysis of the text produced by the students, in the three versions, shows that the subjects use everyday English words, with a low letter per word average (3.9), on a level that, according to the Flesch-Kincaid and Coleman-Liau readability formulas, puts their text on Grade Level 6.
In purely quantitative terms, what changed significantly between versions was the extension of the texts, which became gradually longer. The number of words per sentence and sentences per paragraph remained constant as it can be seen on Table 1. Variation occurred only between subjects; while some used just 10 words per sentence, others arrived at 25. Between versions, however, the tendency was to write sentences and paragraphs the same size, even after rewriting the same text or adding more sentences and paragraphs. Those who started with short sentences, finished with short sentences and vice-versa.

Table 1 — Quantitative data between versions

	Version I		Version II		Version III	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Words per text	163	51	190	73	237	69
Words/sentence	17	3.6	16	3.6	18	4.2
Sentences/parag.	3.4	2.2	3.1	1.9	3.1	2.0

n = 15

At first sight it looks as if the subjects just added more words in each version, with no concern for compacting the text, eliminating superfluous details. When we compare, however, each version sentence by sentence, we notice that many sentences were completely rewritten, improving on the original idea or even introducing new ones, mainly between the first and the second versions.
We tried to analyze the changes introduced by the subjects in terms of spelling, vocabulary, syntax, style and ideas. What we found was that the greatest changes occurred in terms of style and ideas. Table 2 shows the change rate between the first and third versions. While the changes introduced by some subjects affected just 10% of the text, others changed as much as 100%. The mean of 50%, when

changes in all texts are considered, seems to suggest that the methodology used in the experiment was efficient in provoking changes. To what extent these changes mean improvement in the texts is what we will see next.

Table 2 — Changes between versions I and III

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Change rate	50	24	10	100

n = 15

Qualitative data

In qualitative terms, one of the most salient aspects of the text produced by the students was its oral quality, confirming what was previously found out in the readability tests, which showed an emphasis on the use of colloquial English words. The students wrote, if not as they talk, at least as they were taught to talk, with frequent contractions ("I'm", "I'll", "don't") and construction which are typical of spoken English ("you know", "I mean", "as you can see", "I'm not sure", "now I remember"). Even expletives used in oral language to mark transitions or topic changes were used ("well, I...", "now, I..."). The writing seems to reflect the language used in their textbooks, with an emphasis on oral communication, and possibly the literary works the students were exposed to, many of which impregnated with oral traits.

An analysis of the content of all the paragraphs written by the students show that most of them deal with personal experiences (42%), that is, the topic — Windows 95 and me — is approached through facts that happened in their own lives, with an emphasis on narrative text (a boyfriend who taught how to use the computer, a file

Table 3 — Ways of approaching the topic

Way	Examples (unretouched)	%
Personal experience	"My ex-boyfriend works with computers and he tried to teach me" (Miranda I)	42%
Topic knowledge	"Windows 95 was put to sell in August 95" (Greta II)	12%
Negative criticism	"I'm quite doubtful about Windows 95's reliability" (Nestor III)	11%
General facts	"New scientific discoveries make information abound and technology is in every sort of appliances" (Geraldine III)	10%

Topic ignorance	"Unfortunately I know nothing about computing" (Pamela I)	7%
Metacomentary	"I never thought I would have to write about it. It is really a challenging task" (Pamela I)	6%
Positive criticism	"I really like the Windows, and if the new version is better than the old, it will be a good thing for me" (Virginia I)	4%
Topic definition	"The Windows 95 is a program of computer" (Greta II)	3%
Topic interest	"I would like to learn more about this topic" (Greta III)	2%
Others		3%

NOTE: The Roman number after the name indicates version

that was printed at a friend's house, a brother who helped when a problem arose). The other paragraphs, globally analyzed in the three versions and in decreasing order of frequency, were written to express: previous knowledge of the topic (12%), negative criticism (11%), general facts (10%), ignorance of the topic (7%), metacommentary (6%), positive criticism (4%), topic definition (3%), interest in the topic (2%), others (3%). Table 3 shows examples of each of these contents.

Variation in the way of approaching the topic between versions, as classified above, was almost nonexistent. If somebody, for example, started the text narrating facts from his or her personal experience, that perspective was maintained through the end; similarly if somebody started by making a negative criticism, negative criticism was repeated in the following versions. The only exception was specific knowledge of the topic, since some students who knew nothing about Windows 95, and consequently took an evasive approach in the first version, apparently did some reading afterwards and incorporated these readings in later versions, providing more specific facts. These students did not seem to feel comfortable with the way they had to approach the topic in the beginning and therefore decided to broaden their knowledge on the subject and thus be able to change their approach. Some other students, however, felt very comfortable in their generic approach and, although they knew little about the topic, they did not find it necessary to search for more information. These findings suggest that the way to approach a topic is subject to personal preferences and that these preferences are not easily modified.

Little change was also noticed in relation to the errors committed by the students, mainly when they dealt with spelling, vocabulary, syntax and punctuation. Any of these errors, if made on the first draft, were almost invariably repeated in the following versions. Other errors, which could be classified in terms of style and coherence, were more frequently corrected.

Spelling errors were in fact not frequent, probably because the students could look up words in the dictionaries as they wrote. The ones which came up were probably due to the fact that the students thought they knew how to write the word correctly, including in this case, mother tongue influence (e.g., *eletronic* instead of *electronic*) or some kind of overgeneralization (e.g., *lifes* instead of *lives*).

Syntax errors were more frequent, generally remaining between versions. Sometimes the students seemed to be aware of them, tried to correct them, but in general failed.   Other times they would end up by rewriting incorrectly a sentence that was originally well formed. It seemed that the subjects lacked not only declarative knowledge of the foreign language but also procedural knowledge on how to use the resources available.

This lack of procedural knowledge is more easily detected in vocabulary errors, many of which could easily be solved by consulting the dictionary. The origin of these errors seems to reside in the use of the native language to create the sentence, which is then transposed to the foreign language. This seems to be the explanation for errors such as "The throwing of Windows 95", instead of "The launching of Windows 95". Both *throwing* and *launching* correspond to *lançamento* in Portuguese, but the students were not able to use the cues supplied by the dictionary to choose the right word.

There are also coherence errors, forcing the reader to take long inference jumps to get at the meaning intended by the writer, as in the example below (The Roman number refers to the version in which the example occurred).

I didn't have time to read it because it is very technical (Celia I)

It is only possible to understand the sentence if we infer that a technical text leads to slow reading, thus, demanding more time from the student to read it.

This type of error, however, as opposed to the ones previously discussed, has a greater possibility of being corrected between versions. The subject above, for example, rephrased the sentence in a more readable form in the second version, although still leaving some grammar errors:

I didn't read and I don't think I will because it is a very technical report(Celia II)

The example below shows a sentence that is incoherent in the first version, becomes coherent in the second and is both coherent and concise in the final version.

1. *The range of possibilities you have to take advantages of this multi useful*

machine is so wide that many people don't have access to it (Clara I)

2.   The range of possibilities the computer can offer is so wide that many people can not take everything and usually do not know what it is all about (Clara II)

3.   The range of possibilities the computer can offer is so wide that many people are not able to take everything (Clara III)

This type of revision, involving improvement both in terms of coherence and style, was the one that produced the greatest changes between versions. These changes may involve deletion, insertion, or movement of segments in the text. The examples below show some of these mechanisms:

1.   someone called Bill Gates (Pauline I)

2.   a businessman called Bill Gates(Pauline II)

1.   Nowadays everyone is somehow involved in it, even if without being aware of it (Clara II)

2.   Nowadays we are somehow involved in that, even if we are not aware of it (Clara III)

1.   I have heard lately, and the world has too, I guess, about the computing program called Windows 95 (Nestor I)

2.   Lately the world has heard about the computing program called Windows 95 (Nestor II)

The following example shows the evolution of a paragraph that started in the first version with one sentence, accreted new ideas in version II, and was restructured in terms of syntax and lexis in the final version.

1.   Since the end of August a question has been burning inside me: Should I change to Windows 95? (Emilia I)

2.   Windows 95: Should I make a change to it? I have been thinking about it since the end of August, and as I do not have answers enough I am still in doubt. Day after day a new question appears, and starts burning inside me. (Emilia II)

3.   Windows 95: Should I make a change to it? I have been thinking about it since the software was made available, at the end of August. This question seems to be attracting others and nothing appears to give me the conclusive answer. (Emilia III)

In the three versions the paragraph always expresses a doubt about whether the Windows 95 operational system should be adopted or not. One important change between versions I and II is the emphasis given to the new operational system, which is moved to the beginning of the paragraph, introducing the topic sentence, and transforming the rest into details of this doubt. Finally, in the last version, the topic sentence is kept, but the details are improved.   This is done by a more adequate lexical choice (e.g.: "since the software was made available") and by the

deletion of some exaggerated phrases (e.g.: "burning inside me").

The 50% change between the first and third versions shows that the subjects really tried to modify their texts, mainly in terms of style, looking for more appropriate sentences and phrases to express their thoughts. The analysis of these changes show that, in general, they improved the texts, although of course the final version still left much to be desired, especially with the weaker students.

There was a negative correlation ($r = -.5$) between changes made in the text and proficiency level, that is, the less proficient the students the more they modified the text. This negative correlation suggests that the weaker students tried to improve their texts with deeper commitment than the more advanced students — probably because they noticed the greater distance between the desideratum in text production and what they had produced. All the effort, however, not always produced the desired object. It seems that, similarly to what happens in foreign language reading (Clarke, 1980), lack of a minimum language threshold in writing may also cause a short circuit in the student.

Conclusion

Although the bibliography on revision suggests that students' biggest concern is with grammar points — which was confirmed here by the answers provided by the subjects to the questionnaire — this study found that, in practice, students manage to work better with ideas when they revise. It was in the rephrasing of their ideas, giving more specific details, choosing the words better and improving coherence, where they showed progress from one version to another. As far as grammar was concerned, including spelling, vocabulary and syntax, there was not significant progress.

This improvement in the expression of ideas, from version to version, suggests that students are not only able to revise what they have written but that they are also able to make this revision in a fundamental aspect of writing, that is, the rephrasing of their own ideas. This apparently contradicts previous studies which claim that students usually do not do this. A distinction is made here between not doing and being unable to do. Students do not revise spontaneously, but they know how to do it if the necessary conditions are offered.

In this investigation the necessary conditions were simply the rewriting of the text. Under these circumstances, the students revised what they knew, including grammatical aspects. What was within the limits of their linguistic knowledge, their conceptual world, and their understanding of text, was revised, including coherence, a much more complex aspect of the writing process than spelling and syntax. What these particular students lacked were more appropriate instruments like learner's dictionaries, practical pedagogical grammars aimed at foreign language students, and checklists of many kinds — all of which they were not familiar with. Self-editing tools, seen as important in first language writing, become more important in foreign language writing, where linguistic competence is usually lower.

To the extent that these instruments become available and are more appropriately used, the student who has at least an intermediate command of the foreign language should be able to solve many of the revision problems autonomously.

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