



## The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Proficiency Levels and their Revising Practices

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### Abstract

The present study aimed at examining if Iranian EFL learners' levels of writing proficiency affected their revising practices feeling that this might contribute to deeper understanding of what is going on in L2 writing contexts. The study was carried out with 70 EFL learners studying in Foreign Language Institutes in Ardabil, Iran. The participants had a language learning experience of at least two years. The instruments used in the study were ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981) and writing samples of the participants. A Chi-square test was run on the collected data and the conclusion reached was that the learners' writing ability and their revising practices were related. Cross tabulation of the data also revealed that none of the low-level students engaged in higher-order revision and only 11.1% of them made lower-order revision. But, 40% of high-level students made higher-order and 7.1% of them made lower-order revisions. This study has pedagogical implications for writing courses.

**Keywords:** writing ability, higher-order revision, lower-order revision

### INTRODUCTION

Presently, writing, together with its teaching in both L1 and L2 contexts, is the subject of sizable amount of research and other educational endeavors. Articles on writing can be found in almost any issue of applied linguistics and educational journals. Currently, there are a number of journals specifically devoted to writing. This is, however, a relatively recent progress, with writing and its teaching only appearing as a scholarly issue in the late 1970s (Nystrand, Green, & Wiemelt 1993; Raimes, 1991). Before that time, writing was rarely seen as something to be taught for its own sake and in the second language it was mostly used as a way of demonstrating mastery of the rules and structures studied in the class or for dictation.

Academic writing is of crucial significance in the curriculum at any time of the learning or assessment period in all learning situations. Fukao and Fujii (2001), in a research on student writing at college level, found that writing is of utmost importance in determining the extent of mastering the curriculum.

Revision has been defined variously in the field of writing. It is generally considered as a process broader than, though including, editing for errors. It is viewed as a goal-oriented process that has both internal and external manifestations; that is, it can be both the mental process that the writers go through in reconsidering what is written and in imagining possible modifications, and what actually happens to the final product (Beach & Eaton, 1984; Bridwell, 1980; Nold, 1981; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Sommers, 1980, 1992).

Among other factors, writing quality depends on writers' developmental level and the kind of revision that they apply (mechanical/local vs. substantive/global). Revision is an integral part of the writing process since it is in this stage that students grow as writers, readers, and thinkers. Yet it is challenging to encourage students to revise. There may be some reasons why students are reluctant to revise: some students consider revision to be hard work since it requires time, energy, and commitment. Still others misunderstand editing for revising, that is, they think correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar is the same as revising for general meaning through processes such as ideas, organization, and audience awareness.

Revising is an essential component of quality writing. Yet, it appears to play a limited role in the writings of most novice second-language (L2) writers. Novice writers usually find it difficult to revise what they have written in relation to task requirements, their goals, and audience. Consequently, many of them fail to revise frequently, extensively, and skillfully. According to Wallace and Hayes (1991), one difficulty unskilled L1 and L2 writers experience in revising is 'inappropriate task definition' for revision; that is, a lack of awareness that revision is attending to both local and global matters, including purpose and overall organization of the writing, as well as the audience. A lack of such awareness on the part of unskilled writers may originate, at least in part, from their former writing instruction. For example, teachers may focus on some particular pedagogical activities such as grammar and drills in the classroom (Devine, Railey & Boshoff, 1993) or emphasize surface-level correction rather than content in revising (Porte, 1996, 1997).

Whereas explicit instruction on revision practice has been proved to be instrumental for qualitative writing (Kobayashi, 1991; Senguputa, 2000), the effect of second language proficiency on the revision practice of L2 writers has not been explored much, despite the fact that proficiency has been found to make an important contribution to the improvement of writing ability (Cumming, 1989; Pennington & So, 1993; Sasaki, 2000; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996).

This study was designed to investigate the relationship between language proficiency and revising practices of Iranian EFL learners. Although, many learners, teachers, and administrators are well aware of the importance of writing, they are not knowledgeable enough about what revision is and what its kinds are. Also, not much research has been conducted on investigating the relationship between language proficiency and revision practices.

The following null research hypothesis led the present study:

**H01:** Writing ability (high vs. low) and revising practices (higher-order vs. lower-order) are not related.

## **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Importance of Writing**

In recent years, language learning theory has witnessed a comeback of interest in writing. Of course, everyone knows that writing is an essential skill, thus, it may seem a rather banal starting point to emphasize its potential as a tool for learning and communication. However, it would be interesting to see how some researchers stress the virtues of writing. According to Hughey, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Jacobs (1983), Writing is a lifetime skill, which meets four important purposes of learners: a) communication, b) critical thinking and problem solving, c) self-actualisation, and d) control of personal environment. Firstly, writing is a mean to express ideas, thoughts and information to a reader. Secondly, writing helps people think, define problems, and discover suitable solutions. Thirdly, writing helps learners display their knowledge in the academic world. Finally, writing helps learners know how the language works and acquire its mechanisms.

### **Writing Proficiency**

Proficiency is defined variously in the literature. Stern (1992) regarded proficiency as a goal that can be defined in terms of ends or objectives. According to Stern (1992) the criteria to assess proficiency can be based on the standards which come in the form of the linguistic performance of an individual student. To Stern (1992), complete competence is scarcely achievable by L2 learners and the criteria for assessing proficiency would range from zero to native-like proficiency. These criteria apply to all skills including writing.

### **Writing Revision**

Clear and detailed definition of writing revision rarely exists in the literature. However, this section provides an implicit contemporary definition of revision, which encompasses both process and product. Writing revision means making any modifications at any point in the writing process. It involves determining discrepancies between the intended and the instantiated text, deciding what should be changed in the text and how to make those changes. Writing revision also implies operating, that is, making the desired changes. Changes may or may not affect the whole meaning of the text, and they may be major or minor. In addition, modifications may be made in the writer's head before being exerted in written text, when the text is first written, and/or after the text is first written (Beach, 1984; Bridwell, 1980; Faigley & Witte, 1981; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Nold, 1981; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1983, 1986).

Mistaking revision with edition is still quite widespread in educational settings. This problem mainly originates from instructors' practices that treat revision as error hunting rather than as rethinking one's writing. Teachers urge unskilled writers to proofread

their work and try to edit at least some of their errors before submitting. As a result, students see revision as correction or an indication that they have failed to get it right the first time. Revision, however, is not just edition. It does involve editing of the text, but also re-seeing of content and meaning during and after the actual text production. Revision is often defined as the final stage in the process of composing (Krashen 1989).

Different explanations have been proposed to account for L2 writers' revising practices. One explanation refers to L2 learners' proficiency levels. Unskilled L2 writers often have a restricted repertoire of the L2 linguistic rules and conventions and of how texts work to achieve a special goal in a particular context (Bartlett, 1982; Piolat, 1997; Roca De Larios, Murphy, Marin, 2002; Victori, 1999).

Kobayashi and Rinnert (2001) discovered that L2 learners' ability to address problems in their L2 texts was radically related to their L2 proficiency and their prior L2 writing experience. It is also found that, the ability to detect problems in writing develops faster than the ability to correct them (Hayes, Flower, Shriver, Startman & Garey, 1987; Roca De Larios et al., 2002).

Thus students' revising practices at any particular time may reflect their developmental stage. As they become more familiar with the language itself, its culture, and readers' expectations, they are more likely to improve in their audience awareness, global revision, and ability to reflect on their own writing.

### **Quality or Quantity of Revision**

Faigley and Witte (1981) investigated the differences among three groups of writers: inexperienced students, advanced students and expert adults. They found that expertise was associated with the quality of revision rather than with the quantity. For instance, the expert adult writers revised less than the advanced writers but made more content-based changes than either of the other two groups. The inexperienced students made more revisions than the experts but they made local changes rather than global. Of these groups, the advanced students made the most revisions, but compared with the experts, they made a smaller percentage of content-based revisions. Faigley and Witte (1984) found that expert and experienced writers made more revisions than inexperienced student writers during the writing of the first draft. In addition, Faigley and Witte (1984) proposed that the frequency of revision is the result of inadequate planning, which makes writers write several drafts and make different modifications. They also discovered that experienced writers focused on higher-order and meaning-related changes, leaving the lower-order modifications until the final stage of the revision. They concluded that the less experienced students had more local errors to cope with and thus could not see beneath the surface whereas the more experienced writers made fewer local errors and thus were not concerned with local revisions.

Sommers (1980) probed the revision strategies of first language college student writers and expert writers and discovered that student writers were mainly engaged with the word and phrase level revisions with lexical substitutions being the most frequent

operation. By contrast, revisions made by the experienced adult writers were distributed at all levels (word, phrase, clause, and sentence) with addition being the major operation. The experienced writers' revisions suggested that experienced writers observed more alternatives than less experienced writers. Sommers (1980) also found that student writers viewed revision as editing whereas expert writers viewed revision as a look for meaning and an effort to communicate ideas more effectively. In addition, Sommers (1980) suggested that novice college writers often cannot see any discrepancy between their intended meaning and what they actually write. She argued that this is due to the fact that they reread their writing at much lower levels of abstraction than experts, seeing and solving problems only at the level of words and phrases. She concluded that the college students in her study revised so because "they were simply doing what they have been taught to do in a consistently narrow way" (p. 387), suggesting the lack of instruction in higher-order revising practices and the need to inform students' revision practices.

Perl (1979) also showed that novice writers were mostly concerned with the detection and correction of errors and that the highest percentage of their revisions was changes of form. Perl observed that unskilled writers revised frequently but were preoccupied with surface errors, which continually interrupted their attention. "What they seem to lack as much as any rule ... is a conception of editing that includes flexibility, suspended judgment, the weighing of possibilities, and the reworking of ideas" (Perl, 1979, p. 333).

In summary, the studies reviewed suggest that skilled and unskilled L2 writers demonstrate a number of distinct characteristics during the writing process. The distinct features that differentiate proficient writers from non-proficient writers can be summed up as follows: (a) attending to audience, and reasoning at a higher-level such as discourse and organization (Zamel, 1983); (b) continuously engaging in all recursive writing processes including planning, drafting, controlling, and revising written products (Zamel, 1983); and (c) global planning including setting goals, organizing ideas, and expressing them coherently (Cumming, 1989; Raimes, 1984).

### **Assessing Writing**

According to Kroll (1998), recently an appreciable amount of attention has been devoted to the assessment of students' levels of proficiency in writing. Writing assessment comprises evaluation of writing quality by a holistic or an analytical or a multiple trait scoring system (Kroll, 1998). Other assessments of writing have involved evaluations of linguistic accuracy (Polio 1997). Assessment in writing should demand students to "demonstrate their membership in the community of fluent writers of [English]" (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll 1997, p. 17). It should determine not only the stage of general linguistic proficiency of the students, but also their ability to use the structures appropriately within the social and professional conventions of writing in the target language.

## **Analytic Scoring System**

The analytic scoring system was first suggested by Diederich, French, & Carlton (1961) as an attempt to remedy the severe problems of reliability and validity caused by subjective scoring systems (Bachman & Savignon, 1986; Fulcher, 1987). A number of studies have shown that, since its emergence, analytic rating has proved to be more informative on the testees' scores than the single score of the holistic rating and it has permitted an emergence of profile of the domains of the rated language components in order to be used in the analytic rating system (Diederich, 1974; Murray, 1982). In analytic scoring, a number of individual features or components of the written text are identified and raters supply a separate assessment for each aspect (Hamp-Lyons, 1991). According to Cooper (1977) the analytical rubric encompasses a list of the most important features of writing. Therefore, the texts are scored according to a scale which determines the construct of writing (Weigle, 2002). Diederich et al. (1974) signified five major traits towards which the raters had a tendency to assess when scoring the writing samples (flavor, ideas, forms, wording, and mechanics).

According to Sasaki and Hirose (1996), Jacobs et al.'s (1981) writing profile was the most initial of the attempts to develop an analytic scoring scale to assess L2 writing. These two authors state that Jacob et al.'s writing profile was firstly developed to assess a large quantity of compositions that were part of an English L2 proficiency test battery (the Michigan Test battery). Sasaki and Hirose go on to say that Jacobs et al. developed this five-component analytic scale (organization, content, language use, vocabulary, and mechanics) in an attempt to find an assessment system that could enjoy high reliability with "a large number of relatively inexperienced readers" (Jacobs et al, 1981, p. 33).

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

At the beginning, the participants of this study were 80 male and female Iranian EFL learners enrolled in English language institutes in Ardabil, Iran. All of the participants were native Iranian students and their age ranged from 17 to 35 with a language learning experience of at least 2 years; consequently, they were at an appropriate proficiency level for the purpose of this study. Learners who avoided revising their written drafts and those whose handwritings were not legible were excluded from the research (n=10). These strategies reduced the overall number of the participants to 70 (38 females and 32 males).

### **Instruments**

Two kinds of instruments were used in this study. The first instrument was the ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs, et al. (1981) to rate the students' written texts analytically. This ESL Composition Profile consists of the following breakdowns: Content and Organization (high-level issues), Language Use, Vocabulary, and Mechanics (low-level issues). Render (1990) believes that the ESL composition profile of Jacobs, et al. is an appropriate analytic scoring system, and Haswell (2005) views that this profile is a

very popular tool. Jacobs et al.'s marking rubric has been successfully used in assessing writing proficiency levels of students in L2 programs all over the world, especially in the USA. Jacobs et al.'s marking rubric uses a weighted scoring scheme on a percentile scale, measuring five distinct features of writing performance. Each of the subcategories has four rating levels with clear descriptors of the writing proficiency for that level and a corresponding numerical scale. The subcategories and their corresponding score ranges are as follows:

- Language use (5–25, maximum 25 points)
- Organization (7–20, maximum 20 points)
- Content (13–30, maximum 30 points)
- Mechanics (2–5, maximum 5 points)
- Vocabulary (7–20, maximum 20 points)

Another instrument used was the written samples (first-drafts and revised-drafts) of the participants to identify the errors they made as well as the kind of revising practices they employed. The revised-draft samples were, in addition, used to divide the participants into high and low writing ability students based on the mean of their holistic scores.

## Procedure

The required data were gathered from 70 male and female Iranian EFL learners enrolled in the English language institutes in Iran. As the first step, the participants were given 30 minutes to complete a writing task on the following topic: "Describe an interesting person you know or a person who makes you happy" in 100 words. The students were then asked to look back on their first drafts and rewrite better versions of them the next day; no particular instructions on the type of revision were given to them. They were simply asked to write better versions of their first drafts. The length of the assignment was kept relatively short not to exceed the limit that may have discouraged the participants from writing with enough attention.

During the scoring, first, all of the written texts were scored holistically; then the ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs, et al. (1980) was used to rate the texts analytically. Subsequently, 20% of the texts were scored holistically and analytically by another experienced rater to establish inter-rater reliability between the average of the scores given by the researchers and scores given by another rater. The results of these correlations are given in the results section.

In the next step, the participants were divided into two groups of novice and expert writers based on the average of their holistic scores in the revised drafts. Although the mean of the learners' holistic scores was 77, to establish a balance between the numbers of the students in the high and low level groups, those learners who took 80 or above it were assigned to the high level group and those who scored below 80 were assigned to the low level group.

Finally, the likely relationship between the students' levels (novice/expert) and their revising practices (higher-order/lower-order) were explored. The findings were

presented using tables and graphs. Discussing the findings and comparing the results of this study with other similar studies constituted the last stage of the research.

### Design of the Study

The design of this study was ex post facto, because independent variables already existed. This means that, the study involved no intervention. In fact, in ex post facto design a pre-existing characteristic (writing ability) is used to form the groups. This design differs from experimental designs in that it does not allow the researcher to manipulate the independent variables of the study.

### RESULTS

As mentioned previously, a second judge rescored 20% of the data both analytically and holistically. In order to check for the inter-rater reliability, a set of Pearson Correlations were calculated. It should be noted that in Table 1 below, number 1 represents the average of the two researchers' analytical and holistic scores while number 2 refers to the other rater's scores.

**Table 1.** Inter-rater Reliability of the Holistic and Analytical Scores

	Number	Content	Organization	Vocabulary	Language use	Mechanics	Holistic
1 & 2	14	.928	.948	.763	.863	.958	.896

As Table 1 indicates, there were strong correlations between the raters' scores with correlation coefficients of  $r = .928$ ,  $r = .948$ ,  $r = .763$ ,  $r = .863$ , and  $r = .958$  for content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, respectively. All these values point to high levels of reliability. Correlation between the two sets of holistic scores was also .896. Therefore, the consistencies between the raters' analytical and holistic scores were ascertained.

The hypothesis of the study was formulated to test the possible relationship between the two categorical variables of the study: writing proficiency level, defined categorically as low-proficiency and high-proficiency, and revision method, again defined categorically as lower-order revision and higher-order revision. To this end, a Chi-Square Test for Independence was run since it compares the frequency of cases found in the various categories of one variable across the different categories of another variable. In the Chi-square test, the most important table for us is the Chi-square Tests Table and specifically the Pearson Chi-square value within this table. But some other tables are also generated as a result of running the test that provide some extra but valuable information. The first of these tables is the Cross tabulation Table given below.



**Table 2.** Cross tabulation of the Relationship between Writing Ability and Revising Practice

		revision type				Total
		higher-order revision not done	higher-order revision done	lower-order revision not done	lower-order revision done	
low level	Count	72	0	88	20	180
	% within students level all	40.0%	0.0%	48.9%	11.1%	100.0%
	% within revision type	98.6%	0.0%	49.7%	62.5%	51.4%
	% of Total	20.6%	0.0%	25.1%	5.7%	51.4%
high level	Count	1	68	89	12	170
	% within students level all	0.6%	40.0%	52.4%	7.1%	100.0%
	% within revision type	1.4%	100.0%	50.3%	37.5%	48.6%
	% of Total	0.3%	19.4%	25.4%	3.4%	48.6%
Total	Count	73	68	177	32	350
	% within students level all	20.9%	19.4%	50.6%	9.1%	100.0%
	% within revision type	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	20.9%	19.4%	50.6%	9.1%	100.0%

Cross tabulation tells us what percentage of each proficiency level practiced each revising method. To find out what percentage of low-level students practiced each revision method, we read the first row after Count in the first set of rows. To find out what percentage of high-level students practiced each revision method, we read the first row after Count in the second set of rows. According to Table 2, therefore, none of the low-level students engaged in higher-order revision and only 11.1% made lower-order revision. This means that, 88.9% of them made no revision at all. But, 40% of high-level students made higher-order revision and 7.1% of them made lower-order revision while 53% of them did neither higher-order nor lower-order revisions.

Another important table is the Symmetric Measures table that provides information about the effect size of the Pearson Chi-square test. This table is given below.

**Table 3.** Measures of Effect Size (Symmetric Measures)

		Value	Sig.
Nominal by	Phi	-.193	.005
Nominal	Cramer's V	.193	.005
N of Valid Cases		210	

The Phi value is only reported for 2 by 2 tables. For tables larger than this we have to report Cramer's V. The Cramer's value in this table is .193. To interpret this value, according to Pallant (2013), we have to first subtract 1 from the number of categories in our row variable (R-1) and then subtract 1 from the number of categories in our column variable (C-1) in the crosstabulation table. These two operations will give us the values

of 3 and 1. For R-1 or C-1 equal to 3 an effect size of .19 is an effect size of medium magnitude.

The Chi-square value, given in Table 4, indicates that the association between the two categorical variables is significant. This is understood from the smaller than .05 *P* value that is calculated for the Pearson Chi-square,  $\chi^2 (3, n = 70) = 138.9, p = .001$ , Crammer's *V* = .005. This finding compels us to reject our null hypothesis which speculated no relationship between writing ability (high vs. low) and revising practices (higher-order vs. lower-order) of EFL learners.

**Table 4.** Chi-Square Test of Independence

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	138.888 <sup>a</sup>	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	186.642	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.406	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	350		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.54.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results from analyzing the data revealed that we had to reject the research hypothesis that conceptualized a lack of relationship between high level vs. low level EFL learners and their revising practices (higher-order vs. lower-order). The results of a Chi-Square for Independence showed a significant relationship between the students' writing ability and their revising practices. Also, it was revealed that, none of the low-level students made higher-order revision and only 11.1% of them made lower-order revision. In other words, 88.9% of them made no revision at all. Likewise, 40% of high-level students made higher-order revision and 7.1% of them made lower-order revision while 53% of them engaged neither in higher-order nor lower-order revision.

These findings are in line with Faigley and Witte (1984) who observed that expert and experienced writers made more revisions than inexperienced student writers during the writing of the first draft. They also found that experienced writers mainly focused on global and content-related changes, leaving the local and surface-level modifications until the final stage of the revision. Additionally, they found that the less experienced writers among their participants had more low-level errors to cope with and thus could not see beneath the surface whereas the more experienced writers made fewer low-level errors and thus were not preoccupied with surface-level revisions. Also, less experienced writers believed that by revising, they make their text even worse!

The findings of this study are also in line with Sommers (1980) who explored the revising strategies of first language college student writers and expert writers and discovered that student writers were mainly engaged with the word and phrase level revisions with lexical substitution being the most frequent operation. By contrast, the revisions made by experienced adult writers were distributed at all levels (word, phrase, clause, and sentence) with addition being the major operation. The experienced writers' revising

practices suggested that experienced writers had access to more alternatives than less experienced writers. Sommers (1980) also found that student writers viewed revision as editing whereas expert writers defined revision as a look for meaning and an effort to communicate ideas more effectively. In addition, Sommers (1980) suggested that novice college writers often cannot see any dissonance between their intended meaning and what they actually write. She argued this is due to the fact that they reread their writing at much lower levels of abstraction than experts, finding and solving problems only at the level of words and sentences.

Perl (1979) also conducted a research regarding the effect of writing proficiency on revising practices of novice and expert writers. His findings are in line with this study's findings since he proved that novice writers were mostly concerned with the detection and correction of errors and that the greatest percentage of their revisions was changes of form compared with expert writers who were mainly concerned with meaning-based changes. The conclusion reached was that the students' writing ability and their revising practices were related.

It is absolutely true that some students choose not to revise since it is a demanding job. But there may be other reasons as well. The very word 'revision' seems to provoke dread in many writers, perhaps because they find it very difficult to re-enter the 'space' of writing and call up their original energy about the topic. But the further writers can move away from thinking of revision in terms of grade, and toward the thought that revision clarifies the text and enhances writing, the less fearful it may seem.

Expert writers distinguish between revising and editing, seeing the former as a recursive process to change their texts in relation to their intended meaning, audience, and goals. Novice writers, in contrast, do not distinguish between editing and revising; they see revision a step at the end of the writing process that involves only cosmetic operations such as grammatical accuracy and mechanics. Good writers revise more frequently, considering both global and local aspects of texts while poor writers revise less frequently and often restrict their attention to local aspects ignoring higher-order issues.

The final point to make is that teachers should encourage students to do extensive revisions, clarify the meaning of revision to them, and guide students' attention toward global revision which is vital in increasing writing quality.

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