

## Helping Second Language Student Writers Improve Their Revision

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### What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Nowadays, most universities offer writing-related courses to help students lay a good foundation for writing and contribute to their subsequent studies. These writing-related courses often discuss the value of a thorough revision process. Compared with native English speakers, second language learners need to do more revision, which is a great challenge for them. Therefore, this paper aims to make second language students understand and apply revision more effectively.

#### *The Importance of Revision*

Students of a second language often subconsciously perceive revision as troublesome and formulaic. According to Nancy Sommers (1980), a writing researcher at Harvard University, students are used to paying more attention to other writing skills like proofreading, which deviates from the purpose of revision. However, revision is a critical step in determining the effectiveness of a text. In Christina Grant's (2012) "Writing processes" graphic (see p. 59 in this volume), the difference between getting an excellent final draft and a bad final draft is the writer's attitude and the number of revisions.

Before starting revision, students need to be clear about the definition and meaning of revision. Donald Murray (2005), an American journalist and English professor, introduces the meaning of revision: "revision means restructuring, adding, deleting, and rewriting sentences or even the whole paragraph to a certain extent" (p. 395). Revision with methods

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and goals will help students find a more positive attitude towards revision. In his video about revision, Obert Skye (2016) also suggests that revision is like a writing detective asking questions about his own articles. It provides an opportunity for a writer to rethink their writing from a new perspective, helping them find their writing dissonance. It can help structure an essay, allow writers to find relevance in sentences, and make arguments more logical. “Revision is actually where the magic happens, where banal words are carved and polished until it shines, ” says Obert Skye (2016).

### *Two Principal Forms of Revision*

There are two main forms of revision: internal revision and external revision. According to Murray (2005), student writers enter the stage of internal revision after completing the draft, starting from rereading their writing, maintaining ignorance, that is, re-examining what they have written from the perspective of a stranger: “They read their own writing in order to find out where the content and form of their writing and where their language and sound will lead them” (p. 399). There is only one audience for internal revisions: the author himself. At this stage, the writer should find more ideas, because as Murray (2005) mentioned, internal revision is a process of discovery. As Sommers (1980) suggests, most students are used to proofreading habitually, but in reality, revision strategies should focus on identifying something larger, such as the design and structure of writing, the connection of arguments and arguments, rather than the tangle of spelling, grammar, and other problems that most second language students struggle with.

The second stage of revision is external revision when the author needs to convey his views to the outside world. At this stage, the reader of the text is no longer the author himself but the professor and classmates who evaluate it. They are great resources for prompting authors to burst out new inspirations and examine the article from a new perspective. In accordance with Nancy Ami (2020) and her co-authors, “No one can write alone” (2020, para 1). When writing alone, students will subconsciously create content in accordance with their own thoughts and habits, where it is easy to neglect the feelings and understanding of readers. However, external feedback can make authors pay more attention to thinking from the readers’ perspective and help them find the gaps and omissions in the content of the article. The “peer review” activity Ami (2020) refers to, for example, is a form of external revision that can help bridge the gap between what kind of feedback an author needs to be given, thereby reducing the author’s revision anxiety.

### *Problems Faced by International Students*

Compared with native speakers, second language students need to overcome cultural and communication problems when making external revisions. According to LaRay Barna (2007), Professor Emerita at Portland State University in Oregon, the reason why

international students feel anxious about communication is cultural diversity. During external revision, international students may receive many suggestions different from their cultural background, and students need to integrate these suggestions and keep their own characteristics. At the same time, second language students need to communicate with others in a second language, which is a great challenge. Still, more communication is conducive to the development of external revision.

*The Revision Process*

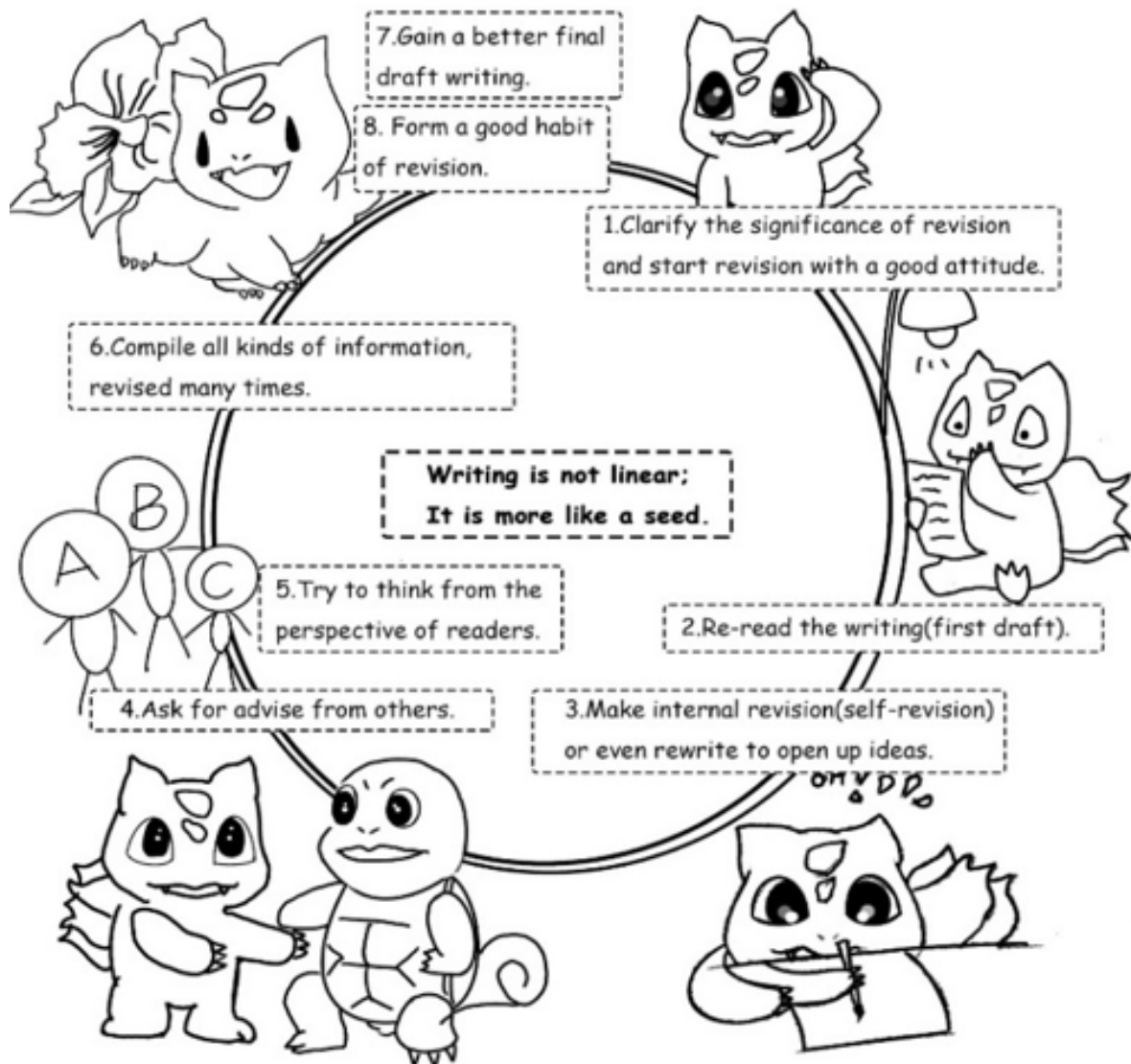


Figure 1: Writing as growing a seed. Cartoon image by Ruiyi Zhang and Wenzhe Kang

A vivid illustration can help students understand the process and method of revision more clearly. Sommers (1980) proposed that “writing is not linear; it is more like a seed” (p. 384). The illustration in Figure 1 uses a popular cartoon pattern in Asia, which started with Bulbasaur (the Miaowa seed) and later with the Miaowa flower. Writing is like planting a

seed, and it requires care and attention to grow into a flower. Most of the second language students in first-year writing courses at the University of Alberta come from Asia. The illustrations that conform to Asian culture will make second language students feel more cordial—hoping that second language students can take the revision process seriously and create better writing.

### *Conclusion*

Students need to realize that revision is an important part of writing. Writing is difficult, so is revising, especially if you are learning a second language as there are more things to consider when revising. It is not only a process of broadening one's mind but also a process of blending into local academic culture.

### Five Key Points When Revising

1. *Keep an open mind*

Accepting revision as an important part of the writing process may allow you to be honest with yourself without being lazy and finding out what you really think.

2. *Reread your own work as a stranger*

Find out where you stumble or get lost in a sentence, where you are distracted or bored, and what needs to be modified or deleted.

3. *Check the key points of the paper*

Focus on something larger. Students should first pay attention to the large issues in the paper, such as topic, argument, etc., rather than grammar and spelling. Make sure you stay on track throughout the entire paper.

4. *Don't revise alone*

Not only will your professor look at your writing, but also your classmates, colleagues, and friends can help you find issues you have overlooked before. They are great resources for getting a fresh, outside look at your work.

5. *Be more confident in revision*

You should honour your own thinking after getting other people's suggestions, and don't blindly follow other people's recommendations and lose your own direction.

## Unanswered Questions

1. Barna (2007) argues that international students are anxious when it comes to communication because of cultural differences. How should students cope with the anxiety, and how is communication for different cultures related to writing for different cultures?
2. Murray (2005) mentioned in his article that many people focus on internal revision but do not clearly indicate whether this is correct. How should future students allocate time and energy for internal and external revision?
3. Sommers (1980) proposed that student writers should discover the meaning and “disharmony” of writing like experienced writers. This is just a big concept. What should student writers do specifically?

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