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Word Processing and English as a Foreign Language: Environmental Factors Affecting Revision Quality - A Qualitative Analysis

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SUMMARY

This study investigates the impact upon quality of revision changes of four specific variables: (a) tiredness, (b) the time of the day, (c) noise, and (d) writers' psychological situation. The particular context is 46 University students whose first language is Greek and had various experience on word processing. These student writers were interviewed in order the researcher to extract the information necessary for an in-depth analysis. They wrote and revised in English through the medium of word-processors. The analysis has shown that no immediate negative influence is evident in the output and the writers felt an impact of environmental factors considered needing to produce quality revisions. Discussion concludes with the results, implications and the limitations of the findings.

KEYWORDS: *Word Processing, English as a Foreign Language, Environmental Factors, Revision Quality.*

INTRODUCTION

Nold (1979) argued that: 'revising is adding or substituting meaning to clarify the originally intended meaning or to follow more closely the intended form or genre of the text' (Nold, 1979: 105). Within this framework, revising covers minor tasks (e.g., fixing spelling and punctuation, substituting synonyms) as well as major editing tasks (e.g., reorganising blocks of discourse, adding whole sections of content). This study focuses upon an important aspect of revision: the quality of it. Issues relating to quality of revision include ideas of the revised text (i.e. main points clearly supported), organisation (i.e. a written revised text with a detectable plan), wording (i.e. good use of words), flavour (i.e. writing the revised text honestly with the writer suggesting a thoughtful person), usage, punctuation and spelling. Depth of understanding is lacking on the impact of environmental factors upon quality of revisions.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AND REVISION

The hypothesis of this research was that adverse environmental conditions (i.e., tiredness, time of the day, work environment and the psychological situation of the writers) affect negatively the quality of revision changes. Despite being almost 20 years that Ramsden (1984) called for the study of environmental factors in research of writing, there is still limited empirical evidence on the area.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

This article has a single objective: to assess the impact of four environmental factors, namely: (a) tiredness, (b) the time of the day, (c) noise, and (d) writers' psychological situation upon the purpose of revision changes. From the standpoint of manageability of data collection the context of the study has been restricted to Greek University students with various experience in word processing. This investigation will inform language education researchers on the nature of environmental factors' contribution upon the revising in English as a foreign language.

METHODOLOGY

Six respondents were protocol-based interviewed. Four questions during these interviews pertained to specific environmental factors investigated, namely: tiredness (the writer being tired versus being fresh/comfortable, the time of the day (adequate versus inadequate for the writer), noise (noisy versus quieter work environment) and writers' psychological condition (calm versus non-calm due to events of importance to them). Measurement was based upon the respondents' affirmative or negative answers to the following questions:

- a. Is the quality of your revision affected by tiredness?*
- b. Is the quality of your revision affected by the time of the day?*
- c. Is the quality of your revision affected by noise?*
- d. Is the quality of your revision affected by your psychological condition?*

The respondents' answers were recorded and used in a cross-case qualitative analysis.

Sample

This research involved 6 University students from the same faculty. The specific size of the sample was chosen for three reasons: a) because the size of students was thought to be enough to get useful insights on the issues examined; b) to be in accordance with previous literature related with the subject (Sengupta, 2000); and c) because as Yin (1984) explains: '*the researcher limits his/her number of qualitative analysis' sample when he/she starts having replicable information on the issue examined*'. The students were selected to be of the same faculty, according to their willingness to participate in the study. First year (second semester) students were selected to take part in the experiment, because their flexible timetable permitted them to concentrate on the experiment. University students rather than school pupils were also chosen because: a) they would be more likely to select information, cross out, edit, draw, rehearse, revise, and reorganize their texts than school pupils (Willinsky, 1989); and b) the positive effects of word processing appear to be most unequivocal with college-age writers (Sommers, 1985; Bernhardt *et al.*, 1988).

Context

The study took place in a single country, and more specifically Greece, for the following reasons: it was considered to be methodologically appropriate to collect accurate data in Greece where English is a foreign language. Greece is particularly suitable since English is the widest taught foreign language for Greek students; English is the most important language to the wider economic and social community. Concentration upon English may have a wider audience, practicality and importance for teachers and students alike.

This research took place in the University of Thessaly, Greece. The university is fifteen years old. Undergraduate programs for agricultural department span five years. The reasons for the selection of the specific number and grade of students' were explained above. As the research was conducted in the second semester of the students' first year texts written in English by the selected students during the first semester of their English lessons were collected. Their English course was obligatory, including both general English and English of their specialization (one and a half hours

per week general English and two and a half hours per week English of their specialization). The researcher was their tutor. The research took place as part of an ordinary course in order to succeed in getting an unobtrusive data collection without a negative influence upon the students. In this way the data collection's validity will be strengthened.

Task

The essay topic of the research was chosen to be familiar to the entire sample across the different main subjects of study. It was an argumentative essay because of the students' age. The task given to students taking part in the research had the title: 'The advantages and disadvantages of using public transport'.

Writing and revising practice

All students were working to 486 PCs/ 66MHz connected to a network that had three printers. It was not necessary to instruct the students on how to use the program that they used for writing (Word), as they had already used it for writing essays in other courses of their study. Students used the above word processing software to compose on screen, but they were not given printouts of their texts. Printing their texts was thought to distract their attention from revising on screen and would have an impact on the quality of revision. When the students revised, they referred to the screen, because it was asked by the researcher.

ANALYSIS

As also explained earlier, six respondents were protocol-based interviewed. Four questions during these interviews pertained to specific environmental factors investigated, namely: tiredness (the writer being tired versus being fresh/comfortable, the time of the day (adequate versus inadequate for the writer), noise (noisy versus quieter work environment) and writers' psychological condition (calm versus non-calm due to events of importance to them). Measurement was based upon the respondents' affirmative or negative answers. These were recorded and used in a cross-case qualitative analysis. The findings of the analysis is presented below:

Table 1: Summary of findings of the research

Writer Code	Environmental factors
P-1	All factors' impact identified
P-2	No impact
P-20	No impact
P-18	All factors' impact identified
P-19	One factor's impact Identified (time of the day)
P-17	No impact

RESULTS

The findings of this research showed that there was a variety of answers by the students. The analysis has shown that no immediate negative influence is evident in the output, but the writers that felt an impact of environmental factors considered needing to put a greater extent and quality of effort to perform revising. This advances knowledge on the subject as there has been no previous research examining the impact of specific environmental factors upon quality of revision changes.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The implications of these findings are firstly that teachers must be very careful to organise computer's writing classes so that these classes can suit students, not computer room occupation schedules. Secondly, they must arrange access to computer for each student, as work environment has an effect upon quality of the revised text. As far as the limitations of this research are concerned findings may not be generalizable due to specificity and size of the sample of this study. Finally, in this research there was no examination of heterogeneous groups to find out if the same results persist when this is the case.

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