Editing or revision: An examination of EFL teachers' feedback on writing drafts

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Abstract

Second language acquisition (SLA) literature is replete with studies exploring the effect of teachers' corrective feedback or comments on the improvement of students' writing accuracy, with little attention paid to the true nature of the process of revision. This case study was intended to understand the type and nature of revision that writing teachers required students to make to their drafts based on the feedback they were provided. A second aim of the study was to reveal how students evaluated teachers' comments and what problems they faced in revising their writing drafts. A close scrutiny of four university teachers' comments on the papers of 32 student-writers reveals that writing teachers provide, to a large extent, common and identical comments which mainly deal with language-bound errors and problems. They hardly seem to expect students to re-examine the text beyond its surface level. In the current study, almost 97 per cent of teachers' comments directed students' attention to low level skills such as punctuation, spelling and grammatical structure. Teachers' comments did not seem to communicate to student writers the meaning of revision anything more than editing or proofreading. The results also indicated that

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students did not attribute any other meaning to revision than tidying-up or copy-editing. The problems students faced while revising are discussed and some pedagogical implications are offered.

Keywords: corrective feedback, editing, proofreading, revision, writing accuracy

1. Introduction

For more than two decades, a substantial part of writing research focused on the revision process of student writers. In the context of multi-draft process writing, revision is an integral part of the process (Ferris, 1995, 1997; Zamel, 1983). Taylor (1981, cited in Sze, 2002) regarded revision as a meaning discovery procedure. Soven (1999) defined it as the activity of making allowance for larger components of an essay, its content, development and organization. Revision is different from editing which refers to correcting what has been written and where the focus is on sentence accuracy, spelling, usage and punctuation. Experienced teachers of writing know that revision is an integral part of writing process (Sommers, 1982) and that "a piece of good writing [is] often the culmination of one or more revisions" (Sze, 2002, p. 25). They know that it is in this stage of writing process that students grow as writers, readers, and thinkers. Revision is a way to learn about the craft of writing. As Phyllis Whitney (Lehr, 1995) wrote, good stories are not written: They are re-written. Learning to revise teaches students about the characteristics of good writing, which will carry over into their future writing. Revision requires that writers distance themselves from the writing and *critically evaluate a text*.

For the novice writer, however, revision appears to be synonymous with editing or proofreading. Students' efforts at revision are devoted to changing spelling, punctuation, and grammar (Faigley & Witte, 1981; see also Wall & Petroskey, 1981). Studies (Flower, 1979, 1981; Sommers, 1980, 1981; Zamel, 1982, 1983) have shown again and again that the best way to learn to write is to rewrite. In the revision process, a student improves his reading and analytical skills. He learns to challenge his own ideas,

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thus, deepening and strengthening his argument. He learns to find the weaknesses in his writing. He may even discover patterns of error or habits of organization that are undermining his papers. Though revising takes time and energy, it also helps one to become a more efficient writer (Sommers, 1980, 1981, 1982; Zamel, 1983, 1985). The difficulty for teachers in applying revision is to do it with proper expectations and objectives. True revision is more a habit of mind, a disposition or an inclination to further examination, a tendency to stick to it. And "revision for students should not result in blandness and flattening of the students' language nor the imposition of teacher's phrases and insights" (Horning & Becker, 2006, p. 5).

2. Literature Review

In the field of composition, revision has a long history and has been assessed and evaluated in different ways (Williams, 2004). Over the past 20 years, an important part of writing research dealt with the revision process of student writers. Revision is widely understood as a process broader than, though embracing, editing for errors (Williams, 2004). In the setting of multi-draft process writing, revision is an inseparable part of the process. The notion of linearity which is a characteristic of early "writing process movement" during the 1970s led some researchers to regard writing as a linear structure divided into separate phases. The linear model of writing was conceived to consist of pre-writing, writing, and post-writing (Clouston, 1995). Some researchers in the field of composition studies challenged this notion of linearity in writing (Sommers, 1981; Zamel, 1983, to name a few), arguing that "it was a simplistic view of composing, and that revision should not be understood as a separate stage at the end of the process" (Cabrera, 2003, p. 21). When we deal with teacher feedback or commentary and student composing and revision, we need to be wary that it is a "complex process, with multiple contextual, teacher and student interacting and mediating each other, through a cyclical process within which multiple student texts and teacher commentary texts are created" (Goldstein, 2004, p. 67). Horning and Becker (2006) contend that

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revision affects every aspect of writing process, so it should be explored not only as a point of departure but also as woven into all aspects of writing. In line with Horning and Becker's (2006) viewpoint, Williams (2004) contends that although in some process approaches, revision follows drafting, in the multi-phase writing process; revision can take place at any point in writing.

Bridwell (1980, cited in Sze, 2002), however, describes composing process as both linear and recursive (see also Horning & Becker, 2006; Sommers, 1981; Zamel, 1982). In the course of writing, the writer forms an idea and advances linearly, unravels and evolves the concept, but at certain points, he or she pauses to reconsider or reexamine the product to confirm what is on the page or discover some incongruity. Discernment of incongruity would lead to a decision to alter, to pause, or to simply overlook it and proceed. "The underlying assumption is that the process is a loop and goes on until all dissonance is resolved or until the point when the writer sees no need for further revision (Bridwell, 1980, cited in Sze, 2002, p. 22; see also Horning & Becker, 2006). Williams (2004, p. 174) conceives of revision as a "problem-oriented process." The writer discerns that parts of a draft need improvement. Of course, the sheer discernment of the problem will not result in text improvement, but realization of a problem is a prime step (Williams, 2004). Wendy Bishop (2004), in her edited title (*Act* of *Revision: A Guide for Writers),* distinguishes between *revising out* □ endangering, unfolding and expanding ideas as much as possible □ and *revising in* □ chopping, shortening and pruning with confidence. In a similar vein, Williams (2004) also views revision as a "goal-oriented process that has both internal and external manifestations, that is, it can be both the thinking process that the writer goes through in reconsidering what is written and in imaging possible changes, and what actually happens to the product" (p. 174).

A weighty body of research has been concerned with the study of revision process in both first- and second-language writing. In studies concerning revision made by L2 student writers, there is convergence of opinions that they tend to focus on local or lower level concerns just as their L1 counterparts do. This is partly

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because teachers' comments predominantly targeted language errors in student writing. This may be, in turn, because students' first drafts were treated as a final product, and teachers saw themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers (Lee, 2008; see also Zamel, 1982). The L2 student writers regard revision as an activity that affects only the superficial aspects of the text; they revise more low level concerns than high level concerns (Porte, 1997, cited in Sze, 2002). Gaskil (1987, cited in Ferris, 1997) contended that ESL student writers regard revision as a patching up or copy-editing exercise that focuses on the word level. "Outside the writing classroom, the word revision suggests a process of change, one of re-seeing and re-conceptualizing. In the writing classroom, however, revision is treated as a non-creative act, a polishing act concerned with taking the litter out of sentences" (Sommers, 1981, p. 41; see also Horning & Becker, 2006).

Some teachers and researchers question the power of teacher feedback in diminishing language errors in students' revised drafts (Diab, 2010). In contrast, other studies admit the power and strength of teacher feedback in getting students to improve the quality and accuracy of their writing in revision sessions (Fathman & Whalley, 1990, cited in Diab, 2010). Truscott and Hsu (2008), taking the power of teachers' feedback for granted, conducted a study entitled 'error correction, revision, and learning' in which they identified and underlined half the students' errors in their write-ups and the students utilized this feedback in the revision process to polish their writing of the mechanical errors, whereas the other half tackled the same job with no teacher intervention (i.e. revising their writing without their errors being identified). The results favored the former group. That is, the group that received revision feedback excelled the other group at the revision session. Identifying the errors helped students to reduce their errors in the revision session. This advantage, however, did not transfer to a subsequent writing task carried out a week later. They jumped to the conclusion that "successful error reduction during revision is not a predictor, even a very weak predictor of learning" (Truscott & Hsu, 2008, p.299).

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As far as student writers' response to feedback is concerned, some researchers assert that ESL students attend to and hold teacher comments on their errors in high regard in writing and that they perform many form-related revisions in their writing (Tagong, 1992, cited in Ferris, 1997). Sugita (2006) conducted a study in which he assessed the influence of teacher's comment types on students' revisions. He found that some teachers' commentary on students' written drafts tends to be imprecise and unclear. Owing to this deficiency, students' revisions show "inadequate responses to the comments, and some essays even seem to ignore comments completely" (Sugita, 2006, p. 35; see also Lee, 2008). Horning and Becker (2006) assert that professional, mature writers are exceptionally good at revising compared to their novice counterparts. In *Revision Revisited,* Horning examines the wide-ranging repertoire of revising practices that professional writers use. Student writers, now and then, revise extensively too, but are more "likely to stick to surface correction and small changes" (Horning & Becker, 2006, p. 4).

Of course, programmatic and institutional perspectives towards writing, towards writing instructors, and towards different multilingual populations can exert a strong pressure on how teachers supply feedback or written commentary and how students react to it and apply it in their revisions (Goldstein, 2004; Lee, 2008). More recently, Hyland and Hyland (2006, cited in Lee, 2008) reiterate that "feedback practices are influenced by personal beliefs and mediated by the institutions and cultures in which teachers operate" (Lee, 2008, p. 73). Some researchers scrutinized the classroom context to account for ineffective revision or lack thereof. They examined the relationship between particular features of instructional approach and teaching strategies and revision patterns of the students in terms of frequency and types of revision (Sze, 2002). The kind of teachers' strategies and the standards or norms for appraisal of students' writing may explain student revision practices. It is thought that these strategies and norms consolidate the traditional and obsolete view of what good writing and revision is, and give rise to students' paying inordinate attention to lower-level concerns in revision. Therefore, as posited by

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Yagelski (1995, cited in Sze, 2002, p. 23; see also Goldstein, 2004) "the process writing orientation of a composition classroom with its prewriting activities, multiple drafts and peer editing can be offset by teacher's grading practices that focus on linguistic accuracy and form rather than content and organization" (see also Flower, 1981).

3. Purpose of the Study

In the present study, the researchers examined four university instructors' marginal, interlinear and end comments written on first drafts of papers by university English students, exploring the pragmatic goals for and linguistic characteristics of each comment. To this end, an attempt was made to subject the revised papers of students to thorough and careful scrutiny to observe the influence of instructors' commentary on the students' revisions and examine whether the changes brought about as a result of teachers' feedback actually gave rise to improvements in the students' papers.

Customarily, writing teachers have scribbled comments on compositions to utter their reactions to students' work -- an activity that consumes a great deal of time and energy -- taking for granted that students will gain from such comments and will employ the new instruction to the ensuing drafts of the same paper, resulting in writing quality. In an attempt to understand whether teachers' intentions to improve student writing by offering them written feedback on papers actually serve the revision function in the writing process or not, we embarked on this study to fill in a gap in research on revision in writing. The ignition for this case study was fueled by observing that more or less the same comments are provided by teachers with no or little pay-off. This study was accordingly conducted to investigate whether teachers' comments on students' papers assist both parties in accomplishing their aims, that is, in leading to improved writing in terms of content and quality rather than structure. The research questions were:

1. What strategies do students employ to handle teachers' comments on their papers?

2. What is the impact of teachers' comments on students' responses?
3. What difficulties do students confront with while revising their papers in response to the teachers' comments?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

In this study, an attempt was made to examine 1200 marginal, interlinear and end comments written on 32 first drafts of papers written by university EFL students. The selection of the participants was based on convenience and their willingness to participate. Initially, it was intended to include more students in the study. However, having found that many students were reluctant to take part in the study, in spite of the fact that they had already been assured of anonymity and confidentiality of the information they were to provide, the researchers had to move on with a smaller sample. It should also be mentioned here that only those students who had successfully passed the writing related courses such as 'advanced English writing' and 'essay writing' courses participated in this study. The participants (18 females and 14 males, with the age range of 22-27) came from Azad and Payam-e-Noor universities in Khoy (West Azerbaijan province). The participating university instructors were 3 males and one female, with MA and PhD degree in TEFL and with a teaching experience ranging from 10 to 16 years. The selection of instructors was also based on their willingness and convenience.

4.2 Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Writing samples (first drafts) from the above participants were used as data in this study. The students were instructed to write short essays of about 400-500 words (in an hour and a half) on one of the seven topics assigned by the researchers. Upon collecting students' papers, the researchers submitted them to four university teachers to provide feedback and comment on the quality of their writing. In order to compare students' first drafts with their second drafts, the

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researchers made copies of students' commentated papers by instructors. The students were requested to revise, rewrite or 'change' their writing in response to the instructors' comments (the researchers deliberately applied the term 'change' instead of 'revision', for in no way can the changes that the students made in response to the teachers' comments be called 'revision'). The 'revised' papers were returned to the corresponding teachers for the second time for evaluation and commenting on their quality and improvement.

Notes written by the students at the bottom of or on the overleaf of the paper were also found useful for analysis. Serving as nonparticipant observers in the revising session, the researchers gained useful information about students' motives to revise, students' reactions to teachers' comments, strategies employed by the students to make changes and to process the comments, students' attitudes towards the comments and scores assigned to their papers as well as the difficulties students faced while making revisions.

As soon as the revision session was over, data were also elicited from students by administering them a questionnaire with 16 open-ended questions on 'revision', 'how it differs from editing and proofreading', 'the teachers' purpose of writing comments', and 'comments and its influence on students' writing quality improvements' (Appendix A). The questionnaire was administered to them in order to gain an in-depth insight into how students dealt with teachers' comments, their attitude towards teachers' comments, and their actual revision strategies. Students' answers to the questions posed by the researchers deepened our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (i.e. revision). Since the questions in the questionnaire had been laden with technical knowledge or terms, most of the students answered the questions in Persian which were, then, translated into English. Unfortunately, the return rate of questionnaires was quite low, that is, only one-fourth of the students returned the questionnaires. Though no convincing reasons were put forward for declining to hand in their questionnaires, the point or message implicit in their reasoning, as

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anticipated, was technicality of the questions in the questionnaire and hence the difficulty of answering them.

During the analysis, the students were given false identity or pseudonyms whenever being quoted. Also, it is worth mentioning that the researchers made some modifications in the students' utterances for the purpose of making them understandable.

5. Results

5.1 Classification of Teachers' Comments and Students' Textual Changes

For the purpose of determining the effect of teachers' comments on students' writing, a simple yet vigorous system for analyzing the effect of revision changes on meaning was sought. This need was met by following taxonomy provided by Faigley and Witte (1981) as shown in Figure 1 below. This taxonomy has two subdivisions: 'surface changes' which "are changes that do not bring new information to a text or remove old information and 'text-based changes' that involve the adding of new content or deletion of existing content" (Faigley & Witte, 1981, p. 402). The former (i.e. surface changes) is itself divided into 'formal changes' which include conventional copy-editing operations and 'meaning preserving changes' that include changes that paraphrase the concepts in the text but do not alter them. The latter (text-based changes) is divided into 'microstructure changes' or changes which are "simple adjustments of existing text or elaboration and 'macrostructure changes' which make more sweeping alterations" (Faigley & Witte, 1981, p. 404). This taxonomy embodies both those changes motivated by teachers' comments and those which students make independently of teachers' comments. What is left outside of this taxonomy is a great number of comments (about 50) on the students' papers which do not call for the students to make textual changes, such as 'good', 'well done', 'good English sentence', 'good handwriting', 'ok', and the like, for the taxonomy in question is change-based there is no room for these types of comments. Thus, deleting these so-called neutral comments from the students' papers leaves us with exactly 1150 comments which

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require student writers to make textual changes. Via independent classification of teachers' comments and students' textual changes by the researchers and another proficient university professor, the researchers arrived at a higher degree of agreement (we more than ninety five percent of times agreed on the grouping of the teachers' comments and students' textual changes under appropriate categories).

As is the case with other classification systems, in this classification, too, there is an element of subjectivity in categorizing revised changes under appropriate groupings. This high degree of agreement is because of the fact that overwhelming majority of teachers' comments, that is about 97 percent (1116 out of 1150) targeted and addressed surface changes in Faigley and Witte' (1981) system. Textual changes (which were nothing more than tidying-up or copy-editing) were also concerned with surface errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and diction and were accordingly grouped under surface level changes.
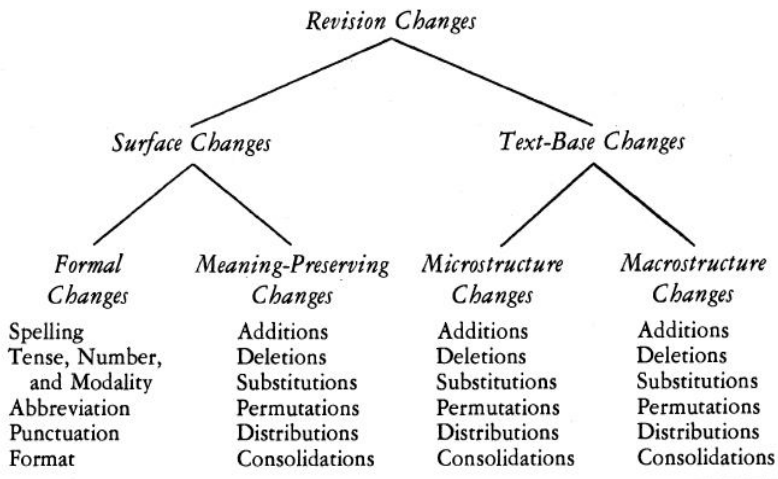

Figure 1: A taxonomy of revision changes (adopted from Faigley & Witte, 1981, p. 403

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As displayed in Table 1, an analysis of teachers' comments reveals that a great majority of teachers' comments (1116 out 1150; that is about 97.26%) focused on surface changes. That is, while over 746 (about 65%) out of 1150 comments directed students' attention to formal changes (spelling, punctuation, tense, number, abbreviation, capitalization), only about 370 (about 32.36%) addressed meaning preserving changes (addition, deletion, substitution, permutation, distribution, consolidation). A very negligible number of the comments (11, that is about 1%) directed students' attention to micro-structural changes and just a very small fraction of comments (23, that is about 2%) concentrated on macro structural changes.

Table1: Teachers' comments

Formal Changes	F	%	Meaning Preserving Changes	F	%
Capitalization	110	9.5 ☐	Reword	73	6.5
Spelling	74	6.5	Rewrite	87	7.5
Punctuation	63	5.5	Redundant	43	3.7
Wrong Word	91	8	Underlining	23	2
Grammatically Wrong	123	10.70	Circling	24	2
Wrong Tense	92	8	Add	27	2.5
Wrong Word Order	53	4.6	Delete	28	2.5
Subject-Verb Agreement	41	3.5	Incomplete Sentence	30	2.6
Wrong Sentence	55	4.8	Non-Sense Word	17	1.5
Wrong Verb	44	3.8	Awkward Word	18	1.56
Total	32.36	746		64.9	370
Micro-Structural Changes	**F**		**%**		
Ambiguous Sentences	11		0.95		
Macro-Structural Changes	**F**		**%**		
Not Clear Paragraph	10		0.87		
No Conclusion	9		0.78		
Not Good Paragraphing	4		0.35		
Total	23		2		

*Note: *Throughout the paper percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add to 100.*

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Table 2: Students' textual changes

Formal Changes	F	%	Meaning Preserving Changes	F	%
Capitalization	109	10.5	Reword (addition)	70	6.75
Spelling	73	7	Rewrite (addition)	85	8.19
Punctuation	69	6.65	Redundant (deletion)	42	4.05
Grammatically Wrong	120	11.57	Wrong Word (substitution)	84	8.10
Wrong Tense (tense)	90	8.70	Underlining (permutation)	23	2.21
Subject-Verb Agreement (Number)	40	3.9	Circling (distribution)	24	2.31
Wrong Verb (modality)	43	4.15	Add (addition)	27	2.60
Wrong Tense (modality)	50	4.80	Delete (deletion)	28	2.70
			Incomplete Sentence (addition)	25	2.41
			Non-Sense Word (substitution)	15	1.44
			Awkward Word (substitution)	15	1.44
Total	594	57.27		438	42.2
Micro-Structural Changes	**F**		**%**		
Ambiguous Sentences (addition)	5		0.05		
Macro-Structural Changes	**F**		**%**		
0	0		0		

An analysis of students' revision changes shows that a good deal of changes made by the students was related to the surface changes. That is, about 1032 (almost 99.5%) out of total number of changes (1037) were related to the surface changes level. Comparing teachers' comments that called for surface changes (97%) with students' surface-level changes (99.5%), it becomes evident that students almost attempted all the teachers' comments (i.e. there is almost one-to-one correspondence between teachers'

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comments and students' changes). Again students' changes at the formal level is about 57.27% and at the meaning preserving level, it is about 42.2%. The three categories of 'grammatically wrong' (11. 57%), 'capitalization' (10.9%) and 'wrong tense' (8.75%) rated high among the changes students made at the surface changes level. Only 0.5 percent of changes (that is, 5 out of 1037) related to micro structural changes. Not even one student made macro structural changes.

5.2 Analysis of Students' Answers to Open-Ended Questions

As stated before, in addition to making changes to their drafts in response to teachers' comments, students were also given a questionnaire which helped the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of their purpose of making textual changes and the revision strategies (see appendix A). Through careful scrutiny of the answers, it became evident that a great majority of the answers revolve around eight themes as in the following table:

Table 3: Students responses to open-ended questions pertaining to various themes

Theme	Examples of Students' Responses
1-Students' purpose of revision:	-Revision improves scores
2-Students' strategy of handling teachers' comments :	-Not reading the whole text, just correcting the errors in sequence.
3-Mistaking rewording, editing, or reviewing for revision :	-Our teacher never applied the term revision but rather it was the term editing, rewording, or reviewing that was frequently used.
	-Our teacher never asked us to revise in writing classes.
	-Our first draft was our final draft.
	-Our teacher just sends a paper back to us with some comments on it to justify the score not to help us improve its quality.
	-To proofread is enough.
4-The relationship between the teachers' comments and students' responses:	-I would like to revise my writing but since my teacher's correction addressed low level concerns, I felt no need to make macro-structural

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	changes. -I have my own doubts that my self-initiated changes will gain my teacher's approval.
5-Compliance with abstract rules: 6- To attach importance to surface level features:	-Nothing is wrong with this conditional sentence type 2. -Teachers comment extensively on mechanical issues. -Making surface level changes leads to score improvement.
7- Text appropriation:	-I would like to revise, but fearing that my self-initiated changes may not gain the teacher's approval.
8- Difficulties students encountered:	- My paper was replete with comments such as awkward, reword, and rewrite.

5.3 Analysis of Researchers' Observation

The qualitative data came not only from teachers' comments on students' papers, from the textual changes students render, from students' answers to open-ended questions, but also from the researchers' observation of the students' strategy of handling teachers' comments. The researchers' observation revolves around certain themes (similar to students' answers to open-ended questions) in the table below:

Table 4: Researchers' Observation Pertaining to Various Themes

Theme	Researchers' Observation
1-Strategy of revision:	- In the revision session, students were observed jumping hastily from one comment to another without reading the whole text from beginning to end. - Students commence with the first comment and proceed through the paper in sequence or haphazardly from one comment to another ignoring macro structural changes. -A student murmured slowly while making textual changes: "only a becoming word will suffice". - Students restricted revision to low level concerns.
2-Frequent use of synonymous words:	-They thumbed the dictionary to find alternative words for the words noted by the teacher.

6. Discussion

In the preceding paragraphs, we analyzed the teachers' comments and students' textual revisions in response to the teachers' comments. Next, we discuss the findings that emerge from this study. We have organized this section into a few themes to be elaborated below. In the course of explanation of the results of the study, whenever necessity arises, some extracts (in italics) from the students participating in the study and from the researchers will be given for further elucidation of the issue.

6.1 Students' Purposes in Making Revision

Prior to dealing with students' strategies in making textual changes in response to the teachers' comments, it seems essential to articulate a few words about their intentions. The university students in this experiment, in response to the teachers' comments which called for textual changes (1150), made a total of 1037 changes. In plain terms, students responded to all of the teachers' comments, the only exception being the comments calling for micro structural and macro structural changes (i.e. 34 comments that addressed high order concerns). There seems to exist an almost one-to-one correspondence between teachers' comments and students' changes. In studying students' responses to teachers' comments and feedback on their papers, they reported that they attended to and highly valued teachers' comments on their errors in writing. They were almost unanimous in thinking that teachers' aim was to help them become more efficient writers in the future, ameliorate their writing, learn from their mistakes and, more importantly, to incorporate these comments into their subsequent drafts of writing. Sad to say, their view of 'revision', the phraseology they used to describe it, strategies they employed to make textual changes all seem to run counter to aforementioned aims. It has been demonstrated that students welcome teachers' comments and feedback and earnestly pursue them simply not to learn about their goofs or to better their writing skills but to improve their grades (Dohrer, 1991). *Hossein* in response to the role of revision said:*"if we do revise, we will get higher score"*. This finding corroborates

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Dohrer's (1991) in which he examined the impact of "teachers' comments on students' papers on subsequent drafts of papers and uncovered that students' revision in response to teachers' comments were associated with significantly higher quality rating" (p. 48). Besides, sensing that teachers attach much importance to the low-level concerns, the students gave priority to these concerns while making changes, the result being that these concerns overshadow other aspects of writing and *"lock the writer in the position of writing solely or primarily for the approval of teachers"* (Perl, 1980, p. 368, see also Perl, 1979; Zamel, 1985).

6.2 Students' Strategy in Dealing with Teachers' Comments

The dominant strategy employed by students for revising was reminiscent of the fact that their prevalent and outstanding purpose was to focus on and fix the deviant forms which their teachers had highlighted on their papers. Though the students promulgated that they incorporated their self-initiated changes besides those of teachers, in actual revision session and while scrutinizing the revised papers, it became evident that students' did not apply any self-initiated changes but just responded directly to teachers' highlighted comments, making surface level changes that seem to worsen, let alone to ameliorate the original quality. This is because *"in the revision session they were observed jumping hastily from one comment to another without reading the whole text from beginning to the very end and were hounding and assessing relentlessly and energetically teachers' comments"* (researcher's own observation)**.** Hossein in describing his strategy of revision says, *I did not read the whole text from beginning to the end. I just corrected the errors in sequence noted by the teacher. I hope these changes would be desirable and enough".* They often *"commence with the first comment and continue through the paper by hopping from one comment to the other in sequence or haphazardly from one to another, often turning a blind eye to large parts of the text and articulating"* **(**researchers' observation),*"nothing is wrong with this sentence, what it needs is a better word"* (*Masoumeh* murmured slowly while making textual changes). The findings of this study

confirm those of Keh (1990), who found that "students actually read most if not all comments written on their papers" (p. 302).

Due to paying attention to those parts of the text highlighted by the teacher, students did not demonstrate vivid, global concepts of their work. Their view of a text as composed of isolated parts rather than a unified whole may somewhat account for their reluctance to make global changes as opposed to local changes (Dohrer, 1991; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985).

Assuredly, all students were tracing teachers' comments in red ink without exploring the preceding and succeeding chunks of discourse.

"The students were observed to revise from a limited perspective, concentrating their revision on low level concerns in lieu of high level concerns of organization and logic" (researchers' observation, for similar results see Flower, 1981; Perl, 1980; Sommers, 1980, 1981, 1982; Sze, 2002; Zamel, 1982, 1983).

6.3 The Effect of Teachers' Comments

The nature of teachers' strategies and criteria for evaluation of students' writing may explain and justify students' revision practices (Sze, 2002). It is postulated that these strategies and criteria act to consolidate the traditional views of what makes good writing and revision, giving rise to students paying inordinate attention to surface features in revision (Perl, 1980; Sommers, 1980, 1981, 1982; Sze, 2002; Zamel, 1982, 1983, 1985). Therefore, as posited by Yagelski (1995 in Sze, 2002, p. 23) "the process writing orientation of a composition classroom with its prewriting activities, multiple drafts, and peer editing can be offset by the teacher's grading practices that focus on linguistic accuracy and form rather than content and organization". Sommers, in an analysis of the responses of thirty-five experienced teachers on three student papers, uncovered that although her subjects aimed to accelerate revision, their feedback thwarted their intentions. By juxtaposing comments calling for usage errors with comments requiring reformulation and expansion, the teachers conveyed a contradictory message: that the text was finished yet also in a state of flux and agitation (Sommers, 1982; cited in Radecki & Swales, 1988). The

results of this study also confirm the findings of Radecki and Swales (1988), who cast doubt on the usefulness of the teachers' marking techniques and comments and appraised them inefficacious in accelerating and expediting revision. That is, the comments proved to be useless in helping students to make changes in content or macrostructure of a piece of writing.

6.4 Students Purpose to Improve their Grade

Despite the fact that students asserted repeatedly that they made sense of the objective behind teachers' comments, they in no time relinquished the objective of ameliorating their own writing skills so as to get a higher grade. This is because students have sensed that their superficial tactics of revising such as 'rewording, avoiding repetition, fixing spelling, capitalization' and the like, in the absence of macro structural changes, to use Faigley and Witte's (1981) term, have always resulted in higher grades. That is why the students do not seem to bother to challenge teachers' comments calling for in-depth revision. As Sommers (1981, 1982) rightly put it, teachers' comments seemed to dictate a standard for students' extent of revision. The findings of this study are concordant with those of Radecki and Swales (1988) who reported that students expressed satisfaction over teachers' comments but, in the meantime, they reported that students first glanced at the grade on their returned paper rather than the comments, implying that grades are the chief concern for students. They also found that students preferred "short evaluative adjectives and a grade, or a grade alone" (Radecki & Swales, 1988, p. 358).

6.5 Mistaking Rewording, Editing or Reviewing for Revision

An overwhelming majority of the students we studied did not use the terms 'revision' or 'rewriting'. Indeed, they did not sound convenient applying the word revision, and reasoned that *"it was not the term they applied but the one that their teacher most frequently used was editing, rewording, or reviewing"* (Maryam and Amir said).

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Not only do they in the actual revision session seem to mistake 'editing' for 'revision', but while answering questions at the end of revision session, their repeated use of editing for revision consolidated this misconception. This finding confirms Sommers' (1982) argument that students' inability to make substantial revision may be due to textbooks' wrong approaches and faulty instruction provided. From what these students said and did, one can build a thorough picture of what is going on in composition classes and what the dominant endorsed approach to writing is. The classroom context must play a part in the revision strategies of these EFL students. Contrary to expectations, below is what a student named Behnam actually wrote:

> *Never did my teacher ask me to revise in writing classes in university. Never did the writing teacher give my paper back for second or third drafts. Your first draft is your final draft. When you finish writing an essay, you hand in. The teacher assigns a score on and sends it back to you with some comments on it just to justify your score not to require you to revise it or improve its quality.*

Another student named Javad in response to the question 'do you think revision is an integral part of any writing activity', says *"it is not necessary to revise the whole writing. To proofread, I think it is enough. Because my mistakes are related to vocabulary and grammatical usage."* This line of thought is rightly confirmed by Spandel who said that "not all students live for revision. Some will say of a first draft, I'm happy with my writing just the way it is. I don't want to change a thing" (Spandel, 2005, p. 68).

The present study confirms the findings of earlier studies. Zamel (1982, 1983) posits that though teachers propose revision, they do not ask for further revision. Radecki and Swales (1988) reported that students "expressed reluctance or hostility toward revision. Most of them saw no redeeming value in rewriting, some viewing it as punishment: rewriting is only a way of penalty in elementary school" (p. 358). Emig (1971, cited in Sze, 2002) reported that "students did not revise school-sponsored assignments unless required to do so" (p. 30). "Almost students were never given or seldom required to do any kind of revision, nor were they

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offered the incentive of a better grade if they did" (Wall & Petrosky, 1981, p. 112, see Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985).

6.6 Frequent Use of Synonymous Words while Making Changes

Use of synonymous words and lexical repetition avoidance were another chief revision activity of the students which only became evident when the students' original papers with comments on them were mapped against their revised papers. Students were constantly asking themselves while revising**: "***Can I find a becoming word or phrase"?* (One student named Masoumeh said to herself)**. "***They thumbed the dictionary to find alternative words for the words noted by their teacher on their paper"* (researchers' observation)**.**

This is what Sommers (1980, p. 381) labeled as "a thesaurus philosophy of writing". Student writers, finding that they have duplicated the same word or phrase frequently, do away with the repetition, by replacing it with other words or phrases or deleting the words and leaving them with zero substitution. While it is the case that they presumably come up with the solution to their immediate problem by avoiding repetition, they grappled with the larger conceptual problem. To put it differently, "although they are using different words, they are merely restating the same idea, not developing it" (Sommers, 1981, p. 48; see Perl, 1980; Sommers, 1980; Zamel, 1983). This widely-rehearsed, yet untenable, strategy of making textual changes (i.e. the use of synonyms) by the student-writers is scarcely welcomed by academicians.

6.7 The Relationship between Teachers' Comments and Students' Responses

What is more astonishing about these teachers' comments is that a significant proportion of teachers' comments, 1116 out of 1150 (about 97 percent), did not appear to direct students' attention to substantive revision, for teachers' comments concentrated on or addressed surface level concerns in the students' compositions. Therefore, students revised them accordingly. That is, teachers' comments seemed to dictate a standard for students' extent of

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revision (Perl, 1979; Perl, 1980; Raimes, 1991; Sommers, 1981, 1982; Zamel, 1983). That is why Morteza said:

I would like to revise my writing, but since my teacher's corrections just addressed superficial matters in my writing such as spelling, punctuation, subject-verb agreement and the like, I, therefore, felt no need to make macro structural changes.

Amir commenting on the relationship between teachers' comments and students' depth of revision says: *Besides wasting time on something not requested by the teacher, I have my own doubts that these self- initiated changes will place the teacher in a state of mind to appreciate them"* (*Abbass* and *Taghi's* comments are also notable).

That is why Sommers (1982) utters that revision always entails a peril or risk:

Too often, revision becomes a balancing act for students in which they make the changes that are requested but do not take the risk of changing anything that was not commented on, even if the students sense that other changes are needed. (p. 152)

6.8 Compliance with Abstract Rules

A close and thorough inspection of the participants' papers in this study shed light on the sort of the problem student writers suffer, and reveals that in the majority of cases writers are compelled, by unwritten canon, to abide by abstract rules while writing. In plain terms, they were mainly concerned with deliberate and conscious practice of the rules they had learned. The changes they made in response to the teachers' comments were in absolute agreement with the rigid and abstract rules they had acquired. The above students perceived writing as a set of techniques and pursued the rules even when:

some of them are appropriate for the specific text they are creating. Furthermore, since there is no one rule which governs the writing and revising of an entire text, unskilled writers are stuck with revising word by word, sentence by sentence, rule by rule. (Sommers, 1981, p. 44)

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This became evident when one of the teachers had underlined one of the sentences in a student's paper as being incorrect in terms of its tense. This is while *Amir* disagreed with the teacher on the issue in question, reasoning that

"I am sure there is nothing wrong with this sentence tense use. You know we use conditional sentences type 2 for expressing unreal present situations, and we use 'were' with all the subject pronouns". This is what is rightly addressed by Sommers (1980), who asseverated that students tend to "subordinate the specific problems of their text to the demands of the rules" (p. 383). "The tyranny of 'shoulds' dictates to unskilled writers what they should or should not do when revising" (Sommers, 1981, p. 44; see also Perl, 1980; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1983; Zamel, 1985).

Therefore, the problem is not that the students are reluctant to make substantive changes; conversely, they are willing to revise but they just do what they have been taught in a narrow and predictable manner and bring revision to a halt when they find that nothing in their paper violates or breaks arbitrary rules. Therefore, it is a complete compliance with these abstract rules that students fix mechanical errors and revision remains on the surface. Flower (1980 in Zamel, 1983, p. 167) has pointed out that these "early decisions to proceed in a certain direction may lock writers into a premature solution before they have entered the problem" (see also Zamel, 1985).

The problem (i.e. compliance with abstract rules) has its roots in the educational system of Iranian universities where the English students upon entering the university for the first two consecutive terms are given 8 or 12-credit English grammar courses in which the textbooks and instructors meticulously deal with construction of English sentences applying rigid and abstract rules in the total absence of context of use. That is why students in our study did not perceive writing and revision anything more than abiding by the abstract rules they have internalized.

A case in point is an ESL textbook bearing the title of 'The Process of Composition'. Unlike what its title implies, the book

"presumes to teach students to write according to a nearly mathematical set of rules, to write in a very specific format, according to a formula" (Zamel, 1983, p. 167), not knowing that writing and revision "rarely arrives by room-service, all neatly laid out on the tray" (Murray, 1981, p. 33, see Perl, 1979; Sommers, 1981).

6.9 Students Attach Importance to Surface Level Features

Not only did the students spend an enormous amount of time on surface level changes noted and requested by the teacher, they were also on the whole in absolute agreement with their teachers as regards the priorities given to the different aspects of language. It is, after all, not unreasonable for the students to discern that some sort of relationship holds between the heavy weight given to a particular issue and the amount and the number of times the teacher using red ink highlights that issue. Teachers' comments on students' writing clearly reflect the hierarchy of their concerns about the paper.

> More importantly, when teachers keep their attention on surface-level concerns, they lose sight of other important dimensions of writing, such as ideas, rhetorical features, style and voice. Writing is not a mere vehicle for language practice. To rid themselves of tunnel-vision, teachers have to bear in mind that there is much more to good writing than grammatical accuracy. (Lee, 2009, p. 35)

When being asked in the interview session, how do you know what your teachers' priorities are in evaluating your paper? Maryam said: "*If they comment extensively on grammatical or mechanical issues, we can infer that such issues are among their main concern with the paper"*. Masoumeh, another student, drawing on her own experience, put forward a convincing proof reasoning that *"making surface level changes such capitalization, spelling, subject-verb agreement, commas and the like at the teachers' request always lead to obtaining higher scores. Therefore, it is not difficult to know that these are the matters that count"*. Yet another student named *Maryam* puts forth a somewhat different and interesting reason for attempting just mechanical issues and says:

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"All *sorts of errors should be eliminated but surface level errors should take precedence over the others because they are the felicities that at first glance catch the reader's attention*".

Besides, the teachers lay stress on grammatical and mechanical issues and on accuracy so sturdily that the students, in the first place ☐ for the purpose of attracting the teacher's approval of changes and ultimately to improve their grades ☐ were seen to be ready to omit problematic words and phrases and even larger segments of a text. Their prime concern was just to guarantee the accuracy and precision of the written material no matter how the deleted material adversely affected the whole text conceptually. The students' revised papers are abundant in evidence of deleted information from the original. The students in our experiment, for sure, were ignorant of the fact that what they were doing was 'rewording' not revising.

The consequence was that they followed every comment and purged the text of mechanical errors at the teachers' requests, but the revision was not observed or thought about. The structure and meaning of the text itself did not ameliorate at all and it sometimes got worse. Our perception of our students' view of revision is that they do not regard revision as an occasion to create or develop a piece of writing but as an evidence of their failure to do it right the first time. To them, revision means correction. Revision, however, is the core of writing process -- the means by which ideas unfold and expand and meanings are purified (Lehr, 1995). The findings are in contrast with Radecki and Swales' (1988) finding who found that revision is viewed differently by teachers and students. Also, it is perceived differently by experienced and inexperienced writers. While teachers in Radecki and Swales' study regarded it as an opportunity whereby to reformulate their writing and reevaluate the meaning and reshape the text, students even surprisingly teachers, in the present study, perceived it as a process of purging the text of mechanical errors.

6.10 Text Appropriation

Last but not least saddening and adverse feature of teachers' comments was 'text ownership robbery' (to use Sommers' term).

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This simply means that the teachers' comments prompt the students to revise or to make changes to gain the teachers' approval, to make changes that teachers want rather than the changes that students themselves assume are indispensable, for the teachers' concerns laid on the text produce the purpose for the succeeding changes (Flower, 1981; Keh, 1990; Sommers, 1980, 1982; Zamel, 1983). Morteza, one of our students in the experiment who said that "*I would like to revise my writing, but fearing that my self –initiated changes may not gain the teacher's approval, or may not help me to improve my grade*" is a vivid instance of what Sommers (1982 see Flower, 1981; Zamel, 1985) calls text authorship robbery or text appropriation.

6.11 Difficulties Students Encountered

One of the leading problems the students, in this study, had to grapple with was the great number of comments on their papers. The average number of comments per paper was about 40, and of course it varied from paper to paper. The minimum number was 12 and the maximum was 56. The students' papers replete with written comments, as we noticed, firstly gave rise to the feeling of frustration and discouragement in the students at the sight of the amount of red ink poured on their papers; secondly, it was accountable for the students' unfocused activity.

It was thought that it was due to great number of comments on the students' papers that students were observed hopping hastily from one comment to the other in no predictable pattern or scheme and cursorily attempting them without reading the whole text from beginning to the end. To cope with the time allotted for the revision of the paper, the students were found to leave some of the comments unchallenged. Making exhaustive comments, it appears, does more harm than good. Frustration and dissatisfaction brought about as a result of great numbers of comments on the students' papers are well attested in the words of *Maryam* who frankly asseverated that "*it was not necessary for the teacher to write more comments, a few ones, I think, would be sufficient to put me in the right track*". Not only does it take up most of the teacher's time, it leaves the students with no sense of priority among them (see Perl,

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1980; Murray, 1981; Sommers, 1980, 1981, 1982; Zamel, 1983, 1985).

The papers under scrutiny were replete with comments such as 'reword', 'rewrite' and 'awkward'. Students' responses with respect to these comments are indicative of the fact that these comments are not fully grasped by the students. More often than not, the comment 'reword' for the students meant 'synonym'. Therefore, students' strategy for dealing with 'reword' was either to find a becoming synonymous word or structure or delete the word labeled as 'reword'.

To illustrate the case in point, an example and its respective change by one student named *Maryam* is given: *"Home foods are made up of safe things like fresh vegetables and meat"*. She responded to the comment 'reword' just by replacing 'safe' with the word 'good' so she rewrote the sentence as *"home foods are made up of 'good' things like fresh vegetables and meat"*. As stated above, an alternative way of dealing with this comment (i.e. reword) was to delete the problematic word. Again an example from Maryam's paper will make the point clear: *"In this disease, the blood vessels' parapet is closed by the fat stored in them"*. In the above example the word 'parapet' is labeled as 'reword' by the teacher. In the revised version, the student got rid of the problematic word by deleting it, as a result, she rewrote the sentence as "*in this disease, the blood vessels are closed by the fat stored in them*". These findings demonstrate that teachers' comments on students' written drafts tend to become obscure or vague. Because of this, "students' revisions show inadequate response to the comments, and some essays even seem to ignore the comments completely" (Suguita, 2006, p. 35).

The comment 'rewrite' was also problematic. The strategy for dealing with the comment 'rewrite' was not dissimilar from 'reword', but in one amazing case, one student in response to the teacher's 'rewrite' comment has just reproduced a neater and fairer copy of the original text without making any trivial changes. The comment 'awkward' was also not properly understood: *"The comment 'awkward' especially in its contracted form (awk.) was the*

most problematic comment for the students", Morteza declared. The students had great difficulty in figuring out whether the sentence marked as 'awkward' was structurally or conceptually ill-formed. Based on their perception, some challenged the awkward sentence structurally and some conceptually. This finding is in complete concordance with the results of the studies which claimed that teachers' comments are sometimes worded in such a way that revising or re-examining becomes a guessing game (Sommers, 1982; see Dohrer, 1991). Zamel (1985; Agudo, 2012; Raimes, 1979; Raimes, 1985) found that marks and comments are often perplexing, arbitrary, and inaccurate. He, further, argues that teachers' marks and comments are usually in the form of impractical and imprecise commands, instructions or directives that are unintelligible to the students (see Treglia, 2008). These vague directives, while teachers may imagine that they have widely-known definitions, are in the form of marks and comments that typify complicated meanings "which remain locked in the teachers' head" (Butler, 1980 cited in Zamel, 1985, p. 83).

7. Conclusion

The participants in this study do not appear to know that writing is a recursive, non-linear, cyclical, exploratory, and generative process which requires multiple drafts of a piece of writing and which consists of different cycles whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they go through these cycles. Rather, they viewed it as a linear, intuitive and spontaneous process which through compliance with a set of rigid and abstract rules leads to a neat, ready-made finished product-text. They do not seem to know that revision is an integral component of writing process; nor do they know that revision is an ongoing process of rethinking the paper, reconsidering one's arguments, reviewing the evidence, refining one's purpose, recognizing one's presentation and revising state prose (Horning & Becker, 2006). They did not seem to ascribe to revision any role other than tidying-up or copy-editing, aimed at eliminating surface errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and diction. Their idea of revision as correcting mechanical errors is also strengthened by the teachers' comments mainly by focusing on

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or addressing these low level concerns and by drawing on their experience that fixing these superficial issues counts or always leads to improvements in their grade. Besides, students' long years of experience with the red ink made them feel that their writing is being 'corrected' rather than 'responded to'.

A closer look at the above problems revealed that they have their origin in our inefficient educational system. We found that our participants were innocuous victims or sufferers of feeble and ineffectual instructional or educational system. An overwhelming majority of the participants frankly acknowledged that they had not taken straight composition courses, nor had they taken any writing courses except for 'advanced writing' and 'essay writing'. What is more, they had not had sequenced assignments requiring multiple drafts of a piece of writing, neither had they been given a grade only after a set or series of assignments had been completed, nor did they have any real audience other than the teacher. In a nutshell, it is felt that the instruction that the participants have been receiving in the universities is, to a larger degree, lagging behind the current research in the field. This research is hoped to function as a springboard for both writing teachers and researchers to rethink the meaning and role of revision in writing. By understanding the true meaning of revision and trying to apply this in their practices, teachers will provide students the chance to enjoy writing as a means of real-life communication and as a tool to display their creativity rather than a handy device to practice language and mechanics of writing.

Teachers should exercise more care and caution while commenting on the students' writing, for teachers' comments besides making students aware of their mistakes, can communicate indirectly many messages to the students, of which the teachers may not be aware. For instance, teachers' comments may communicate to the students what aspects of language count more, what sort of changes outweigh the others, what the teachers' priorities are, and the like. Teachers can make comments in such a way that not only prompt true revision in the students' papers but also prevent

students from making preconceptions about teachers' grading criteria and evaluation judgment.

Teachers may want to be cognizant of the number of comments they are making on compositions. While they may assume that writing a great number of comments will communicate their concern for students' writing quality, students, for their parts, may be overpowered by plentiful written comments on their assignments. They may find it difficult to make sense of all the comments on their papers, not to mention applying them to their subsequent drafts of writing to ameliorate the quality of their writing. Therefore, teachers' comments on students' writing should clearly mirror the priorities of their concern about the paper. Major issues should be dealt with at a greater depth or length, secondary issues only succinctly or not at all. If teachers comment exhaustively on formal features or mechanical issues, they should wait for their students to discover that these are the matters that count. It should be remembered that it is not difficult for students to deduce that the amount of red ink teachers pour on some particular issue, has some relationship with that issue's prominence.

Teachers, who make the students write papers, spend many hours each term reading, commenting, and grading students' papers; yet, they are not sure whether the time spent will translate into improvements in their students' writing skills. Students, on the other hand, want constructive feedback on their writing and often feel discouraged or frustrated when they find the teachers' comments on their papers to be mysterious, confusing, or too brief (Carol, 2005). Teachers should refrain from writing informatively devoid comments such as "awkward" "rewrite" or "reword", for comments as such rob the students of the time that could be fruitfully spent on reconsidering arguments, ideas, and thoughts, and cause the students to spend excessive amounts of effort deciphering the teachers' meaning.

Most experienced writers find the task of responding to students' writing to be one of deciding not to comment on secondarily important issues. Teachers should bear in mind that offering inexperienced or novice writers a few, carefully chosen comments may lead to deeper revision than asking them to

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challenge many comments at a superficial level. Making exhaustive comments not only takes up much of teachers' time, they leave the students with no sense of priority among them (Procter, 2013).

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Appendix A: 16 Open-Ended Questions Used in the Study

Dear Respondent,

Below are a number of questions. Please read them carefully and answer them in whatever language you feel you are competent and comfortable. The language you use does not matter. What matters here is that you communicate your ideas completely and clearly. Any bothering is regretted and so many thanks are due to you for your valuable time spent on answering the questions.

1. Do you agree with the teachers' comments? Why?

2. What is the purpose of teachers' in writing comments on students' papers?

3. What is your idea of revision? Do you consider it as an opportunity to improve the quality of your writing?

4. Do you consider revision as an activity in correcting errors to get higher marks?

5. Do you consider the teacher, primarily as an evaluator, one who gives grades or as the person who should help students to write better?

6. Were you unwilling to introduce your own ideas for the fear that the teacher might not agree?

7. What were your strategies in incorporating the suggested changes into your paper?

8. Did you find it necessary to read the whole text from beginning to the end while responding to the teachers' comments calling for the changes in the writing, or you could make the desired changes without reading from the very start to the end? Describe your strategy. What did you do?

9. What was your purpose by making changes in the text, whether you wanted to improve the quality of your writing or to get higher grade?

10. Why did you just make the surface- level changes such as correct tense, appropriate word, spelling, capitalization, and the like?

11. Did your changes address logical and organizational matters?

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12. Did you make changes in the text not suggested by teachers' comments? If so, what kind?

13. What kind of comments did you find most helpful? (for example, one-word comments, phrasal comments , paragraph comments, and question comments).

14. What problems did you face with? Did you have any difficulty in making sense of teachers' comments?

15. Did you try to incorporate (i.e. insert) your own ideas or you just corrected the sentence in a way that to meet your teachers' expectations?

16. Do you think that revision is at all necessary? Or are editing and proofreading enough?