

**Improving Quality in L2 Writing; the effects of implementing a learner-as-participant observation model in a formal foreign language setting.**

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# Contents

Abstract .....	3
1. Introduction.....	3
2. Theoretical Framework .....	3
2.1 Learning How-to-Write and Writing-Production.....	5
2.2 Target audience.....	6
2.3 Language proficiency.....	7
2.4 Providing Feedback .....	8
2.5 Research questions.....	9
3. Method.....	10
3.1 Participants.....	10
3.2 Setup.....	10
3.2.1 First Version / Writing phase.....	11
3.2.2 Intervention / Feedback .....	11
3.2.3 Second Version / Rewriting Phase.....	12
3.2.4 Assessment.....	12
4. Results .....	13
5. Discussion .....	15
References.....	19
Appendix I.....	22
Appendix II.....	23

# **Improving Quality in L2 Writing; the effects of implementing a learner-as-participant observation model in a formal foreign language setting.**

## **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore whether or not an approach following the learner-as-participant observation model as formulated in Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008) proves to be effective when trying to improve secondary school students' writing proficiency in a L2 instead of a L1. 65 students from a secondary school in the south of the Netherlands participated in this experiment in which they are asked to write an e-mail of complaint to their neighbour. After a feedback session they are required to rewrite their e-mail, after which the e-mails are assessed and the results compared. The results of this research show that there is no significant increase in overall writing quality in the e-mails of students who were part of the experimental condition when compared to those who were part of the control group.*

## **1. Introduction**

When observing the field of writing proficiency education there are various papers that deal with the development of various approaches which prove to effectively increase the writing proficiency in a L1 (first language) context, such as, for example, Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, Van den Bergh & Van Hout-Wolters (2004), Rijlaarsdam et al. (2005), Kieft (2006). In an increasingly globalised world it is not, however, just important to possess good writing proficiency in a L1, but also in a (foreign language) L2, often English. Despite there being certain similarities, the field of foreign language learning faces its own distinct set of challenges as pointed out by among others: Silva (1993), Schoonen et al.(2003), Thorson (2000), Tillema (2012), and Van Weijen (2009).

Tillema (2012) shows us that L2 (English) texts are of a lower quality when compared to the similar L1 (Dutch) texts written by the same ninth grade students. This difference is attributed to the added cognitive load of writing in a second language. This begs the question do the types of approaches that have proven effective in a first language (L1) setting, and employed in the students(/learners) L1, lead to the same effect on improving writing proficiency when employed in a second language (L2), English. This leads to this paper's research question: Does an approach following the learner-as-participant observation model as formulated in Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008), which has been proven to be effective in improving the writing proficiency of L1 students of Dutch, also have a positive effect when employed on Dutch L2 students of English in a formal setting?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Writing, or transferring ones ideas through a written medium, is one of the most important skills for educational success, and yet it remains one of the skills that is most difficult to teach and to learn. Although some make it seem like a straightforward business, it has been likened to being the cognitive equivalent of "digging ditches" (Kellogg, 1994, p. 17). Flowers and Hayes (1981) capture the various cognitive actions which are undertaken during writing in a comprehensive model,

differentiating between *writer's long-term memory* (dealing with the knowledge of topic, audience and the writing plans), *task environment* (dealing with the specifics of the assignment, such as topic and audience, and the text written thus far) and *writing process*. The *writing process* is subsequently divided into three sub processes: Planning of a text, translating thoughts into words, reviewing and revising the text, all of which are regulated by a fourth element: monitoring (Flowers and Hayes, 1981, p. 369). This model has been updated later in Hayes (1996), where he differentiates between the *task environment* and the *individual*, unifying the *writer's long-term memory* and *writing process* into one category (the *individual*). He expands each category by adding not only the assignment, but also the social and cultural environment into the notion of *task environment* and by expanding the *writing process* with two new subcategories: affect/motivation and working memory. Because of these various aspects that need to operate in conjuncture and frequently at the same time when writing, Flowers and Hayes (1981) refer to writing as the act of 'juggling with constraints'. The sheer number of constraints a writer needs to juggle might cause what Kellogg (1988) refers to as a cognitive overload, a situation where too much attention is demanded for a particular aspect of writing which causes detrimental effects upon other remaining aspects of the writing process.

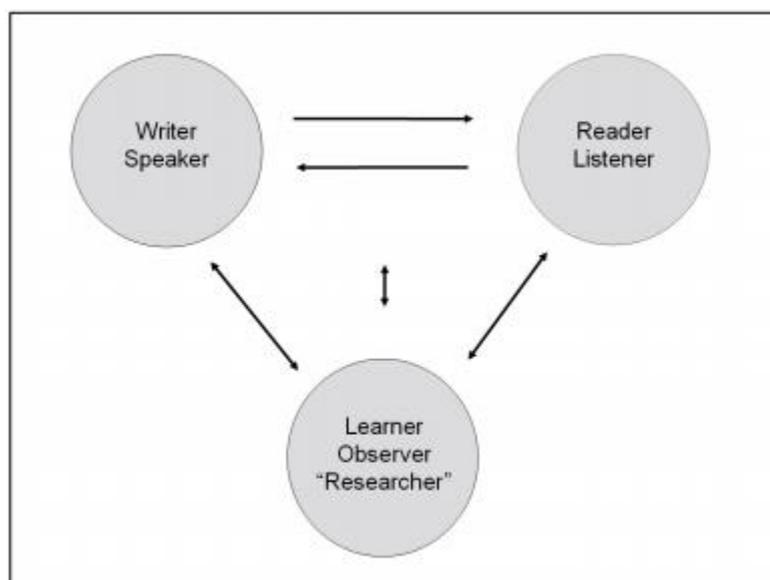
When dealing with writing in a second language these issues are complicated even further as one starts to deal with a lagging language proficiency that can adversely affect the written work produced, as pointed out by Sasaki & Hirose (1996), Schoonen et al. (2003), Tillema (2012) and Van Weijen. (2009). As shown in Tillema (2012) the quality of the written L2 texts, in this case English, are of a consistent lower quality when comparing them to the same L1, in this case Dutch, texts written by the same students. The added difficulty of a second language might increase the cognitive load on writers to the extent that a cognitive overload situation is more likely to occur. Research has demonstrated that there is a relationship between the availability of working memory capacity on the one hand, and writing proficiency and writing fluency on the other (e.g. Bourdin & Fayol (1994), Kellogg (1999), McCutchen (2000), Chenoweth & Hayes (2001)). Based upon this research it has to be noted that it is not only a necessity for students to be imparted with the linguistic and metacognitive knowledge when writing, but they must also be able to apply this knowledge in an efficient manner. For example Bourdin & Fayol (1994) noted that within the context of a recall task, where both adults and children (aged 7 – 9) were asked to either respond via spoken or written medium, language proficiency was a significant factor. Children performed significantly poorer when compared to adults within the writing condition. Bourdin & Fayol (1994) interpret the results as evidence that in children the transcription process was not fluent enough to operate with minimal working memory. It is not unreasonable to assume that when looking at students who need to perform in a language in which they are less than fluent they have greater difficulty when performing written tasks.

Moreover research on teaching writing proficiency in both the L1 and the L2 shows that one of the central issues is communicative effectiveness; which can be surmised in the question: Is the reader doing what I want him/her to do? In other words: am I creating the effect I wish to create? Connected to this central issue three sub-questions should be answered: 1) What am I trying to achieve? 2) Who am I trying to achieve this with? 3) How is that person responding to my efforts? Lee (2006) and Pinkman (2005) point out that students often experience a lack of 'authenticity' when expected to write in the target language. A connection with their actual supposed audience is lost. Recreating such a situation can be complicated in a formal setting, and although by attempting to choose a relatively relatable figure, the tested approach seeks to, at the very least, mimic this connection.

## 2.1 Learning How-to-Write and Writing-Production

The lack of quality in the students' written work in a L2 when compared to the quality of similar assignments, written by these same students in the L1, is often attributed to the added cognitive load imposed by the act of writing in the second language. Preconceived notions, such as for example 'practice makes perfect', have been proven to be problematic when analysing the process of improving students' writing proficiency (Graham & Perin (2007)). The main source can be discovered in the fact that the act of writing, regardless of language setting, is cognitively demanding to the extent that there is little cognitive energy left to pay attention to or reflect upon the act of writing, the effectiveness of writing, or any mistakes and/or errors made while writing (as pointed out by Kellogg (1988), Flowers and Hayes (1981), Hayes (1996), Van Weijen (2009)) It is therefore paramount while learning-how-to-write that the cognitive load is limited. This can be achieved by disconnecting the process of learning-how-to-write from the production of writing. Research conducted by, for example, Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008), Manchón & Roca de Larios (2007), Miceli, Murray & Kennedy (2010), Braaksma et al. (2004), explore various strategies to improve the students' writing proficiency and by doing so making it more effective. One method that seems to be effective in doing this is the one outlined in Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008) which follows a student-as-participant observation model. By separating the process of learning-to-write from the actual act of writing, by installing a reflective moment in which students are only required to pay attention to questions with regard to its communicative effectiveness, not necessarily attached to their own written work, it allows the learners to focus on the acquisition of "pragmalinguistic knowledge", answering for themselves the broader question of "what makes a text effective?" (Rijlaarsdam et al., 2008, p. 61). By implementing the activity of observation, cognitively there is space or energy left to actively pause and reflect upon that which is being written and the response that it evokes with the one reading it. It is here the actual learning-how-to-write occurs. In this it follows the conclusion as laid out in Braaksma (2002), who focusses on the effectiveness of observation learning. In short because the student is not occupied with writing, more attention can be paid to such issues as communicative effectiveness. In Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008) the following diagram is used to indicate in what ways students learn from the student-as-participant observation model:

Figuur 1: interrelated roles or functions of students (Rijlaarsdam 2008, p. 58)



As is illustrated by this diagram there are two roles in which the student can be confronted with the reader perspective, in the reader/listener role and the learner/observer role. Therefore, accepting the assumption that indeed learning-to-write and writing-production should be disconnected, there are two roles in which the student is able to reflect and develop their writing proficiency without need for production.

In the situation where the writer becomes the reader, as pointed out by Holliway & McCutchen (2004), students learn through experiencing how texts work from a reader perspective and by comparing and evaluating strategies adopted by different writers. Furthermore by abstracting and generalizing their own observations students are able to apply this new found knowledge in the role of writer. In the case of Holliway & McCutchen, initially students are tasked with describing three figures from a larger (similar) set of figures, and later are tasked to discover which description belongs to which figure, formulating ideas based upon their observations and applying this newly acquired knowledge in a second round of writing.

In the situation where the student becomes the observer the student is confronted with the response by the reader on a text. The learning process starts the moment the expected effect and the created effect are compared by the student. Such an approach is used in, for example, Couzijn (1995) and Evers-Vermeul & Van den Bergh (2009), where the students do not write a text or read a text, but instead observe, analyse, compare and evaluate other writers who are in the process of learning to write, in these cases, a tutorial.

However it has to be noted that in these observation situations the matter of who is observing whom is vital. As pointed out in the thesis by Braaksma (2002) it are the “weak learners [who] benefit only from observational learning when they reflect on weak models, they do not profit from reflecting on good models.” (Braaksma, 2002, p. 96) Her explanation for this finding is that it is much easier to evaluate a performance that is weak or weaker than one’s own, where it is much harder, especially for one with a lower proficiency, to find flaw with someone who is already quite good.

It has to be noted that in the above mentioned texts the focus is primarily on teaching writing proficiency in a L1 setting (e.g. Braaksma (2002), Couzijn (1995), Evers-Vermeul & Van den Bergh (2009), Holliway & McCutchen (2004), Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008)). The cases cited by Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008) upon which the assumption is based that similar processes would also work in an L2 setting (e.g. Van Steendam, Rijlaarsdam & Sercu (2007, 2008a, 2008b)) was conducted with undergraduate students of Business Communication and therefore of a much higher basic language proficiency when compared to the participants within this experiment; secondary school students in the ninth and eleventh grade.

## **2.2 Target audience**

Central to any communicative action is the response one evokes with the audience. Adapting one’s text to become as communicatively effective as possible is, especially for younger learners, a complicated task. A writer is required to take into account the perspective of the one reading his/her work, Holliway & McCutchen (2004) refer to this as *perspective taking*. Learners often do not realize how much their own perspective can differ from the perspective of the other, which can create unexpected results in their written work. The metalinguistic knowledge that would enable someone to adopt the position of someone else, also referred to as *decentering* (vs *egocentrism*), is more

easily acquired in spoken language than in written language, as pointed out in Kroll (1978). This might be due to the direct feedback one receives from the audience one is addressing. By attempting to restore this link, by providing the learners a direct form of (spoken) feedback, during the writing process one could argue that this issue, regardless of language, might well be resolved, by making the learner aware of the reaction one evokes with the target audience.

In order to deal with all the aspects that complicate the attainment of writing proficiency, however, it is also important that the assignment not only separates learning-to-write from writing but also confront the learner with the reaction of the reader, and not, as is the case with many writing assignments used now, focus on low order concerns (LOCs), such as spelling and grammar. The limited effect of this type of correction is revealed by Semke (1984) in her article "Effects of the Red Pen".

### **2.3 Language proficiency**

Within a L1 context, as pointed out by Van Weijen (2009), a methodical approach to the production of written work has the greatest impact upon the quality of the writing assignment. Following the notion offered in Van den Bergh & Rijlaarsdam (1996), that the function of each cognitive action as outlined in Hayes (1996), is determined not by the fact it occurs, but by the context in which it occurs, making writing ultimately a time based activity, Van Weijen (2009) shows that, despite there being a difference on an individual level between students, the teaching of a methodical and organised approach to the writing process provides the most consistent positive results. This lends credence to the idea that the order in which students perform various actions in the writing process, such as generating ideas, reviewing and revising, organising, reading the assignment, determine to a great extent the ultimate quality of their work (Van Weijen, 2009, p. 175). Her notion seems to hold true in an L2 context. However, when writing in an L2 it is not only the order in which certain actions are performed which is of influence, but the factor of writing in a language that is not one's own also comes into play, therefore the idea that writing strategies employed within a L1 context can be transported to a L2 context becomes problematic. On the one hand the cognitive load is bigger as one is dealing with a language that is not one's own, causing possible interference. On the other hand it might be a possibility that the overall level in the linguistic development of students might be lower, because they start later with developing proficiency in this language.

Much like Van Weijen (2009) Tillema (2012) shows that there is an effect of language proficiency on various cognitive tasks during the writing process, namely evaluating own text in the L1, process planning in the L2. These elements are primarily conceptual (evaluating own text in the L1) and regulatory (process planning in L2) activities, and as Tillema points out, there is no clear evidence that the formulating activities are effected by language proficiency. Tillema's research is one of the few who attempts to place L1 texts and L2 texts from the same students on a similar scale. By doing so she reveals there is an enormous gap between the quality of any L1 written work and the quality of the written work by the same students in the L2 (Tillema, 2012, p. 109). More importantly it is noted that in the L1 the influence of the structure of the writing process, as shown by, among others, Van Weijen (2009) holds true, while in the L2 the overall structure of the writing process is disrupted. Tillema establishes a relationship between language proficiency in combination with the time on which certain actions are performed during the writing process, which eventually has a positive effect upon the overall writing quality. Such a link was previously suggested (e.g. Chenoweth and Hayes (2001), Sasaki and Hirose (1996), Schoonen et al. (2003)), but not necessarily displayed in

the way it has been in Tillema. It has to be noted that Tillema's testing of language proficiency was measured by means of a timed vocabulary test, and the assignments were somewhat generic (Tillema, 2012, p.78).

The results shown in Tillema (2012) are in line with results as shown in Schoonen, Van Gelderen, Stoel, Hulstijn & De Glopper (2011), where it is shown that linguistic knowledge and the speed with which students were able to retrieve this knowledge have a great added effect when writing in a L2, larger than was the case in L1 (Dutch). Van Gelderen & Oostdam (2005), show that within a lesser constraints task, a task where there are less guiding elements that steer the translation process and which are therefore semantically more demanding, students with increased fluency training perform significantly better in the semantic application of linguistic operations. Based on these results they feel strengthened in their assumption that students with a higher fluency in the target language are better at controlling the semantic consequences of linguistic operations and therefore ultimately produce writing assignments with a higher overall quality. In other words, as shown in Schoonen, Van Gelderen, Stoel, Hulstijn & De Glopper (2011), the effect of language proficiency has a greater effect on writing proficiency in the L2 than it would have in the L1, while Van Gelderen & Oostdam (2005) reveal that students who receive fluency training as a result are more capable of dealing effectively with the "attention absorbing" and "risky" process of operating in a lesser constrained situation, where they are required to construct sentences from incomplete syntactical structures (Van Gelderen & Oostdam, 2005, p. 232). Linguistic fluency, or more specifically the application of linguistic operations in an effective manner, is more important to keep on track while performing semantically demanding tasks.

The result of the abovementioned research seems to suggest that the overall impact of lagging language proficiency on writing proficiency might not immediately become apparent, but it does in many ways effect the overall writing process, if only on the level of the temporal order of actions when writing. Although communicative effectiveness and direct feedback from one's audience might still be central in the attempt to improve writing proficiency in a L2 setting one cannot avoid having to deal with a language proficiency that is of a greater influence on the final product than it would have been in a L1 setting.

## **2.4 Providing Feedback**

Providing feedback on written work can be a complex affair. Semke(1984) points out that merely marking of the errors is not enough for students to effectively improve upon their work. It is pointed out in Hattie and Temperley (2007) that feedback should be oriented towards indicating where precisely the mistakes, errors or miscommunications occur while at the same time making sure that ownership of the text is not undermined. This can be achieved by providing students feedback oriented towards their level of writing proficiency, while at the same time providing this feedback to the students at a time they are ready to accept it. This would, however, subsequently lead to a feedback process that is highly labour intensive, especially from the perspective of the teacher. In practice the making of generalisations, using feedback that is addressed to an entire group of students, is therefore an option easily resorted to, especially when dealing with larger groups of students. To mimic this scenario the feedback session within this research project makes use of generalised feedback, moving the experiment away from an ideal situation, but by doing so perhaps leading it to a more realistic situation.

Furthermore, following the suggestions as done in Hattie & Temperley (2007), which state there are three important goals which should be the focus of feedback: Where am I going? (What is the goal?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?), and Where to next? (What needs to be done to achieve that goal?), within this experiment the focus of the feedback is oriented primarily towards the first question, 'Where am I going?'. Accepting the notion that the time when certain actions are conducted during the writing process are of great influence, as pointed out in Van Weijen (2009), when determining the ultimate quality of the written work, then the question of 'Where am I going?' is the first question students need to ask themselves and be aware of before starting the act of writing. One would suggest that this question of 'Where am I going?' is vital regardless of the individual approach to the writing process. Furthermore it hangs closely together with questions of audience and effective communication, elements which, as have been pointed out earlier, are often problematic during the writing process. Implicitly it is assumed in this paper that clarification of the goal influences the process of how students go about it and what they must do next. To further examine this assumption the intermediate steps the students are asked to make, translating goal clarification into reflection and action, will be examined.

Because an important part of this research questions whether or not through direct confrontation with the target audience the students will become more aware of the communicative effectiveness of their work (as suggested by for example Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008), Miceli, Murray & Kennedy (2010), Braaksma et al. (2004)) both sets of feedback will be oriented towards the same goal, the question 'Where am I going?' only the manner in which they are confronted with this question differs. However the other two questions ('How am I going?' and 'Where to next?') are inherently tied up within this process of improvement, as these are the two following steps the students have to take in order to be able to improve their own work. Following the notion of the zone of proximal development (or ZPD) as defined by Vygotsky (1987) it would follow that by first establishing the goal, new steps can be formulated by the learners, with the aid of a teacher, to improve upon their own work. ZPD is often metaphorically defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86) The assumption is made that by confronting students with the question 'Where am I going?', they would logically work towards answering questions: 'How am I going?' and 'Where to next?'

## **2.5 Research questions**

In order to explore the effects of the student-as-participant observation model in a formal foreign language teaching setting the primary research question; does an assignment following the learner-as-participant observation model as formulated in Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008), which has been proven to be effective in improving the writing proficiency of L1 students of Dutch, also have a positive effect when employed on Dutch L2 students of English in a formal setting, can be divided into two sub questions:

- 1) Does the rewriting by the students of an assignment in a L2, in this case English, regardless of a difference in the manner in which feedback is received, lead to an improvement in the overall quality of the written text after having received the feedback?

- 2) Does the use of a learner-as-participant observation model of feedback lead to a greater increase in overall quality of the students' written text when compared to a control group which does not follow this learner-as-participant observation model as one would expect from research done about this topic with regard to the students' L1?

### **3. Method**

In order to create the most comprehensive overview of the extent of the effectiveness of the chosen assignment several factors need to be taken into account.

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants consist out of a group of 65 students (n=65) from a secondary school in the south of the Netherlands, divided over four classes, two of which were in the ninth grade, two of which were eleventh grade classes. The ninth grade classes consisted out of thirteen and fifteen students respectively. The eleventh grade classes consisted out of fourteen and twenty-three students respectively. The classes were divided without any preselection into two main groups, the experimental film condition group and the control read condition group. Each condition group contained one ninth grade and one eleventh grade class. The experimental film condition group consisted out of 27 students (n= 27; 13 ninth grade; 14 eleventh grade). The control read condition group consisted out of 38 students (n=38; 15 ninth grade; 23 eleventh grade). Due to illness, absence or failure to hand in their assignment during the second measurement (the rewrite phase), six students were not taken into account during the second measurement. Leaving the condition groups as followed: The experimental film condition group (n= 23; 11 ninth grade; 12 eleventh grade) and the control read condition group (n= 36; 14 ninth grade; 22 eleventh grade). Student consent was obtained. (See table 1)

The choice to divide the groups according to grade, or age, was based on the fact that there was a desire to divide the students according to level of writing proficiency, one group containing learners with a high writing proficiency and the other containing learners with a low writing proficiency. Research has shown that good writers benefit most from being provided with 'good' examples (how you should do it), while poor writers benefit the most of 'bad' examples (how not to do it) (e.g. Braaksma et al., 2004). The division between good and poor writers was made on the bases of educational level. The high proficiency main group will consist of students from a higher grade (eleventh grade), while the low proficiency main group will consist of students from a lower grade (ninth grade), as it can be argued that by definition the higher grade (/older) students have a higher writing proficiency than the lower grade(/younger) students. Because the groups are compared within themselves, not with each other, any possible age effects upon the quality of the written work should be limited. However this factor has to be taken into consideration when analysing the results.

#### **3.2 Setup**

All sessions in this experiment were provided and given by one teacher, me, in an effort to keep any possible outside influences to a minimum and create consistency between the various groups.

### **3.2.1 First Version / Writing phase.**

Both groups of students with high and lower writing proficiency were presented with the same assignment in which they were asked to write a short argumentative e-mail in which communicative effectiveness is central. They received the following assignment:

*Your English speaking neighbour has gotten into Irish folk music and since a few weeks listens to it fanatically for several hours each day. During the week she often does so at night, and in the weekends in the early morning. Unfortunately your houses are not that soundproof [geluidsdicht] and you have to listen to her, often during times you don't want to. Write an e-mail to your neighbour to make clear to her that you are not happy with the situation and that you want to find a good solution for this, together.*

*(150-250 words)*

After a brief introduction to the topic the students were asked to write this e-mail in class on the computer and were required to hand it in digitally. The students were made aware of the fact that this assignment was not for a school grade.

### **3.2.2 Intervention / Feedback.**

During a second meeting the students were provided with feedback, which occurred in one of two conditions: the *read condition* or the *film condition*. The read condition is more oriented towards reviewing the written work, while the film condition is more oriented towards the reader response. The feedback in each of the conditions was based upon a model e-mail containing the most frequently occurring errors in the e-mails of all the students. This resulted in the creation of a 'poor model' from which the poorer writers should retrieve the most input as suggested by, among others, Braaksma et al. (2004).

#### *Read Condition.*

In the reader condition the students were, during the feedback session, divided into pairs or groups of three (depending on the number of students present) and received a model e-mail (which has been constructed on the basis of the e-mails written during the previous class. (See Appendix I). Firstly they were asked to read the e-mail individually and ask themselves the question: How good(/effective) do you think this e-mail is? In other words do you think the neighbour will do what you asked her to do? Secondly they had to confer with each other and discuss their views on the effectiveness of the e-mail and create a list of (at least) 5 tips and tops for the writer. Thirdly an in-class discussion was held about the do's and don'ts of an effective complaint e-mail. Finally the students were asked to look at (a hard-copy of) their own e-mail and reflect on which elements of their work they would alter, and mark these, giving a brief indication of what they would change. These reviewed versions were handed out at the beginning of the third class when they were asked to rewrite their own e-mail.

#### *Film Condition.*

In the film condition the students were, during the feedback session, firstly shown a short film in which they were confronted with a neighbour who responded to the same model e-mail as used by the control reader condition group (Appendix I). After having viewed this short film they were divided into pairs or groups of three (depending on the size of the class) and asked: how does the

reader respond to the e-mail? And: Do you think she will do what is asked of her? Secondly they were asked to create a list of 5 tips and tops for the writer. Thirdly an in-class discussion was held about the do's and don'ts of an effective complaint e-mail. Finally the students were asked to review (a hard-copy of) their own e-mail and reflect on which elements they would alter and mark these, giving a brief indication of what they would change. These reviewed versions were handed out again at the beginning of the third class when they were asked to rewrite their own e-mail.

The focus in each condition was on assessing the communicative effectiveness, so focussing more on high order concerns (e.g. structure or tone) rather than low order concerns (grammar and spelling).

### **3.2.3 Second Version / Rewriting Phase.**

During a third class students were asked to rewrite their own e-mail on the basis of the feedback they had received during the previous class. They were allowed to alter the existing version of their e-mail or completely rewrite the e-mail. This new version was handed in digitally at the end of class.

### **3.2.4 Assessment.**

The e-mails (first and second version) produced by the students were anonymised, and any names in the e-mails were replaced by the generic 'your neighbour' or 'neighbour', the assessors were made aware of this fact before assessing. This was done to try to eliminate any possible bias during the assessment. Subsequently the e-mails were assessed by two assessors with a high proficiency in English who were either a teacher of English or a trainee teacher of English. The choice was made to use two assessors in order to eliminate any possible bias caused by a single assessor, and thus increase the validity of this research. To further insure that the assessment of the products was uniform, the assessors were provided with a standard e-mail (or standard) selected from all the writing assignments handed in by the students. This standard was granted a rating of 100. The assessors were asked to relate the rest of the assignments to the standard (see appendix II), rating it according to 'how many times the standard' they believed the work to be. So for example if they believed the to be assessed work to be twice as good as the standard they would afford this work a rating of 200, if they believed the to be assessed work to be twice as bad they would afford it a rating of 50. This method of rating prevents the rating to go below 0, and disconnects it from a school grading system (on a scale of 1-10), hoping to achieve a more neutral and generalizable rating for each work. The standard was selected with the aim to create a similar outcome for each assessment and allowing a better and more objective assessment of the work's quality. Furthermore the standard was provided with a minor explanation on why the e-mail was elected as standard, naming several elements that were considered good, and several elements that were considered less good, making it into a more or less average e-mail (see appendix II). It was made clear to the assessors that the main focus of the rating was based on communicative effectiveness rather than low order concerns such as grammar and spelling.

## 4. Results

The reliability of the ratings was calculated for both the first version and second version results. Cronbach's Alpha equals .93 for the first version results and .94 for the second version results. This leads to the conclusion that the ratings, at least when compared to each other, are considered to be reliable and as such can be combined in order to come to a single average score in both the first version and second version ratings for both groups in both conditions.

*Table 1; Descriptive statistics for the writing assignment scores divided by grade, time and condition. Mean, standard deviation (Sd), population size (N),*

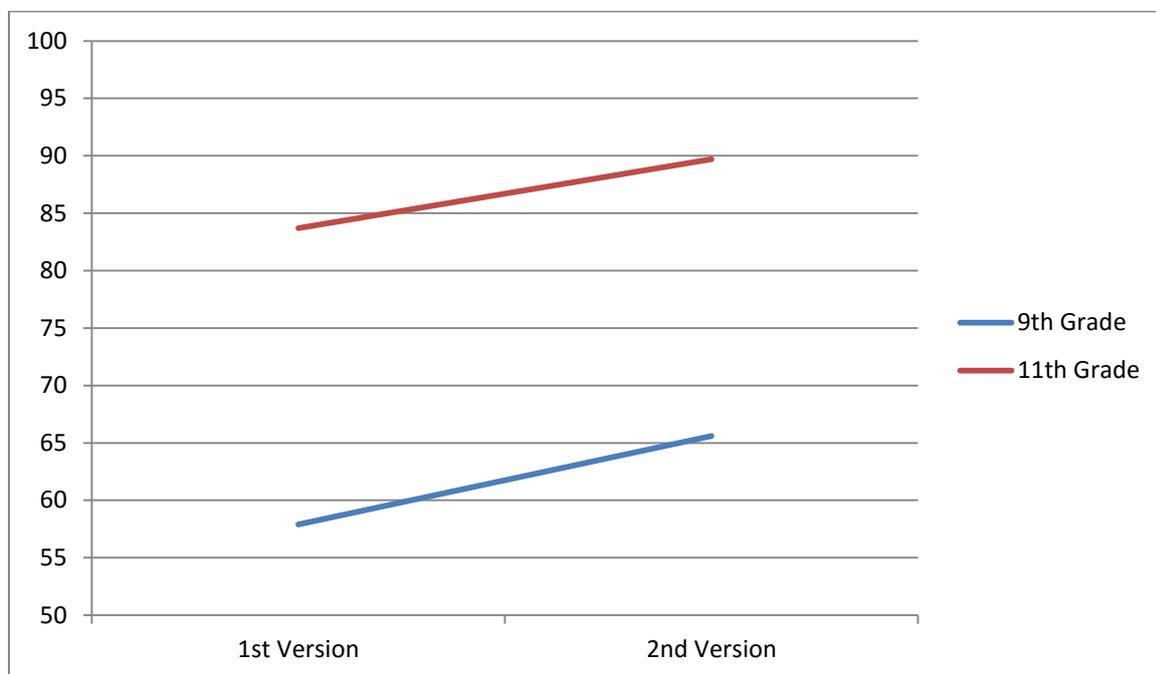
Grade	Control Read Condition					Experimental Film Condition				
	1 <sup>st</sup> Version		2 <sup>nd</sup> Version			1 <sup>st</sup> Version		2 <sup>nd</sup> Version		
	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	N
9	65.5	25.0	70.8	24.9	14	51.2	22,8	61.2	17.9	11
11	86.1	37.4	89.7	43.3	22	75.7	25.1	79.1	21.1	12

Table 1 features the descriptive information about the data. It shows that the control read condition in the first version situation, in both ninth and eleventh grade has a higher mean when compared to the experimental film condition group (65.5 versus 51.2 and 86.1 versus 75.7 respectively). Furthermore based on the initial results as shown in table 1 it seems that the overall quality of the rewritten texts for both groups is higher than that of the quality of the first version. However the cause of this increase has not yet been pinpointed. The question remains whether these differences between the two versions depend on condition, grade or an interaction between both. The data further shows that for both grades, and for both conditions, the mean increases between the first version and second version scores (ninth grade the increase is on average: 7.6; the eleventh grade increase is on average: 3.9). When looking at the results more closely it becomes apparent there is a sharper increase in the quality of e-mails for the ninth grade segment of the experimental film condition during the second version situation when compared to the quality of the e-mails for the eleventh grade experimental film condition. Furthermore it has to be noted that the standard deviation in all groups, regardless of grade, version or condition is very large, as is shown in table 1. Based on the size of the standard deviations it becomes apparent that the lowest score of the ninth grade is not that much lower than the lowest score of the eleventh grade, despite the fact that the mean score of the eleventh grade is significantly higher than that of the ninth grade, the overall dispersion within the group is much larger. In order to further determine if the increase in mean score, the score per grade and in fact the overall score of all the e-mails has significantly increased a multi-level analysis of variance for repeated measurements was conducted.

This analysis shows that on average the increase between first version and second version can be considered significant ( $F(1, 56.3) = 4.3; p = .04$ ). Hence the overall quality of the second version texts is, on average, higher than that of the first versions, regardless of grade or condition. The average text quality of the eleventh grade is significantly higher than the average score of the ninth grade ( $F(1, 60.9) = 8.7; p < .01$ ) confirming known population validity. However, the interaction between condition and version (text versus rewritten text) fails to prove significant ( $F(1, 55.3) = .2; p = .65$ ). The results do not suggest that the increase in text quality between the first and the second version of the text is dependent upon the condition in which the text was written. Furthermore when

looking at the possible interaction between version, condition and grade it is revealed that here too the results are not significant ( $F(1, 55.3) = .18; p = .67$ ). Ergo the increase in quality of the written work seems, based on these results, not to be influenced significantly by the difference in condition (experimental film versus control read) in relation to a difference of grade (ninth grade versus eleventh grade). Even when the relation between version and grade and condition and grade are analysed both fail to reach significance, ( $F(1, 55.3) = .53; p = .47$ ) and ( $F(1, 60.9) = .014; p = .91$ ) respectively. Hence it cannot be shown that the increase in text quality between the first and second version is dependent on either the condition in relation to the grade, or a difference between grades, despite the fact that initially it seemed that the ninth grade increased more sharply than the eleventh grade. A main effect of grade and a main effect of version are the only things that can be verified. On average the quality of the text of an eleventh grade student is higher when compared to that of a ninth grade student, while it can also be shown that the overall text quality of the first version is poorer than that of the second one. These effects are graphically shown in figure 1.

Figure 1 Estimated marginal means increase between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> version according to grade.



When comparing the means of the first version scores of the experimental film condition group with the control read condition group it becomes apparent that the overall control read condition group was significantly better at the onset of the experiment, in other words the first version situation (writing phase). The mean of the control read condition group was 11.1 points higher than the mean of the experimental film condition group in the first version situation. The mean increase of 5.3 between the writing phase and rewriting phase shows that, although the increase in text quality for the experimental film condition group is greater, the overall difference between the experimental film condition group and the control read condition group remains too big to be considered to amount to a significant increase when looking at the experimental film condition group.

## 5. Discussion

The question central in this experiment is: Does an assignment following the learner-as-participant observation model as formulated in Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008), which has been proven to be effective in improving the writing proficiency of L1 students of Dutch, also have a positive effect when employed on Dutch L2 students of English in a formal setting? The nature of this question is twofold: Firstly does the rewriting of the e-mail, regardless of the feedback condition, lead to the improvement of the overall quality of the written work? Secondly does the use of a learner-as-participant observation model of feedback lead to a greater increase in overall quality when compared to a control read feedback model as one would expect from research done about this topic with regard to the students' L1?

Firstly; does the rewriting by the students of an assignment in a L2, in this case English, regardless of a difference in the manner in which feedback is received, lead to an improvement in the overall quality of the written text after having received the feedback?

Results indicate that, regardless of feedback condition, there is a significant difference in quality between the first version e-mails and the second version e-mails and this difference is in favour of the second version situation. This means that the rewriting of the work leads to a significant increase in the overall quality of the written work as judged by the assessors. These results are in line with the findings of other researchers with regard to this topic (e.g. Evers-Vermeul & Van den Bergh (2009), Rijlaarsdam et al. (2005), Van Beuningen, De Jong & Kuiken (2008)). These results seem to suggest that this effect of rewriting has an effect regardless of the nature of the language of the written work, be it L1 or L2. There was no third condition which measured the effects of only rewriting the assignment; therefore there is no clear indication of the impact of only rewriting the work. Considering the large standard deviation within each group the impact of just rewriting without any clear intervention would most likely be minimal.

Results also show there is a significant difference in the quality of the written work between ninth grade students and eleventh grade students, confirming known population validity, adding to the overall external validity of this research. Moreover by showing a significant difference between the ninth grade students and the eleventh grade students the results suggest an agreement between the overall score and the quality that is being tested, because the significant difference between the two grades confirms the premises on which they were selected, namely one group having a higher overall proficiency in English than the other and therefore should be able to produce higher quality texts.

Furthermore mapping out the individual progress of all the students seems to strengthen the notion that rewriting improves the quality of the work, even if only to a minimal degree. However despite the fact the overall scores of the students increase the difference between good writers and poorer writers remains similar. The good students remain good, the poorer students do not improve to such a degree they move closer to achieving a similar score comparable with the better students. The question whether or not these gains are permanent was not taken into account in the setup of this project. As pointed out in Van Weijen (2009) and Schoonen (2005) other factors, such as the topic of the writing assignment, can greatly influence the quality of the written work. Several more writing tests would need to be administered in order to definitively show there is a lasting effect on the improvement of the students writing skills. As mentioned before this is not within the scope of

this research, as it researched the initial effects of the different types of feedback upon the quality of the writing assignment.

Secondly; does the use of a learner-as-participant observation model of feedback lead to a greater increase in overall quality of the students' written text when compared to a control group which does not follow this learner-as-participant observation model as one would expect from research done about this topic with regard to the students' L1? The results of the experiment show that there is no significant increase in the overall quality of the learner-as-participant observation model approach (the experimental film condition group) when compared to the control read condition group, going against the expectation based on research about this topic with regard to the students' L1. There is an increase for the experimental film condition group, and for the ninth grade segment this increase is sharper when compared to the increase in quality for the control read condition group, however the increase does not reach significance suggesting that the experimental intervention was not effective to the extent it was hoped and as was expected considering the results from research done in a L1 setting (e.g. Rijlaarsdam et al., Braaksma et al. (2004). The remainder of this discussion will be dedicated to exploring possible reasons why this experiment yielded such contradictory results when compared to other, more extensive, experiments.

Firstly the lack of significance when observing the interaction between condition and version, and/or grade might have been influenced by several environmental factors, such as the timespan in which the classes were given. Because all classes had two hours of English a week there sometimes was a, significant, gap between the creation, feedback and rewrite sessions. The ninth grade experimental film condition group was the only group which had the feedback session and rewrite session in one sitting. The others had a day to three days gap between the feedback and rewrite session.

Secondly the data reveals that the control read condition group was significantly better at the onset of the intervention. The marginal mean of the control read condition group is a good 11 points higher than that of the experimental film condition group. Taking into account that the average mean would increase with about 5 points, and even if the experimental film condition group performed better, the differences between the scores of both conditions would be still too great to lead to any significant results. This difference in first version scores was allowed to exist because of the grades were granted a condition without any preselection. It was believed at the beginning of the experiment that by selecting four different classes that this variable would be controlled for. However within this experiment the relationship between version and condition was examined not an overall comparison between groups.

The decision to implement only one model e-mail for all the grades taking into account the most common mistakes of all the students in all their e-mails might have resulted in either a lack of input for the higher grades, or input below their level, decreasing its effectiveness, as suggested by, among others, Hattie & Temperley (2007). The film made based upon the model e-mail might therefore also have failed to convey clearly enough the feedback for the higher grades, resulting in their overall lack of improvement. The ninth grade students in that respect might have been in a more advantageous position as the overall level of quality of their work was significantly when compared to the eleventh grade, granting them more areas in which they could, possibly, more readily improve.

Thirdly the data has shown that the standard deviation in each group, regardless of grade, condition or version, is remarkably high, resulting in a situation where in both the first version and the second version situation the lowest score in the ninth grade is not that much lower than the lowest score in the eleventh grade. In other words the lowest of the low proficiency group, is not any lower than the lowest of the high proficiency group. Most of the research upon which this assignment was based (e.g. Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, Van den Bergh & Van Hout-Wolters (2004), Rijlaarsdam et al. (2005), Kieft (2006)) focusses on writing proficiency in a L1 situation. However with the added complication of a foreign L2, in this case English, the added complication of language proficiency enters into the picture.

Those that do focus on the assignments in a L2 situation often do so with students with a much higher English proficiency (among others Miceli, Murray, & Kennedy (2010) and Manchón & Roca de Larios (2007)). Following the results from such research Tillema (2012) and Van Gelderen & Oostdam (2005) and the notion that language proficiency does indeed have an impact on the quality of the writing product and on the process of writing it is not unreasonable to suggest that these factors have an adverse effect on the quality of the written work by students in a secondary school L2 situation. Unfortunately no language proficiency test was conducted during the course of this experiment, as it did not fall in the scope of the research, as the research was oriented towards the communicative effectiveness of the students written work and not language proficiency, and therefore there is no corroboration that in this case language proficiency had an impact on the quality of the written work, although it does seem a likely suspect. A suggestion for further research would be to explore in more detail the level of the students' language proficiency and vocabulary size and retrieval speeds to further determine the effects of this upon the overall writing proficiency of secondary school students.

Moreover, unlike this experiment, most of the research mentioned above has been conducted over a longer period of time allowing students to get used to and have more practice with the format, and, as has been pointed out by Van Weijen (2009), the nature and topic of the assignment can have a great effect upon the overall quality of the written work. Multiple assignments are needed to counter these effects and establish a clear benchmark of the class' overall writing proficiency.

Based on this experiment several new avenues of research can be suggested. First of all, as mentioned above, it might yield results to further explore the level of the students' language proficiency and vocabulary size, plus retrieval speeds to further determine the effects upon the overall writing proficiency. This experiment and the research upon which it is based (e.g. Van Weijen (2009) and Tillema (2012)) have not explored this issue extensively enough to merit any assumptions made with regard to this element.

Furthermore in future research it is recommended to further explore effect of the sequence of instructions. As shown in Braaksma (2002) there is an interaction between familiarity with a type of task and with the type of instruction preferred by different types of students based on their level of aptitude. A generalized approach was adopted within this experiment that was applied to all the students, regardless of their level of English. However it might have been beneficial if the students had been allowed to choose for themselves from what kind of instruction they think they can learn the best, with only limited suggestion from the teacher. Furthermore more different types of

instruction could be applied by the teacher to see which evokes the best response with the students.

Also based upon the results as shown above a further subdivision of each of the groups into good writers and poorer writers might lead to more substantial results. As it is noted that the best writers in the ninth grade groups are on par with the best from the eleventh grade group and the lowest scores in the ninth grade group are not much lower than those in the eleventh grade group. A possible subdivision might show which group benefits the most of this particular approach to teaching writing proficiency, if any of them benefit at all. The current research is not able to provide any conclusive evidence on that particular front.

To conclude; does an approach following the learner-as-participant observation model as formulated in Rijlaarsdam et al. (2008), which has been proven to be effective in improving the writing proficiency of L1 students of Dutch, also have a positive effect when employed on Dutch L2 students of English in a formal setting? Although the experimental film condition group shows a sharper increase between the first and second version, especially considering the ninth grade segment, these results failed to reach significance between the experimental film- and control read condition groups. This result, which goes against the expectation based upon research done in a L1 setting, might have several reasons.

Firstly the time span between the feedback session and the rewrite session might have played a part in the decreased effectiveness of the task. However even in the idealized situation, as was the case in the ninth grade experimental group, no significant changes were noted.

Secondly the data reveals that both in the first and second version situation the control read condition group was significantly better when compared to the experimental film condition group, making it, even with a boosted feedback session to increase enough for the results to reach significance. Furthermore the choice to construct only one model e-mail, and one film (based on that model e-mail) might have limited the effect of the feedback, especially for the higher grades, because research suggests (Hattie and Temperley (2007) they would benefit more from feedback on their level.

Lastly the standard deviation within each group is remarkably high, leading to the conclusion that the lowest of the low proficiency group scores about as high as the lowest of the high proficiency group. This might have caused the effect of the intervention to be negligible. Research done by Tillema (2012) and Van Gelderen & Oostdam (2005) suggests that a possible factor could have been language proficiency, fluency and vocabulary retrieval speed, unfortunately the testing for language proficiency, fluency and vocabulary retrieval speed did not fall within the scope of this research. This initial experiment has provided enough material for possible further research in this particular area, either to further explore the effects of language proficiency, fluency and vocabulary retrieval speed upon writing proficiency in relation to the model implemented within a L2 setting.

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## Appendix I

Dear Neighbour,

Let us be clear on one thing, this e-mail is a solution.

I want to discuss with you the hassle about your love for Irish Folk music. I resent it, not only is the music loud, but you also listen to it all the time! It is so loud it looks like there is a live concert in my living room. I can't stand it. My house isn't soundproof so I hear it every day. Sometimes I don't care because I am too lazy to plug in some headphones, but sometimes I don't want to hear that music, because it is very stupid and boring.

We could fix this problem, if you decide to cooperate. However if the problem continues I will be forced to call the police.

This is my solution: You are only allowed to turn up the volume on the following times:

1. Every Monday around 14:00
2. Tuesday and Thursday every other week around 10:00
3. Every Saturday when I play tennis

Also I think that getting a better isolation for both of our houses can help. Of course this cost money but if we both pay then it won't be a problem. Or if you think this is too expensive then maybe you can just put in some headphones so that I do not have to listen to your music.

The last solution I have is that you move. I'll even pay half of the costs, but I think you would rather pay for a headphone than for a mover.

Can we make some appointment? I doesn't me where you will discuss, it doesn't me seriously

Kind regards,

Your Neighbour.

## Appendix II

Dear neighbour,

There's something I'd like to talk about. I'm completely fine with you listening Irish folk music, but I would appreciate it if you to turn down the volume a bit, because sadly enough our houses are hardly soundproof. I hope you'll understand and that you don't feel offended. I mean it's ok if you listen fanatically to your favorite music, sometimes I enjoy listening to, but when I'm working, trying to sleep or rest, it just isn't that nice anymore.

If you have a better solution, I would love to hear it. I hope we can figure this out together and that we'll both be happy with the final solution. Maybe we can compromise in an even better way than to turn down the volume and maybe listen and talk together more often. I hope that after this we can still be good neighbours.

See you soon,  
Your neighbour

Rating: 100

### Description:

This e-mail bares the hallmarks of what is considered, for this particular assignment, to be a successful e-mail. The writer of this e-mail makes an active attempt to resolve the situation by trying to be positive, understanding and offers some minor suggestions without being too demanding. It is noted the writer is 'open for solutions', and is willing to 'compromise'. However there are still some mismatched sentences and poorly chosen words that at times prevent the writer from conveying his/her feelings or intentions. Furthermore on a spelling and grammar level there are some minor mistakes.

In short this e-mail will most likely, with a willing neighbour, lead to a positive response and/or the finding of a solution to the problem posed in the assignment. The overall intention of the e-mail is good, however on a sentence and word level there are some improvements needed to make sure the writer can convey his/her feelings and intentions in an understandable, polite, respectful and correct manner.

The Assignment:

*Your English speaking neighbour has gotten into Irish folk music and fanatically listens to it every day, rather loudly. During the week she often does so late at night and in the weekends she likes to get up early and turn the volume up. Unfortunately your homes are hardly soundproof and you are forced to listen to her music, often at times you don't want to. Write an e-mail to your neighbour to make clear to her that you are not happy with the situation and that together with her you want to find a good solution for this problem.*

*(150-250 words)*