Circles and Letters:
I do; I understand.

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ABSTRACT

How do we writing teachers respond to our students’ writing? How does our response affect both us and the students? Is it irresponsible to mark only a few recurring errors? Or is irresponsible to mark every error? Do students learn better when the errors are labeled or not? What about positive feedback?

This thesis explains an action research project I conducted with my reading/writing students. In the project, I explored many methods of responding to student writing, and I documented how one of those techniques affected me and my students. That technique called the reduced grammar technique focuses on recurring errors. I employed the reduced grammar technique to respond to students’ writing in three process writing assignments. Four students were chosen to represent the higher and lower level students in my class, and all of those students found the technique helpful. While I found it limiting, I learned some important lessons, which are explained in chapter four.

ERIC Descriptors:
College Second Language Programs
Writing Skills
Writing (Composition)
Error Analysis (Language)
Student Attitudes
Teacher Responsibility
Scoring
For Dad
I hear and I forget
I see and I remember
I do and I understand
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GLOSSARY

Approach: “A set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning. It states a point of view, a philosophy…” An approach is hierarchically arranged above a method and technique respectively. (Anthony 1963)

Dialogue journals: A separate notebook where I pose a question, students write a response, and I write them a letter modeling misused grammatical structures or asking questions to clarify the student’s message. I personally never mark students’ errors or mistakes in dialogue journals.

Error: A standard deviation from the accepted grammatical rule where the error is not known by the student who makes it. It is done in ignorance.

Method: “An overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material . . . all of which is based upon the selected approach. An approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural.” A method is hierarchically arranged below an approach and above a technique. (Anthony 1963)

Mistake: A slip of the tongue where the mistake is known by the student who makes it. It is done as an oversight in a lapse of focus.

Process writing: A paper in which students have worked through a series of drafts. Between each draft, students worked in groups to either read their paper aloud, outline their ideas, or proof read for errors and mistakes with each other.

Reduced grammar technique: A technique which shows students their recurring errors without using grammatical terms.

Response: Any kind of response to a student’s writing. This could range anywhere from silence, to a knowing look, to an elaborate response using a system of codes to show recurring errors, to written responses used in dialogue journals.

Technique: “A technique is implementational – that which actually takes place in a classroom. It is a particular trick, stratagem, or contrivance used to accomplish an immediate objective. Techniques must be consistent with a method, and therefore in harmony with an approach as well.” A technique is hierarchically arranged below a method. (Anthony 1963)

Writing process: The process writers go through knowingly or unknowingly when writing.
INTRODUCTION

How do we as writing teachers respond to students’ writing? Do we focus on what the student does right or what they do wrong? Is there some magical balance we should aim for? Where is a response most effective for the student, in the margins of the paper, at the end, or on another sheet of paper? What are the responsibilities of the teacher, not only in terms of what is expected by the students and the school administration but also with respect to what the teacher knows and believes about second language acquisition theory? What are the responsibilities of the student? What degree of student autonomy can be expected? What degree should be expected? Is the practice of only marking recurring “global” errors irresponsible because they do not show students their other mistakes and errors? Or does marking mistakes and errors deny students the opportunity of learning how to proofread?

These questions illuminate a full spectrum of response that teachers can give their students, and they probe the relationship of the teacher, the student, and the subject. Taken together as a whole, they can be simplified into one question which revolves around balance and focuses on how. But the nuance and connotation of that single question is lost if not for the foundation of all those other questions. Those questions provided the impetus for the research question in this classroom-based research project.

This Master’s thesis explains an action research project I conducted with my reading and writing students to explore various techniques of responding to students’ writing with an ever steady aim on fostering student autonomy. In the project, I
documented how one particular technique affected my students and me. That technique which is called the reduced-grammar technique\(^1\) focuses students’ attention on recurring errors in their writing (Eaton 2003). I employed the reduced-grammar technique in conjunction with a variety of other techniques to respond to students’ writing in three process writing assignments. I documented four students who were strategically chosen to represent the higher and lower level students in my reading and writing class. Each of those students reported that the technique was helpful, and by the end of the third process writing assignment, all of them were able to control their recurring errors. Even though I found the reduced-grammar technique limiting, I learned some important lessons in the process of action research and in the application of the technique.

**Teaching Context**

I chose to do an action research project to learn how to specifically address questions I had in my context. Therefore, it is imperative to introduce that context before explicating the specific question which fueled the research.

I teach students who speak languages other than English as a first or primary language at the Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) in Annandale, Virginia. The college serves the greatest number of students of any school in the entire Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, roughly 1,500. The community college’s program is divided into two departments depending on whether students receive college credit or not. All of the non-credit classes are offered in the Continuing Education Department (CE Department) while all the credit classes are offered in the English as a Second Language Department (ESL Department). I have been an adjunct faculty member of

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\(^1\) Eaton refers to this as the reduced-grammar method. Using Anthony’s definition, I call it a technique. Please see the glossary for clarification of these terms.
NVCC since the fall of 2002 and I have worked exclusively in the Continuing Education Department.

The classes in the CE Department are divided by competency, or what some call modality. There are listening speaking classes and reading writing classes—currently, there are no integrated skills classes in either the CE or ESL programs. In addition to being divided by competency, classes offered by the CE Department are either full-time “intensive” classes which meet everyday for two hours or part-times classes which meet every other day for two hours. All classes regardless of competency or periodicity are taken on a pass/fail basis.

Students are placed into the correct classes by means of a diagnostic evaluation conducted by teachers. Students who come to the program and are unable to communicate in English are placed in a “Basic Entry” class. All other students submit a thirty-minute timed writing sample and are interviewed and placed into a level according to their proficiency. The levels are labeled A through E where A is the lowest proficiency and E is the highest. It is possible for a student to place differently in each competency. For example, a student may be in level A for reading writing and level B for listening speaking. In the intensive program, students can complete a level in one semester, while in the part-time program, students split the level and complete the coursework over the duration of two semesters or one academic year. Students generally transition into the credit program (offered by the ESL Department) in either level D or E.

Students progress from one level to another depending on their improvement in each level. At the end of each semester, students take a comprehensive exam which mirrors the initial diagnostic evaluation used to place students into the program.
are evaluated by their potential teachers. For example, a student in level A will be evaluated by teachers in level B. If a student is unable to demonstrate the skills necessary to enter the succeeding level, they must repeat their current level until they demonstrate the skills required to advance. Generally, students do not want to repeat any levels, and they are hyper-aware and eminently concerned, perhaps to a fault, with whether or not they will be forced to repeat their current level. Social promotion, or the act of passing a student from one level to another who has not yet acquired the requisite proficiency, is considered unacceptable by the administration and there are many checks in place to make sure that students are correctly placed in the appropriate level.

The students in the ESL and CE Departments are well educated and the English taught is for academic purposes. Most of my students are in college in their home countries or have graduated from either an undergraduate or graduate program in their home countries. Some of the students are immigrants, but the majority are on an F-1 or J-1 student visa. The largest language community in our school is Korean. The Spanish speakers from South America, Latin America, and Europe are the next biggest community with the majority being from Latin and South America. And the next largest group would be a combination of speakers from other Asian countries, Europe, the Middle East, and African countries. In the three years that I have taught at NVCC, all of my students have indicated a desire to attend an American college or university for credit.

The class I researched and documented was an intensive level B reading writing class. Like all intensive classes, we met everyday for two hours. Our specific class was comprised of twenty-one students from eight countries: twelve from South Korea, two
from Peru, two from Venezuela, and one each from Colombia, El Salvador, Panama, Japan, and Macedonia.

If you were to attend a typical intensive class, be it reading writing or listening speaking, you would first notice the light atmosphere in the classroom. The students are generally happy to be in class and are smiling and talking to other students in either their first language or English. It is unusual to have behavioral problems in the classroom. Students are generally dedicated and work hard to learn. In turn, the faculty and staff at the community college enjoy the students and are generally dedicated to doing a good job. The teachers’ office is the noisy nexus where meetings are held, collaborations are fostered, and resources are shared.

The Goals of the Writing Course

One of the primary goals of this research project was to learn how to respond to my students to help them become better writers. And while the context has been explained, the definition of what it means to become a better writer is lacking, so too is a definition of what good writing is. So what does “becoming a better writer” mean? And what is “good writing”? This section will address these questions.

Ultimately “becoming a better writer” means that a student is passing their current reading writing class. The CE Department uses a pass/fail grading system in which an S is satisfactory or passing, an R means repeat, and a U is unsatisfactory or failing. The midterm and final grades are determined by a student’s score on a thirty-minute timed writing test. A typical test would ask students to explain in writing whether they prefer one thing or idea over another and why. For example, students would be asked to write a response to a question such as, “Do you think it is better to study or play during the
weekend? Why? Give specific reasons to support your ideas.” A holistic evaluation is used to determine students’ grades. If a student scores an R on their writing it means two things. First, they will have to repeat their current reading writing class the following semester. And second, the student is not writing as well as they should given the number of hours of writing instruction they have received. Therefore, in the CE Department at NVCC, Annandale, “becoming a better writer” means improving enough during the semester to receive an S (or satisfactory) on the thirty-minute timed writing. But this begs the question. What does it take to get an S on the thirty-minute timed writing test?

In order to achieve an S, or a passing grade, on the final timed writing in the reading writing level I teach, a student’s writing would need the following attributes: (1) be either a well developed paragraph with a topic sentence, supporting sentences with details and examples, and a concluding sentence, or be an essay with a basic introduction, body, and conclusion including a thesis statement, some transition signals between paragraphs, and some examples that support their ideas; (2) use understandable sentences which are complete, simple, or compound; (3) use controlled spelling (meaning that if words are misspelled, they are hard words to spell and are recognizable); (4) use the present tense of the simple aspect correctly; (5) use the regular and irregular past tense of the simple aspect correctly; (6) use the present and past tense of the progressive aspect correctly; (7) use the modals "will", "be going to", “should”, “might”, “don’t have to”, “must”, and “must not” correctly; (8) use subject, object, and possessive pronouns correctly; (9) use the quantifiers “much” and “many” correctly with count and non-count nouns; (10) use varied and generally correct vocabulary; (11) and use basic punctuation including periods, quotations marks, and commas correctly.
To help teachers assess and evaluate students, there is a rubric and “anchor” or “norming” papers. The papers are examples of students’ writing in each level. When it comes time to evaluate students’ writing, each student’s paper is read and evaluated by two teachers who negotiate a score based upon their understanding of what is demanded of the student in the next level. The teachers assessing and evaluating a piece of writing rely as much on their intuitions and observations about the student’s writing—and in most cases on an understanding of who the student is and their specific study habits and work ethic—as they do on the official rubric or “anchor” paper. In the end, the score given to a student’s writing is never the opinion of one teacher but is rather the consensus of at least two teachers who have negotiated and discussed the student’s writing skills and considered whether the student would be ready for the next level.

My Goals and Principles in Teaching Writing

The attributes I just outlined represent the goals of the community college with respect to writing. If I did not teach my students the necessary grammatical structures and the necessary elements of writing for them to pass the timed writing test, I would not be doing my job as a writing teacher at the community college. But I feel that there is more than just a list of grammar topics that my students need to be able to use correctly to become better writers. My personal goals extend beyond those of the school.

My primary goal, whether it be in a reading writing class or a listening speaking class, is promoting student autonomy. Autonomy in my mind is one of the most important goals of education. Very simply it is the ability to learn on one’s own for one’s own purposes. Students go to school to learn how to become self-sufficient in whatever discipline they choose. Actually, all academic disciplines try to move students closer
towards being autonomous practitioners in their chosen field. I feel that learning a language should be no exception. But in truth, the rewards for language students are unique because students’ goals often times transcend academic success and include goals such as promoting intercultural communication and understanding their identity as it relates to language and culture.

To empower students and promote student autonomy, students need to understand the process writers go through when they write. This process called the writing process is comprised of four basic steps: brainstorming, organizing ideas, writing, and revising. It is fair to point out that some educators would add publishing as a fifth step. One way for students to practice the steps of this process is to teach and practice process writing. Process writing is a type of writing assignment where students focus on the steps, or the process involved in writing, rather than on the outcome or product of the writing. In a process writing assignment, students engage in each aspect of the writing process deliberately and carefully. This work is usually done in a group or with a partner. For example, when students are given a topic to write about in a process writing assignment, the teacher can ask students to work in groups to brainstorm ideas or ask students to talk with each other about some of the ideas that they have but are not yet ready to commit to paper. After having practiced brainstorming, if not carefully at least deliberately, students are familiar with the process involved in brainstorming, and with practice, they are able to focus more on the content they wish to express. The same holds true for each of the other stages of the writing process. As students learn how to engage in each aspect of the writing process, their writing skills increase.
Despite this general increase in understanding and skill, there are other more quantifiable advantages gained by engaging students in process writing which lead to academic success. One of the most immediate advantages for my students is learning the timing involved in each stage or step of the writing process. Once students understand each of these stages and how to do it, they are better able to manage their time during a writing project. In the case of my students who are required to perform on a thirty-minute timed writing test, this could mean the difference between writing a complete paragraph or essay or being asked by a test proctor to stop writing in mid-thought. And while that is an extreme example, having a plan or strategy on how to organize one’s time is crucial. After studying the writing process students know how they are going to take the timed writing test. They are in control of at least one thing, and this serves as a source of empowerment in the intensity of such high-stakes performance testing.

One of the most important advantages for students who learn the writing process is how to become autonomous writers. Generally speaking, writing is an independent activity where writers write their thoughts on paper without the aid of others. But whether we realize it or not, all authors work with editors before their writing is published. For students, the question of who that editor is marks the difference between an autonomous writer and a student who is reliant on the teacher as expert. By working through the writing process in process writing assignments, students practice and develop the skills of working both independently and interdependently with classmates and friends. Students begin to learn how to proofread their own papers and to read other students’ papers critically. It is a huge boost for my students to learn how to proofread and get into the habit of practicing it. Furthermore, this is an example of a capacity
building skill that students will need to transfer and continue developing throughout their academic careers. Proofreading also gives students greater control and power as they become less reliant on others to determine what they can and can’t communicate through written expression.

In my research project, I saw students come to rely on each other as valuable resources. A few of the more advanced writers developed writing buddies with whom they worked on their writing outside of class. In essence these students were becoming autonomous. They were improving their ability to express themselves and they were learning how to do this without relying on a teacher as expert to tell them what they could write or how to write it.

My Strategies for Responding to Students’ Writing

This subsection will provide anecdotes which explain the basic technique I used for responding to students’ writing before this research project. It will also explain how I came to learn the reduced-grammar technique, what it is, how it’s used, and where it got its name.

In my first teaching job, I remember asking another teacher how she graded mistakes and errors in her students’ papers. It seemed quite obvious to me at the time that if I made corrections as if I were an editor, the student would learn nothing. And if I made no corrections, the student would never become aware that they had made mistakes and errors. I was puzzled by the dilemma.

The teacher I posed this conundrum to showed me a system she had learned where she circled the mistake or error and wrote something like “prep.” or “art.” next to it. “Prep” meant preposition, and “art” meant article. When I asked her why she
bothered to even label the type of mistake or error the student had made, she replied that perhaps if the student saw the “prep” or “art” comment enough, they would become aware that they have a problem with prepositions or articles. She reasoned that perhaps the next time the student went to write an article or a noun they would look twice and think about whether what they just wrote was correct. That teacher was Elizabeth Springer, an SIT alumna.

The technique Elizabeth taught me was the technique I used for many years until I felt that it just wasn’t the best way to spend my time responding to students’ writing. But it wasn’t until my teaching practicum, almost six years later, that I saw a new way of responding to students’ writing. This new way of responding to students’ writing was taught to me by Alex Silverman, my Interim Year Teaching Practicum (IYTP) advisor. He said he learned about the technique in an article he read by Angela Eaton. In this technique of responding to student writing, the teacher reads the paper and identifies a few recurring mistakes or errors. The idea is that if a problem is recurring, it is most likely an error and not a mistake. So once the teacher identifies two or three recurring errors, the teacher circles those errors and labels them A, B, and C respectively. Then either in the margin or at the end of the paper the teacher would write a key for the errors (e.g. A: subject verb agreement, B: articles with count nouns, C: spelling). Another important aspect to this technique is that it focuses the student’s attention on a few important errors as opposed to potentially dozens of mistakes and errors thereby presenting the student with an achievable goal: controlling two or three errors.

One of the many options in using this response is the way the teacher labels the recurring errors. So instead of labeling the second recurring error “B: articles with count
nouns” as in the example I just provided in the previous paragraph, the teacher could write, “B: a / an,” which may prove to be a much more understandable response from the student’s perspective. The decision on how to label these errors would revolve around the teacher’s beliefs about using metalanguage in the classroom and the students’ declarative knowledge of grammar.

Throughout this paper I will refer to the technique Alex Silverman taught me as the reduced-grammar technique. A reduced-grammar method is actually a method where the teacher teaches grammar without using grammatical terms such as “noun,” “adjective,” “reduced adjective clause.” As I just mentioned, the way recurring errors are labeled is quite open. As you will see in my research, I did not always identify errors using metalinguistic jargon. I used a combination of common terms that students knew, and intuitive labels that made the error immediately apparent to the student. For example, I would label an error “pronoun,” and at the same time label another error “too many words” or “combining ideas.” Therefore, the name for this technique of responding to students is the reduced-grammar technique, although it does not strictly adhere to a pure reduced-grammar methodology if indeed there is one.

The Research Project

Experiences That Led Me to Explore Responding

In this subsection I will relate my experiences responding to students’ writing and how those experiences led me to this research project. I will also discuss how I set up my research project.
A couple of years after meeting Elizabeth Springer, I decided to teach English in Mongolia. After my year-long teaching contract ended, I had an opportunity to continue working in Ulaan Baatar editing the largest English-Mongolian newspaper, *The UB Post*. At first I loved my new job. But my euphoria didn’t last long. I noticed that the writers, who were all Mongolian, made the same mistakes and errors the following week as they had the previous. Being a teacher, I naturally approached one of the reporters/writers and showed him how to correct one of his most common mistakes. He nodded, and then in preparing the next issue he made the same errors. Through this experience I learned first hand that there has to be a willingness on the part of the writer for learning to occur. I also learned that as long as a writer recognizes that someone will edit their writing, there is no incentive for them to learn how to write better.

When I got home from Mongolia, I started teaching ESL at a high school during the day and at the community college at night. As I worked throughout that year with high school students, I started to become interested in process writing. And when I first asked students to proofread each other’s papers, I heard things like, “You an idiot, man. Don’t you know how spell?” Very quickly I realized that I had to teach students how to respond to each other. So together with my students, we created a set of posters with phrases written on them to help us respond to each other’s writing. Examples of the kinds of phrases we wrote are: “I’m not sure I understand ______, could you explain ______ to me?” “I like your paper, but may I suggest ______.” In generating these posters and setting up some guidelines for students, I started to really think about why we as teachers respond to students’ writing. What are the goals? And once we know our goals, how do we go about achieving them? How does my marking a mistake or error on
a paper teach a student how to control that mistake or error so that it doesn’t occur again? I learned a lot through this experience, but of most interest are the valuable questions I found.

After the academic year, I started the first summer of the Summer Master’s of the Art of Teaching (SMAT) program at SIT. I held onto my questions and explored many others during my first summer. And when I returned to my teaching context at the community college, I started to explore new ways of dealing with students’ mistakes and errors. I developed a few techniques that drew upon the collective knowledge of the entire class, or used the grammar book as scaffolding to help students focus on proofreading for specific grammatical structures in each other’s writing. But as I mentioned, it wasn’t until my IYTP that I first encountered the reduced-grammar technique.

When I tried the reduced-grammar technique during my IYTP with a few of my students, they seemed to find it helpful. But I noticed that the technique really slowed down the way I was responding to students’ writing, and at the time I was not interested in slowing anything down about that process. I tired the technique inconsistently with students, and in hindsight I realize I was only using it with students who had recurring errors.

During the second summer session of my SMAT program, I gave a presentation about responding to students’ writing for the 2004 Sandanona Conference. In the presentation, my partner and I presented the reduced-grammar technique along with a couple of other techniques, and we explored with our participants/audience how to apply the various techniques well and what advantages and disadvantages each technique
presented. After our presentation, I knew immediately that I wanted to explore the technique in my classroom and document it in my Independent Professional Project (IPP).

Setting Up the Research Project

Initially, I wanted to somehow test the reduced-grammar technique to see if it was “the right way” of responding to students’ writing. But my IPP advisor Pat Moran suggested that instead of trying to prove it does or doesn’t work, I should document how the technique affects me and my students. I wasn’t sure why at the time, but I could sense that by taking away the onus of proof, I would be free to explore the technique more fully and address my questions more fully.

The way I conducted the action research project was to set up a time line for what I would do and when I would do it. I decided to document four students in my reading writing class over the course of three process writing papers. Before and after each process writing paper, I decided to ask students, by way of a questionnaire or survey, what types of responses they found helpful in their writing. Then I would use various techniques at different points in the writing process based upon the feedback students gave me. If they found something helpful, I used it more. If they didn’t find something helpful, I would scale back my use of it as a way of responding to their writing.

Throughout the entire research project I kept a journal of my experiences and questions as they came along. In the end, the reduced-grammar technique was the central focus of my action research project, but it was not the exclusive focus.
The Paper

I have divided this paper into four chapters. The first chapter lays out the specific details of the methodology I used in this action research project. The second and third chapters discuss the findings. In chapter two, I discuss the findings about the errors I chose and how they affected the results of my research, and in chapter three I discuss the feedback my students gave me about the various responding techniques that were used. In the fourth chapter, I share my personal views on the techniques, how I felt the reduced-grammar technique affected the students, and my general impressions and observations of the research project and what I learned.

Conclusion

The title of this IPP, “Circles and Letters: I Do; I Understand,” alludes to a questionnaire I gave to the students where I referred to the reduced-grammar technique as “circles and letters.” The name comes from the way the technique looks on a student’s paper. In the questionnaire, it was the easiest way to identify the technique. I think it is a fitting name considering one aspect of the technique is that it focuses on presenting information without using complex terms that are a potential source of confusion for students.

The subtitle of this IPP, “I Do; I Understand,” comes from the proverb, “I hear; I forget. I see; I remember. I do; I understand.” I chose this as the subtitle because it was a subtext to the reading writing class I researched. Throughout the semester in my level B reading and writing class we explored this proverb, talked about how it fit or didn’t fit our beliefs about learning, and revisited it intermittently to get a sense of how our ideas were changing, if at all. This proverb resonates for me because I am always striving to
find a way to allow my students “to do and understand” for themselves. Using the reduced-grammar technique is a perfect example of a way to get the students to “do and understand” for themselves because the students make the corrections themselves. And if the ancient proverb holds true, hopefully students will come to understand how to control their mistakes and errors.
CHAPTER 1

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this research project is called action research. This chapter will present the process of action research along with some general thoughts about it and why it was chosen. Intimately linked to the choice of research methodology is the hypothesis, or in this case, the research question. This chapter will illuminate the research question and discuss how the question and methodology chosen to explore it are linked. Because an understanding of the reduced-grammar technique will be integral in understanding the research question, it too will be presented followed by some thoughts on why it was initially found attractive. This chapter will conclude with issues that emerged in the research process.

The Nature of Action Research

The process I employed in this classroom based research project closely mirrors the experiential learning cycle, and it closely follows the basic format of action research: (1) pose a question, (2) research the topic, (3) define a way of measuring the outcome, (4) design a way to test it in my classroom, (5) employ the design, (6) collect data, (7) analyze the data, and (8) publish my findings. This particular research project began before I was able to pose a question.

Before I formed a research question, I spent some time thinking about what was I wanted to learn in doing my IPP. Almost immediately, I realized that I wanted the
external validity of a formal research project. But in time, I understood that the reason I was doing a research project was because I wanted to learn a better way to respond to my students in our context. In time I realized that what works generally for students studying English for academic purposes may not be relevant in our context with high-stakes performance writing tests. And conversely, what works for my students, may not be generally applicable to other students studying English for academic purposes. So I began to look at action research.

Action research is a type of qualitative research. Originally it was dismissed as too subjective by some researchers who preferred the rigor and objectivity quantitative research offers. It is important to point out that action research addresses issues that are particular to a specific researcher and their context. Some researchers claimed that this is a pitfall because the findings in action research are too specific and not generally applicable on a larger scale. In essence the findings of action research are not necessarily relevant to a wider context. Ironically, this “pitfall” became the reason that action research gained popularity and is now considered an important research method. Action research offers researchers/teachers the opportunity to rigorously study and document specific issues and questions in their classrooms. For this reason it is a powerful tool to help researchers/teachers investigate their teaching practices. Generally speaking while the process of action research does yield valuable results, it is also a cyclical process in that the findings lead to more questions which can be the impetus for further research.

This IPP is my first formal research project. Therefore, while I was interested in the results of the research, I was just as keenly focused on the process of generating those results. I found the rigor of action research an important tool which helped me more
carefully investigate my teaching. Action research forces the researcher to try ideas and experiment for preset lengths of time. Like all teachers, I am constantly experimenting and observing what works and what doesn’t in my classroom. With action research, I was forced to continue using a technique of responding to students’ writing that I might have abandoned after trying on one or two occasions. The benefit of action research is that it forced me to explore that technique of responding more carefully and more fully than if I had just “tried it out” on one or two writing assignments. Indeed as I will show in my findings, if I had not used the technique throughout the entire research project timeline, I would not have learned some of the things that I did.

The Research Question

The research question for this research project is, “how does the reduced-grammar technique as taught to me by Alex Silverman affect me and my students?” While I have briefly explained the reduced-grammar technique already, I will explain its use more thoroughly in the succeeding section. It may not be entirely clear what I mean by the word affect, so I would like to address that at this point as well.

When I posed this research question, I felt like I was limiting the potential of my research. And in fact I was but in a necessary way. The questions we ask dramatically affect how we focus on the world around us. How we focus and what we focus on determine what we see and sometimes more importantly what we don’t see. I wanted to explore the reduced-grammar technique in my classroom and see how it worked for me and my students. The most accurate way that I could express the focus I wanted to adopt was by asking how the reduced-grammar technique feels. Clearly in my question there are two parties at issue here: me and my students. Therefore, I wanted to know not only
how it felt to use the technique personally but also how my student responded to that technique. I did not want to prove that the technique was the most powerful technique or the best in any particular way. Instead I wanted to try the technique and document the process of employing it in my classroom, and the perceptions that both my students and I had. I wanted to keep my eyes open, so to speak, so that I could see as much as possible.

The Reduced-Grammar Technique

To understand the reduced-grammar technique better I contacted Angela Eaton and requested a copy of her dissertation. I had learned a variation of this technique and I wanted to better understand what this technique originally looked like and how it was applied. In Eaton’s dissertation, she explains that participating teachers put each student’s writing in a large envelope and marked the students’ recurring errors on the outside of the envelope. So for example, if I were a student in her study, I would find an envelope with my name on it and three recurring errors marked on the outside. Inside the envelope I would find my paper marked with those recurring errors and a copy of how to form and use the structure correctly as presented in my grammar book. The same recurring errors were used for each student throughout her study.

In my study, I borrowed the idea of responding to recurring errors, but I did not use envelopes or refer students to their grammar books for an explanation as to why something was circled and lettered. Remember I wanted students to “do and understand” for themselves. In keeping with Eaton’s research, I did use the same recurring errors throughout the three process writing papers because I wanted to see how the use of the technique helped students learn to control those specific recurring errors.
As mentioned in the Introduction under My Strategies for Responding to Students’ Writing on page 10, the reduced-grammar technique focuses on recurring errors in students’ writing. The reason to focus on the recurring errors as opposed to say the random mistakes, is that these are areas in the students’ writing where there is disparity between how the student expresses an idea and what is generally considered Standard English. The reason for focusing students’ attention on these areas of disparity are two-fold. First this is where the student needs to learn. Second this is where the student can learn. In the next sub section, I will address what I mean by these two statements.

Second Language Acquisition Theory

By and large second language acquisition theories are polemical and contradictory. And while an overview of second language acquisition theory as it relates to writing is clearly outside the scope of this paper, I would like to briefly explain my views on learning in regards to teaching students to write and why focusing on recurring errors offers promise in making that learning more effective.

As I just mentioned, focusing a students attention on their recurring errors shows the student what they need to learn. When we as educators see random disparities in a students’ use of language, we do not know if we are seeing a mistake or an error. The difference between an error and mistake is whether a student is aware of the Standard English construction or not. If the student is aware of how to form a structure correctly, but instead uses another irregular construction, that would be considered a mistake. It would be the same as my dropping an article in the course of writing a sentence. I know how to use articles correctly, but I made a mistake when I formed my sentence. In contrast, an example of an error would be my using the accusative case in Mongolian
incorrectly. I have not yet learned how to control the use of the accusative case in Mongolian, nor am I aware of all of the irregularities and exceptions to the rules. Therefore, if we as educators focus on what is not known, as opposed to what is, we are addressing an area of the language where the student needs to learn, not where they don’t need to learn. By focusing on irregularities in a students’ writing which are recurring, we are increasing the likelihood that we are concentrating students’ attention on what is not yet learned or not yet under control.

In my second statement I said that focusing on an error was a way of addressing what students can learn. Although there a multiple layers of truth to this statement, most obviously, a student needs to be able to understand how what they are being presented is used. Additionally, students need to be given opportunities to practice what they are being presented in meaningful ways. If I teach an abstracted grammatical point which is used infrequently in the language, the chances are most students will not learn that structure. Of course there are exceptions, but generally speaking students are able to learn things that they can immediately put into use and practice and which they can understand. By focusing on a students’ recurring errors, the teacher provides the student with the opportunity to understand how what they are being taught is used, and the students are provided ample practice to use that structure correctly in a meaningful way. And in satisfying these two conditions—contextualizing the information and practicing how to use the information—teachers are thereby increasing the likelihood that learning can occur.
The Techniques for Responding to Students’ Writing Used in This Action Research Project

In this action research project, I used the reduced-grammar technique as a base. I documented how my students and I reacted to the technique and whether we found it helpful in our quest to become better writers.

I used the technique on three process writing assignments in conjunction with some other techniques. The other techniques I used include: (1) not correcting anything but giving the students a grade of U, R, or S as on the midterm; (2) writing a letter to the student at the end of the paper as if it were a dialogue journal entry; (3) using the technique Elizabeth Springer taught me where I circled or underlined the mistake or error and wrote an abbreviation for the metalinguistic term that describes the mistake or error (e.g. adj. for adjective); (4) copying sentences that students wrote on an overhead transparency and working on correcting those sentences as a class on the overhead projector (OHP); (5) putting an arrow next to an error or mistake, but not including the metalinguistic term that describes the mistake or error; (6) asking students to compare a piece of writing that I have responded to with a process writing paper to try and find similar mistakes and correct them; (7) asking students to trade papers and have another classmate proofread it; (8) asking students to either outline their own paper or outline their partner’s paper; (9) distributing a list of grammatical structures that we have covered in class, and asking students to look for errors or mistakes in their own paper or in a partner’s paper following the checklist (e.g. On the checklist students would see, “Present Continuous, I am sitting., pg. 14.” And they would search the paper they are proofreading for errors or mistakes with this structure.); (10) asking students to read their paper aloud to another student and marking mistakes they notice; (11) asking students to
write two or three things at the top or bottom of their paper that they would like me to
look for (e.g. students would write, “Please check my thesis statement.”); (12) working
with students one-on-one in class to address their specific questions.

Throughout and in between each assignment, I asked students which types of
responses were most helpful to them, and how they would like me to respond to their
writing the next time they turned in a paper. I asked students as a class for direct
feedback on each of the specific techniques I described above using a thumbs-up, a
thumb on its side, or a thumbs-down representing good, so-so, and bad respectively. I
used my students’ suggestions and my own reflections, which I recorded in a journal, to
augment the reduced-grammar technique and to make it more helpful as per my students’
suggestions. For example, although students like seeing a grade of S, R, or U on their
writing, they never indicated that it helped them improve their writing. So I used that on
just a few occasions to give students a sense of how they were doing in the class.
Alternatively, students thought working together to correct errors and mistakes on the
OHP was helpful, so I tried to include that in each of the process writing assignments.

**Feedback on Writing and Data Analysis Procedure**

In this subsection I will present each of the different feedback tools. I will present
and discuss the actual questionnaires and questions asked, I will not discuss the findings
and results of each of these pieces of feedback. The findings are covered in Chapter 3.
First Process Writing Assignment

First Feedback Posed as a Writing Topic
1) Do you like writing? Why or why not?
2) What kind of writing do you like to do?

Second Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire
(1) Do you think the teacher should correct every mistake you make? Why?
(2) Do you think being corrected makes you a better writer?
(3) What kind of correction is most helpful?
   ___ a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and giving you the correction
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
   ___ putting an arrow next to the mistake and asking you to correct it
   ___ putting mistakes on the over head projector and working on the mistake as a class
(4) Remember the rubric we made? Do you think the rubric explains what you think good writing is?
(5) Would you like to change the rubric?

In the first process writing assignment, I used two forms of feedback. The first was a writing topic and the second was a questionnaire. In essence both were diagnostic in the sense that I was trying to document students’ pre-existing notions, attitudes, and expectations. The first feedback piece, the writing topic, was given before the beginning of the process writing assignment. Alternatively, the questionnaire was given the day before the final draft of the process writing assignment was due. At this point in the process writing assignment, students had not been exposed to the reduced-grammar technique.

The first feedback piece is very straightforward. It asks students whether they like writing and what types of writing they like. I wanted to find out what students thought about writing because I think that a student’s attitudes about writing will generally affect how well they write and vise versa. If a student likes to write, they will be more inclined to practice writing, and they will be able to engage in writing with an
open mind and a willingness to learn. If a student doesn’t write well, and or they have had a hard time with writing, they may have developed a fearful or negative attitude about writing. So attitude and learning go hand in hand and can affect each other. I wanted to understand how my students felt.

The second feedback piece was a questionnaire in which I asked diagnostic questions as well as genuine feedback questions about the types of response students’ found helpful. The first two questions were diagnostic in nature, while questions three, four, and five asked for feedback about what students had experienced in their first process writing assignment.

In question three, I ask which type of response was most helpful for the students. The various types of responses which are listed were techniques I had used while responding to students’ writing during the first process writing assignment. Not all of those responses were used in the processing writing itself. Some were used in quizzes and/or in dialogue journals.

The fourth and fifth question are related to a writing rubric students developed in class. Before the first process writing assignment, I asked students to work in groups and generate a rubric which expressed what good writing is. When I gave this questionnaire, I also handed out a copy of the rubric students had made in groups. I wanted to know if students had changed their opinions about what good writing was based upon what they had learned in the first process writing piece.
Second Process Writing Assignment

First Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
What was helpful for writing?

5=very helpful
4=helpful
3=so/so
2=a little helpful
1=not helpful

__ Overhead projector
__ Partners
__ Circles and Letters
__ Proofreading
__ Re-Writing
__ Other

Second Feedback Posed as a Writing Topic:
How have I helped you correct mistakes? What did you like and dislike? What was helpful and unhelpful? What would you like to see change?”

Third Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
Pick One
How do you want me to correct you next process writing paper?
___ Don’t correct it.
___ Don’t correct it, but give us a grade S, R, or U.
___ Use circles and letters just like last time.
___ Correct mistakes on the overhead and make me find the same mistake in my writing.
___ Correct the quiz like last time, and then make me compare my rough draft to my quiz and find mistakes.
___ Give it to a partner to check for mistakes.
___ Give me a list of grammar topics we have studied and let me find the mistakes.
___ Correct every single mistake and make me correct every signal mistake on my own.
___ (write your suggestion here)

In the second process writing assignment I collected three forms of feedback: a questionnaire, a writing topic, and a final questionnaire. I gave the first questionnaire before the second process writing assignment started. I gave the second feedback piece, the writing topic, somewhere in the middle of the assignment. And I gave the third
feedback piece, the final questionnaire, the day before the final draft of the process writing assignment was due.

In the first questionnaire, students were confused about what was being asked. In fact it is ambiguous. Is the student being asked to compare which of the six types of response was most helpful, or were they being asked to rate each individually? Or more clearly, is it possible to rate more than one technique the same. For example, as a student, can I rate both “partners” and “circles and letters” a “5” for “very helpful”? Or am I, as a student, supposed to rank one of the six listed techniques “very helpful”, one as “helpful”, one as “so/so”, etc? Despite this gaff, students were able to understand the intended question and rated each technique individually. I will address this issue of ambiguity later in the subsection entitled Issues.

The second feedback piece was a writing assignment in which I asked students how I helped them correct mistakes, what they liked and disliked, what was helpful and unhelpful, and what they would like to see changed. In asking for students to recall what was helpful, as opposed to giving them a list to choose from, I was hoping to capture what was most significant for them. My thought was if a student can recall and not merely recognize what I did to help them, then whatever I did was significant. But I also wanted students to think about what I could do to make my response better. I guess generally I would say that in asking questions like these I was trying to honor the intelligence of my students. These questions are hard, but I believe that they engage the students intellectually and as my equal in helping them become better writers.

The third feedback piece for the second process writing assignment was very clear: pick one. After the previous questionnaire, I wanted there to be no mistake. I
wanted to limit the students’ choices. In limiting the choices, I thought I could tease out which of the many techniques they thought was indispensable. This list of techniques represents all of the various techniques that had been used with the students up until that point in class. But in the end, I still wanted students to have the option of sharing with me anything else that they might prefer to the techniques I was offering, so I asked them directly for suggestions.

Third Process Writing Assignment

First Feedback Posed as a Dialogue Journal Topic:
Do you think process writing is helpful? Why or Why not?

Second Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
(1) Do you think the teacher should correct every mistake you make? Why?
(2) Do you think being corrected makes you a better writer?
(3) What kind of correction is most helpful?
   ___ a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and giving you the correction
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
   ___ putting an arrow next to the mistake and asking you to correct it
   ___ putting mistakes on the over head projector and working on the mistake as a class
(4) Remember the rubric we made? Do you think the rubric explains what you think good writing is?
(5) How would you like me to respond to the third process writing assignment?

Third Feedback Posed as a Choice between Two Writing Topics:
(1) What is the difference between a writing editor and a writing teacher?  
Or
(2) How do grammar exercises help you become a better writer?
Fourth Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
1. Do you like to write?
2. What kind of writing do you like to do?
3. Do you think the responses I made to your writing this semester helped you improve or not? Give one example of how it did improve it or didn’t improve it?
4. Which types of responses were helpful? (You may mark more than one.)
   ___ Don’t correct anything, but give us a grade S, R, U like midterm.
   ___ Write a letter at the end, like the dialogue journal
   ___ Use circles and letters like the process writing papers.
   ___ Correct mistakes on the overhead.
   ___ Put an arrow next to the mistake but don’t correct it.
   ___ Compare the writing to other corrected writing and find the mistakes alone.
   ___ Give it to a partner to check for mistakes.
   ___ Outline the paper.
   ___ Use a list of grammar topics we have studied and find the mistakes alone.
   ___ Read the paper out loud to a partner and mark mistakes alone.
   ___ Did I forget one?

In the third process writing assignment I used four different feedback pieces. The first was a dialogue journal entry, the second a questionnaire, the third another writing topic, and the fourth a final questionnaire. The first feedback was given before the process writing assignment began. The second feedback was given during the middle of the process writing assignment, and the third and fourth were given the day before the final draft of the process writing assignment was due.

The first feedback, in the form of a writing topic, was designed to get a sense from the students about whether they thought process writing was helping them improve their writing skills. At this point, they had completed two process writing assignments. I didn’t really have a clear sense of whether students thought process writing was helpful. I did get the impression that some students felt like they were writing the same thing over and over, so I wanted to get a direct confirmation and documentation of whether students thought process writing was helpful.
The second feedback piece is the same questionnaire I gave students in the first process writing assignment. I wanted to see if attitudes had changed with respect to whether they liked writing, so I decided to give students the exact same questionnaire.

The third feedback piece was designed to explore some of the questions I asked in the second feedback questionnaire more deeply. In fact, by this point in the research project, I had serious doubts about whether responding to students’ papers was at all educative. While I keep referring to what I did as a “response,” students keep referring to what they wanted as “correction.” Some students seemed to think that I should correct every mistake and error, and I felt a growing schism between my beliefs about autonomy and the students’ expectations about what a writing teacher is supposed to do. It was almost in frustration that I asked students to prove to me that my “corrections” helped them learn. So I asked them to explain the differences between an editor and writing teacher because in many ways I felt like they wanted a writing editor. Interestingly, some of the students that seemed to be the most adamant about my correcting their paper chose the second writing topic which asked them to explain how studying grammar helps them learn to write better. If I had the opportunity to do this differently, I would have not given them a choice.

The final questionnaire was designed to ask some of the same questions that I had asked previously and get some conclusive feedback and documentation on whether my response was helpful. I asked students if they liked to write. This was the very first question I asked students before the first process writing assignment. I also asked them to give me an example of how my response to their writing helped them write better. Again, this question was asking students to prove to me that my responses helped them
become better writers. In asking some of the same questions twice, I wanted to find out if the way I was asking the question would change the results. Or if given another chance to answer the question, students would change their mind.

Research Context and What Was Documented

As I mentioned earlier, this class was comprised of twenty-one students from eight countries: twelve from South Korea, two from Peru, two from Venezuela, and one each from Colombia, El Salvador, Panama, Japan, and Macedonia who were studying English for academic purposes. Of these twenty-one students, I chose four students to document my research project. These students were Hyung Suk (a thirty something South Korean male), Jorge (a twenty something Panamanian male), Ji Soo (a twenty something South Korean female), and Sunny (another twenty something South Korean female). Initially I tried to choose students who represented the lowest and highest level writers in my class, and who would be present for the entire study. The students I chose to represent the extremes of the class moved more towards the mean during the research project; although, they still represented the lower and higher level writers respectively. Additionally, Sunny did not have the opportunity to provide feedback during the final process writing assignment due to her unexpected departure to Korea.

I documented what happened in my action research project in five ways. First, I kept a journal of what I assigned, why I assigned it, how long it took me to assess and evaluate, and how I felt about the assignment in general. Second, all my students maintained a writing portfolio which contained all of their writing. I made copies of the process writing assignments of the four individual students I documented. And as I just explained, I also used questionnaires, in-class discussions, and dialogue journal entries to
ask students what they found helpful and how they would like me to respond to their writing in the future. I tried to focus on helpfulness as opposed to general likes and dislikes. Although I limited my documentation to these five dimensions, I included my general impressions of the class and how it changed throughout the semester. The findings of the action research project will be presented and discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

Issues

As I mentioned there were some issues that arose out of my questionnaires. Generally I would say all of these issues stemmed from my inexperience writing questionnaires. I would like to discuss two issues that presented me with a learning opportunity in documenting this research project and another general observation about writing questionnaires.

First, in the second process writing piece, I wrote a questionnaire with ambiguous directions. It was not clear whether students were supposed to rate or rank each of the techniques I listed. When I handed out the questionnaire, students immediately started asking for clarity in the directions. Quickly I explained that I wanted students to rate each of the techniques. When I wrote the questionnaire, I thought the fact that there were six techniques including “options” and only five ratings would make it clear. But I was wrong. What is most important to point out about this questionnaire is that it is a clear example of how the rigor of action research helped me learn. If I had simply tried the reduced-grammar technique on one assignment, I would not have generated so many feedback pieces and would not have made this kind of error. I learned a significant
lesson in generating this confusing questionnaire. And whatever embarrassment or frustration I felt at the time is overshadowed by what I learned.

The second issue that I see relates to my goal surrounding autonomy. I think the students had a different understanding of my final inquiries in the third process writing assignment than I did. When I ask students if being corrected makes them a better writer, students say yes because they can’t see their errors and mistakes on their own. In essence they are saying they need the expertise of the writing teacher. But what I was really asking was how does my making a mark near a mistake or error help them learn that that mistake or error is unacceptable and is a deviation from Standard English. I wanted to know how the mark that I write changes students’ behavior, and how that mark will prompt students’ not to make the same mistake or error again. I think I would need to ask the question in a different way to glean that type of information. In fact this is one the Questions for Future Research I will explore in the Chapter Four.

The final issue, or observation, I recognize has to do with the grammar I used in the questionnaires. Some students didn’t answer some of the questions I asked correctly. For example in the first process writing assignment in the second questionnaire, I asked a lot of questions which started with “Do you think...” and which were followed by a noun clause. Noun clauses are not taught explicitly until late in level C and are not really under control until level D. So I’m not sure how my level B students interpreted these questions. The second question is particularly troublesome in my mind because it involves a passive structure. As I will show in Chapter Three, many students did not respond to these questions correctly. I’m almost certain that if I had asked these
questions using more familiar grammatical structures, I would have gotten a more useful response.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented what action research is and why I chose it as a methodology. I presented my research question and how I explored it. I also discussed the reduced-grammar technique and the feedback pieces that I used to document the students’ reactions to the reduced-grammar technique and the other techniques I employed. The unexpected issues that emerged in the research process were also discussed although more will be presented later in the Questions for Future Research.
CHAPTER 2
FINDINGS RELATED TO THE RECURRING ERRORS I CHOSE AND ANALYSIS

In this Chapter I will present the recurring errors I chose for each student and how well they learned to control those errors. I will also present and discuss graphs I generated showing each student’s progress throughout the course of the three process writing assignments. Additionally, I will discuss some of my shortcomings which, as usual, provided some of the most valuable lessons in this action research project.

The Recurring Errors I Chose

In Hyung Suk’s first process writing paper, I outlined three recurring errors: (A) noun for adjective, verb for adjective, adjective for noun; (B) indefinite articles a/an; (C) too many verbs. In his first paper he had ten instances of A, one instance of B, and six instances of C. In his second process writing paper, he had zero instances of A, five instances of B, and zero instances of C. In this third process writing paper, he had zero instances of A, zero instances of B, and two instances of C. (See fig. 1)

In Ji Soo’s first process writing paper I outlined three recurring errors: (A) passives; (B) plurals; and (C) combining ideas. In her first process writing paper Ji Soo had three instances of A, six instances of B, and two instances of C both of which involved combining multiple adjectives to describe one noun. In her second and third process writing paper she had no instances of A, B, or C. (See fig.2)
In Jorge’s first process writing paper I outlined three recurring errors: (A) capital “F” in the middle of a sentence, lower case “t” at the beginning; (B) run-on or no periods; (C) “it is”, “it”, and “is”, which included starting a sentence with the word “is” or using “it’s” and “its” incorrectly. In his first process writing paper, he had eighteen instances of A; six instance of B, which accounted for 87.5% of his paper; and two instances of C. In his second process writing paper he had zero instances of A; three instances of B, which accounted for 100% of his paper; and zero instances of C. In his third process writing paper Jorge had six instances of A, zero instances of B, and zero instances of C. (See Fig. 3)

In Sunny’s first process writing paper, I outlined three recurring errors: (A) adjective order, (B) “the number” is, and (C) pronouns. In her first process writing paper Sunny had two instances of A, two instances of B, and two instances of C. In her second and third process writing papers Sunny had zero instances of A, B, and C. (See Fig. 4)
Fig 1. Hyung Suk’s Recurring Errors across Three Process Writing Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Errors of A</th>
<th>Hyung Suk’s first paper</th>
<th>Hyung Suk’s second paper</th>
<th>Hyung Suk’s third paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors of B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors of C</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Error A noun for adjective, verb for adjective, adjective for noun
Error B indefinite articles a/an
Error C too many verbs
Fig 2. Ji Soo’s Recurring Errors across Three Process Writing Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ji Soo's first paper</th>
<th>Ji Soo's second paper</th>
<th>Ji Soo's third paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors of A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors of B</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors of C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Error A passives
Error B plurals
Error C combining ideas
Fig 3. Jorge’s Recurring Errors across Three Process Writing Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Errors of A</th>
<th>Jorge’s first paper</th>
<th>Jorge’s second paper</th>
<th>Jorge’s third paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors of B</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors of C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Error A capital “F” in the middle of a sentence, lower case “t” at the beginning
Error B run-on or no periods
Error C it, it, and is
Fig 4. Sunny’s Recurring Errors across Three Process Writing Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sunny's first paper</th>
<th>Sunny's second paper</th>
<th>Sunny's third paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors of A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors of B</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors of C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Error A adjective order
Error B the number is
Error C pronouns
Analysis

The first thing I thought of when I went to check the second process writing paper was, “what if I choose the wrong recurring errors?” Indeed if I had chosen other recurring errors, perhaps the technique would have been able to capture more throughout the entire study. In this analysis, I would like to address each student in turn and explore how I feel this technique successfully captured each student’s challenges and affected the way I was able to address those challenges.

Hyung Suk

In Hyung Suk’s case it might have been more appropriate to choose “wrong word” as one of the recurring errors and “negatives” as another because I can find at least one instance of both of these errors in each process writing paper he wrote. However, I would be hard pressed to find much else beyond that. It also may seem peculiar that I chose a recurring error with only one instance of that error in Hyung Suk’s first writing, as I did with error B: indefinite articles a/an. At the time I chose that as an error, I predicted that Hyung Suk would have continued trouble with articles because he was Korean. And I chose to label the error indefinite articles, as opposed to articles in general, because we would cover some of the uses of a/an later in the course. As it turned out he did have an increased number of recurring errors in his second process writing paper, and in his third paper he appeared to have indefinite articles under control.

What is more important to note in Hyung Suk’s papers is a general increase in the complexity of ideas that he tries to communicate, and the success with which he communicates them. For example, if we survey the topic sentence and thesis statements in each of his process writing papers it becomes quite clear. In his first process writing
paper he wrote, “The best food in Korea is Kimchi for several reasons.” And in the second he wrote, “A lot of foreigner (sic) have a vague yearning to live in the US for several reasons.” And in the third he wrote, “Euthanasia is the most important issue (sic.) of today. Euthanasia has several problems, and it should not be legalized.” Hyung Suk goes from talking about a cultural food, a topic he has no doubt written about on many occasions since entering the writing program at the NVCC, to a very hard topic that probes the thoughts of philosophers and ethicists since the time of Hippocrates. To be fair, I did assign the first and second topic, and I tried to increase the difficulty of the topic. However, it is possible that an easy topic yields complex ideas and that a difficult topic yields simplistic ones. This survey of Hyung Suk’s theses indicates an increase in the sophistication of his writing.

That aside, I would also say that the complexity of the grammar in each of Hyung Suk’s sentences increases. In the first topic sentence he uses the simple present with the verb “to be.” He does the same in the last, but he also uses a negated modal which takes the base form of the verb “to be” (i.e. should not be). And as I just mentioned, Hyung Suk had a problem with negation, so seeing him use the structure correctly in the thesis and then incorrectly later in the same paper would indicate that this was a mistake and not an error. This strongly indicates that Hyung Suk is gaining control of this particular grammatical structure.

Another important aspect to consider in Hyung Suk’s writing is that his first process writing paper was a paragraph while his second and third were well developed essays. The most impressive things in Hyung Suk’s writing were higher order writing elements which eluded the reduced-grammar technique I was using. Therefore, I made
comments in the margins of the paper about the coherence or clarity of the writing. And I asked questions about things in his writing that confused me or made comments where I felt a sentence or idea could be expressed more clearly.

I am not able to say that the reduced-grammar technique improved Hyung Suk’s writing. There are so many factors which could be responsible for improving a student’s writing some which may include: previous writing experience and practice in other classes, general practice in writing, or a combination of some or all of the techniques I was using to respond to Hyung Suk. I am reminded of the U shaped learning curve, and the fact that I may be documenting the dramatic upswing after the half way point at the bottom of the curve. It is a very plausible that I had nothing to do whatsoever with Hyung Suk’s improvement. I only hope that the techniques I used didn’t “get in the way” of Hyung Suk’s progress.

Ji Soo

Ji Soo’s progression expresses a clear example of how the reduced-grammar technique is limited. She never made the same errors that she did in the first process writing paper. In Ji Soo’s case, the most obvious recurring error is stilted or awkward syntax. But labeling errors as “stilted” or “awkward” would do very little to help a student learn how to correct the problem because there are so many causes of this problem. In Ji Soo’s particular case sometimes it was using an infinitive instead of a gerund as the subject of a sentence (e.g. “To transfer and the bus time schedule is very inconvenient.”); missing a preposition or an article (e.g. “But, teacher can’t concentrate just one person”); and using relative pronouns and adverbs incorrectly (e.g. “We have a same problem what is just speaking English at NVCC during our classes.”). As you can
see from these three examples there is more to Ji Soo’s problem than listing one grammatical structure. In the first example we see the conjunction “and” instead of the preposition “to”, and then we see the compound noun “time schedule” which is ambiguously related to the other ideas in the sentence. Is the “time schedule” the “bus time schedule” or is Ji Soo saying that both transferring and the time schedule are inconvenient?

How can we as writing teachers best label all three of Ji Soo’s sentences? Clearly labeling these as “awkward” would do very little to help her understand what is wrong. Usually when I see errors like these, I think that the student is translating their ideas from their first language (L1) to English. The only way to confirm my intuition is to ask the student if they were translating, and the results of such an inquiry usually result in my saying something to the effect, “Stop translating.” Yet once again, as with labeling an error “awkward” or “stilted”, I feel like I have just made an impossible request upon the student. How exactly is a student supposed to write their ideas in English but stop translating? Often times we teachers will say, “Think in English. Write in English.” And once again, I ask myself how exactly is a student supposed to follow this request? The point here is that unless we have the time to work one-on-one with a student to help them understand for themselves what is wrong with their writing, our standard responses such as: “awkward,” “stop translating,” and “think in English” are nearly meaningless to students. So too is a technique which tries to capture complex, deep structural errors in one or two words.

Most of the grammatical structures in Ji Soo’s writing are clearly outside the scope of level B with the exception of gerunds and infinitives as subjects of sentences.
But here again we see a limitation with the reduced-grammar technique. Should I choose recurring errors that I know I won’t teach until the end of the semester? I find this especially tricky to answer broadly for all students because it would depend on the student’s threshold for ambiguity, and on the student’s tolerance and acceptance of uncertainty. In Ji Soo’s case, I think I could have probably chosen gerunds and infinitives as the subject of the sentence as one of her recurring errors because she was an intelligent student who was not easily rattled by ambiguity or uncertainty. But this realization is bolstered by my semester long assessment of Ji Soo, and in the beginning of the semester or even at the mid-point, I do not always know a student well enough to make such a decision with certainty.

Jorge

Jorge was one of the best candidates for using this technique. Throughout the semester he made several recurring errors and mistakes. I think most of them were errors because they were inconsistently made and because Jorge was sometimes able and sometimes unable to rewrite his flawed sentences correctly when they were pointed out to him. Jorge did not have a strong sense of why sentences were right or wrong; his errors were usually made in ignorance. The three recurring errors I choose for the first process writing piece were errors that I have found in other Panamanian students: problems with writing capital letters in the middle of sentences, using run-on sentences, and starting sentences with the verb “to be.” In fact the third problem plagues many Spanish speakers, and it is a clear example of L1 interference.

As you can see in “Recurring Errors I Chose” on page thirty-seven, I included some percentages when relaying Jorge’s errors. The percentages are based on what
portion of the sentences were correct in the paper. In understanding this calculation it is important to note that I was counting the number of sentences Jorge wrote, not the number of sentences I recognized in each run-on sentence. For example, in his first essay Jorge wrote eight sentences. One of those eight sentences was not a run-on sentence. So 87.5% of the paper (7/8=.875) was affected by the run-on sentences. In his second paper there were 3 sentences and all of them were run-ons. I wanted to add this extra computation because while there are six run-on sentences in the first paper and only three in the second, the second paper was not better than first with respect to run-on sentences.

One interesting aspect of the first recurring error (i.e. capital letters in the middle of sentences) I chose was Jorge’s reaction to it. After class he confided in me that, “this is just the way I write.” I got the impression that it was almost like a personal attack against Jorge’s character that I was commenting on his handwriting. In fact if we stop to consider the multitude of handwriting styles that are considered acceptable yet are sloppy, my choosing Jorge’s handwriting as an area to focus his attention on seems one degree shy of discrimination. Why is it that a doctor’s illegible handwriting with lowercase and capital letter problems is accepted in the United States while an F-1 visa student’s sloppy handwriting is not? Although the answer to this question is clearly outside the focus of this research paper, these sociolinguistic issues should not be ignored. I probably would not have included Jorge’s recurring error if it hadn’t been for another teacher’s reaction to Jorge’s writing.

In order to get an unbiased score on the mid-term writing test, the community college requires teachers who teach the same reading and writing level to trade papers and grade each other’s students. The teacher with whom I traded papers marked Jorge’s
paper as an R, and one of the attributes that he cited to support his reason for grading it as an R was Jorge’s handwriting. I have mixed responses to this situation because this is an area of ambiguity in our program and as I just alluded to, it is uncomfortably close to discrimination based on a host of issues ranging from protectionism to racism to xenophobia. In the community college, I have heard contradictory comments such as, “I don’t worry about what it looks like; it’s not a beauty pageant.” But I’ve also heard, “this looks like a kindergartener wrote it.” On the one hand, I think that I should focus on what I think is important for my students and not worry about what other teachers say. My reasoning for this is that they do not have a full assessment of the student’s ability. Additionally, as with the teacher I traded papers with, I know that despite what I just said, other teachers probably would not allow handwriting to bias their evaluation of a student’s paper. On the other hand, because handwriting obviously is an issue, I should help my students with poor handwriting realize that this is an area of their English that is scrutinized by other English speakers. In fact, I could assume the role of a cultural ambassador/facilitator, and in a gentle, non-threatening way explore the issue of handwriting as a Freirian code for discrimination in the United States against students studying English by teachers and others. And all of this from a mis-crossed T.

Sunny

As with Ji Soo, Sunny’s process writing papers clearly show the limitations of the reduced-grammar technique. Like Ji Soo, Sunny never again made the errors that she did on her first process writing paper. And yet if I had the opportunity to re-choose the recurring errors, I would be hard pressed because Sunny’s errors are not on a syntactic level. Of course there are syntax errors, but what’s more significant in Sunny’s writing is
the rhetorical style or discourse level organization. For example, in her final essay Sunny will express examples and provide details that support her thesis, but she won’t specifically state or relate those examples back to the thesis and clarify her point. When I read her last paper, I was always hungry for that one last sentence that would crystallize her ideas. How would a technique that labels recurring grammatical elements ever hope to address these kinds of stylistic elements? I suppose I could circle a whole paragraph and label it “unsatisfying” or “tie it together.” But once again these directions are the sort of vague comments that are nearly meaningless to the student. How is a student supposed to “tie it together,” and what is “it” anyway?

There are some interesting points to make about one of the errors I did choose for Sunny. This error was her second error “B: ‘the number’ is”. First, it is interesting because it was an error that I knew we would cover later in the class but had not yet studied. But while this is an error that we would cover later in class, it is not the sort of error that is especially difficult to master. There are two choices; “the number is,” and “a number are.” Second, this is the type of error that does not typically recur in writing. For example, from the front cover of this IPP until now there have been 50 pages of print and I didn’t use the “the number is” or “a number are” naturally until page 42. I only used the expression after page 42 in relaying Sunny’s errors, and this is the last time I use it in the rest of this IPP. This highlights an important point. It is important to choose errors carefully because depending on how you set up the reduced-grammar technique, once you make that choice, you are in a sense stuck with it. And if you choose an error that does not naturally recur, you have wasted an opportunity to teach and learn.

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Conclusion

As a whole we see that each student improved significantly. All of the students were able to control almost all of their recurring errors. However, as I have pointed out the errors that I chose were problematic. In some instances I chose errors that are very infrequent, in other instances I chose errors that were specific to a particular writing topic. What is most obvious to me, but is not documented in any of the feedback pieces I designed or in any of the specific measurement devices I use, is that my students don’t make recurring global errors. All of these students make random mistakes and errors. In fact looking for recurring errors in my students’ writing was difficult because it was forced.
As mentioned in the Introduction under “The Techniques for Responding to Students’ Writing Used in This Action Research Project” on page six, I responded to student writing in a variety of ways, and I asked them what they found helpful. I also asked students questions about writing. In this next section, I will present the questions I asked, the responses I received, and a brief analysis thereof.

First Process Writing Assignment

First Feedback Posed as a Writing Topic:
   1. Do you like writing? Why or why not?
   2. What kind of writing do you like to do?

Hyung Suk

Hyung Suk said that he did not like writing, that he felt most people do not like writing, and that writing was necessary because it is part of studying English. In his paper he asked me why I was asking him if he liked writing, and he concluded his paper by asking me if I liked writing. It seemed like Hyung Suk was asking me a rhetorical question.

It is hard to know if a student’s tone accurately reflects their intentions. However, from the way Hyung Suk turned the question around and asked me if I liked writing and from his demeanor in class, I got the impression that Hyung Suk was skeptical of me, my
questions, and writing in general. There are many communication barriers especially in lower level classes where students are not yet fluent. Hyung Suk was one of those students who had the potential to wreck the atmosphere of a classroom simply by not participating. Engaging with him in questions like this helped him and me build understanding and trust, and it seemed to show Hyung Suk how to participate in class in an acceptable way.

Ji Soo

Ji Soo said she enjoys writing. She said it helped her explain and preserve her ideas. The contrast between Ji Soo and Hyung Suk is like orange and blue.

Jorge

Jorge also said he enjoys writing, and that it is his favorite thing to do because it is difficult. He said that writing is one way to communicate and that it is very important. He went on to express that there are many rules for writing and that he gets these rules confused with the rules for Spanish.

Sunny

Sunny said that she likes writing more than speaking because she can “describe [her] opinion clearly.” She also mentioned that she wrote poems in her native language, and that she felt her English is improving “more and more.” Finally she closed with, “I want that I can write with English exactly.”
Analysis of the First Feedback Piece

Each of these writers expressed a lot about themselves when we look for the clues. Hyung Suk did not like to write and it is no surprise that he displayed a bad attitude about writing class. His response to the feedback pieces indicate that for him writing is a necessary evil. Conversely, Ji Soo finds writing personally beneficial, so it is no surprise that she enjoys it and excels at it. Jorge really expressed his problem with L1 interference when he said he found the rules for English and Spanish confusing. I think Jorge expressed his difficulty with learning English perfectly when he said writing was important because it is difficult. It also shows Jorge’s work ethic. He worked very hard at improving his writing, especially his handwriting, and he seemed to enjoy the challenge. Finally, although we have not learned too much about Sunny, the fact that she is concerned with exactness is telling. This could explain why, even though she was one of the best students in class, she rarely spoke. Perhaps her concern for being exact preempted her desire to communicate orally in class.

Second Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
(1) Do you think the teacher should correct every mistake you make? Why?
(2) Do you think being corrected makes you a better writer?
(3) What kind of correction is most helpful?
   ___ a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and giving you the correction
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
   ___ putting an arrow next to the mistake and asking you to correct it
   ___ putting mistakes on the over head projector and working on the mistake as a class
(4) Remember the rubric we made? Do you think the rubric explains what you think good writing is?
(5) Would you like to change the rubric?
Hyung Suk

1. No I don’t think so just 60~70%. You have many students.
2. Yes I do.
3. He checked:
   - a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal
   - putting an arrow next to the mistake and asking you to correct it
4. Correct grammar, fixed-rule, organization
5. Yes, but actually I don’t know.

Ji Soo

1. Sometimes he did do that but usually he want to write freely to us. It’s more confidential for us.
2. I think so. But if I don’t use the correction, it’s not helpful for me.
3. She checked:
   - a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal
   - marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
4. Yes I think so.
5. Yes, I want to change more specific.

Jorge

1. He corrects every mistake that he can because he told what I do.
2. Yes.
3. He checked:
   - a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal
   - putting mistakes on the overhead projector and working on the mistake as a class
4. No I don’t like rubric, it is good to understand but I think that don’t help me.
5. No.

Sunny

1. Yes. Because we are students now. We are learning.
2. Yes I do.
3. She checked:
   - marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
   - putting mistakes on the overhead projector and working on the mistake as a class
4. Yes I do.
5. No.
Analysis of the Second Feedback Piece

In Chapter One I discussed the grammar in this questionnaire. It is far beyond my students’ understanding. For example in question number two I wrote “being corrected” as a subject of an embedded noun clause. It seems everyone understood the question, but if I were to do it again, I would reword the questions. In question number one, both Ji Soo and Jorge misunderstood the question. From their answers it seems they thought the question was, “Does your teacher correct every mistake?”

When it comes to how students answered the first question (i.e. Do you think the teacher should correct every mistake you make? Why?), it is interesting to note that the students I chose to document do not represent the majority opinion of students with respect to whether the teacher should correct every mistake. When we look at the entire class’ response to this question, fifteen of my students said I should correct every mistake, two said I shouldn’t because there are too many students, one said I shouldn’t because they should find their own mistakes, and two did not understand the question. The two who did not understand the question were Ji Soo and Jorge. Therefore, 75% said I should correct every mistake, 15% said I shouldn’t, and there was a 10% error due to the way the question was worded.

In the second question (i.e. Do you think being corrected makes you a better writer?), 100% of my students answered yes. It will be interesting to see how the response to this question changes over time. This told me that my students thought grammatical accuracy was an important element in good writing—and it is especially in academic writing. However, in my opinion not all writing that is grammatically accurate is good.
In the third question, (i.e. What kind of correction is most helpful? a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal; marking the mistake with a circle and giving you the correction; marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction; putting an arrow next to the mistake and asking you to correct it; putting mistakes on the overhead projector and working on the mistake as a class) almost all the students checked the first type of response (i.e. a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal). Seventy-five percent of the four students I documented said this type of response was helpful. At this point, 50% of the students said marking a circle and asking them to make the correction was helpful. This is basically the reduced-grammar technique without the key labeling the error. If I include the entire class, we see that 40% of the students thought this type of response was helpful. The two types of response that students thought were the most helpful were the first and last (i.e. a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal; and putting mistakes on the overhead projector and working on the mistake as a class). Forty-five percent of the students chose those two types of responses.

In the fourth and fifth question (i.e. Remember the rubric we made? Do you think the rubric explains what you think good writing is? Would you like to change the rubric?), I was trying to get a sense of just how much my students’ opinions have changed. In the first week of class, I put students into four groups of five students each and asked them to design a rubric that explained what good writing is. To get students to express specifics, I asked them to design it so that I could use it to grade their papers.

Hyung Suk’s group generated a pie chart. Neatness, good ideas, good organization, and grammar each represented 20% of that pie. So for Hyung Suk’s group these four aspects of writing were of equal importance. Ji Soo’s group also drew a pie
chart. In their pie chart good ideas and good organization were each worth 30% and grammar was worth 20%. In Jorge’s group, the rubric was expressed as a rather complicated bar graph. Each horizontal bar had five attributes of good writing. But the horizontal bar was not straight because the various aspects of writing were not equally important. It’s hard to say exactly how to read the graph, but both spelling and structure were 5% more important than grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation. Sunny’s group drew a grid type graph, and listed at the top was grammar. In order for student’s to receive an S in grammar the grammar had to be “various and advanced.” The next aspect of writing below grammar was structure. In order to receive an S for structure a student would have to have “three parts (intro., body, concl.).”

Returning to the questionnaire and student’s responses, we see that once again the question was misunderstood. Jorge thought I asked about whether or not he liked the rubric. However, there is nothing particularly remarkable about the students I documented. Most of the students in the class thought that the rubric did explain what good writing was, but the class seemed divided on whether they would want to change the rubric. In class I was still getting strong signals that error free writing was the goal. One student who I did not document answered, “Good writing has no mistake (sic).” As if to underscore her conviction she used correction tape to cover mistakes that she made responding to the question.
Second Process Writing Assignment

First Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
What was helpful for writing?

5=very helpful
4=helpful
3=so/so
2=a little helpful
1=not helpful

__ Overhead projector
__ Partners
__ Circles and Letters
__ Proofreading
__ Re-Writing
__ Other

Hyung Suk

Hyung Suk answered:
3__ Overhead projector
2__ Partners
5__ Circles and Letters
3__ Proofreading
4__ Re-Writing
3__ Dialogue Journals

Ji Soo

Ji Soo answered:
2__ Overhead projector
5__ Partners
4__ Circles and Letters
4__ Proofreading
4__ Re-Writing
4__ Dialogue Journals
Jorge

Jorge answered:
3 Overhead projector
4 Partners
3 Circles and Letters
3 Proofreading
2 Re-Writing
__ Will be helpful for me something like write about a one specific topic each weekend, no repeat the same topic and also check my spelling not my capital letters.

Sunny

Sunny answered:
4 Overhead projector
4 Partners
5 Circles and Letters
3 Proofreading
5 Re-Writing
5 Dialogue Journals

Analysis of the First Feedback Piece

I think three out of four of these students who wrote “dialogue journal” for the last option were influenced by the way I administered the questionnaire. When I was giving students directions for filling out the questionnaire, I used “dialogue journal” as an example of what could be included in the option marked “other.” If I had not mentioned it, I’m not sure students would have remembered it as being so useful.

At this point in the research students have definitely changed their opinions about the reduced-grammar technique. During the first process writing, 50% of the students documented said the technique was “helpful,” whereas in the second 50% of the students rate it “very helpful,” 25% rate it “helpful,” and 25% rate it “so/so.” When the entire class is included, only 40% said the technique was “helpful” during the first process writing assignment, while 85% said it was either “very helpful” or “helpful” during the
second process writing assignment. Clearly students are claiming that the reduced-grammar technique is becoming more helpful for them. And yet when we consider that most students were not seeing any of the same recurring errors from the first paper on their second, I have to wonder just how much help it could be.

Second Feedback Posed as a Writing Topic:
How have I helped you correct mistakes? What did you like and dislike? What was helpful and unhelpful? What would you like to see change?”

Hyung Suk

Hyung Suk responded first with a concern that we would not finish the grammar book by the end of the semester. He said that although our class is a grammar and writing class, he wasn’t sure which was more important. He also said that because the book is easy, he thought we could finish the grammar book. Later in his response Hyung Suk said that peer work was not useful because “we don’t have enough knowledge of English.” He suggested that next time we peer check each other’s paper just one time.

Ji Soo

Ji Soo did not truly address the question. She wrote about feeling a little depressed, about liking our class, and about liking the variety of activities we do in class. She did however offer this important comment about needing time limits in class, “While we take a quiz, you don’t give us a time limit. But, I prefer a time limit. Because if we take a real exam, we have limit time.”
Jorge

Jorge said generally that the various correction techniques are helpful. He did not mention any specific type of correction as being more or less helpful. He also reiterated that he knows he has a problem with capital letters, but that it would be difficult to change because it was the way he has been writing for years.

Sunny

Sunny responded that she liked corrections where I draw a circle and she has to correct the mistake. She said, “especially you divide the mistake and draw a circle while write A, B, C. Then I could understand my mistakes well.” She went on to say, “I made a lot of mistakes about pronoun. So now, I’m concerned about pronoun more carefully. And it’s the same about the test. I could think about my mistake once more carefully.”

Analysis of the Second Feedback Piece

Each of these students offers some more important insights about the various techniques used throughout the writing process. Hyung Suk notes that working with other students is not useful because of their lack of expertise in English grammar. Ji Soo comments on the lack of time constraints, and both Jorge and Sunny show the true power of the reduced-grammar technique.

Hyung Suk has a valid point, which I will restate as forcefully as possible: students have not yet mastered English, so they are not capable of responding (proofreading and making suggestions) to each other’s writing effectively. Hyung Suk was not the only student to make such a comment during class. In my response to Hyung Suk’s dialogue journal and to other students who raised this concern, I said, “you are
capable of correcting some things in the paper, why don’t you focus on what you do know.” For example, my students know how to indent properly, and yet some still indent incorrectly. This is an easy thing that students can check in each other’s papers. In the realm of grammar, all my students know that present and past progressive require the verb “to be” + a base form verb with –ing. I told them that if they read each other’s papers carefully, I was sure that they would be able to check for this mistake. And once again although this is true in principle, it may be impossible for students to focus on generating a meaning from the text and simultaneously searching for topographical errors and mistakes. To try and circumvent this issue, I always asked students to first read their partner’s paper to understand it, and then read it again looking for a specific problem. This type of nuanced reading was completely lost on my students, and I felt like I was talking to a brick wall on the two occasions when I gave this type of direction.

Ji Soo’s comment about the lack of a time limit is interesting. Because each of our quizzes involved new challenges that I had previously not tried with this class, I was apprehensive to put a time limit on the quizzes. It was as if each quiz were an experiment, and I was watching the students to get a sense of how much time it would take. Without digressing too far, some of the exercises in the quizzes involved correcting grammatically incorrect sentences, finishing sentences that were already started, and outlining paragraphs or otherwise identifying an aspect of an essay such as transition signals. As I said, I tried to generate new challenges each week so that students had to focus on the method of presenting the knowledge they knew and had studied. This was accomplished by presenting novel tasks which expressed the student’s knowledge of what was being tested. Some would argue that this might be a overwhelming for students
as I’m testing the processing ability and content knowledge simultaneously. However, I think that is one of the challenges of studying English for academic purposes that mirrors the real world experience of academia.

What Jorge wrote about the question was interesting. Jorge had told me face to face on two previous occasions that he knows he has a problem with capital letters, and that it would be difficult for him to change because he has been writing that way for years, and yet he wrote the same thing in his dialogue journal. This signals a couple of possibilities. First, Jorge may not have had anything better to write about, so he wrote about something he knew I knew about and something that we had talked about. Or second, he is resistant to changing this aspect of his English and even though he had told me in person, he thought he would make sure I understood by writing out his ideas on the subject.

Sunny’s response when asked which type of corrections were helpful was the most direct evidence I have that the reduced-grammar technique is capable of heightening students’ awareness and affecting a change in the way they communicate. Sunny said she knew she had a problem with pronouns, and that after I identified this as one of her recurring errors, she thought about her choice of pronouns when she wrote. This validates Elizabeth Springer’s technique of responding to students writing.

The crux is that Sunny knew she had a problem with an aspect of her English and she accepted it. If we compare this situation to Jorge’s, the crux becomes even more apparent. Jorge knew he had a problem with his handwriting, but he didn’t accept it. Equally important, the student must understand the error. Sunny knew what a pronoun was. In contrast, Jorge asked me twice what a run-on sentence was. But even after
explaining what a run-on sentence was, I didn’t get a reassuring acknowledgment from Jorge that he understood. In fact, I explained what a run-on was two times to Jorge, and each time I showed him how to fix it. But he was still unsure, and it was no surprise that he still had problems. Sunny on the other hand clearly understood her problem and knew how to work to change it. This is not to say that she was 100% successful, as we can see in her response to this questionnaire, but her problem is difficult and not something teachers expect to see changed in one semester. The biggest difference between Jorge and Sunny was in their understanding and acceptance of the problems. Jorge did not accept that his handwriting was important, and he did not fully understand how to control run on sentences. Consequently, it is no surprise that he was unable to control these two recurring errors successfully.

Third Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
Pick One
How do you want me to correct your next process writing paper?
___ Don’t correct it.
___ Don’t correct it, but give us a grade S, R, or U.
___ Use circles and letters just like last time.
___ Correct mistakes on the overhead and make me find the same mistake in my writing.
___ Correct the quiz like last time, and then make me compare my rough draft to my quiz and find mistakes.
___ Give it to a partner to check for mistakes.
___ Give me a list of grammar topics we have studied and let me find the mistakes.
___ Correct every single mistake and make me correct every signal mistake on my own.
___ (write your suggestion here)

Hyung Suk

Hyung Suk chose:
√ Correct every single mistake and make me correct every signal mistake on my own.
Ji Soo

Ji Soo chose:
√ Use circles and letters just like last time.
√ Give me a list of grammar topics we have studied and let me find the mistakes.
√ Correct every single mistake and make me correct every signal mistake on my own.

Jorge

Jorge chose:
1  Don’t correct it, but give us a grade S, R, or U.
2  Correct every single mistake and make me correct every signal mistake on my own.

Sunny

Sunny was absent for this survey.

Analysis of the Third Feedback Piece

Hyung Suk is saying that he would prefer to correct his own mistakes once I point them out to him. In his previous assertion he said that students do not know English well enough to proofread each other’s papers, but on the first questionnaire during the first process writing assignment he also said that “putting an arrow next to your mistake and asking you to correct” was “most helpful.” Therefore, Hyung Suk is only saying that he does not have the ability to identify his own errors. Moreover, on three separate instances he has said trying to correct his mistakes once they are identified for him is helpful. Hyung Suk’s response is completely consistent with his previous assertions and his desire to be autonomous. Once the error is identified, he is capable of correcting it.

Ji Soo is also consistent in her reply. On the first questionnaire given in the second process writing assignment, she rated only “partners” as “very helpful.” And in her dialogue journal she said she found the responses that I made to her writing helpful.
Throughout these process writing assignments, and more so in this second assignment, students had to work together many times before I responded directly to their paper. I did walk around on a few occasions and answer questions, but by and large students were on their own to revise their drafts. It is also important to note that Ji Soo had a good partner who was her equal in writing.

Jorge’s response is not at all surprising. He was one of the few students who ranked his response; this was not something I asked students to do. As I’ve mentioned, I had many little discussions with Jorge about his handwriting, and invariably these discussions would conclude with Jorge’s asking me a question about whether I thought he would pass the class. Jorge represents those students in our program who are fixated on their grade at the expense of all else. In fact Jorge’s only motivation for changing his handwriting was the fact that it could potentially earn him an R on a writing test. Seeing this level of servitude in students is frightening and forces me to consider if the community college writing program is fostering education or appropriating students’ motivation for writing.

Jorge’s other choice to “correct every single mistake and make me correct every single mistake on my own” is also consistent with his response on the first questionnaire in the second process writing assignment where he rated “partner” as “helpful,” his highest rating. He did not rate any other choices as “very helpful.” I think this provides a fuller spectrum of what I know about Jorge after having worked with him for a semester. Although he is reluctant to change his handwriting, and he may have some gaps or confusion in his knowledge about grammar, he was a hard working student who wanted
to learn. That may sound contradictory, but Jorge is not a one dimensional person. He
wants to learn and do well, but he might not go about his education in the most ideal way.

Third Process Writing Assignment

First Feedback Posed as a Dialogue Journal Topic:
Do you think process writing is helpful? Why or Why not?

Hyung Suk

Hyung Suk said he found process writing helpful for three reasons. First, he had
more time to think about how to construct his ideas correctly. Second, he could work
with a partner who could help him with such things as providing supporting details.
Third, he had feedback from me before he submitted his final paper, so he could “think
again” as he put it. Finally, process writing helped him feel comfortable. Hyung Suk
said when he finished a writing test, he didn’t know if something was wrong or not, but
when he finished a process writing assignment he felt he “finished perfect” because he
worked on his writing many times.

Ji Soo

Ji Soo also said that process writing was helpful for her because she learned her
mistake patterns and she could think about the organization of her writing. Interestingly,
Ji Soo said, “Even though I know my mistakes, next time I usually make the same
mistake again. I don’t know why I do that. But, after I did my process writing I always
try to correct my mistakes.” And as for organization, she said, “I always felt the writing
time, 30 minutes, is very short. So, when I wrote an essay I always didn’t do
brainstorming and I just wrote down my opinion. There were no structure, no
organization….However, after process writing, I always try to brainstorm and make little structure and organization.”

Jorge

Jorge said that there were things that helped him in process writing, but there were also things he didn’t like. He felt that process writing helped him improve his handwriting. However, he said that after three rough drafts he got bored and said, “is like monotonous.”

Sunny

Sunny also liked process writing. First she said, “novel writers and even textbook writers do process writing.” Next when she compared her first and last drafts, she was surprised. “I was surprised how different two writings. I fixed little by little, but at last it was different a lot. And I liked my last writing.” Sunny said that when she does process writing she can “add her opinion, fix grammar and spelling, and sometimes change the topic, so [she] likes process writing.”

Analysis of the First Feedback Piece

Each of these writers found process writing helpful, and their opinion mirrors the class. In fact only one student said she did not find process writing helpful. Although asking students for feedback on process writing might seem a little off topic, as we see it actually directly relates to how students responded to the grammar-reduction response I gave them. By this point in the research project time line, Hyung Suk has actually found something about writing he likes. Ji Soo has expressed one of my hypotheses: that process writing makes the writing process more deliberate and writers more careful. And
Sunny’s response is one of those that I love to see: a student surprised by what they are capable of doing.

Second Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
(1) Do you think the teacher should correct every mistake you make? Why?
(2) Do you think being corrected makes you a better writer?
(3) What kind of correction is most helpful?
   ___ a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and giving you the correction
   ___ marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
   ___ putting and arrow next to the mistake and asking you to correct it
   ___ putting mistakes on the overhead projector and working on the mistake as a class
(4) Remember the rubric we made? Do you think the rubric explains what you think good writing is?
(5) How would you like me to respond to the third process writing assignment?

Hyung Suk

Hyung Suk responded:
1. Yes, when I asked he corrected my mistakes.
2. Yes.
3. He checked:
   √ marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
4. No.
5. I want [you] to check the my writing paper [for] everything.

Ji Soo

Ji Soo Responded:
1. Yes. We are not American. Although we know English grammar, we still make mistakes and we don’t know what is our mistakes on our writing.
2. Yes, I do because when I wanted to correct the verb tense on my writing and then you check my verb tense. After that, I can find my mistakes by myself and I try to write correctly.
3. She checked:
   √ marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
4. Good writing is good organization, creative thinking, diverse expression, good grammar and spelling.
5. I want to know can you understand my topic and writing. And my writing has good organization or not. And please check all grammatical mistakes.
Jorge

Jorge responded:
1. No every mistake but will be good to check grammar and vocabulary.
2. Yes I think
3. He checked:
   ✓ marking the mistake with a circle and making you figure out the correction
   ✓ putting mistakes on the overhead projector and working on the mistake as a class
4. The rubric was so confused for me.
5. I would you to respond me like how you were doing and also if you could modify those sentences that are ambiguous.

Sunny

Sunny was absent for this questionnaire.

Analysis of the Second Feedback Piece

This questionnaire was the same that I gave in the first process writing assignment. I gave students the same questionnaire to find out how their opinions changed or if at all.

Hyung Suk changed his answer on the first question. In this second questionnaire he misunderstood the question. In the second question he answered the same as he did during the first process writing assignment. However, in the third question he originally answered the first choice, “a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal,” and fourth choice, “putting and arrow next to the mistake and asking you to correct it.” Here he favored the reduced-grammar technique. On the fourth question Hyung Suk originally misunderstood the question and answered, “Correct grammar, fixed-rule, organization.” On this questionnaire, he said that the rubric did not reflect his opinion about what good writing is, but he offered no explanation. Finally Hyung Suk asked me to check for everything in his paper. This was the third time I offered students the opportunity to tell
me how they wanted me to respond to their paper. In each of the previous two instances I
told students not to write “everything” and to be specific. Unfortunately I’m not sure
what Hyung Suk means by everything, so I’ll have to take him for his word and assume
he wanted me to look for organization and grammar.

Ji Soo misunderstood the question in the first questionnaire and answered,
“sometimes he did do that but usually he want to write freely to us. It’s more confidential
for us.” On the second questionnaire, Ji Soo says that even though she knows English
grammar, her knowledge is not exact. On the second question, Ji Soo’s response did not
change, but this time she added more information which sheds light on the first question
as well. It sounds as if once the mistake is identified she can correct. On the third
question, Ji Soo, like Hyung Suk, initially responded that the first and fourth techniques
(i.e. a letter at the end, like our dialogue journal; and putting and arrow next to the
mistake and asking you to correct it) were helpful whereas on this questionnaire she said
that the grammar reduction response was most helpful. On the fourth question, Ji Soo
shows that she has really revised her understanding of what good writing is. She includes
things like, “creative thinking and diverse expression.” None of the students included
creative thinking or diverse expression in their rubrics. In the final response, Ji Soo asks
me to focus on a few very specific details (i.e. whether I can understand her organization
and topic) and on some broad ones, “check all the grammatical mistakes.” Although I
told students to be specific in their requests, this kind of response is not inconsistent with
Ji Soo’s other responses.

In the first questionnaire Jorge misunderstood the question, but in this
questionnaire Jorge answered that I should check the grammar and vocabulary. Although
there are many aspects to writing, the one that seems glaringly absent here is organization. Again it is what Jorge doesn’t say that it so informative. Jorge did not change his answer of “yes” on the second question. On the third, he checked the grammar reduction response in addition to the final choice of using the OHP. On his first questionnaire he indicated that he thought the OHP was helpful. On the fourth question about the rubrics Jorge once again states that the rubric was confusing for him. And in the final question Jorge asks me to continue using the reduced-grammar technique. Sunny was starting to come to class less and less frequently, and was not present for these questionnaires and questions.

Third Feedback Posed as a Choice between Two Writing Topics:

1. What is the difference between a writing editor and a writing teacher?
   Or
2. How do grammar exercises help you become a better writer?

Hyung Suk

Hyung Suk chose the first topic and made two important distinctions. First a writing teacher can give you advice about your writing. He says, “Conversation is a good way to learn another language. Editor is just answering. They don’t hear my another question.” So Hyung Suk is saying that advice comes from a conversation between the students and teacher. Secondly, he says that “I think the tutor and I didn’t have trust.” And early he had said a tutor was like an editor because they just fix the mistakes in his essay. So a writing teacher for Hyung Suk is someone you trust and with whom you can engage in conversations.
Ji Soo

Ji Soo also chose the first topic. In her essay she summarizes her response as, “A teacher is the person who teaches me how to write a good essay not check my all mistakes.” Throughout her essay she talks about how at first she concentrated on her grammatical mistakes and spelling problems and not on her creativity and organization. And it was through a teacher that she learned these other qualities. She says, “If I want to correct grammar and spelling, I can pay someone who is a writing editor. Maybe they can check my grammar and spelling. But they never give me how to write a good essay.”

Jorge

Jorge chose the second topic and provided two reasons why he thought grammar exercises were helpful. His first reason is clearer than his second. First, when writing about the benefit of grammar exercises he writes, “it could help us understand very quickly and in an easy way.” He says that with most exercises like, “I _______ (have liked/like) chocolate all my life,” you only have two choices so it is easier. Secondly he says that exercises like the one above, “help us have better comprehension.” Unfortunately he never clarifies what he means or explains how these exercises promote comprehension.

Sunny

Sunny was absent for this feedback piece.

Analysis of the Third Feedback Piece

I really appreciate Hyung Suk’s answers. He says a writing teacher is someone you can converse with, and it’s someone you can trust. In the past, I have felt that my
response to students’ writing was identical to that of an editor. And the reason I thought this was a problem was because I didn’t see any educational value in the comments I made. The comments and response might have helped the student rewrite their paper correctly, but I would often see the same problem in the next paper the student wrote. I tried to console myself that learning took time and that although I couldn’t see a change in the student’s output, that perhaps there was a change in the student’s understanding of their mistake or error. At best, this was a waiting game with an uncertain end.

Hyung Suk’s response to the question really underscores the value of a writing teacher. It’s someone you can talk to and trust. I would have to say that “being there” for the student and being someone they can trust is such an important aspect of being a teacher. These attributes were certainly present in all the great teachers who taught me. And it is this potential which is denied when a writing teacher assumes the role of a writing editor.

Ji Soo also made a good point, you can easily hire someone to correct your mistakes, but a writing teacher teaches you how to write better. Jorge did not really address how grammar exercises help, only that cloze exercises are easier because they involve recognition and a limited number of choices.
Fourth Feedback Posed as a Questionnaire:
1. Do you like to write?
2. What kind of writing do you like to do?
3. Do you think the response I made to your writing this semester helped you improve or not? Give one example of how it did improve it or didn’t improve it?
4. Which types of responses were helpful? (You may mark more than one.)
   ___ Don’t correct anything, but give us a grade S, R, U like midterm.
   ___ Write a letter at the end, like the dialogue journal
   ___ Use circles and letters like the process writing papers.
   ___ Correct mistakes on the overhead.
   ___ Put an arrow next to the mistake but don’t correct it.
   ___ Compare the writing to other corrected writing and find the mistakes alone.
   ___ Give it to a partner to check for mistakes.
   ___ Outline the paper.
   ___ Use a list of grammar topics we have studied and find the mistakes alone.
   ___ Read the paper out loud to a partner and mark mistakes alone.
   ___ Did I forget one?

Hyung Suk’s Response and My Analysis

Hyung Suk’s opinion about writing hasn’t changed, but on this questionnaire he says he doesn’t like to write because it is “most difficult in English.” This is a much more reasoned response than he gave in his first questionnaire where he said that he, like most students, didn’t like writing, and that it was a necessary part of studying English. In the first questionnaire he turned the question around and asked me if I liked writing whereas in this questionnaire he says that he likes the diary. By diary writing I assume he is referring to the dialogue journal, but perhaps Hyung Suk started keeping a diary. At any rate this is progress.

When asked about whether my responses this semester were helpful, Hyung Suk said that his writing improved. Of the techniques, he said, “use circles is most helpful.” In the fourth question he chose the third, fourth, and sixth types of response (i.e. Use circles and letters like the process writing paper. Correct mistakes on the overhead. Compare the writing to other corrected writing and find the mistakes alone.) Hyung Suk
has consistently said that he likes the reduced-grammar response and the OHP, and I’m not surprised that he likes the challenge of trying to find his own mistakes.

Ji Soo’s Response and My Analysis

Ji Soo’s response to whether she likes writing hasn’t changed. She said she likes, “All kinds of writing!” When asked whether my responses this semester helped, she said that her confidence in writing has increased and, “I can express my thinking better than before this semester.” When asked which types of response she found helpful, Ji Soo chose the third, fourth, fifth, and eighth (i.e. Write a letter at the end, like the dialogue journal. Use circles and letters like the process writing papers. Put an arrow next to the mistake but don’t correct it. Outline the paper.) Once again Ji Soo’s response is completely consistent with the other questionnaires she’s answered.

Jorge’s Response and My Analysis

Jorge said, “I like to write but some topics aren’t interesting.” When asked what kind of writing he likes he said, “I like to write about exciting things like adventure we can do if we are rich.” With exception of the last topic I assigned, none of the topics had to do with adventure. On the third question, Jorge once again said that after three drafts, the responses were not helpful for him. On this questionnaire he said, “I felt stuck and I didn’t have more ideas how to modify it.” When he says “it” he is referring to his process writing paper. In the fourth question Jorge chose the third, fourth, and seventh techniques (i.e. Use circles and letters like the process writing papers. Correct mistakes on the overhead. Give it to a partner to check for mistakes.).
Sunny’s Response and My Analysis

Once again Sunny was absent on the day that this questionnaire was collected.
Of the nineteen students present, 83% said they found the reduced-grammar response helpful. The next most helpful techniques was correcting mistakes as a class on the OHP which 53% found helpful.

Conclusion

As you can see, there is an analysis for each of the questions above where I have interpreted what each student’s response meant and how it related to the assignment and the student. In some cases I summarized and synthesized the commonalities and differences for each questionnaire. At this point I would like to synthesize all of the feedback from the questionnaires and draw some conclusions about the students and their preferences.

When it comes to correcting students’ mistakes, the majority of students think the teacher should correct every mistake. Three quarters of my students feel that I should correct every mistake, and all of my students felt that being corrected makes them better writers.

Three-quarters of my students said that writing a letter at the end of the paper was helpful. The two types of response that students thought were the most helpful were writing a letter at the end of the paper, and putting mistakes on the overhead projector. Forty-five percent of the students chose those two types of responses. By the end of the fourth process writing assignment, 85% of the students said the reduced-grammar technique was helpful. Perhaps this is because most students were not seeing any of the same recurring errors from the first paper on their other process papers. So they
erroneously believed that the reduced-grammar technique was helping them. But this is pure conjecture.

Most of the students’ attitudes about writing did not change. They felt that the rubric they made at the beginning of the semester still reflected their beliefs about what good writing is. Generally the class was very concerned with accuracy. As I pointed out earlier, one student whom I did not document wrote, “Good writing has no mistake (sic).”

Finally I’d like to close this chapter with Hyung Suk’s words. He said a writing teacher is someone you can talk to and trust. The reason behind doing this research was to help my students become better writers. For me that process necessitates a relationship of trust between the students and the teacher. I hope that Hyung Suk’s words represent other students in my reading writing class.
In this chapter, I will discuss the challenges I faced in each of the process writing assignments and what I learned from those challenges. Following this, I will address my research question. Before concluding with a breakdown of some of the general lessons I learned about teaching in doing this research project, I will contemplate some questions for further research.

Challenges I Encountered And What I Learned

I can say now that it felt like torture to limit myself to only those recurring errors that I identified in the first process writing assignment. As I went to respond to the second process writing assignment, I didn’t want to dig out the first process writing papers and find which errors I had chosen. I wanted to mark what errors and mistakes I saw and leave a few encouraging remarks here and there. But I couldn’t do that because I wanted to complete this action research project. So I dug out the first process writing paper and found the recurring errors I had chosen. Immediately I knew that the errors I had chosen were flawed. I was seriously considering generating new recurring errors for each student, but then thought that I should continue with my original plan of using the same recurring errors throughout the semester, if only to complete this project. I was warned that this was a potential frustration of doing action research.
As I read through the second process writing assignment, I wanted to respond to everything. I wanted to circle or underline topographical errors and mistakes and not label them with letters. In fact it is such an ingrained habit for me to mark errors as I read that I had to deliberately take the pencil out of my hand before I started reading. And occasionally I stopped and seriously thought about whether I was being irresponsible by not marking some of the errors I saw.

In the teachers’ office at school, I saw teachers sitting at desks all around me with their head’s bent over a stack of their student’s papers busily grading and marking papers. I looked on in envy at the ease with which they felt so confident that what they were doing was right and educative. I wondered if these teachers had already gone through a process of examining their response to students’ writing and questioning its effectiveness.

When I first used the reduced-grammar technique, I was not doing process writing with my students and so never thought about it in that context. During my Sandanona, I thought about the reduced-grammar technique as a sort of middle ground straddling pure red-ink error correction on the one hand and an antithetical approach of teaching writing through a written dialogue with the student on the other hand. I’m not sure that there is a real dichotomy between the two. And although it might seem that marking grammatical errors and mistakes focuses on grammatical accuracy, while engaging students in dialogue focuses on communication, it could just as easily be the opposite. That is I could engage a student in a dialogue about why they chose a particular incorrect grammatical structure, and I could underline or circle incorrect communicative aspects. But this is all sophistry. Using the reduced-grammar technique in process writing forced me to respond to more than just grammatical accuracy.
As I went to respond to the second process writing assignment, I decided to continue using the same recurring errors, but to add comments in the margins about things I liked. In fact, I made sure to include at least two or three positive comments about each student’s writing. I didn’t do this just to make them feel good. I wanted students to get the critical feedback they need, and this feedback includes not only “this is wrong” but also “this is right.” This is particularly true when I felt like students were experimenting with the language. Additionally, I made similar comments on specific things we had worked on in class. For example, we worked on introductory paragraphs during the second process writing assignment, so on the second process writing paper I made a comment on how effectively the student did or didn’t generate interest in their introduction. Finally, I also decided that some errors were so egregious that it would be irresponsible to ignore them. I tired to limit myself to marking only those egregious errors that students are expected to know in my level. I marked them by underlining the error.

By the third process writing assignment, I knew what frustrations to expect with the reduced-grammar technique. I basically followed the same procedure that I just outlined for the second process writing paper, but with one inclusion. On the last questionnaire in the third writing assignment, I asked each student how they would like me to respond to their final paper, so I tried to honor each student’s request.

One important thing I learned was to choose the recurring errors carefully. This is especially true if the errors will be used for an entire semester or for a series of writing assignments. One question to consider when choosing recurring errors is whether to choose errors that have not yet been covered in class. As I mentioned in “Chapter Two”
in the “Analysis” under “The Recurring Errors I Chose” on page 16, it is often hard to make such a decision at the beginning or even in the middle of the semester. In fact as I pointed out in the text, it was only after a full semester of assessment that I was able to say confidently that Ji Soo could have accepted and understood an error that we would not cover until the end of class. And then too there is the problem I encountered with Sunny when I chose a recurring error that doesn’t occur often in writing. For example, no where in this paper will you find the expression “the number of…is,” or “a number of…are,” outside of my mentioning it in relation to which errors I chose for Sunny.

I appreciate the rigor of action research. By setting up the parameters of this experiment, I forced myself to continue working with a technique that I might have abandoned or altered prematurely. So for example, I might not have seen the mistakes that I made in the errors I chose if I had abandoned the experiment after the first process writing assignment or at the beginning of the second when I was frustrated. The error on my part was a learning moment. If I had abandoned the study or if everything had gone perfectly, I wouldn’t have learned what I did. That being said, it is hard to continue doing something you know could be better. And yet here again, this was a learning moment because by limiting the way I responded to errors, I forced myself to respond to aspects of writing that I might have been previously overlooking. At the very least, the reduced-grammar technique forced me to consider how important grammatical accuracy is, and in what ways students can bolster their reader’s impression of their writing with other simpler writing elements. I have in mind aspects of writing such as spacing; logical transition signals; clear, strong theses; and clear handwriting. These aspects of writing were easier to learn and employ than conventional grammar structures for my students.
And learning these somewhat easy skills improved my student’s writing in the eyes of other readers.

How the Reduced-Grammar Technique Affected the Students

My basic research question was how the reduced-grammar technique would affect me and my students. It seems to me that the reduced-grammar technique probably did not affect my students as strongly as it did me.

All of the students said the technique was helpful throughout all the process writing assignments. I think if I had limited my response to only the “circles and letters” (the reduced-grammar technique), I would have gotten a lot of complaints from my students. I say this because it was just one of the many techniques I employed to respond to students’ writing. And of all the techniques I used, this was the one I could not alter because of the way I set the parameters of this action research project.

Other techniques, such as working with groups or partners, affected the greatest change in my students understanding of what good writing is. In the beginning of the semester most students declared that grammatical accuracy was the most important aspect of good writing. In time and through working with partners, students loosened their grip on grammar and started to look at other aspects like using transition signals, providing examples and details, and focusing on the organization of the ideas in the paper. I would say one of the most important exercises we did as partners was outlining each other’s papers. Through outlining students came to see how much organization increased the cohesion, clarity, and strength of their writing.
Questions for Future Research

By the end of this research project, there are many more questions circulating that would prove useful for further research. First, in light of information processing theory, is it possible to teach students how to proofread their own papers using a reduced-grammar technique? Second, would students respond better to a version of the reduced-grammar technique that addresses new errors in each paper giving priority to those which are recurring from the previous paper, or would students respond better to the version I documented? Third, how would a taxonomy of errors better inform the choice of recurring errors used? And stemming from this question, where would that taxonomy of errors come from? I see two sources: (1) the college’s writing rubric, and (2) a survey of the writing teachers’ expectations for exiting students from either a particular level or from the writing program. Generating a recognized taxonomy of errors based upon the school’s writing rubrics and conducting a formal survey of the teachers in the writing program would legitimatize and standardize this process and make it available on a larger scale. In essence it could function as a curriculum.

What I Learned

I feel that I learned a lot doing this research project. Many of these “learnings” I have already discussed. I would like to explicate some of the more “global” pearls of wisdom I gleaned.

First, I have learned how to investigate my teaching using the process of action research. All too often I have intuitions which I do not verify or test. How do I know that a particular technique of responding to students writing is meeting my goals or the students’ goals, or the school’s? Action research is a tool to help me focus on and see the
effects of my teaching efforts. I also recognize it as a way to answer many of the epistemological questions that arise in teaching English. I now know how to explore and document whether my intuitions have any basis.

Additionally, I have clarified for myself the various aspects of writing, how they affect each other, and how they affect the reader’s impression of the writing. As I explain to my students at least once each semester, after studying grammar for years, we are still uncomfortable with grammar. Learning how to write well-organized essays and paragraphs in English is easy to understand, relatively easy to do, and instantly helps readers understand our ideas. In fact in the writing program at NVCC, most teachers are more apt to grade an essay higher than a paragraph for the mere fact that it is an essay. This indicates that the rhetorical style of the essay is in fact a communicative element that helps readers better understand what a writer is communicating.

Another unintended thing I learned relates to my authority and leadership as a teacher in the classroom. Throughout this study, I used ten questionnaires. I have never used so many questionnaires in one class, and I’m pretty sure that my students had never been asked so much and so frequently what they think and feel about what was happening in class. I feel that this eroded my students’ confidence in me as the teacher/leader of the class. I saw comments like, “I don’t know, I’m not the teacher.” In hindsight, I’m not sure that the students understood why I was asking the questions that I was asking. So in this research project, I learned a valuable lesson about the student population I teach. Generally, they expect the teacher to be the teacher in the traditional sense of word: authoritarian in so far as they decide what to cover and for how long.
Most importantly, I have learned a way of engaging my students in teaching me how to weave together a variety of responses to create a fabric of trust and learning in our classroom community. Variety is the key word. This research project spurred me to try new ways of responding to students writing. For example, the technique of “copying sentences that students wrote on an overhead transparency and working on correcting those sentences as a class on the overhead projector (OHP)” is really helpful. Generally speaking my students are making similar mistakes. So in using this technique I’m showing students how to learn from our mistakes, I’m addressing specific problems that my students have, and I’m protecting the identity of the students who made the mistake thereby maintaining trust and security.

Ultimately this research project was about my role as a teacher. I would say that some of the most important things I learned were things I taught myself by investigating one aspect of my teaching and holding it up to the scrutiny of action research. The ancillary lessons in conducting a formal research project will serve me well as I continue to grow professionally because when “I do, I understand.”
REFERENCE LIST


