# The mode not taken: Reformulative audio feedback in the revision process of second language writing

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**ABSTRACT**

*As mounting evidence increasingly points to the value of providing error treatment in L2 writing, attention is now being turned to the investigation of how best to accomplish this. Taking mode into consideration, the author has created a novel technique he is calling reformulative audio feedback (RAF) in which a piece of student writing is read aloud and recorded by the instructor as treatable errors are implicitly corrected on-the-fly and instances of awkward usage are similarly—and seamlessly—replaced with suitable, alternate text. Students then listen to the recorded feedback while simultaneously reading along with their previously-submitted draft; any discrepancy noted between the RAF and original text signals a potential need for revision. In this respect, RAF occupies a unique place in the corrective feedback typology in that it is direct (providing the correct forms) yet highly implicit (as the forms themselves are not overtly flagged). In this study, 8 second-year students were tracked across 4 papers (2 per semester) in an English-medium writing course at a Japanese university. After first editing for content and organization, students listened to RAF when revising subsequent drafts. This paper explores the opportunities and constraints of RAF as shown through its utilization by the 8 student writers (including suggestions for further research). Findings will be of interest to L2 writing instructors curious about exploring mode as way of providing feedback that may be more accessible to (certain) students.*

## INTRODUCTION

Providing feedback on written assignments to learners-of-English through reformulated, recorded readings is a technique the author first implemented circa

2006 at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa's Hawaii English Language Program. The inspiration for taking a new approach to corrective feedback arose from a series of observations about what was intuitively not working with respect to the revision of written narratives (often personal in nature):

- Channeling feedback to learners via an array of error codes, circled words, arrows, question marks, and scribbled notes in the margins was found to be time-consuming, monotonous, and extremely limiting in terms of creating an empathetic connection between instructor and individual authors; in other words, the typically dry, aloof, and lifeless experience that is "marking papers".
- As the beginning stages of drafting focused on the exchange of personalized, supportive feedback among a community of peers (and the instructor), students appeared visibly deflated when handed drafts of their stories "defaced" by a cascade of error symbols.
- The redrafting done in class by students came to be conceptualized by the instructor as an exercise in "speed revision", where individually-circled, underlined, or tagged errors were isolated and addressed—usually at a word level—without taking the time to reread the sentence (or surrounding passage) in question and thus benefit from situating the error within the larger context in which it occurs.

The frustration resulting from the cumulative effect of these demotivating practices spurred the development of an alternative approach to corrective feedback. Reformulative audio feedback (as it was later coined by the author) seemed to fit the bill perfectly and has, in fact, changed very little since its inception. After years of positive response from students and a gut feeling that RAF

was "just working", this study was devised to gain insight into whether or not this may, in fact, be the case.

## BACKGROUND

Research has highlighted the priority that university ESL writing students place upon written feedback from instructors (Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994). Despite this, Ferris (1997) found that while students responded to roughly three-quarters of comments (deemed substantial) written by instructors, a mere half of those revisions were considered an improvement—with nearly one-third compounding the original error. How, then, to acknowledge the value students attach to feedback on writing assignments while tackling the larger issue of error correction in the L2 classroom?

One approach is to change the mode of delivery. Aural feedback, while not new—Moore (1977) used audio cassette tapes to provide writing feedback for university students—is a technique with great promise, yet one which has been largely overlooked by educators. In L1 higher education settings, aural feedback has been lauded for encouraging student engagement in learning (Kirschner et al., 1991) and allowing students the freedom to review feedback multiple times (Merry & Orsmond, 2007). Perhaps of greater significance, audio feedback has been reported by students as being easier to understand (Merry & Orsmond) and more supportive (Gould & Day, 2012) than its written counterpart. In the L2 realm, Johanson (1999) found similar results in a university ESL setting: students cited audio feedback as being more personable—the perceived role of teacher shifting from "grader" to "coach". The ability of audio feedback, then, to foster a stronger personal bond between teacher and pupil—and thus potentially increase

motivation—has great promise (in the affective domain) for L2 language learners, especially in cultural contexts where students may be hesitant to ask for help in class or otherwise seek clarification from instructors. Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted with respect to audio feedback for writing in an EFL setting.

The aim of this project is to investigate how, exactly, students in a university EFL context revise their writing when incorporating RAF into the process (as opposed to using audio as a medium for the sharing of comments on errors and general "conferencing talk").

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Eight students taking the (compulsory) sophomore writing course within the English Department at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) were selected as the focus group of this study. There was a total of four writing assignments for which audio feedback was created during the course of the year—two per semester (see Appendix A). While all students in the class received RAF for each paper, only the eight chosen for this study saw all four assignments through to completion.[1]

### Procedure

The revision process for each assignment comprised four discrete stages.

[1] It should be noted that the majority of students successfully revised the first three papers using RAF; it wasn't until the academic research paper—the final and most challenging assignment—that many students began to founder such that they never reached the RAF revision stage before the end of the semester.

Feedback for stage one (delivered either as written comments or via face-to-face conferencing) focused on content and logical structure. (Though not common, it did happen that certain papers required more than one round of revision before being given the green light to clear the first stage.) Stage two is where the instructor created RAF—making a recording while reading through each piece of writing, implicitly reformulating the text in a manner similar to that described by Thornbury (1997):

> …rather than simply correcting a student's composition, which usually involves attention to surface features of the text only, the teacher reformulates it, using the content the student has provided, but recasting it so that the rewritten draft approximates as closely as possible to a putative target language model. (p. 327)

In addition to correcting errors, the instructor also substituted individual words, phrases, and even entire sentences that were judged to be awkward, stilted, or otherwise "unnatural-sounding" (see Appendix B for a sample "before and after" passage). There were also substitutions made that were deemed (during the coding phase) to be entirely unnecessary. This will be discussed in more detail later on.

The process of recording the actual feedback took anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes depending on the length of the paper. (Excluding the research paper, most assignments took approximately ten minutes to read through.) Once finished, the file was processed using audio editing software to normalize volume levels, remove unwanted background noise, and delete silent gaps where the instructor had paused to read ahead or consider how to reformulate a passage in the text; this final step would often shrink the length of an RAF file by 70% or more. Once processed, the audio was exported to a lightweight (64 kbps) mp3 file.

Revision using RAF took place during a single 90-minute class session. Each student was provided a laptop computer and headphones to download and listen to her specific mp3 file while simultaneously reading along with the original draft (also on the computer). Students were told that any discrepancy they noticed between what is said in the RAF and what appears in their second draft indicates a potential error and the need to stop and consider whether or not revision is called for. In line with Schmidt's finding that input must be consciously noted by learners in order for it to become available to acquisition (1995), this technique focuses a learner's attention to her mistakes in a manner not previously considered in the literature. Students could ask for clarification if they did not catch what is said in the audio feedback but this was not common.

Listening to the RAF and submitting a revised third draft constituted entering stage three. At this point the instructor checks the new draft against the audio feedback (often at a faster playback rate to save time), highlighting words and passages in need of further attention. These drafts are then given to students, who return to the RAF with the sole purpose of focusing on the highlighted areas. The resulting revised draft is considered the fourth and final stage; the instructor reviews both the paper and RAF once more to ensure no errors remain. (As with stage one, it is possible for a student to revise more than once after having reached stage four.) This study, however, is concerned only with stages two and three—where students initially listen to RAF and subsequently make changes to their writing.

Upon completion of the writing course, the instructor used TAMS (Text Analysis Markup System) Analyzer software to code each of the 96 documents under consideration here: 32 second drafts (produced by the eight students across four assignments), the 32 corresponding transcripts of RAF, and the resulting 32

third drafts. The process of creating codes to tag what was happening in the 96 files revealed four primary groupings (each with a multitude of sub-divisions): treatable errors, untreatable (critical) errors, untreatable (non-critical) errors, and unnecessary repairs. The conception of "treatable" and "untreatable" are taken from Ferris (2011):

> A *treatable* error is related to a linguistic structure that occurs in a rule-governed way. It is treatable because the student writer can be pointed to a grammar book or set of rules to resolve the problem. An untreatable error, on the other hand, is idiosyncratic, and the student will need to utilize acquired knowledge of the language to self-correct it. (p. 36)

Untreatable errors were split further into "critical" and "non-critical" sub groups, depending on the nature and severity of the error. "Critical" errors demanded a change of some sort—though not a singular, rule-based one—whereas the meaning of those tagged as "non-critical" was evident, though perhaps awkward or stilted in execution. The "unnecessary" tag was used in cases where the instructor made a substitution—for whatever reason—in the RAF to replace original text that is perfectly fine. Examples of each major division (taken from actual papers used in this study) are given below:

Table 1
*Examples of the four primary coding categories (text in brackets indicates original student writing)*

| category | description | example taken from second-draft (text deleted from RAF in brackets; substituted /inserted text is underlined) |
|---|---|---|
| **treatable** | there is a clear, unambiguous repair | *Because a university education is so important,* ***it*** *[is] should be free for all high school graduates.* |
| **untreatable** *(critical)* | repair is needed, though multiple options available | *[The] subliminal perception has been examined by a number of experts.*<br>*The subliminal perception* ***of young children watching TV*** *has been examined by a number of experts.* |
| **untreatable** *(non-critical)* | repair is warranted due to stilted and/or awkward usage | *Scientists should develop cloning technology because it [cloning technology] could solve many problems.*<br>*My father always* ***prepared*** *[cooked] two lunchboxes for us.* |
| **unnecessary repair** | substitutions are made in the RAF for original text that is perfectly fine | *My school stands in the middle of a small forest and therefore is* ***very*** *[so] dark and scary at night.*<br>*They don't know the* ***value*** *[importance] of having a job.* |

## FINDINGS

The extent to which students noticed substitutions in the RAF was based upon three possible actions they could have taken in revising draft two into draft three: repaired (following the RAF), partially-repaired (in which some—but not all—of the instructor's suggested or substituted text makes its way into the revision), or rejected (which necessarily must include the possibility of the change in the RAF not being heard, and thus not noticed).

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of these actions for each of the four major coding categories.

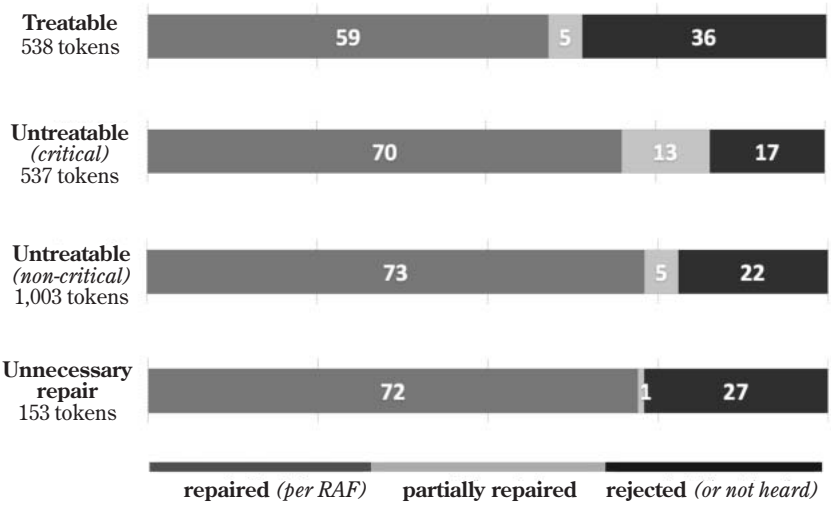


*Figure 1.* Percentages of three possible actions to be taken by students—repair as given in the RAF, make a partial repair, or do nothing (either as a rejection or the result of not noticing)—on changes made in the RAF in each of the four major coding categories spanning all four assignments.

For the purposes of initial assessment on what students noticed in the RAF, the six most common treatable errors (as coded) were singled out for closer examination. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of these errors across the papers included in this study.

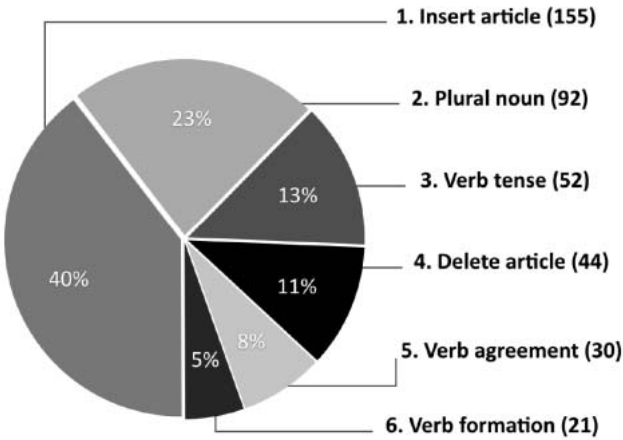


*Figure 2.* Distribution and type of six most common treatable errors.

Table 2
*Type and token count for the six most common treatable errors, with examples*

| type | tokens | example taken from second-draft (text deleted from RAF in brackets; substituted / inserted text underlined) |
|---|---|---|
| insert article | 155 | *…in order to get **a** high score on **a** test you must…"* |
| noun plurality | 92 | *"Pirated DVD**s** are a growing problem for the Japanese entertainment industry."* |
| verb tense | 52 | *"However, after my cousins **grew** [grow] up, the camping vacations stopped."* |
| delete article | 44 | *"If we forbid [the] nuclear power, these plants would have to shut down."* |
| verb agreement | 30 | *"If one see**s** a ghost before turning 20, she will continue to see ghosts for the rest of her life."* |
| verb formation | 21 | *"My father is responsible toward his family and has always [been] worked hard."* |

It must be noted that after coding the first three assignments for "student 6", the decision was made to exclude this student's fourth paper from the data presented here because it was obvious that revision of the second draft was not attempted (see Figure 3).

While refinement of this study's design and future research are needed, pre-

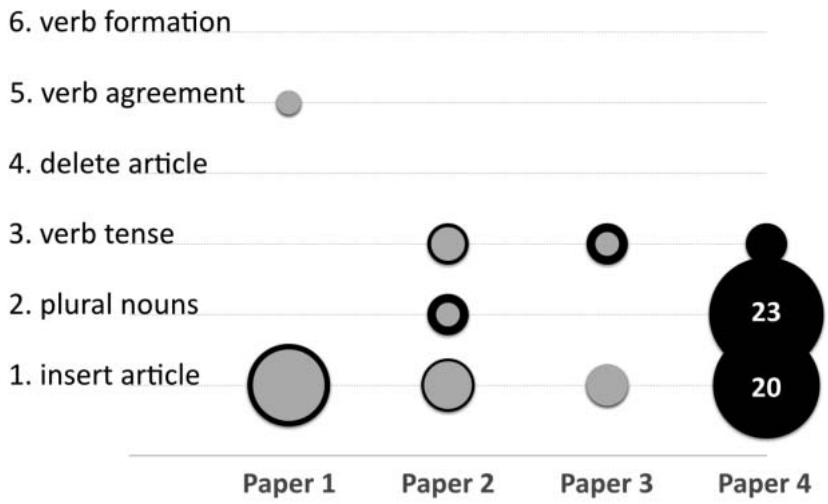


*Figure 3.* Token count for each of the six most common treatable errors for "student 6" (black circles) relative to the number of those errors correctly repaired after listening to the RAF (light circles); since none of the errors was repaired on paper 4, it is obvious this student simply did not revise the second draft.

liminary findings seem to suggest two items of note. The first is that students do appear to have increased the amount of treatable errors they noticed and repaired over the course of the year. While there is no way to directly attribute this (even in part) to using RAF in the revision of written assignments, it is nonetheless interesting to consider. Figure 4 plots the percentage of correct repairs for each of the top six most common treatable errors; the tokens of all eight students for each

error type are collected together in one circle, across all four assignments. As the year progresses, there is a gradual upward drift and gathering together of all six error types under consideration (indicating a higher percentage of noticed-and-correctly-repaired errors). The fact that large circles linger over paper four should not be worrisome as the average length of that assignment was nearly double the other three, thus accounting for the larger representation of type tokens.

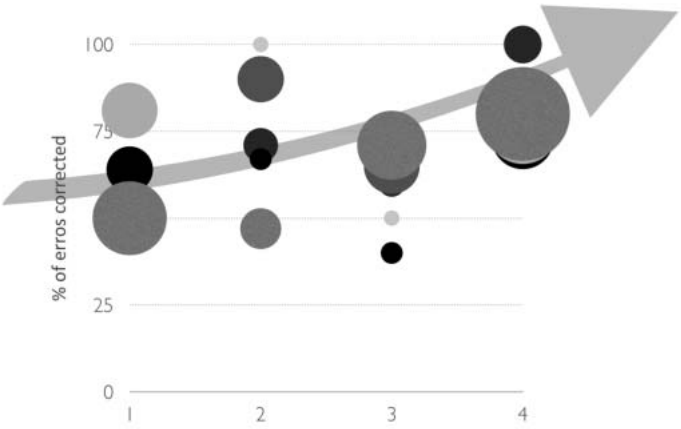


*Figure 4.* Percentage of top six treatable errors noticed and corrected by assignment; token count is represented by the relative size of each circle (error type).

The second observation to emerge from the data is the variation in distribution of the six error types among different students. Each has a unique profile: only half commit at least one of each error type across the four assignments—though none in the same quite the same way. Two students avoid a category altogether but not the same one. The remaining pair managed to go an entire year without setting foot

in two of the top six treatable errors, the insertion of extraneous articles being the one they both shied away from.

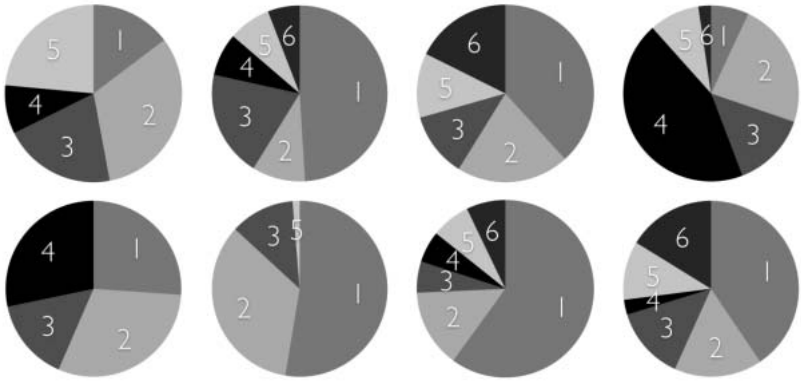

*Figure 5.* Error distribution profile of the six most common treatable errors for each student in this study. Numbers represent the different error types: 1 = insert article, 2 = noun plurality, 3 = verb tense, 4 = delete article, 5 = verb agreement, 6 = verb formation.

## DISCUSSION

Some eight years after first using RAF as a substitute for the wholly unsatisfactory experience of providing written corrective feedback, little has changed in terms of students' intitial reaction to and ultimate embracing of this "novel" approach. They still enjoy having the instructor read their work back to them, forging a personal connection not possible through smiley faces doodled in the margins. Individual learner differences are taken into account through a shift in mode to the aural domain along with the added flexibility of digital files in lessening the constraints of geography and time. Students often remark how much they enjoy the challenge of "hunting" for errors and suggested language while

listening to their own stories read back to them. There is also no question about the motivational boost that comes in the absence of all the red ink.

The early findings in this study that are (still) making their way to the surface are promising but the need remains for a more fine-grained analysis of the data to see what other patterns emerge to both shed light on and problematize how students utilize RAF and how it can be more efficiently deployed in the future. The scope of this project quickly escalated such that it raised more questions than were answered. How do the prosodic features encoded in the oral stream influence how RAF is received and interpreted? Can punctuation be "heard"? What information is better made available via speech than *written* corrective feedback? While not discussed here, there is some evidence pointing towards L1 as a variable in the saliency of certain error corrections substituted in RAF. The author would also like to revisit the category of unnecessary repair to question what prompted those substitutions. This is all good news, however, as the initial insights gleaned from this cursory examination point to multiple avenues of inquiry yet to be explored.

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**APPENDIX A –** Description of written assignments

| Assignment | Semester | Average word count |
|---|---|---|
| argumentative essay | 1 | 347 |
| personal story (personal hero or favorite memory) | 1 | 408 |
| ghost story | 2 | 386 |
| research paper | 2 | 742 |

**APPENDIX B –** Sample passage from a second draft and the corresponding RAF transcript

Excerpt taken from a second-draft paper for assignment #2:

*When I was elementary school student, I participated in the festival with my friends that lived in same area. We carried a portable shrine, played festival music and dancing, it was so exciting. I was always a cast but now I am an audience.*

Same passage of the RAF transcript. Changes made by the instructor are bolded.

*when I was* ***an*** *elementary school student I participated in the festival with my friends* ***who*** *lived in* ***the*** *same area we carried a portable shrine played festival music and* ***danced*** *it was so exciting I was always a* ***participant*** *but now I am an* ***onlooker***