

THE EFFECTS OF TARGETED FEEDBACK AND MICRO-CONFERENCES ON THE
WRITING PERFORMANCE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS ON EXTENDED
RESPONSE QUESTIONS

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER of EDUCATION

by

Scott Roskos

William Paterson University of New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

According to The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011), students with disabilities significantly underperform in writing in comparison to their nondisabled peers. While only 15% of 8th-grade students identified as not having a disability scored below the basic level, 60% of 8th-grade students identified as having a disability scored below the basic level (NAEP, 2011). Writing ability affects student scores in reading where students complete extended response questions, “A non-multiple-choice question that requires some type of written or verbal response” (NAEP). In reading, the average score of students identified as having disabilities decreased by 4 points nationally from 2014 to 2022. A significant factor in this discrepancy is writing in response to text and extended response questions in particular. During the writing process typical students respond well to longer form conferences during which the teacher highlights items in need of revision or editing. Special education students are often overwhelmed by such conferences and benefit more from targeted feedback and multiple shorter conferences rather than one prolonged conference.

A review of literature was conducted to examine topics related to the problem determined and the question developed in response to the problem. The review examined categories of research. These included; teaching revision skills to middle school writing students, Writer’s Workshop, cloud-based writing formats such as Wikis and Google Docs and how they can be used for collaboration and feedback, and the extent to which different feedback approaches are related to the writing quality of students’ compositions and motivation.

The findings of the six-week study manifested as two themes: (a) narrowing feedback on Google Docs to mechanics and grammar using direct and commentary feedback and (b) it may be better to utilize my micro-conferencing time for higher level corrective feedback regarding

content, organization, and word choice. The study findings suggest that feedback and conferences affect student engagement, communication, and skills.

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To Dr. Carrie E. Hong, thank you for your guidance and thoughtful feedback. Your patience and dedication to your students is what allowed me to move confidently through the steps necessary to successfully write my thesis.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sister Mary Beth Roskos. Your incredible spirit and enthusiasm continue to inspire my teaching every day.

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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem

Introduction

According to The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011), students with disabilities significantly underperform in writing in comparison to their nondisabled peers. While only 15% of 8th-grade students identified as not having a disability scored below the basic level, 60% of 8th-grade students identified as having a disability scored below the basic level (NAEP, 2011). Writing ability also affects student scores in reading where students complete selective response, or multiple choice, and extended response. An extended response is a question that requires some type of written or verbal response (NAEP). In reading, the average score of students identified as having disabilities decreased by 4 points nationally from 2002 to 2014. At the state level, the average score of students identified as having disabilities in New Jersey decreased by 5 points.

This disparity manifests at our district level as well. According to the New Jersey Student Learning Assessment (NJSLA) 2023-2024 results, only 27% of our special education students scored at meeting or exceeding on the ELA portion of the test while 83% of our general education students scored at meeting or exceeding. At the district level, we need to find methods to reduce this achievement gap. I have observed that this gap is not strictly a matter of disability. In my experience, I have found that special education students can make significant improvements in their performance with extended response questions if I as a teacher utilize a different feedback strategy. Secondly, in order to improve in answering extended response questions, students need to improve in sentence craft and the use of text evidence. These skills translate to improved extended response questions related to reading but also improved skills in long form essay writing.

Research Questions

Based upon the problem identified above that special education students underperform in writing in comparison to their nondisabled peers, the primary question is identified. This research question is, *can providing special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro- conferences improve their performance on extended response questions?*

In addition to the primary research question, this study also examines related questions: *Will students' proficiency with sentence writing improve with the increased writing of and feedback on extended response questions?*

Will students' proficiency with longer form writing and essays improve with the increased writing of and feedback on extended response questions?

Definition of Terms

This section gives a definition of terms that will be used throughout this research study.

This research study will be designed to answer the research question, *can providing special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions?*

Targeted feedback: In this study, targeted feedback is specific narrow feedback on one to two skills or areas of improvement rather than a larger array of skills. This can be in the form of verbal feedback or typed comments on Google Docs.

Micro-conferences: Micro-conferences are one-to-one or small group conferences that last 2 to 5 minutes in length.

Extended response question: This is a type of open-ended question that requires a detailed, in-depth written response. In this study, responses will include an initial sentence restating the question and providing an answer. Additional sentences will include evidence, analysis, and explanation.

Small group instruction: Small group instruction in this study refers to instruction provided for a group of 2-4 eighth grade special education students who struggle with writing.

Special Education student: This refers to any student who has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) based upon disability. In this study, the special education students attend a resource classroom.

Resource classroom: The resource classroom is a smaller classroom made up of special education students taught by a special education teacher.

Zone of Proximal Development: This original concept is developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978) and in this study, it refers to the area of learning that occurs when a student is guided by a teacher to reach a writing goal. The zone refers to the ideal level of difficulty a task can be to activate the highest level of learning for the student.

Theoretical Framework

This section presents the theoretical framework selected based upon the research question. The research question is can providing special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions? This question was used to identify the theoretical framework. This framework includes the following theories: *Process Writing and Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, 1978) and *The Cognitive Process Theory of Writing* (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000).

Lev Vygotsky's theories are foundational to education and specifically to special education. The concepts of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding are essential to best practices in the education of students with disabilities. According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through

problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” His conceptual understanding of student development supports the focus of my research in meeting students at their actual level and providing scaffolding to bring them closer to their potential level. This theory also emphasizes the importance of the need for students to interact with other people in order to awaken learning processes. My research is based on the theory that writing is social and writing development is a social process. For the purposes of my research, the social process will be between the teacher providing the targeted feedback and micro-conferences and the students.

The Cognitive Process Theory is key to understanding how students engage in the writing process. linear, and students may revisit stages to review and revise their work. This theory is important in writing education because it allows students to move back and forth between planning, translating, and reviewing. It is a model that can be applied to more varied writing situations and skill levels. According to Flower & Hayes (1981), the Cognitive Process Theory focuses on four key points: 1. The process of writing is a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing. I theorize that by providing targeted feedback and micro-conferencing for special education students, teachers can isolate specific thought processes. This will allow students to better develop those skills in relative isolation in preparation for later orchestration and/or organization during that act of composing a larger text. 2. These processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization in which any given process can be embedded within any other. This aligns with my research that specific support provided at specific points in the process will strengthen students’ skill and performance throughout the larger process. 3. The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writer's own growing network of goals. By providing special education students with targeted support, teachers will

support them in meeting sequential goals that should lead to expanding their network of goals.

4. Writers create their own goals in two key ways: by generating both high-level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer's developing sense of purpose, and then, at times, by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). This theory supports my research by highlighting the need for scaffolding and support throughout the writing process. The special education teacher supports and models the specific thinking skills required for each stage of the process. They also guide the student through the hierarchy of processes towards greater independence and goal setting. Lastly, the special education teacher assists the student in revisiting previous steps throughout the writing process. The goal of my research is to show that by providing targeted feedback and micro-conferencing students will develop the efficacy to begin the process of creating their own relevant goals.

Educational Significance

The purpose of this study is to examine the research question can providing special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions? This question is extremely significant because it is important that we learn more about how teachers can support special education students' proficiency with writing. Teachers will be able to learn from this study so that they will be able to provide targeted feedback and micro-conferencing that maximizes student growth in the writing of extended responses. Special education students require scaffolded versions of strategies used with their non-disabled peers. Targeted feedback and micro-conferences are scaffolded versions of the prolonged information dense forms of feedback and conferences given to their non-disabled peers. The strategies proposed in this study will better facilitate teaching special education students in their zone of proximal development.

The issue of narrowing the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities is significant. Students who learn how to think logically and express themselves coherently in writing will be better prepared to succeed in an information-based economy. We as educators need to equip our special education students with strategies that they can internalize and bring with them into the larger world.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Overview

This chapter reviews the literature that is relevant to the primary question identified in this study. This research question is can providing resource students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions? This review of the literature examines research studies that looked at The Writing Conference and Feedback.

The Writing Conference

Sperling (1990) describes the writing conference as an occasion for teacher-student collaboration. This is composed of conversational and instructional elements that merge in the service of the student's learning to write. This can be a one-to-one teacher student conference or can be with a teacher and 3 to 4 students. This study analyzed how variables in the conference context affect the construction of writing conference conversations and how writing conference conversations are accomplished for different students. This study was designed for 9th-grade students at a high school in San Francisco. There were 5 females and 1 male. The study was for writers' conferences over the course of six weeks. Data collection included audio and visual recordings, student interviews, and drafts of students' writing. Over the course of the study, it was found that there is often variation in the construction of conference talk over time and tasks and under different conference conditions. This suggests that conferencing is a literacy event that is itself a fluctuating and often evolving process. The teacher-student writing conference in this classroom was seen as a context of social co-construction. It was found that in this context the student comes to "inherit" the conventions

of written language through the pursuit of those conventions with a more able adult. The writing conference in this classroom involved negotiation and decision-making. It was a context that could be jointly controlled by both participants.

In the next study conducted by McCarthy (1992), the author analyzed twenty-seven fifth-grade students in a New York City public school. The primary purpose of the study was to demonstrate how teachers' views of their roles and their ways of enacting those roles in writing conferences changed over time. This analysis consisted of a descriptive numerical analysis from observational data across conferences and systematic, qualitative analyses to form cases of two teachers. This was drawn from interviews and observational data. Over the course of this one-year study, data were collected from three sources. These were: classroom observations, semi structured interviews, and post-observation interviews conducted after classroom observations. Student involvement and student talk increased as the teachers shifted their roles within the conference. During the course of the school year, the teacher moved toward an orientation in which students were taking more control of their writing. She was also becoming more sensitive to individual differences among students and moved from having a focus on the technical aspects to having more of a focus on the writer. It was also observed that the teacher asked more questions of the writer as the year progressed and provided fewer directives. From October to June, there was a sharp and steady increase in the amount of talk about ideas in the conferences and a decrease in the amount of talk about spelling, punctuation, and mechanics.

Healey (2024), posed the research question what features of teachers' writing conference dialogue support students' "embodied thinking" of narratives and their linguistic choices? In this study of narrative writing conferences "embodied thinking" refers to the tendency of writers to mentally simulate the narrative world they are writing about. Those

writers then write from within this world. In this study involving seventy-five fifth-grade students at a Chinese/English bilingual school in Hong Kong teachers conferenced with students over the course of nine weeks. Six to eight conferences were held with each student. Each conference was recorded, transcribed and coded according to the stage of the conference in which it was held. This qualitative analysis led to the following conclusion; writing conferences allow teachers to adapt their teaching in response to student understanding and their process of writing. Teachers knowledgeable of imaginative thinking processes have the power to not only teach writing effectively but also to teach students to think like writers. Teachers could assist students by asking probing questions to understand the student's narrative world. They could then explain links between imagination and grammar and guide students through the process in their own narratives. However, a significant limitation identified through the study was whether the teacher had a sufficient understanding of grammar that was sufficient to support this process.

Irawati's study (2012) researched the combination of teacher written feedback and conferencing to improve students' writing. This study involved seventy-one eighth grade students in a state junior middle school in Indonesia over the course of one academic year from 2011 - 2012. This research posed two variables. The first was the independent variable or the treatment of the research. In this study, the treatment used was the combination of teacher's written feedback and conference. The second variable was the dependent variable or the students' writing skills. The participants were given pre- and post-assessments. Based on the descriptive analysis, it was found that the mean scores of the post-test of both classes were higher than those of the pre-test. It means that both control and experimental classes had an improvement of the mean score on students' writing skills. The improvement of the mean score in control class was (6.00). The improvement of the mean score in experimental class

was (7.90). The improvement of the mean score in the experimental class was (1.90) higher than the control class. It was concluded that written feedback and conferencing is appropriate as a good combination technique in teaching writing for the level of junior high/middle school. The students at this level still need teacher's intervention in the learning process and, as adolescents, seem to be "dependent learners". One additional finding and suggestion for further research was that there was variation in the amount of suitable written feedback depending on students' knowledge of content and components of writing. Many students do not understand the meaning of the teacher's written feedback appropriately.

Feedback

A study by Zheng, et. al., (2015), involved 257 sixth-grade students in suburban Colorado during the 2011 – 2012 school year. This study examined how middle school students used Google Docs for different writing activities; the relationship between students' writing on Google Docs and their writing achievement; and what types of feedback students received from peers and teachers on Google Docs. This research addressed four questions: 1. How did students perceive the use of Google Docs in their English language arts classrooms? 2. What were the patterns of revisions and amendments for documents with various numbers of authors and with authors at different writing skill levels? 3. How were students' writing development on Google Docs, and their self-reported use of Google Docs, related to their standardized writing and reading achievement growth? 4. What kinds of feedback did students receive from peers and teachers on Google Docs? And do different types of feedback or feedback providers affect students' writing and reading achievement growth? Students completed multiple survey questions. Students were enthusiastic about using Google Docs. They exhibited more positive attitudes toward using Google Docs for organizing, writing, and giving and receiving feedback than toward other writing modalities, including traditional

word-processing software. They also reported spending so much time editing documents (an average of 4.11 times per week). Peer feedback was mostly focused on pointing out errors in mechanics and grammar. Most of the feedback students received from others was on the language level rather than the content level. A proposed focus for future research was the effects of different feedback types on writing quality.

Next, Ferris (1997) conducted a study with forty-seven freshman and sophomore students at a California public university for a period of fifteen weeks. The research was guided by two questions: 1. What characteristics of teacher commentary appear to influence student revision?

2. Do revisions influenced by teacher feedback lead to substantive and effective changes in students' papers? Students were given four essay assignments. These included personal narrative, expository, and persuasive. Students were required to write a minimum of three drafts for each assignment. Mini lessons were provided in writing skills. There were discussions of readings, prewriting and revision activities, and regular peer response sessions in permanently assigned writing groups. Teacher comments provided information to the students in one of two forms. The first gave student writers feedback about how the teacher perceived their organization or ideas.

The second provided information about another author's text that students may have misunderstood. Each comment length appeared to influence positive changes, and revisions improved gradually as the comments got longer. Text-specific comments influenced more positive changes than general comments. Some important conclusions were that teachers should be careful in their responding strategies, in explaining those strategies to their students, and in helping students learn to revise. Lastly, students reported that they at times find that they do not understand teacher comments that are in the form of questions.

Zumbrunn, et. al., (2016), conducted a study on the perceptions of middle school studentson feedback. This sequential mixed method study included 598 sixth through tenth-grade students in a large suburban school district in the southeastern United States. The quantitative and qualitative data illustrated the influential role writing feedback perceptions plays in middle and high school student writing motivation and self-regulation beliefs. Participants with positive perceptions of feedback reported higher self-regulation aptitude than participants with negative feedback perceptions. The primary reason students gave for liking feedback was to improve theirwriting skills.

Neumann and Kopcha's (2019) study included eleven sixth grade and ten seventh gradestudents in a public charter school in the Pacific Northwest. This three-week single case study included evaluation of comment types, rubric scores, and data analysis. The three research questions were: How did students and the teacher use Google Docs to provide feedback during the peer-then-teacher approach to peer review? How does the quality of middle school students' argumentative writing change during the peer-then-teacher approach to peer review? What revision patterns emerged during the peer-then-teacher approach to peer review? The findings onthe teacher comments included "Conventions (10.14) and Organization (6.23); Language and Vocabulary (2.10), Elaboration of Evidence (4.33), and Statement of Purpose (1.10)" were among the least frequently made comment types. Most teacher comments were single comments(418). Scores for each rubric criteria increased each time students received feedback. Peer-to- peer feedback failed to lead to substantive changes in students' written work, while teacher feedback led to improvements in student writing.

Next, Patthey-Chavez, et. al., (2004), included sixty-four middle school students from an urban school district. A mixed study design was used to analyze pre- and post-performance and student responses to teacher feedback for four revisions of the single essay assignment.

Teacher feedback was labeled as either “surface level” or “content level”. “Surface-level” included edits and comments on grammar, punctuation, spelling, or format (e.g., a teacher reminding a student to center and underline the title). “Content feedback” included comments to delete, reorganize, or add information. This also included questions meant to challenge students' thinking. Results indicated that teacher comments on final drafts were not effective in comparison to comments provided at each stage of the writing process.

Lastly, Hillocks (1982) examined the effect of three treatment conditions. These were: 1. observational activity preceding writing, or assignment only; 2. regular revision or no revision; and 3. brief teacher comments or extensive comments. The study included 278 middle school students in urban Chicago and rural Indiana over a four-week period. This mixed method study included data analysis of pre- and post-test results and observations of instructional methods. “Brief comments” were composed of 10 words or less. “Extensive comments” averaged well over 10 words. “Brief comments” included a compliment and at least one suggestion for improvement. “Extended comments” included one or more compliments and very specific suggestions. The mean gain for all students receiving short comments was 1.39 and for longer comments the mean gain was also 1.3. The researchers concluded here that given the amount of time spent on comments, it could be more effective to focus on short comments. However, it was also found that longer comments with an increased number of specific suggestions may be more meaningful when they are preceded by specific instruction.

Summary of the Literature Review

This section provides a summary of the studies used in this literature review. Studies were selected for this literature review based on the research question. The research question is,

can providing resource students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions?

Many studies found that conferencing had a positive effect on student revision and writing proficiency. Sperling (1990) and McCarthy (1992) highlight the importance of the writing conference as a collaborative process in which the perception of the participants plays a major role. Zumbrunn, et. al., (2016) points to the importance of self-perception related to feedback as well. Writing conferences and feedback are social contexts that require insight and sensitivity from the teacher. Students with a positive perception of both conferencing and feedback are more likely to respond positively to both and improve their writing during the revision process.

Feedback can take various forms. These are categorized according to type or length. Patthey-Chavez, et. al., (2004) and Neumann and Kopcha (2019) categorized feedback according to type. While “surface level” and “conventions” may at first glance appear to be shorter in duration, they may not be based upon students’ proficiency and prior knowledge. Conferencing categorized by length was proposed by Hillocks (1982). While specific word lengths of “brief” versus “extended” were provided, a knowledge of each students’ proficiency with skills and understanding of feedback is essential. Irawati’s study (2012) points to the beneficial effect of using both feedback and conferences in conjunction. Lastly, each study points to the importance of understanding student variations in writing skills, content knowledge, communication skills, and perception.

CHAPTER III

Research Design

Introduction

This chapter describes the qualitative research design of this study. The data was collected and analyzed to answer the research question: can providing special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions? Participants were aware that they had been selected for this study. My role in the research is as both teacher-researcher and participant-observer.

I chose the qualitative approach as a method for research in my study because it looks at situations as they occur in school each day. I am a special education ELA teacher in a replacement resource class, so it makes sense to study the impact of individual feedback and small groups, “as they unfold naturally” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p 45). I understand that my research will not be generalized, but specific to my assignment at my school. However, as my goal is to discover the effectiveness of implementing a new strategy for my practice, I see the results as worthwhile. My role as a special education ELA teacher provides me with student and teacher familiarity and trust (Efron & Ravid, 2020). This will enable me to work with students immediately as well as be able to have open conversations with teachers for observational purposes.

A case study is the most beneficial method because it looks to understand a specific piece of school processes. I wish to study the effectiveness of feedback with individual students and small writing groups (Efron & Ravid, 2020). I am working with individual and small groups of students and use observations and artifacts to investigate the ways in which focused instruction on writing impacts their process and product. My research

uses primary writing samples as an initial data point. Types of feedback are presented both as comments on Google Docs and transcriptions from small group and individual conferences. An extended response rubric and pre- and post-feedback work samples are also documented. A constant comparison method is used to identify patterns of change in student writing from pre- and post- comments and conferences. This is a hypothesis-generating study, so the information collected in this study may confirm or change my initial beliefs in the feedback and conferencing process.

Research Setting

This section presents the setting for this research study. This study is designed to answer the research question: can providing special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions? This research study is set in a suburban school district located in Central New Jersey within the New York Metropolitan area. According to 2020 census data, the population of the town is made up of approximately 40,905 people, from a variety of backgrounds, impacted by socio-economic status, ethnicities, languages spoken, and time spent in the United States. White (non-Hispanic) people make up most of the town's population at around 33,000 residents, followed by Asian (Non-Hispanic), with around 3,200 residents, Hispanic at around 2,300 residents, and Black at around 1,100. Additionally, about 4.3% live below the poverty line, while the median income was around \$151,000 in 2020. At least 97% achieved at least a High School diploma, or GED equivalent, and an additional 56% of the population have received at least a bachelor's degree, according to the 2021 census data.

The school district is split between eight different schools: one lower elementary school (grades P-K), five elementary schools (grades 1-5 respectively), and two middle schools (grades 6-8). The district employs around 160 teachers amongst these eight schools.

The student demographics in this district are, as of the end of the 2023-2024 school year, the district had approximately 1,000 staff members and 4,700 students (1,800 at the middle school level). Within this total population; 72% of students are White, 12% of students are Hispanic, 11% of students are Asian, 2% of students are Black, and 3% of students are Multiracial); of these students, 9% of students in district are on the Free and Reduced Lunch program, 1% are enrolled in the ELL program, and 16% are classified as part of the Special Education program.

The school in which this study is being conducted is a middle school, with an overall population of approximately 1,200 students and around 90 teachers. This award-winning middle school includes state of the art classrooms, 13 science labs, 6 world language classrooms, 2 art classrooms, 3 gymnasiums, a health center, computer, STEAM, and 2 STEM robotics labs, a Media Center, 3 music rooms, and an auditorium. The school offers many afterschool programs, sports, and activities to provide students with an overall well-rounded educational experience. All students are provided with Chromebooks and work within the Google Workspace for Education suite of applications, and the majority of student writing is completed on Google Docs. Student work is monitored through Google Classroom and Go Guardian in real time. ELA classes are five days a week and 75 minutes long.

Research Participants

I, the participant-observer and sole teacher participating in this study, have been working in this school/district for the past 21 years (from September 2003 - Present). I graduated from The College of New Jersey in May of 2003, where I completed my Practicum and Student teaching within a 5th grade resource classroom in the Ewing School District. I was also an Interdisciplinary Trainee at the Elizabeth Boggs Center on Disability and Human Development

at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. After graduating, I taught resource and in-class support from 2003-2006 in one of our district's elementary schools. I also taught a behavioral/emotional disabilities class during those summers and then for the 2006-2007 school year at an elementary school in our district. I then transferred to our middle school, where I have taught since 2008. Most of this time has been teaching resource and in-class support in the 8th- grade. Over the course of my career, I have become a certified Teacher Consultant through the National Writing Project at Rutgers University and an Orton-Gillingham certified Dyslexia Teacher through Fairleigh Dickinson University. I have also served as teacher-supervisor for our after-school Social Skills Club and Gaming Club.

Also in this study are three 8th grade student participants from my resource ELA room of 7 students; all participants in this study received whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one instruction. All three students receive special education services under the classification of communication impairment and receive speech and language services one day out of the six-day cycle in the speech therapy room. Based on the most recent Lexile level reading assessments; Student A scored within the end of 3rd grade range, Student B scored within the beginning of 3rd grade range, and Student C scored within the middle of 4th grade range.

Data Sources

The data collected in this study comes from four main sources. The first source of data will be the pre- and post-conference writing samples of extended responses produced by my students. Students read articles on 6 different topics to complete 6 informational text extended response questions over the course of six weeks. The second source of data is writing rubrics based on the R.A.C.E. method. Students have been taught and follow the R.A.C.E. method (Restate the question, Answer the question, Cite evidence to support the answer, and Explain the connection between the answer and the cited text). The third source of data comes from

teacher comments on student Google Docs. Types of comments will be monitored for effectiveness. The fourth data source comes from the small group (2 to 3 students) and one-on-one conferences I held with students. These consist of feedback given to the students, my notes, and questions and statements from students during the conferences. All of these data sources were collected over the course of 6 weeks of class and were completed on Google Docs. Articles read by students were selected from Scope magazine from Scholastic Publishers and the free website Read Works. All questions were from the original informational text reading selections. Teacher comments are my creation but are influenced by my literature review and research.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected in this study comes from four sources. Two of these sources are based on student work. These are the pre- and post-conference written extended responses. Two sources come from the teacher. These are teacher feedback and scored rubrics. By analyzing the data, we can determine whether teacher feedback and micro-conferences led to improvements in students' extended responses. We can also determine what specific types of feedback yielded the best results. Importantly, we can determine whether more frequent micro-conferences including targeted feedback led to better results for special education students in comparison to longer writers' conferences that include feedback on a larger number of writing skills and concepts.

Data Analysis

Several forms of data were collected, and each was analyzed according to its type. These include; pre- and post-conference writing samples, rubric results, feedback typed on Google Docs, and verbal feedback provided at writers' conferences.

Validity and Reliability

My research examines the provision of special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences to improve their performance on extended response questions. This specifically addresses students in my 8th grade resource ELA class. To ensure that the data collected in this study is accurate and can provide insight into the efficacy of the methods used, we must look at the validity and reliability of the data. As a participant observer of this study, I ensured the validity of the study. I accomplished this by using several strategies for data collection. Those strategies are as follows. I used multiple sources of data. I collected data regularly and consistently. I used peer checking by examining the data with an experienced researcher. I also shared my professional backgrounds, so readers have a better understanding of my perspectives or assumptions toward the research topic and research subjects.

I ensured the reliability of the study by using strategies. I used multiple sources of data and cross-checked results from several data sources to find any similar or contracting patterns before I concluded the findings.

Limitations

Throughout my research, I was able to find data to support my original research question. However, throughout the research process, I did encounter some limitations that may have slightly hindered the research process in my study.

First, time was a limitation due to the six-week window of research. This window also

included our Spring Break (April 14th through 21st) which caused a pause in the research and state testing (April 29th through May 2nd) which contributed to student fatigue. An additional limitation was the degree of behavioral management needed in my classroom. Two students who refused to be in the study would often disrupt the learning of others in the class.

Chapter IV

Findings

Providing special education students with scaffolded or modified strategies that meet their individual learning needs is essential to helping them meet their potential as students. In the feedback and revising process this can be achieved through targeted feedback via Google Docs comments and brief focused conferences, also known as micro-conferences. The impact of feedback and micro-conferences on the middle school special education students participating in my research study, focused on *how providing resource special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences would improve their performance on extended response questions*. Mainly, two themes have emerged from three qualitative case studies. Even though there is individual variation, each of the three students was represented within the themes.

Throughout the research period, my students completed a series of nonfiction extended response writing pieces in response to text-dependent questions. They followed the RACE writing formula, as well as feedback in the form of Google Doc comments, and teacher conferencing. Overall, the data collected featured the development of a collaborative process over time. The regularity with which I provided comments and met with students in micro-conferences led to improvements in student writing, metacognition, and communication about their writing. Much of my reflection refers to the procedural tasks of writing in the RACE format. These are displayed in Table 2 below. Students also responded to multiple comments related to spelling and mechanics. These comments are displayed in Table 3 below. Students were active participants in the micro-conferences and highly engaged in the revision process. While it was expected that students would struggle with the higher-level skills such as finding appropriate text evidence, it became evident that students

initially had difficulty with more fundamental skills such as using the graphic organizer to restate the question, properly citing text evidence, and capitalization. Over time, student communication with the teacher increased. Students requested scaffolding in the form of reminders written on the board and examples of restatements. Students also asked questions related to teacher-typed comments and during conferences. These questions often refer to the organizer and how to address each section of the process. Rubrics were used for my scoring but not provided to the students as the organizer was the focus. Students displayed an increase in metacognition, participation, and production over time. They also displayed improvement in accuracy, capitalization, and punctuation.

Impact of Individualized Attention on Student Writing Needs

Student writing needs are more individualized than they may appear. Students A, B, and C shared a number of similar needs. However, each had sticking points that were more individualized.

Student A was easily confused and needed instruction presented in a manner that worked with their way of writing. This student did not appear able to learn a new way of writing rather than modify and adapt their current way of writing. For example, this student appears to blend portions R and A of the organizer and has difficulty separating the two. For example: As stated in conference notes from 4/4/25, “Student A is writing section A as a continuation of section R. I do not know yet whether this is a hindrance due to the student’s inability to separate each thought. This repetition of the use of the same words leads to a lower quality answer.” Teacher, “You can combine Parts R and A if that is easier for you. As long as your final answer is correct, it is fine”. The result was that Student A was able to combine R and A into the same sentence and their production increased after allowing for this. On the following assignment, Student A utilized this strategy and came to the conference

prepared to discuss it. As stated in conference notes dated 4/10/25, “Student, ‘Is it okay that I put R and A in the same sentence?’ Teacher, ‘Yes. This is well done’”.

Student B was affected by a visible lack of confidence in the procedure and expectations of the writing task. They were able to successfully complete the tasks but required scaffolding and verbal reassurance. For example, from conference notes dated 4/3/25, “Student B requested a model of the proper citation. The model provided was, ” (Tarshis 7). This allowed Student B to choose their own text evidence but use the correct format.” The result was that the student properly used the model and added the correct page number. Special education students may experience challenges in coordinating working memory and procedural memory at the same time. By being provided with procedural support where needed, students may make fewer errors during this part of the writing process.

Student C’s pre-conference writing was primarily paraphrasing. This improved over time in samples from 4/10, 4/21, and 4/22. However, earlier writing samples required more direct teacher intervention. As stated in conference notes from 3/26/25, “Student C answered correctly but paraphrases or copies text evidence and incorporates it without citation. Student had difficulty correcting the paraphrase and needed more direct instruction” and conference notes from 4/3/25, “Student C answered correctly but paraphrases or copies text evidence and incorporates it without citation. Student corrected it after this conference. Student also stated that this was part of their rough draft process”.

Moreover, individualized attention affects the volume of written production. Students appreciated both typed and verbal feedback. They asked follow-up and clarifying questions and wrote longer selections in comparison to writing selections without feedback or conferences. They also wrote more in initial drafts overall and then revised to make their writing more concise and direct. This is an important finding as special education students

often struggle with initial drafts and revisions. Within the total writing samples; Student A composed a total of 399 words during initial drafts and 421 during final drafts. Student B composed a total of 410 words during initial drafts and 447 during final drafts. Student C composed a total of 337 words during initial drafts and 608 during final drafts. Although the factor of additional time on the same assignment cannot be ruled out, students were provided with sufficient time on initial drafts and were visibly able to produce more after feedback and conferencing with the teacher.

Table 1

Pre and Post Conference Word Count Totals

	Total	Student A	Student B	Student C
Pre	1,146	399	410	337
Post	1,476	421	447	608

On-demand Teacher Feedback and Modeling

Students respond better to corrective feedback if provided with models. My assumptions of student mastery of certain skills were incorrect. Even after multiple writing tasks, students still needed models as a form of scaffolding. Examples included models of the Restate portion of the graphic organizer, provided to all three students, as shown here from class notes from 4/2/25, “Model provided to the whole class at Smart Board for question “What aspects of the giant molasses tank bothered residents of the North End?”. The model involved the crossing out of the “question words”, “~~What aspects of the giant molasses tank~~ bothered residents of the North End?” and from 4/22/25, “Model provided on 4/22 of Restate portion: ‘In the article, ‘How to Fail Like a Pro’, your celebrity highlights a healthy way to deal with setbacks’”.

Individual models were also provided. Student A was provided with models of how to combine steps R and A together into one sentence. For example, from 4/23/25, “In the article,

‘How to Fail Like a Pro’, Abraham Lincoln highlights that he thought he was a failure because he was being blamed for the states’ financial problems”. Student B requested multiple times that I write models of text citations on the board for the students to refer to. This was ever present and was in the form of “In the text it states,”. Student C responded to typed comments that were related to what we discussed that also redirected them to models. An example from comments on 3/26/25 is, “(Referring to what student typed in part A of the organizer) ‘Here is where you discuss the examples of personification in your own words. Then, in part C, you cite text evidence’”. It did not always appear that students were referring to these models, but on the day that I did not place it on the board, several students in the class requested it. In my experience student usage of models fades as a sense of mastery increases. However, even after a visual model is no longer needed for instructional purposes, it may be required to provide special education students with reassurance through checking their work against the model.

Individualized attention appears to improve student engagement and metacognition. Participating in individualized micro-conferences appeared to improve student participation in the conferences. Providing students with a narrower focus on specific errors allowed them to work specifically on those errors. Letting students know that we would conference again by the end of the period affected their engagement in a positive manner. Over time, students displayed increasing meta-cognition and awareness of their individual writing struggles.

As discussed previously, Student A shared that they have difficulty separating the steps of the organizer but can answer the question by combining steps R and A and then proceeding to step C. Student A also expressed that they did not understand step E. As highlighted in conference notes from 4/21/25, “Student, ‘Do I have to write the E part? I

don't get it.' Teacher, 'As long as you have written the other parts correctly, you can end with the quote'. Reflection, Student A does not appear to grasp the concept of the E or End portion of the organizer. He is successfully writing the answer and citing text evidence. At this point, elaboration after text evidence is confusing for them".

Student B expressed their understanding that they knew what to do but could not always remember how. They expressed that having visual models and asking reassuring questions made them feel better about writing because they felt they could not memorize everything. This example is from conference notes dated 4/4/25, "Student, 'I put the period after the parenthesis. Right?' Teacher, 'Yes. You have been doing that'. Student, 'I know, but sometimes I forget'".

Student C explained their method and the need to get all of the information down and then go back and revise so that they would not forget the important information. This student also engaged in our conference discussions about greater efficiency and better time usage. This student also responded to teacher-typed Google Comments while the other students did not. For example, when I commented praising an answer, Student C commented back. Although it is extensive communication in the revision process, it does show that individual students may use this as an avenue of communication. Teacher typed comment from 4/22/25, "Teacher, 'Excellent! This is true. You are having a great year because you never give up :)'. To which the student responded, 'Thank you'".

Summary

The data gathered in this study was analyzed to determine the effects of providing resource special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences and whether this would improve their performance on extended response questions. Within the data sources of pre and post conference word count totals, teacher micro-conference notes, and teacher-typed comments on Google Docs, two themes emerged. The first theme was the

impact of individualized attention on student writing needs, which may be more individualized than they appear. The second theme found was that on-demand teacher feedback and modeling promoted more successful student implementation of writing strategies. The findings show that individualized attention helps address writing needs and improve writing production (writing stamina) and learning occurs within collaborative process between teacher and students.

Table 2
Teacher Micro-Conference Notes

Students	Verbal Feedback in Micro-Conference	Student Actions
A	3/26 Student, “What do I write in A?” (Referring to the Answer portion of the organizer) Teacher, “You write your answer in your own words.”	Student A appears to blend steps R and A of the organizer in the same section
B	3/26 Student, “Can you write the author’s name on the board?” Teacher, “Yes. But remember it is also in the text.”	Student B appears to prefer having some models and information on the board.
C	3/26 Student C answered correctly but paraphrases or copies text evidence and incorporates it without citation.	Student had difficulty correcting the paraphrase and needed more direct instruction.
A	4/3 Conference Notes “Restated after modeling provided at the Smart Board”	Student correctly copied the model from the screen.
B	4/3 Conference Notes “Student B requested a model of the proper citation. The model provided was, “ (Tarshis 7). This allowed students to choose their own text evidence but use the correct format.”	Student properly used model and added appropriate page number.
C	4/3 Conference Notes Student C answered correctly but paraphrases or copies text evidence and incorporates it without citation.	Student corrected it after this conference. Student also stated that this was part of their rough draft process.

A	<p>4/4 Conference Notes</p> <p>“Student A is writing section A as a continuation of section R. I do not know yet whether this is a hindrance due to the student’s inability to separate each thought. This repetition of the use of the same words leads to a lower quality answer.”</p> <p>Teacher, “You can combine Parts R and A if that is easier for you. As long as your final answer is correct, it is fine.”</p>	Student permitted to combine R and A into the same sentence and their production increased after allowing for this.
B	<p>4/4</p> <p>Student, “I put the period after the parenthesis. Right?”</p> <p>Teacher, “Yes. You have been doing that.”</p> <p>Student, “I know, but sometimes I forget.”</p>	Student B is learning to discuss and negotiate their concerns. I am hoping that with time and support they will become more confident.
C	4/4	Student appears actively engaged in the process and benefits from explanations.
	<p>Student C asked, “Why do we spell it with an e?”</p> <p>Teacher response, “You are using effect as a noun. When it is a noun, it begins with e”</p> <p>“Change couldn’t to could not. Write out contractions.”</p>	
A	<p>4/10</p> <p>Student, “Is it okay that I put R and A in the same sentence?”</p> <p>Teacher, “Yes. This is well done.”</p>	Student A has progressed to successfully combining R and A into the same step.
B	<p>4/10</p> <p>Teacher, “You have a lot of information here. Can you revise it and make it into 4 or 5 sentences?”</p>	Student B revised but still had a run-on sentence.
C	<p>4/10</p> <p>Teacher, “Excellent restating. Remember to write out contractions like won’t”</p> <p>Student, “Should I write out that’s too?”</p> <p>Teacher, “Actually, that is your text evidence. You do not need to change it.”</p>	Student C forgot to change won’t to will not. I should have followed up with a comment. Corrective comments related to mechanics, grammar, and spelling are better in the form of typed comments.
A	<p>4/21</p> <p>Student, “Do I have to write the E part? I don’t get it.”</p> <p>Teacher, “As long as you have written the other parts correctly, you can end with the quote.”</p>	Student A does not appear to grasp the concept of the E or End portion of the organizer. He is successfully writing the answer and citing text evidence. At this point, elaboration after text evidence is confusing for them.

B	4/21 “Teacher, ‘Remember to use, In the text it states . . .’” “Student, Can you write that on the board so I remember?”	Student successfully used the model and completed the citation.
C	4/21 “Teacher, Excellent corrections. You are following my comments well.”	At this point Student C is making corrections based on comments. This student displays a high level of intrinsic motivation.
A	4/22 Teacher, “Remember this is an article and not a story.” Student, “What’s the difference?” Teacher, “Since this is informational text and not fiction, we can refer to it as an article.”	Teacher had to follow up some typed comments with verbal reminders and clarification.
B	4/22 Teacher, “You need to replace them with you.” Student, “I changed it in the two spots. Why do I have to change it again?”	Student B made the changes and expressed understanding of subject/verb agreement.
	Teacher, “It’s subject/verb agreement. You need to use you throughout the whole sentence”.	
C	4/22 Teacher, “Great job with your corrections. You forgot to write out your contractions again. If using contractions is part of your prewriting, you need to remember to fix them during revision”. Student, “I need to get my ideas down”.	Student C shows increasing self-awareness and metacognition but needs to remember to make corrections during revision.

Table 3***Teacher Typed Comments on Google Docs***

Students	Comments on Google Docs	Student Actions
A	3/26 (Referring to what student typed in part R of the organizer) “This is where you restate the question as a statement. So, you do not use “In the text” yet. You will use that in part C.” (Referring to what student typed in part A of the organizer) This is part C. Cut and paste it there. Part A is where you answer the question in your own words.	Student did not correct the error. Student corrected the error and wrote an appropriate answer in Part A of the organizer.

B	3/26 (Referring to what student typed in part A of the organizer) “This is great! What words does she use.?” (Referring to what student typed in part C of the organizer) “Remember to properly cite text evidence.”	Student added to but did not complete her answer. She ran out of time. Student corrected errors in text citation.
C	3/26 (Referring to what student typed in part R of the organizer) “Great first sentence! Check the spelling of the author’s name.” (Referring to what student typed in part A of the organizer) “Is this the start of a new sentence?” (Referring to what student typed in part A of the organizer) “Here is where you discuss the examples of personification in your own words. Then, in part C, you cite text evidence.”	Student corrected the spelling of the author’s name. Student changed the sentences and removed this part. (Revision) Student discussed the examples but still had surface errors.
A	4/3 Direct corrective:	Student A made corrections.
	“Lowercase s in states” “Invisible” “Lowercase s in states” “noises”	
B	4/3 “residents” “North End is a proper noun” “Change had been to was” “Lowercase a in As”	Student B made some corrections. Student B changed north end to North end. Student B changed “had been” to “was”. Corrected uppercase error
C	4/3 “Change ‘affect’ to ‘effect’” “Remove ‘a lot’”	Student C made corrections.
A	4/21 “Lowercase b in being” “Replace with ‘Being afraid to fail can prevent’” “Page number?” “Remember to add your corrections to the box”	Student A made corrections.

B	4/21 “Excellent!” “Replace this with ‘you’” “Replace with ‘at’” “Excellent!” “Replace with ‘many’” “‘try. This tells you’ (End the first sentence and make a new second sentence.” “Remember to change this according to how you fixed the graphic organizer.”	Student B made some corrections but needed two additional reminders to correct all of them.
C	4/21 “Put a period at the end of the sentence. Very nice!” “Excellent! This is true. You are having a great year because you never give up :)” “Uppercase ‘I’”	Student C made corrections.
A	4/22 “It is an article. You need to write ‘article’ not ‘story’” “states’ You need to add an apostrophe to make it a plural possessive.” “problems. Rewrite the next sentence.”	Student A made corrections.
B	4/22 “Remember to provide text evidence.” (Part C of organizer) “You need to finish” (Part E of organizer)	Student provided text evidence and finished the organizer.
C	4/22	Student made corrections.
	“Spelling” “Is this a quote from the text?” “do not” “End punctuation” “Excellent! This is true. You are having a great year because you never give up :)”	Student responded via comment, “Thank you”.

Chapter V

Conclusions, Discussions and Recommendations

This chapter presents conclusions, discussions, and recommendations regarding this research study. This study was designed to answer the research question: can providing special education students with short, targeted feedback and micro-conferences improve their performance on extended response questions? Three main conclusions were drawn from the research that display ways in which these strategies improve their performance. In addition to presenting and discussing the conclusions drawn from the research study, this chapter also presents recommendations for further study, as well as recommendations for teachers

Conclusion I

Individualized attention can affect writing stamina and motivation of special education students

Discussion

From the data analysis, specifically the participants in this study increased the volume of words produced, I came to this conclusion. From the findings I discovered that each of my students arrived at a point in their pre-comment and preconference writing at which they reached a limit of what they could write. These were essentially sticking points from which they needed outside assistance in the form of typed/verbal feedback and models. For example, Student A reached points of confusion related to the format and procedure of the rubric. An important discovery for me was that using the method of targeted comments and micro-conferences increased the frequency of and narrowed the focus of corrective feedback. In writing, special education students can encounter a number of challenges throughout the different stages of the writing process. Firstly, increasing the frequency of teacher feedback

guides special education students successfully through the process. They often lack the ability to move back and forth through stages and need to be guided linearly through the logical sequence. Many special education students are not able to proceed to a later step until they have achieved a level of proficiency with the previous step. Secondly, narrowing the focus of teacher feedback assists special education students with more specific needs. In this research, it was found that corrective feedback related to grammar, spelling, and punctuation was better addressed through teacher-typed comments on Google Docs while procedural feedback and student questions were better addressed through one-to-one micro-conferences. Sperling (1990) describes the writing conference as an occasion for teacher-student collaboration. This is composed of conversational and instructional elements that merge in the service of the student's learning to write. Through the use of more frequent and focused conferences, special education students improved their ability to communicate their needs in the collaborative process with the teacher. This research also aligns with Irawati's study (2012) that researched the combination of teacher written feedback and conferencing to improve students' writing. In that study, it was concluded that written feedback and conferencing is appropriate as a good combination technique in teaching writing for the level of junior high/middle school. According to Irawati, the students at this level still need teacher intervention in the learning process and, as adolescents, seem to be "dependent learners". This was found to be the case in this study of 8th grade special education students. The grade level at which special education students may not be considered "dependent learners" may be a strong consideration for further research.

Conclusion II

Revision is a collaborative process that supports student engagement and metacognition.

Discussion

From the data analysis, specifically the participants in this study engaged in a collaborative process that supported student engagement and metacognition, I came to this conclusion. From the findings I discovered that my students became more engaged in the revision process through responding to comments and collaborative discussions during conferences. During initial conferences at the beginning of the research, the discussions were more teacher-led. However, as the number and frequency of conferences increased so did student participation and the quality of student questions, which displayed increased engagement and metacognition. Individual conferences facilitated this better than small group conferences. There were overall patterns. For example, each student discussed revisions and came to conferences with follow up questions from revisions based on previous comments and conferences. The conference patterns and styles with each of the three students had individual nuances. Student A would not regularly participate in whole class discussions but enthusiastically participated in individual writing conferences, Student B identified preferred models, and Student C had specific questions about language usage and how to be more concise. Sperling's research (1990) suggested that as they work together on a succession of tasks, teacher and students become more comfortable together and more evenly active in participating in conversation. As students gain experience writing and revising across a sequence of writing tasks, they become more familiar with conference talk that serves their writing experience. That there is often variation in the construction of conference talk over time and tasks suggests most importantly that conferencing is a literacy event that is itself a fluctuating and often evolving process (p. 308). During individual conferences, these variations become more individualized.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, further research is recommended on the effect of targeted feedback and micro-conferences on the writing performance of special education students. The focus of this study was on the use of these strategies for extended response questions that were based on informational texts and required that students produce answers of four to six sentences with text evidence. Given that the research found the strategies to be useful for supporting and scaffolding students' performance with the procedural demands of writing, it would be beneficial to understand if and how these strategies could be applied to other genres and formats of student writing.

Also, in the special education setting, could there be a scaffolded procedure with the genres and formats that could be applied to determining the ideal scope and sequence of writing instruction for special education students in the resource setting? In the middle school special education classroom teachers plan the year in terms of fundamental writing skills as well as genre and format instruction. This has often taken the form of specific prepackaged programs. A longer study on how the methods of this study could be applied over the course of an academic year could provide teachers with a way to use the strategies to better align the work done in the resource setting with the in-class support setting. This can also be useful for students as they progress through the levels of Least Restrictive Environment and progress from resource settings to more inclusive settings. A final recommendation for further investigation is how to appropriately and successfully incorporate Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the revision process in conjunction with feedback and micro-conferences.

Recommendations for Teachers

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for teachers

to improve upon their practices for the writing instruction of special education students. The first is that this research made a priority of the revision process. I have found that a focus on rewriting through regular revision in collaboration with their teachers supports the growth of special education students as writers. Teachers can create writing opportunities by replacing multiple choice questions with extended response questions. Students will still use valuable skills in reading comprehension that will allow them to answer multiple-choice questions.

The process also facilitates and develops important collaborative skills. Special education students often possess challenges in communicating on an academic level. Through a greater frequency of scaffolded communication, students are provided with more opportunities to develop valuable speaking and listening skills. A recommendation for teachers is to regularly support this process and facilitate its transition to peer conferencing in time. Importantly, the transition to peer conferencing will need to be scaffolded by the teacher.

A final recommendation would be for teachers to help special education students create their own writing resources through the practice of collecting teacher-provided models. While all middle school writers require skills in reference usage, special education students require more individualized references. These references can be in digital or print form, and students can have ownership of them. Importantly, the role of the middle school special education teacher is to foster and develop greater independence in their students. This can be accomplished as a theme that is threaded through the teachers' instructional practices, such as those used in writing instruction.

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