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**Actualidades Investigativas en Educación**

Revista Electrónica publicada por el  
Instituto de Investigación en Educación  
Universidad de Costa Rica  
ISSN 1409-4703  
<http://revista.inie.ucr.ac.cr>  
COSTA RICA

**JOURNALS: A TOOL TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS**

EFFECTOS DEL USO DEL DIARIO EN EL MEJORAMIENTO DE LA PRODUCCIÓN  
ESCRITA DEL ESTUDIANTE

Volumen 7, Número 1

Enero-Abril 2007

pp. 1-37

Este número se publicó el 30 de abril 2007

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## **JOURNALS: A TOOL TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS** EFECTOS DEL USO DEL DIARIO EN EL MEJORAMIENTO DE LA PRODUCCIÓN ESCRITA DEL ESTUDIANTE

*Annabelle Hernández Herrero*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper reports on the results of a research study carried out with a group of second-year students of English at the School of Modern Languages at the University of Costa Rica. The purpose of the study was to determine if explicit instruction of troublesome linguistic aspects (syntax, morphology, lexicon, and punctuation) taken from the students' journal entries improved the students writing skills. A qualitative methodology was used.*

**Key words:** EXTENSIVE READING/ JOURNAL ENTRIES/ IMPROVE/ LINGUISTIC ASPECTS/ WRITING SKILLS/

**Resumen:** *El propósito de este artículo es reportar los resultados de un estudio que se llevó a cabo con un grupo de estudiantes de inglés de segundo año de la carrera de inglés en la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Se investigó qué aspectos de la enseñanza explícita de temas lingüísticos tomados de los diarios de los estudiantes permiten una mejora en las habilidades de escritura de los mismos. Se utilizó una metodología cualitativa*

**Palabras clave:** LECTURA EXTENSIVA/ DIARIOS/ MEJORA/ TEMAS LINGÜÍSTICOS/ HABILIDADES DE ESCRITURA/

### **1. Introduction**

Costa Rica has undergone many changes in the last four decades; it shifted from an agricultural society dependent on its main exports: coffee, bananas, and sugar into a dynamic economy where services are the number one source of income. At present, Costa Rica is one of the most attractive tourist sites in the area; there are many national and international companies with state of the art technology developing software which is exported over the world. There is also a very dynamic industrial and commercial sector. All this has changed its demographic composition, which shows a large increase in the urban population; this means that there are more people dedicated to manufacturing, services, and commerce. These people

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**Artículo recibido:** 25 de enero, 2007

**Aprobado:** 21 de marzo, 2007

have a great need to communicate in English to meet the demands of national and international companies, which require proficient users of the English language. The Internet, for example, has become an important means of communication. People read and write e-mails and letters and use chat rooms to communicate nationally and internationally. They also have to go to job interviews and write résumés in English. In short, there is internal and external pressure on Costa Rica to become more integrated into the international community, and the ability to speak, read, and write in English is an essential tool to get a good job. That is why many public and private educational institutions are joining efforts to make Costa Rica a bilingual country.

The School of Modern Languages of the University of Costa Rica offers a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language, the latter in conjunction with the School of Education. LM-1246 - Reading Comprehension – is a core second-year course for both majors. The purpose of this course is to develop good reading habits and the skills necessary to enable students to become active, fluent readers of a variety of texts. They are encouraged to approach new reading material with pleasure and confidence by using reading strategies that are appropriate to the type of text.

One of the problems that the professors of the program find is that the students are often unable to transfer the skills they learn in one course to the other courses they take. Therefore, in faculty meetings we have noted that grammar and composition must be taught in all the courses offered in the program if we want our students to become proficient speakers and writers of the language. The reading class can help us reach both goals. The texts provide excellent opportunities for discussion, and journal entries can help students improve their writing skills.

This article presents the results of a research project carried out with a group of second-year English students at the University of Costa Rica during the first semester of 2006. Its purpose was to find out if explicit grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary instruction based on feedback provided by journal entries improved the students writing skills. The results and recommendations are addressed mainly to the staff of the School of Modern Languages and to any teacher interested in helping his/her students become better readers and writers of the English language.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Reading and Writing in Second/Foreign Language Learning

According to Willis (1996), teachers and many successful learners feel that extensive reading is a very good means to learn another language. They find that reading is an excellent way of expanding vocabulary, learning new phrases, and consolidating grammar. Reading provides rich exposure to language in use. It has the advantage that students can read at their own pace, read things over again, look up new words in the dictionary, and record new words and useful phrases (p. 8).

Krashen's reading hypothesis - a special case of the comprehensible input hypothesis - claims that:

Reading for meaning, especially free voluntary reading, is comprehensible input and is the source of much of our competence in literacy, our reading ability, writing style, much of our vocabulary and spelling competence, and our ability to use and understand complex grammatical constructions. (Krashen, 1997, p. 5)

Anderson says that many second language learners have mentioned lack of vocabulary as one of the main problems in understanding a text, and the most successful way to acquire a large vocabulary is through extensive reading; "*this includes reading during class time, as well as after school and weekends, reading beyond the required homework assignments, and reading for fun as well as for information.*" (Anderson, 1999, p. 23). In order to expand their vocabulary and become better readers, students can keep a personal dictionary, a reading log (Anderson, 1999, and Atwell 1987; Garcia 1994; Hill and Ruptic 1994; Routman 1994 in O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996), and a reading journal (Casanave, 1993).

In personal dictionaries, also known as vocabulary logs, students record new words related to personal readings and class assignments. The new words taken from in-class readings are teacher-selected. Professors can base their criteria for choosing and recording the words in the log on Nation's (1990) definition of what is involved in knowing a word. According to him, receptive knowledge involves being able to recognize a word when it is heard or when it is seen. It also involves having an expectation of what grammatical pattern the word will occur in, the knowledge of its frequency of occurrence, and the words it will collocate with; that is, which words usually accompany it, for example, *too* frequently collocates with *late* and *much*. Knowing a word also includes being able to recall its meaning when we encounter it and being able to see which nuance is most suitable for the context that it occurs in. Productive knowledge includes all of the above plus knowing how to pronounce

the word, how to write it, and what other words could be used instead (pp. 30-32). Professors, therefore, can ask the students to include in their personal dictionaries the phonetic transcription of the word, a definition, the part of speech, the context in which it occurs, and an original sentence using the word. When choosing words, teachers should also take into consideration the frequency of occurrence. Since new vocabulary from personal readings is selected by the students, Anderson (1999, p. 24) suggests letting them add these words to the log in any way they want: a picture, a definition in the target language, an equivalent term in their first language, their own sentences using the new words, and so forth.

One way to hold students accountable for their reading progress is to ask them to document the type and quantity of reading they do in their reading logs (Atwell 1987; Garcia 1994; Hill and Ruptic 1994; Routman 1994 in O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996). Reading logs provide the students with an account of the books and texts they have read over a specific period of time. Students keep a chart where they enter the book's author and title, the date completed, the number of pages read, and a brief critique of the reading (p. 111).

Research studies (Atwell 1987; Garcia 1994; Hill and Ruptic 1994; Routman 1994 in O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996) have also shown that responding to literature helps students become better readers. This can be done through reading response logs, which are basically journals about what the students read. The students write personal reactions and reflections about the reading material, and the professor comments on the student's observations. In reading the journals, the professors focus feedback on content rather than form, and they write comments about the ideas expressed in the journal entries (p.111).

Casanave (1993) believes, however, that some students are interested in receiving linguistic feedback. Therefore, he suggests extracting passages from the journals and displaying them anonymously on an overhead projector to be examined later for lexical, grammatical, and stylistic improvements. Casanave (1993) also provides some useful advice for successful journal writing tasks. When selecting readings, professors should choose interesting topics to suit their students, they should have a purpose in mind, and they should also provide general journal writing guidelines. These should include the purpose of the writing, the minimum length (in words), how often journals have to be turned in, and the evaluation criteria. Since responding to journal entries is very time consuming, he recommends that teachers resist the temptation to comment on every idea and correct every language error. Comments on content should be brief but meaningful for the students, but once in a while, teachers can include a lengthy response to everyone's writing. This personal

response from the professor establishes a communication with the students that could be more rewarding than other less personal activities in the class (pp. 149-156).

I agree with Casanave that comments on form can also be beneficial. Students have to understand that grammar is important, and that people may not understand what they write (or say) if their sentences are ungrammatical, if they misspell words or use incorrect punctuation. Larsen-Freeman (2003) claims that focusing on the form of the structure is not enough. Form (How is the structure formed?) is only one of the three dimensions applied to language in communication. The other two are semantics (What does the structure mean?) and pragmatics (When/why is the structure used?). Students have to learn not only how to use the forms correctly, but how to use them meaningfully (semantics) and appropriately (pragmatics) as well (pp. 34-36). In addition, professors have to keep in mind that the students will not successfully produce grammatical sentences if the conditions of learning are different from the conditions of use. According to Larsen-Freeman, this shift of modality leads to a change in cognitive demands, and transfer will be unsuccessful (Personal communication, January 26, 2006). This is what might be happening in the School of Modern Languages. If the students spend most of the class time memorizing a set of formulas or practicing grammar points in isolation, professors cannot expect them to transfer the skills to other courses and use the structures correctly in authentic communication situations (oral and written).

To summarize, in order to become good readers and writers, students should be aware of the importance of building a large vocabulary, and extensive reading is one of the best ways to achieve this goal. They also have to produce grammatically correct sentences. This means using grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. Authentic readings help student learn to use grammar structures correctly because they include samples of what native speakers say. It is important for professors to keep in mind that the way they teach and the practice activities they implement in class will directly affect successful transfer of the skills to real-life situations.

## **2.2. Providing Feedback**

Larsen-Freeman (2003, p. 123) uses the term *feedback* to mean "evaluative information available to learners concerning their linguistic performance." She claims that there are many ways in which teachers can provide feedback to the students. However, in order for feedback to be effective, it should be done judiciously, using appropriate techniques, appropriately focused, in an effective supportive, nonjudgmental manner.

She provides guidelines to help professors attend judiciously to certain errors. The following recommendations seem appropriate for writing tasks:

- a. Work on errors, not mistakes.
- b. Focus feedback on errors which hinder communication.
- c. Work with errors which show that students know what they want to say, recognize that they do not know how to do so, and try anyway.

This means that the professor has to be aware of what the student is trying to say in order to provide an acceptable linguistic formulation. Although students might not pay attention to the professor's feedback, knowing what the students want to say will increase the chance of success. Identifying the source of an error can also be very helpful in determining what sort of feedback to offer in response.

There are many techniques that can be used to provide feedback. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994 in Larsen-Freeman, 2003) offer a scale, which goes from more explicit techniques to more implicit ones. At the implicit end of the continuum, students are asked to find their errors and correct them on their own. Toward the middle of the scale, the nature of the error is identified, and explicit negative feedback is given, but the student has to identify the precise error and correct it. At the explicit end of the scale, the student is given an explanation for the use of the correct form and, if necessary, additional examples are provided. It is assumed that self-correction yields better results because when the students correct the error, they are more likely to remember it. However, favoring self-correction does not mean that professors cannot use other techniques, for example, explicit teacher feedback and peer feedback. Regardless of the technique used, it is important to note that no technique is successful unless the student becomes aware of the gap between what they have produced and what is linguistically correct.

Professors should try to create a supportive learning atmosphere in the classroom, which will be conducive to learning. Students have different personalities and learning styles; therefore, professors have to get to know their students and provide feedback selectively. It is important to add that teachers should develop a repertoire of techniques and select the correct one(s) according to the target problem and the individual learner (pp.123-139).

To summarize, Larsen-Freedman is in favor of providing students with feedback. In order for feedback to be effective, though, it has to be judicious, appropriate, and nonjudgmental. She says that even though this is no easy task, teachers should not abandon the quest because this is the only way the students will be aware of what is correct and what

is wrong in the target language. She adds: "feedback is one answer to a question I often ask myself: 'what is it that I can give my students that they can't (easily) get on their own?'" (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 139)

### **3. The Study**

#### **3.1 Research Question**

How does explicit instruction of troublesome linguistic aspects (syntax, morphology, lexicon, and punctuation) taken from the students' journal entries improve the students' writing skills?

#### **3.2. Specific Objectives**

3.2.1 To determine which linguistic aspects (syntax, morphology, lexicon, punctuation) need to be reinforced in order for the students to improve their writing skills

3.2.2 To design materials that help students overcome the selected linguistic problems

3.2.3 To inventory the students' errors based on their journal entries and assess the progress made throughout the semester

#### **3.3 Participants**

A total of 23 LM-1246 – Reading Comprehension students, 10 men and 13 women, studying English at the University of Costa Rica during the first semester of 2006, participated in the study. The students whose ages ranged from 18 to 24 were all native speakers of Spanish. They met on Fridays from 10:00 p.m. to 12:50 p.m.

#### **3.4 The Data**

The following research tools were used to gather information: the students' journals, a questionnaire, and personal communication with the students. The comments included in the analysis of results were transcribed verbatim when they were in English, and they were translated when they appeared in Spanish.

##### *3.4.1 The journal*

The students kept a journal which was divided into three sections: the reading journal, the reading log, and the personal dictionary or vocabulary log. In the reading journal, the

students summarized ideas, expressed opinions, and wrote their reactions and critiques regarding the books they read. In the reading log, they recorded the book's title, the author's name, the number of pages read per week, and the date of completion. In the vocabulary log, the students practiced teacher-selected vocabulary taken from the in-class readings, and words of their choice selected from the outside readings. For the teacher-selected words, the students included the phonetic transcription, the context where the word was found, a definition, the part of speech, and an original sentence using the word. They could record the personal words in any way they pleased. Some students included a definition, others the pronunciation, a picture, or the translation. I asked them to include the page where the word was found so that I could check the context if I thought that the translation or definition was not correct.

The journal was handed in every other week. For the purpose of this project, the professor not only commented on the ideas expressed by the students but also gave feedback on form. The form feedback given in the journal was mainly explicit. However, in the vocabulary log, if the teacher-selected words were used incorrectly, the students had to rewrite the sentence.

### *3.4.2 The questionnaire*

The professor administered a questionnaire (See Appendix A) on the ninth week in order to evaluate the usefulness of the handouts and the feedback given both in the journals and to the whole class. In addition, the data collected served to plan the second part of the semester's work.

### *3.4.3 Personal communication with the student*

The professor held informal conversations with different students to get more information about both their writing problems and the usefulness of the feedback given.

## **3.5 Methodology**

In LM-1246 – Reading Comprehension, the students engage in two types of reading: extensive and intensive reading. Although there is not complete agreement on the meaning of these two terms, in this course we call intensive reading the reading done in class. The students perform activities aimed at activating prior knowledge, cultivating vocabulary, developing reading comprehension, increasing reading rate and fluency, verifying strategies, and evaluating progress. Extensive reading, on the other hand, refers to the reading that

takes place outside the classroom. It encourages the learning of reading through large amounts of reading outside class time. Hopefully, however, the students will transfer the strategies learned in class to their personal reading. The students read three or four novels<sup>2</sup>. The minimum number of pages for the semester is 1000, approximately 50 pages per week. The students keep a reading journal, a personal dictionary, and a reading log.

In the first semester of 2006, when the project took place, the students wrote journal entries every other week, and the professor gave them individual and in-class feedback on content and form. In addition, handouts with rules and exercises were designed to provide group feedback on troublesome linguistic items such as punctuation, lexicon, syntax, spelling, and morphology. The linguistic aspects were selected based on the frequency and the number of students who made the error. Sentences from the students' journal entries were chosen to exemplify the points to be reinforced and to design the exercises. The professor kept track of students' progress throughout the semester based on journal entries.

#### **4. Analysis of Results**

##### **4.1 To determine which linguistic aspects (syntax, morphology, lexicon, spelling, punctuation) need to be reinforced in order for the students to improve their writing skills**

The first objective of this study was to determine which linguistic aspects had to be reinforced in order for the students to improve their writing skills. In order to achieve this objective, the following goals were set:

- a) Coming up with an inventory of linguistic aspects the students would have to reinforce in order to improve their writing skills
- b) Selection of the linguistic aspects to be reinforced in this project based on the importance and frequency of the error and the number of students who made them.

The most common errors found in the journal entries throughout the semester were punctuation marks, subject/verb agreement, subject omission, spelling, word choice, indirect questions, the use of *another*, *other(s)*, *the other(s)*, collocations, prepositions, as well as verb forms and tenses.

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<sup>2</sup> In the first semester, 2006, the students read **The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari** by Robin S. Sharma, **The Chronicles of Narnia**, *The Magician's Nephew*, by C. S. Lewis, **The First Part Last**, by Angela Johnson, and **Go and Come Back** by Joan Aelove.

All the students made punctuation mistakes in the first journal entry. The following were the most common punctuation errors:

**Run on** - sentences with no punctuation

- **omission of a period or a semicolon**

*"Therefore, he started to feel a big hole in his life there was something missing."*

- **omission of a comma before coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet)**

*"So he sold his material possessions and he went to this magnificent place."*

- **omission of commas in a series**

*"He is a boy who lives with his aunt, his "mad" uncle and his mother (who is ill)."*

- **omission of a comma after an introductory word, phrase or clause**

*"After that they started to help each other and to respect their differences."*

**Comma splice** - sentences separated by a comma instead of a period or a semicolon

*"He was completely changed, he passed from looking in the mid-seventies to ..."*

**A comma before *because***

*"He wanted to share his knowledge about life, because he felt it was like mandatory."*

**Subjects separated from verbs**

*"Overweight people, are prone to heart diseases and also to respiratory problems."*

Other types of errors which deserved special attention were subject /verb agreement and subject omission. Eighteen out of twenty-three students had problems with subject/verb agreement, and twelve out of twenty-three students had problems with subject omission. The following are examples taken from the students' journals.

- *"He always protect us and wants the best for us."*
- *"...between people who says nice things."*
- *"It was very dangerous, but [she] could handle the situation very well."*
- *"In one part of the book, Bobby describes how difficult [it] was to be a single parent and a student at the same time."*

Nine out of twenty-three students used embedded questions and *another*, *other(s)*, and *the other(s)* incorrectly. Students wrote the following sentences:

- *"This book help me to remember what are the real important things in our life."*

- "Andrew explained to Digory that his experiments were to go, with the rings, to other world."

The students made word choice errors and many spelling mistakes, most of them probably due to Spanish interference. Some examples of frequently misspelled words were *diferent*, \* *responsability*, \* *beuty*, \* *wich*, \* *inmediatly*, \* *recomend*, \* and *believes (n)*. \* However, a more serious problem was substituting a word for a homophone (a word that sounds the same but is spelled differently) for example, *waist* for *waste*, *roll* for *role*, *tail* for *tale*, *sole* for *soul*, and *to* for *too*. Here are examples taken from the students' journals:

- "It was pretty obvious that he was going to have an important roll in the story."
- Time represents an unvaluable gift in our lives.....never waist it."

Another problem was using words that were spelled and pronounced in a different way, which really caused misunderstanding of the message. Some examples of the latter were substitution of *aloud* for *allow*, *list* for *least*, *most* for *must*, *quite* for *quiet*, *leave* for *live*. Observe these sentences:

- "I most say that I was a little disappointed by this book.
- "We are not aloud to let others steal our time."

The students also had problems with word choice. Some of the words frequently misused were *lecture* instead of *reading*, *costume* instead of *custom*, *remind* instead of *remember*, and *remain* for *remind*. The following sentences illustrate this point:

- "We have to be aware of that and try to understand and respect people who have different costumes and points of view, even when they make no sense to us."
- "The symbol is the shiny gold stopwatch that remain us that time is very precious and nonrenewable."

Prepositions were also a troublesome element. The most common error was selecting the right preposition for verbs such as *arrive (at/in)*, *depend (on)*, *interested (in)*, *consist (of)*, and *care (for)*, *take care (of)*, among others, but students also omitted the preposition, for instance, in *listen to*, *explain to*, *care for*, *take care of*, or added one when it was not necessary as in *enter* and *attend*. Some examples are

- "They first arrive to the Wood between the Worlds."
- "...if I care my body, I am going to care my mind."
- "When we listen good music, we'll feel great."
- "They entered in the tunnel."

The most frequent errors in collocations were: make a decision/an effort, tell the truth, give an account of, catch your attention, do exercise, do/carry out/conduct/an experiment, and be aware of. The students wrote:

- *"Digory shows his courage when he is forced to take important decisions as saving Polly or ringing the bell of the other world."*
- *"The first characteristic that really took all my attention....."*
- *"I think that teenagers should read it to take conscience of what would happen when you're irresponsible."*

The students also had trouble choosing the correct part of speech in closely related words such as *live-life*, *save-safe-safely*, *fill-full*, *sit-seat*, and *die-dead-death*. For example, students wrote the following sentence:

- *"I would try to full my mind with positive thoughts every day."*
- *"He suffered a severe heart attack that changed his live."*
- *"I got sidetracked by all the noisy it caused."*

Other troublesome linguistic elements were word order, and verb form and tenses. For example, students wrote in the vocabulary log:

- *"Catholics go with zeal to church every Sunday."*
- *"She gets pay a pittance."*
- *"She really was reborned."*
- *"Women in this village are used to have sexual relationships since they are very young."*

Based on the importance and frequency of the errors and the number of students who made them, the following linguistic aspects were selected to be reinforced throughout the semester: punctuation, subject/verb agreement, subject omission, indirect questions, *another*, *other(s)*, and *the other(s)*. Handouts and exercises were designed to work on these linguistic elements. However, students were also given individual feedback on their specific linguistic problems. This was done in the journals and in personal communication with them. In addition, in-class group feedback was also provided. The latter focused mostly on teacher-assigned vocabulary included in the personal dictionaries, and common errors in collocations, prepositions, and parts of speech, such as the ones mentioned above.

Spelling, errors in word choice, as well as verb forms and tenses were generally corrected individually. Students were asked to check the meaning of the words in the

dictionary and to remember to use them correctly. Also group feedback was given when several students misspelled or misused the same words.

#### **4.2 To design materials that help students overcome the selected linguistic problems**

The second objective of this study was to design materials which would help the students overcome the selected linguistic problems. For this objective, two goals were set:

- a) Selection of excerpts from the students' journals to design handouts and exercises, as well as to provide feedback
- b) Designing materials with rules and exercises to reinforce the selected linguistic aspects

As was previously mentioned, punctuation was the most common problem found in the first journal entry. Therefore, in addition to individual feedback, a handout with rules and exercises was designed. Also, based on the frequency and the number of students who committed the error, the following points were selected: run-on sentences (omission of a comma before coordinating conjunctions and omission of commas in a series), comma splice, a comma before *because*, and subjects separated from verbs (See Appendix B). Later on in the semester another handout was designed to focus on the meaning of some subordinators and the punctuation of clauses containing subordinators, which were found troublesome by a good number of students (See Appendix C).

It is important to mention that the professor selected a new linguistic element to focus on approximately every two weeks, after journals had been checked. For example, when the students were reading *The Magician's Nephew*, they had to refer to the different worlds mentioned in the book. Many students were using *other*, *another*, and *the other(s)* incorrectly; therefore, a handout with rules and exercises was designed to give them practice with the use of those words (See Appendix E), Handouts were also prepared for embedded questions (See Appendix D), subject/verb agreement and subject omission (See Appendix F). Whenever possible, feedback on form, meaning, and use was provided. The professor went over the rules with the whole class. The exercises were then done individually, and finally they were checked as a group.

#### **4.3 To inventory students' errors based on their journal entries, and assess the progress made throughout the semester**

The third objective of this study was to make an inventory of the students' errors based on their journal entries, and observe the progress made throughout the semester. In order to achieve this objective, the following goals were set:

- a) Bimonthly reviews of the journals in order to determine if there was improvement in the elements reinforced in previous entries, during in-class activities, or in handouts.
- b) Evaluation of the handouts and the feedback given, and observation of the performance of the students in journal entries to find out which techniques were more effective
- c) Selection of nine students (three high-level students, three intermediate and three low-level students) to inventory their errors and observe the progress made throughout the semester.

The students wrote eight journal entries. The professor corrected the most important errors, and the students were told that their grade depended not only on content but also on the attention given to the corrections made by the professor in entries written previously. When the same errors were repeated, the students were asked to review the handouts given or to check the teacher's comments in earlier entries. In general, the majority of the students showed improvement. However, not all the students made progress week after week, or continued making progress. In personal communication with the students, some of them mentioned that at times attention to error correction depended on their having time to edit their work. When I noticed that a student was not making progress, I would speak to him/her personally. One student, for example, said that she had been very busy; therefore, she had written the journal entry the night before the class, and she did not have time to reread her work or pay attention to individual and in-class feedback. She said that that was why she made many of the mistakes, which she had already overcome in previous entries. Other students were unable to detect their mistakes. For example, a student said that she took the time to proofread the entries, but she did not notice a misspelling because the words (homophones) sounded correct when she read them. Another student mentioned that sometimes it was hard to understand the teacher's corrections. For example, she wrote: "*I think this book was boring and actually didn't like me that much.*" I wrote: *The book didn't like you, or you didn't like the book?*" In other journal entries she wrote again: "*That's why*

*the book didn't like me.*" and *"This time the book did like me."* In personal communication with her, she claimed that she had not understood my comment.

On the ninth week of the semester, the students filled out a questionnaire (See Appendix A), to evaluate the usefulness of form feedback based on journal entries. Twenty-one students answered the questionnaire. Twenty students said that they were paying attention to the corrections made in the journal entries, and the same number of students answered that the feedback was helping them improve their writing skills. All the students said that the in-class feedback was helping them improve their writing skills. When asked what kind of feedback was most helpful, the students ranked individual feedback in the journals as the best, followed by in-class group feedback, with handouts as the least helpful. Here are some of the students' comments taken from the questionnaire:

- *"Because it is easy for me to see my own mistakes when the professor marks them and corrects them. Thanks!"*
- *"For me, it's more useful to learn about my personal mistakes."*
- *" Because the correction is more direct, based on a specific situation (I feel it's personal attention toward the student)(my translation)"*
- *"The feedback given in class and in the journals has really help me in all courses."*
- *"I pay more attention in class than at home (corrections from journals)"*
- *"It helps you to improve writing skills like spelling. But sometimes [it] is a little hard to understand the feedback."*
- *"Because I usually put the handout with the rest of papers other teachers give me, so it gets lost."*

When asked what type of feedback helped them the most, the students ranked grammar as the most important, followed by punctuation, word choice, and spelling. Some students mentioned pronunciation (phonetic transcription) as an additional element.

In answer to the question "What would you like to get feedback on the rest of the semester?" eighteen out of twenty-one students mentioned grammar and punctuation, seventeen said word choice, thirteen students chose spelling, and three added phonetic transcription.

Nine students (three high-level students, three intermediate, and three low-level students) were selected to make an inventory of their errors and their progress throughout the semester. The tables below provide a summary of the type and number of errors in the eight journal entries. The following abbreviations were used for the different types of errors:

p	<b>Punctuation</b>	w.o	<b>Word order</b>
s-om	<b>Subject omission</b>	sp	<b>Spelling</b>
s-vagr	<b>Subject/agreement</b>	wch	<b>Word choice</b>
art.om	<b>Article omission</b>	prep	<b>Prepositions</b>
ind-qts	<b>Indirect questions</b>	p-spch	<b>Part of Speech</b>
(an)other(s)	<b>another/other(s)</b>	vt-vf	<b>Verb tense/verb form</b>

**Table 1**  
**Inventory of Students' Errors**  
**high-level students**

Journal entry		1			2			3			4			5			6			7			8		
Sts.	Gender	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
		F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M
Types of Errors	P <sup>3</sup>	5	6	3	6	-	2	4	-	2	4	1	2	-	-	-	3	3	1	2	2	-	1	-	1
	S-om	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-
	S.-Vagr.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Art.om	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	1	-	-	-
	Ind.qts.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	(an)other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	wo	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
	sp	2	-	3	-	-	1	1	2	1	-	1	3	2	1	5	1	-	1	1	2	4	1	-	5
	wch	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	2
	prep	1	-	5	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	1	-	2	-	2	-	1	1	-	1	1	3	-	-
	p.spch	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-
	vf-vt	3	-	1	-	2	1	1	1	2	-	-	2	-	-	1	1	2	2	-	-	2	1	-	-

Student 1, a female, is a high-level learner with an excellent command of the English language. Table 1 shows that the most frequent error found in her journal entries was punctuation. She had run-ons (omission of a period or a semicolon, omission of a comma before a coordinating conjunction, omission of a comma after an introductory phrase), comma splice, and subject separated from verb. She overcame most of these problems except the comma splice. In spite of the feedback given, examples of comma splice were found in several entries, including the last one.

- "I mean, it's ok to share your things, a selfish person is very annoying, but the Isabo push it way too far!"

<sup>3</sup> Because of space limitations, all the errors in pronunciation were grouped together. In the analysis, they were mentioned separately.

She also had a few mistakes in spelling, prepositions and verb form and tenses. It is interesting to know that she took advantage of the journal to ask the professor questions when she had doubts about the use of a particular structure, for example:

*"Is it looking forward to read or looking forward to reading?"*

In general, she made progress in most of the areas, although prepositions continued to be a problem for her.

Student 2, a female, is another high achiever with a very good command of the English language. Table 1 shows that this student had problems with punctuation marks. Her errors included run-ons (omission of a comma before a coordinating conjunction and omission of a comma after an introductory phrase), comma splice, and subject separated from verb. It seems that feedback was helpful, although in entries 6 and 7 she made the same mistakes again, probably due to lack of editing. She also had a few mistakes in spelling and verb forms and tenses. However, no repetition of errors was found in the last entry.

Student 3, a male, is a very good, creative writer. His grammar was quite accurate except for a few problems with prepositions, verb forms and tenses. His vocabulary was varied and extensive with a few mistakes in word choice. The most important problem he had from beginning to end was spelling. He also had some errors in punctuation marks, mainly omission of commas before coordinating conjunctions and after an introductory phrase, and a comma splice in entry six. These problems were overcome, although one instance of the second problem was found in the last entry.

In short, the most frequent errors found in the three high achievers were punctuation and spelling. It seems that feedback was effective in the use of punctuation marks; however, spelling continued to be a problem.

**Table 2**  
**Inventory of Students' Errors**  
**intermediate students**

Journal entry	1			2			3			4			5			6			7			8		
Sts. Gender	4 M	5 F	6 F	4 M	5 F	6 F	4 M	5 F	6 F	4 M	5 F	6 F	4 M	5 F	6 F	4 M	5 M	6 F	4 M	5 M	6 F	4 M	5 F	6 F
P <sup>4</sup>	10	9	23	4	2	7	2	2	5	4	3	15	5	1	2	-	-	10	1	-	9	1	3	1
S-om	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	-
S.-Vagr.	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	2	3	-	-	2	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-
Art.om	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
Ind.qts.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	1
(an)other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
wo	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
sp	3	1	9	4	-	4	2	1	2	-	1	7	3	6	2	-	4	6	4	13	3	6	5	1
wch	1	2	2	-	-	-	2	-	4	1	-	-	-	1	3	-	-	5	1	2	-	1	1	1
prep	-	-	4	1	2	2	3	-	5	3	1	1	2	1	3	2	-	1	1	-	-	1	-	-
p.spch	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
vf-vt	4	2	1	3	-	1	2	1	2	2	-	2	1	3	1	-	1	2	2	1	2	4	1	1

Student 4, a male, is an intermediate learner with a good command of the English language. He showed great interest in expanding his vocabulary and learning the correct use of the new words and expressions he encountered in the readings. He was continually making use of the dictionary to check pronunciation and usage. At the beginning of the semester, he had serious problems with verb forms and tenses, spelling (*quite* for *quiet*), prepositions, word choice, collocations (*use\** clothes, *take\** decisions), and punctuation marks, mainly comma splice, and run-ons (omission of a comma before coordinating conjunctions and after an introductory phrase). Subject/verb agreement seems to have given him some trouble, too. He made progress in some of the areas, for example, punctuation, word choice, and subject/verb agreement, but spelling, along with verb forms and tenses, continued to be troublesome for him. In my opinion, many of his errors were due to lack of editing.

Student 5, a female, is another intermediate learner. Her most serious problems were spelling and punctuation. Other less problematic aspects were verb forms and tenses, subject/verb agreement, prepositions, and word choice. She showed progress in most of these areas, with the exception of spelling, which got worse. Some of the errors she

<sup>4</sup> Because of space limitations, all the errors in pronunciation were grouped together. In the analysis, they were mentioned separately.

apparently overcame were made again in the last entries, as can be noted in the table above, for example, omission of a comma before a coordinating conjunction, and subject/verb agreement, probably due to disinterest. She disliked the last book assigned and, therefore, lacked motivation to write about it. However, she did not mention anything about this until the last journal entry, when it was too late to give her a different book.

Student 6, a female, is a low-intermediate learner. She seemed interested in writing, and her entries were always longer than required; which is why more errors were noted in them. She had serious problems in areas such as punctuation, especially comma splice and run-ons (omission of a comma before coordinating conjunctions and after introductory phrases), spelling, prepositions, and word choice. She also had some difficulty with verb forms and tenses, word order, and subject omission. Some of her spelling errors (or word choice) hindered communication. She used, for example, *costume* for *custom*, *aloud* for *allowed*, and *waist* for *waste*. In personal communication with her, she mentioned that she did not have time to edit her work, which was why she was making so many mistakes. She promised to do a better job on the last entry, and she did.

As a whole, the intermediate students seemed to have had serious problems with spelling and punctuation. In addition, verb form and tenses, prepositions, and word choice were also troublesome aspects for them. They showed some improvement in the different areas; however, spelling, punctuation, and verb forms and tenses continued to be difficult for all three.

**Table 3**  
**Inventory of Students' Errors**  
**low level-students**

Journal Entry		1			2			3			4			5			6			7			8		
Sts.	Gender	7	8	9	7	8	9	7	8	9	7	8	9	7	8	9	7	8	9	7	8	9	7	8	9
		F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	F
Types of Errors	P <sup>5</sup>	15	1	2	12	4	-	11	6	7	7	8	5	12	2	1	10	2	3	8	2	-	4	2	3
	S-om	1	-	1	-	-	3	-	1	3	-	-	3	-	-	6	-	1	2	-	-	1	-	-	1
	S.-Vagr.	1	1	-	2	3	3	2	7	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-
	Art.om	1	1	1	2	2	-	3	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
	Ind.qts.	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	(an)other	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	wo	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	sp	10	6	2	6	3	-	17	1	2	5	7	2	9	1	3	5	-	2	8	-	-	3	-	-
	wch	7	4	4	3	2	-	10	-	5	1	-	-	3	1	1	1	1	2	1	-	-	3	-	-
	prep	1	1	4	-	5	-	1	4	1	2	1	4	1	1	4	-	1	3	1	-	-	-	-	-
	p.spch	1	-	-	3	3	-	1	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	2	3	-	1	-	-	2	2	-	-
	vf-vt	4	6	4	2	1	1	4	7	5	5	5	2	3	1	3	2	2	5	4	-	3	-	-	-

Student 7, a female low-level learner, had serious problems with punctuation, spelling, word choice and collocations, verb forms and tenses, and choosing the correct part of speech. Her most common punctuation errors were run-ons (mainly omission of a comma before a coordinating conjunction and omission of comma after an introductory phrase), and comma splice. She misused words such as *lose-lost-loose*, *lives-leaves*, *remainder-reminder*, and others. In personal communication with her, she mentioned that she edited her entries, but when she read them out loud, the words sounded right. In the last entries she showed some improvement in subject/verb agreement, article omission, word order, and prepositions; however, there were still errors in the other categories.

At the beginning of the semester, student 8, a male low-level learner, had problems in many areas, mainly verb forms and tenses, spelling, subject/verb agreement, prepositions, word choice, collocations, and punctuation (omission of a comma before coordinating

<sup>5</sup> Because of space limitations, all the errors in pronunciation were grouped together. In the analysis, they were mentioned separately.

conjunctions and after introductory phrases), comma splice, and subject separated from verb. He also added commas where they were not needed and overused the article *the*.

The following sentences taken from his journal entries exemplify errors in collocations and overuse of *the*:

*"I need to make exercise at least five hours per week."*

*"During the Holy Week, many people get sidetracked."*

He showed a lot of progress after the second half of the semester. In personal communication with him, he mentioned that he edited his work and rewrote the entries several times while paying attention to the feedback given. An interesting fact about this student is that he was not taking other language courses; therefore, his progress was due to feedback given in the reading class, in the journal, and through personal communication with the professor, but most important of all, to his interest in learning to do things better.

Table 3 shows that student 9, a female low-level learner, had problems in many areas: subject omission, verb forms and tense, prepositions, word choice, spelling, subject/verb agreement, parts of speech, and punctuation (omission of comma before coordinating conjunctions, omission of comma after introductory phrase, and comma splice). In addition, she produced fragments and unclear ideas. In personal communication with her, she made it clear from the very beginning of the course that she did not want to be an English teacher; therefore, she was not interested in improving her grammar or learning to write well. She only wanted to pass the course and be able to change majors, unfortunately, a very common situation at the School of Modern Languages. However, her performance in the courses she was taking was not helping her to achieve this objective. She also said that sometimes she could not understand the feedback given by the professor; therefore, I tried to give her personal attention. She made an effort in the last third of the semester and showed some improvement in most of the areas previously mentioned.

Overall, the low-level students had problems in most of the areas. They also had fragments and unclear ideas in their journal entries. In spite of the feedback given, two of them had a hard time overcoming their problems. It is clear that paying attention to feedback and taking the time to edit the work is the key to success.

To summarize, the students wrote journal entries every two weeks, and the professor collected the journals and gave feedback on content and form after each entry. The linguistic aspects that needed attention in order to improve the students' writing skills were punctuation marks, spelling, word choice, collocations, prepositions, verb forms and tenses, subject/verb

agreement, subject omission, indirect questions, the use of *another*, *other(s)*, *the other(s)*, and parts of speech.

Based on the importance and frequency of the errors and the number of students who made them, the following linguistic aspects were selected to be reinforced by making use of handouts: punctuation, subject/verb agreement, subject omission, indirect questions, along with the use of *other*, *other(s)*, and *the other(s)*. Errors in spelling, word choice, verb tense and form, collocations, prepositions, and parts of speech, in general, were very personal; therefore, they were given individual attention in the journals and in personal communication with the students. In addition, in-class group feedback was also provided mainly on teacher-assigned vocabulary included in the vocabulary log, and common errors on collocations, prepositions, and parts of speech.

A questionnaire was administered on the ninth week of the semester to evaluate the usefulness of the handouts, as well as the feedback given in the journals and in class. The majority of the students ranked individual feedback as the most helpful because it was more personal and direct, followed by in-class group feedback, with handouts as the third choice. The students mentioned feedback on grammar as the most important, followed by punctuation, word choice, and spelling.

Nine students were chosen to carry out an inventory of their errors and observe their improvement throughout the semester. The most frequent errors found in the three high achievers were punctuation and spelling. It seems that feedback was effective in the use of punctuation marks; however, spelling continued to be difficult for them.

The three intermediate students made the same errors as the high-level students, but they were found more frequently in their journal entries. In addition, they had more problems with verb forms and tenses, prepositions, and word choice. They showed some improvement in the different areas; however, spelling, punctuation, and verb forms and tenses continued to be troublesome for all three.

The low-level students had frequent errors in all the linguistic aspects selected to be reinforced in this project. They also produced fragments and unclear ideas. In spite of the feedback given, two of them had a hard time overcoming their problems.

It is important to point out that some sentence patterns, for example, embedded questions, or words such as *other*, *the other*, and *another*, were more frequently used in specific contexts. Therefore, not finding errors in entries did not necessarily mean that the students did not make the error or that they overcame it. It could be that they did not need to use them in subsequent entries.

To conclude, the nine students, regardless of their proficiency level, had difficulty using punctuation marks and spelling words correctly. The majority made progress in the use of punctuation marks, but spelling continued to be hard for most of them. In general, the same errors were committed by all the students, regardless of their proficiency level; however, what constituted the difference was the frequency with which the errors were found.

## **5. Conclusion**

Journal writing can be a helpful tool to improve students' writing skills. First, the learners are more motivated to write because they have a chance to express their opinions about the books they read. Second, they have an opportunity to use the language learned in the readings in a real context. Third, feedback can be tailored to the student's needs. For teachers, the journals provide authentic samples of students' work; therefore, they can pinpoint content and linguistic problems and give individual and group feedback. Since all the entries are kept together in a notebook, the professor can also keep track of the students' progress throughout the semester. However, it seems that paying close attention to feedback and taking the time to edit their entries are key elements for students to succeed.

## **6. Recommendations**

1. Teachers have to be aware of the language problems second-year learners have, and design tasks which will help them overcome them. In order for students to successfully transfer the skills learned, the tasks should be similar to the situations the students will encounter in real-life situations or in other courses.
2. Teachers have to encourage the students to edit their work and correct their mistakes based on the feedback given. As was mentioned before, self-correction seems to yield better results because when students correct an error, they are more likely to remember it.
3. Even though the students ranked individual feedback as the most helpful, a combination of different types of feedback is recommended. First, because students have different learning styles, and second, because providing feedback on the same linguistic problem in a variety of ways might lead to acquisition.
4. It is very important to pay attention to the way we provide feedback. Students might not understand our comments if they are not clear enough, or they are not familiar with the terminology or symbols we use.

5. Individual feedback in the journals might not be enough. Some students might need personal communication with the teacher to go over their errors, clarify doubts, or ask additional questions. Moreover, the professor can ask the students why they are not making progress, and encourage them to work harder and pay attention to the feedback given.
6. Whenever possible, while providing feedback, teachers should focus on the three dimensions of language: form, meaning, and use.
7. Spelling needs special attention. It seems that this area has not been given special attention in any of the courses the students take. It is important for them to know that misspelling in letters and other documents can be stigmatized, and they might lose an opportunity to get a good job if they do not write well.
8. It is important for teachers to make students aware that using *leave* for *live*, *most* for *must* and other twin words is not a spelling mistake, but an error in word choice which hinders understanding of the ideas they want to convey. Professors should take the time to go over the spelling and meaning of these homophones, and encourage students to proofread their work carefully when they find them in their writings in order to make the correct choices.
9. Texts (books, articles, stories, etc.) are excellent for motivating students to write. First because they always find something to say. Whether they like what they are reading or not, they can always react positively or negatively toward the text. Second, the texts provide the language (vocabulary and grammar) the students need to express the ideas they want to convey.
10. It is vital for the students to enjoy what they are reading. Although it is difficult to please everybody, professors should choose books appropriate for the age, interests, and proficiency level of the students. If a student does not like the theme or the type of book assigned, teachers should give them alternatives in order to get better results.

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## APPENDIX B

### PUNCTUATION

#### I. The Use of the Period and Semi-colons

1. Use a period (.) or a semi-colon between grammatically separate sentences.

Some people like Picasso. Others dislike him.

Some people like Picasso; others dislike him.

2. A semi-colon is preferred if the ideas are very closely connected.

It is a good idea; whether it will work or not is another question.

#### II. The Use of Commas

1. Use a comma (,) before **and**, **but**, **or**, **nor**, **for**, **so**, and **yet** when they join independent clauses.

**I drive** my car when I have classes in the morning, **but I take** the bus if my classes are at night.

However, when the independent clauses are very short, the commas before **and**, **but**, and **or** may be omitted. A comma is always used before **nor**, **for**, **so**, and **yet** when they join independent clauses.

They do the dishes together. She washes *and* he dries.

**Should we bring** the journals to class, *or* **can we leave** them in the teacher's office?

Don't confuse a compound sentence with a simple sentence containing a compound verb. No comma is needed between parts of a compound verb.

The great Julian Mantle **had been reduced** to a victim *and was* now squirming on the ground like a helpless infant.

2. Use commas to separate items in a series or list. A *series* is three or more items written one after another. The items in a series may be words, phrases, or clauses.

John, Betty, and Percy are going to the movies. We are going to stay home. (words)

The hamster ran through the kitchen, into the den, and up the curtain. (prepositional phrases)

In New York, we visited the museums, went to the theater, and ate international food. (verbs phrases)

I searched, I found, and I rejoiced. (short independent clauses)

3. Do not use a comma before **because**

### III. Exercise - Proofreading Sentences for Correct Punctuation

A. On the line before the sentences, write **C** for correct and **I** for incorrect. Write/omit commas, periods, or semi-colons when necessary.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. We made a fruit salad of bananas pineapple papaya and orange juice.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Steven wanted to go to the movies but his girlfriend wanted to go shopping.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. My mother got my brother ready, my father took him to school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I filled up the tank and then checked the oil.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The concert will take place this weekend so we already bought the tickets.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Some cabins had only one room, others had two.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I had a lot to do this morning, I washed the clothes, went to the supermarket and prepared lunch.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I wasn't wearing repellent yet the mosquitoes didn't bite me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Amy sharpened her pencil, and immediately began to write.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I drove and he gave me directions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. The parking lot was crowded, because today was market day.

B. Write/omit commas, periods, or semi-colons when necessary.

1. Julian's life changed for good, he embraced his past as a lesson and experienced .....
2. He wanted more and more, he was never satisfied he needed more prestige, more glory and more money, I think those things.....
3. Julian's appearance changed too, his face was a mass of wrinkles, he was overweight, he always seemed tired, and he looked like a seventy-year-old man, when he was just fifty-three years old.
4. Every day the situation got worst, he just slept 2 hours and the rest of the time he was working, his marriage failed, he no longer spoke with his dad, he gained some weight and looked old.
5. He's an attorney but he doesn't know anything about law.
6. I never neglect my friends, because they are very special to me.
7. This behavior not only affected his professional life, but also affected his personal life.
8. He had learned a lot and he was willing to pass that knowledge to those who wanted it.
9. He was obsessed with work so, he spent a lot of time working in his firm.
10. He had all that but, there was something else, he could not stop working not even a minute.

## APPENDIX C

### SUBORDINATORS

#### Even though, (al)though, in spite of

Observe the following sentences and answer the questions:

1. What is the meaning of **even though, (al)though** and **in spite of**?
1. What is their part of speech?
2. When and where are commas used?

- *Even though I have a master's degree in Business Administration, I can't fill out my tax form.*
- *Phil failed the exam even though he tried his best.*
- *We understood him although he had a strong accent.*
- *Though she was terribly tired, she went on walking.*
- *We understood him in spite of his accent.*
- *"Nice day. A bit cold, **though**."*

**Even though, (al)though** and **in spite of** are used for introducing a fact that makes the main statement in your sentence very surprising.

They mean the same. **Though** is informal.

They introduce dependent clauses. Therefore, they are fragments unless we join them to other sentences.

**Although** and **though** are conjunctions. **In spite of** is a preposition.

A comma is placed after the dependent clause when it is at the beginning of a sentence. Do not use any commas when the clause is placed somewhere else in the sentence, such as at the end.

We can use **though** to mean 'however.' It usually comes at the end of a sentence in informal speech.

**Observe the following sentences:**

- **We went out in spite of the rain.**
- **We went out although it was raining**
- **Although I don't agree with him, I think he's honest.**

In spite of + noun

(Al)though + clause

### Despite \*( prep.), Despite the fact that

They are used to show that something happened although you would not expect it.

- *Despite having very little money, they enjoy life.*
- *The project went ahead despite public opposition.*
- *Despite the fact that she left him, he still loves her.*

### Even (adv)

1. We can use **even** to emphasize surprising extremes – when people 'go too far', or do more than we expect, for example. **Even** usually goes in mid-position.

aux verb + even be + even
------------------------------

Even + other verb
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- *She has lost half of her clothes. She **has even** lost two pairs of shoes.*
- *He didn't even open the letter.*
- *She is rude to everybody. She **is even** rude to the police.*

**Even** can go in other positions when we want to emphasize a particular expression.

- *It isn't very warm here **even in the summer.***
- ***Even the kids** helped in the yard.*

2. It is used when you are comparing things to make the comparison stronger.

- *It is even more difficult than I expected.*
- *We are even busier than we were yesterday.*

### Even if

It is used for saying that what follows "if" makes no difference

*I wouldn't do it, even if you paid me a thousand dollars.*

### Exercise - Proofreading Sentences for Correct Punctuation and Word Choice

On the line before the sentences, write **C** for correct and **I** for incorrect. If the sentence is incorrect, make the necessary changes.

- \_\_\_\_ 1. Their customs include no savings, no visits. Although, their most important custom is sharing what they have.
- \_\_\_\_ 2. Despite the fact that he was telling the truth we didn't believe him.
- \_\_\_\_ 3. I got a bad grade, even though I studied for the test.

- \_\_\_ 4. The food was terrible. The dog even refused to eat it.
- \_\_\_ 5. He's determined to prove his innocence even if he has to go to the highest court in the land.
- \_\_\_ 6. Though she was very tired she could not sleep.
- \_\_\_ 7. Economics is a difficult subject. Though it's interesting.
- \_\_\_ 8. Despite the fact I studied for the test I failed it.
- \_\_\_ 9. Although, we have to understand that "happiness is a journey, not a destination (189)" and that "journey is to be enjoyed (p.195)."
- \_\_\_ 10. Although this story has some similarities with God's creation. I think the main point of the book was....
- \_\_\_ 11. Despite, all these possessions did not make him happy.
- \_\_\_ 12. Although he had everything that a person could desire he was not happy.
- \_\_\_ 13. In spite I feel tired, I decided to go out.

**Sources:**

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## APPENDIX D

### Direct Questions

- a. What is the difference between a ghost and a phantom?
- b. Where did the Bell Witch story take place?
- c. How did the haunting finally end?
- d. Do you believe in ghost stories?
- e. Can tales of phantom hitchhikers be easily verified?

### Embedded Question

- f. Can you explain what the difference between a ghost and a phantom is?
- g. Do you know where the Bell Witch story took place?
- h. Could you tell me how the haunting finally ended?
- i. I'd like to know if you believe in ghost stories.
- j. Please tell me if tales of phantom hitchhikers can be easily verified.

- Observe the direct and embedded questions above:
- What is different about the form of the questions?
- When do we use embedded questions?

- Embedded WH questions begin with the WH question word (*what, how, why, when, etc.*). The words that follow are in statement word order, not question word order. Embedded Yes/No questions begin with *if*. The question word order is changed to the statement word order.

- The embedded question begins with a clause such as:

Do you know	}	why
Can/could you explain		what (kind)
Can/could you repeat		how
Can you tell me		when
I'd like to know		where
Please tell me		if

- We often ask embedded questions when we are not sure the person will know the answer. *Do you know where the Bell Witch story takes place?*
- You can also use embedded questions to politely ask for information.

B. Change these direct questions into embedded questions.

1. How can you practice the art of Kaizen?

Could you explain \_\_\_\_\_

2. How big was that opportunity?

Michael Dell had no idea \_\_\_\_\_

3. Who did the ghost haunt in the Bell Witch story?

I'd like to know \_\_\_\_\_

4. Did Michael Dell begin conducting business when he was a student at the University of Texas?

Do you know \_\_\_\_\_

C. Correct the following sentences.

1. Your life will be more meaningful if you dedicate your day to see how can you help your fellow man.

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Well, if you ask me how can I practice the Japanese art of Kaizen? I will probably say that...

\_\_\_\_\_

3. ....taking the time to think how can I be a better person.

\_\_\_\_\_

4. ....because we do not know where does Julian go when he got out of John's house.

\_\_\_\_\_

5. -----and she explained to them how did she destroy that world.

\_\_\_\_\_

6. The teachings are mainly about how can we get a .....

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### ANOTHER, OTHER(S), THE OTHER(S)

#### ANOTHER

1. **Another** is one word. It means one more in addition to the one(s) already mentioned.
2. **Another** is normally used with singular countable nouns.
3. We can use **another** before a plural noun in expression with **few** or **a number**.

Would you like another piece of pie?  
I'm staying another few weeks.  
We need another three chairs.

1. **Each other** and **one another** mean the same.

Mary and I write **each other/one another** every day.

#### Other, others, the other(s)

1. Forms of **other** can be used as either adjectives or pronouns. A final **-s** is used only for a plural pronoun (**others**). **Other/others** (without *the*) means several more in addition to the one(s) already mentioned.
2. **The other(s)** means all that remains from a given number; the rest of a specific group.

The students in our class come from many provinces. One is from Puntarenas. **Another** is from Cartago. **Others** are from San José, Heredia and Alajuela.

I'm going to take sandwiches to the party. What about **the others**?

#### Exercise 1 - Fill in the blanks with a form of **other**.

1. I got three e-mails. One was from my mother. \_\_\_\_\_ one was from my sister. \_\_\_\_\_ was from my girlfriend.
2. I would like to read more books on this subject. Do you have any \_\_\_\_\_ that you could lend me?

3. There are two women standing on the corner. One is Helen Jansen and \_\_\_\_\_ is Pat Hendricks.
4. Some people prefer classical music, but \_\_\_\_\_ like rock.
5. We will graduate in \_\_\_\_\_ two years.
6. Mr. and Mrs. Jay are a happily married couple. They love \_\_\_\_\_, and they support \_\_\_\_\_
7. I'm almost finished. I just need \_\_\_\_\_ five minutes.
8. There are many means of transportation. The airplane is one. \_\_\_\_\_ are the train, the automobile, and the horse.
9. My father reads *La Nación* every day. He doesn't read any \_\_\_\_\_ newspapers.
10. One of the countries I would like to visit is Spain. \_\_\_\_\_ is Italy.  
Of course, besides these two countries, there are many \_\_\_\_\_ would like to see.

Exercise 2 - Work in pairs. Take turns completing the following statements orally using an appropriate form of **other**.

1. I speak two languages. One is .....
2. Some people have straight hair, but .....
3. I'm still thirsty. I'd like .....
4. Some TV programs are excellent, but .....
5. Maria and Pepe are in love. They really love .....
6. There are three colors that I especially like. One is .....
7. I'm still hungry. I'd like .....
8. There are three beaches in particular that I would like to visit while I am in Guanacaste. One is .....
9. One of my favorite TV programs is .....
10. Costa Rica has three basic problems. One is the cost of living .....
11. There are three languages which are the most spoken languages in the world. One is English.....
12. There are many immigrants in our country. Some are from .....

## **APPENDIX F**

### **Learning from Our Mistakes**

Correct the following sentences.

1. ...because he don't use Armani anymore.
2. It is a very useful technique that Julian mention in this part of the book.
3. At the end, talks about service. How by serving others we can improve our life.
4. ...because it remind us to avoid taking everything for granted.
5. I think this book give us a positive message.
6. The Fourth is the Ritual of Abundant knowledge that consist to learning.
7. In Narnia, was the witch who tempted Digory.
8. She touches one of the rings and disappear.
9. ...is easy to recall everything you read.
10. These rituals requires time.
11. He always protect us and wants the best for us.
12. I only notice three symbols that the author use instead of the biblical ones.