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## Proofreading in a UK university: Proofreaders' beliefs, practices, and experiences

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### Abstract

This article presents key findings from an interview-based study of the beliefs, practices, and experiences of 16 proofreaders of student writing in a university setting. *Proofreading* is defined for the purposes of this research as “third-party interventions (entailing written alteration) on assessed work in progress.” We report results relating to the proofreader informants' profiles, the types of texts informants are willing or unwilling to proofread, how much proofreaders charge for their work, the terminology informants and writers use to refer to proofreading, the changes proofreaders are willing and unwilling to make to writers' texts, and some of the ethical uncertainties informants have experienced when proofreading. There were differing beliefs about the appropriacy of proofreading outside the informants' disciplines, different labels given to proofreading by informants and student writers, differences in fees charged and in proofreading practices, and uncertainty regarding the ethical (in)appropriacy of certain types of intervention. We end by discussing the implications of the results and pointing to future research that will enhance our understanding of proofreading.

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### Introduction

When university students, particularly nonnative speakers (NNS), experience difficulties with writing, their lecturers, in the UK at least, sometimes encourage them to “have it proofread.”<sup>1</sup> One can find numerous adverts for “proofreading” around the notice boards of the University of Essex, where we work, and proofreading has always featured in the production of final academic and nonacademic texts. However, the changing nature of the academy, with the recruitment of more and more nontraditional and NNS students (e.g. Lillis, 2001), has resulted in an increasing number of students with a range of language support needs, impacting on academic supervisors and language support tutors. It has also quickened the debate about how much help nonnative writers, in particular, should be permitted in relation to work going on to be assessed. Attention has therefore focused anew on the nature of proofreading practices in the modern university context. In our institution, for instance, proofreading services are completely unregulated. So what is in fact being offered in the name of proofreading?

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<sup>1</sup> We use ‘lecturer’ as a generic term for disciplinary faculty.

We have each reflected on the issues associated with proofreading in the context of our own roles. As a PhD supervisor the first author routinely proofreads his students' theses before submission.<sup>2</sup> He is aware, however, that some other supervisors do not do the same, and indeed may feel very differently about the appropriateness of any significant intervention of this nature on their part. As a language support tutor, the second author has conducted a survey of our university's writing and study guides and found that none of the documents makes any direct reference to the acceptability or otherwise of students seeking help from professional proofreaders. They do, however, suggest markers will take a dim view of language errors, and seemingly encourage the informal use of proofreading by (native speaker) friends or colleagues:

If English is not your first language, try and get a native speaker to read your essay through for you. . . . an uncorrected essay looks unloved, and carelessness in the writer can hardly stimulate a tutor to care about what you have written. (University of Essex, 2005)

Hence, she has found that student writers have approached native speakers around the university asking for their help. Finally, the third author runs a volunteer-led student resource centre in her department with a long-standing and popular proofreading service for students seeking help with term papers, and has long wrestled with debates about the rights and wrongs of proofreading in relation to student texts.

Although there have been several recent studies of proofreaders (e.g. Bisailon, 2007; Burrough-Boenisch, 2003a; Lillis & Curry, 2006a; Mauranen, 1997), most of these have focused on proofreaders helping nonnative academics writing for publication in English-language journals; studies of proofreading nonnative *student* writing are lacking. Among the important issues for universities to consider are the following: What precisely is meant by the term *proofreading* to those who offer a service by this name in the university setting? What kind of qualifications and experience do people proofreading student writing have? What kinds of changes do they make to writers' texts and why? What types of text improvement is it legitimate for a proofreader to make? And at what point and in what ways might proofreading activities tip over into undesirable interventions by, for instance, compromising authorship of work which will go on to be assessed? In the interests of fairness and consistency, it is important that higher education institutions are able to answer such questions to their satisfaction. To begin to address these questions, therefore, our research focused on the following principal areas:

- (1) Proofreaders' *profiles*, in terms of their education, training, and experience of academic writing;
- (2) Proofreaders' *practices and beliefs* regarding proofreading student writing (e.g. the types of text proofread, fees charged, terminology used to describe the proofreading act, and types of intervention made when proofreading);
- (3) Proofreaders' *experiences* regarding proofreading student writing (e.g. good, bad, and problematic).

We should make clear that our use of the terms *proofreading* and *proofreader* at this point is for convenience, as they are the most commonly used terms in our UK context to describe the acts we are focusing on. As we have already noted, we recognised early on, however, that the terms themselves are potentially problematic: *Proofreading* may be used differently by individuals to describe a range of interventions which are not necessarily limited to interventions at the level of grammar, syntax, and morphology, while, as we shall see, a number of different terms are also used, at times for broadly equivalent practices. One of the aims of our study was to explore what different groups and individuals understand by the terms they use, thereby arriving at a more accurate description of the types of activity that the proofreading term is used to denote. In the interview-based study described below, we therefore defined our focus of interest to proofreader informants as *types of help (whether voluntary or paid) that entail some level of written alteration to a "work in progress" (i.e. work that will contribute towards an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, or which may be published)*. Our working definition of proofreading is, more simply, *third party interventions on assessed work in progress*.

In the first of what we plan as a series of papers reporting the results of our study, we wish to provide readers with an overview of our project and to present some of our principal findings. The study involved lengthy, two-phase, semi-structured interviews with 16 proofreaders who responded to our request to participate. In what follows, we report on the proofreader informants' profiles, the types of texts informants are willing or unwilling to proofread, how much proofreaders charge for their work, the terminology informants and writers use to refer to the act we call proofreading,

<sup>2</sup> We follow the UK custom of referring to doctoral-level texts as *theses* and master's-level texts as *dissertations*.

the changes proofreaders are willing and unwilling to make to writers' texts, and some of the ethical uncertainties informants have experienced when proofreading. There are, of course, other parties directly or indirectly involved or affected by proofreading—not least the writers whose work is proofread and the lecturers who mark it. We plan to focus on these parties in future research. However, we felt it was logical to begin by focusing on the proofreaders themselves as those who intervene in and react to writers' texts rather than the writers who respond to these interventions and reactions in turn.

We now briefly review the current debate about proofreading and relate it to the second language writing literature, before describing our methodology, the construction of our interview schedule, and the analysis of our data.

### *Proofreading student writing*

Mary Scott and Joan Turner have contributed to the proofreading debate with discussion pieces and conference papers. Turner and Scott (2007) and Turner (in press), for instance, highlight the “conceptual fuzziness” of the proofreading term itself: Both lecturers and student writers speak of proofreaders “tidying up” their texts when in fact far more substantial interventions are necessary. *Proofreading* in the traditional sense of the word (“a final run-through” before submission, “changing a misspelling here or putting in a punctuation mark there”) is not a true representation of the type of interventions being made. Turner (in press) points out that language support units in UK universities have very different policies regarding proofreading: Some centres offer proofreading free of charge (although what is meant by *proofreading* may vary); others explicitly state they will not proofread; still others are happy to allow staff to proofread for payment outside their working hours, and will pass colleagues' contact details on to writers wishing to secure these services. Turner and Scott (2007) and Scott and Turner (2008) have also focused on proofreaders' advertisements found on the walls of their institutions and the messages they transmit about the proofreading act. They argue that the reader is given the impression that proofreading is a relatively unproblematic, straightforward process: As a result of the writer's payment, the text will be transformed to “reflect the appropriate academic standards.” Yet the advertisements make no mention of generic or disciplinary variation across the academy—the different requirements which may be expected in different fields or by different markers (see Hyland, 2000; Samraj, 2002).

There has also been a recent lively email discussion of proofreading by members of BALEAP, the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes, prompted by one university EAP centre's consideration of the possibility of establishing a proofreading service as part of their range of activities. Many contributors agreed with Turner and Scott (2007) that proofreading means different things to different people, and that definitions of what is meant by proofreading and guidelines on how and what to proofread are needed, however tricky these may be to formulate. Some felt that proofreading sends the wrong message to writers, giving them the impression that surface-level problems (grammar, syntax) are where their problems lie, when in fact they may also have problems with their subject knowledge, their organization and their argumentation. It was also claimed that however much proofreaders may try to limit their interventions to these surface-level problems, this may be difficult, an ethical issue we discuss later in the article. However, if universities require error-free texts (which many do, especially at doctoral level) there were contributors who wondered where else students were to turn for help, if not to proofreaders. It was also argued that universities who accept nonnatives with only a modest command of English have a responsibility to address these writers' linguistic difficulties.

While many BALEAP contributors were sceptical about the formative potential of proofreading, Owtram and Hargreaves (2008) describe how the proofreading system implemented at the European University Institute in Florence is intended to be pedagogically beneficial. Students play an active part in reshaping their text rather than relying on the proofreader to do so. Any student asking for “correction” is required to have a face-to-face tutorial afterwards to discuss the tutor's interventions. Correction is done by hand rather than electronically, again to encourage the writer to play an active part in the process; students cannot automatically accept at the touch of a key all the changes the proofreader may have proposed. In line with the views of Chandler (2003), Ferris (2002, 2003b) and Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) on appropriate methods for correcting second language writing, then, this system encourages student writers to reflect on their weaknesses and become more effective proofreaders and editors of their own work.

The proofreading issue is one which is debated regularly in national newspaper educational publications, including *The Guardian* and *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, with many academic contributors clearly concerned

about the ethics of the practice. Scurr's (2006) article, for instance, likens the services offered by a commercial proofreading service to "a high-class escort agency," because it "promises to be "discreet" and is upfront about charges" (p. 13). Scurr goes on to argue that the services offered by this company, which include ensuring the writer's ideas are expressed clearly, constitute "basic literacy and presentation skills," and that unscrupulous writers can therefore "buy" these skills rather than acquiring them over the course of their university years. While Scurr freely admits that some students, particularly NNS, have always needed more help than others, she would prefer supervisors, rather than commercial proofreaders, to be responsible for giving writers feedback for several reasons. Firstly, she claims that supervisors' interventions are more likely to be formative; commercial proofreaders "will do nothing to improve a student's literacy. The service is designed to disguise illiteracy, not combat it" (p. 13). Scurr does not go into detail about why this should be so, but we assume she is thinking about the dynamics of the proofreading process: Presumably, the supervisor's interventions will involve face-to-face discussions, and his or her interventions will occur over an extended period of time to help enable the writer to acquire the appropriate practices successfully. In contrast, a commercial proofreader may return the writer's text just before a submission deadline with little or no face-to-face contact and discussion of the writer's errors, with the writer accepting the proofreader's interventions, perhaps not even properly examining them or reflecting on them. Scurr may also prefer the interventions of supervisors rather than proofreaders because of the supervisor's superior content and disciplinary knowledge, which we discuss later. Secondly, Scurr points out that if it is no longer taken for granted that supervisors will proofread students' work as part of their role, those students who can afford commercial services will have an advantage over their less well-off peers. Finally, Scurr argues that lecturers will be burdened with detective work: While they are currently expected to identify plagiarized essays and theses, supervisors will also be obliged to try to find out whether a flawless piece of work has been proofread, and, if so, by whom.

Some of the issues Scurr raises in connection with proofreading can also be found in another piece appearing in the same publication (Baty, 2006), where we are told that a UK university is routinely providing undergraduates with a list of professional proofreaders "to help them correct poor English and improve their marks," a policy which has "split opinion" amongst staff. While some argue the practice is tantamount to "cheating," others see it as offering "legitimate support" for writers, especially nonnative and dyslexic students. A defender of the policy claims it helps to correct a bias in favour of the native speaker "with good command of written English." Those who oppose it say it encourages students to play a passive role in their studies by "spoon-feeding" them; that it misleads employers, who reasonably assume that a graduate of a British university will be able to write English well; that, as Scurr (2006) argues, it favours those writers who have the ability to afford proofreading services; and that, if the ability to write English proficiently is included in lecturers' marking criteria, the writer whose work has been proofread will be unfairly benefiting from the proofreader's linguistic proficiency.

In contrast, McCulloch (2007) is more open to commercial proofreaders working on PhD theses. McCulloch justifies his position by arguing that universities no longer expect academics to work, or write, alone, and that those students who do not have linguistically proficient friends or spouses willing to proofread for them are at an unfair disadvantage; why, then, should we object to their seeking professional help and paying for it? While McCulloch concedes there is a danger of unethical interventions on the part of the proofreader, he says the PhD viva<sup>3</sup> will determine whether such practices have taken place. McCulloch's article led to several letters of reply from irate readers including Koutsantoni (2007), who objected to the idea of proofreaders reading work in any and every field, since they are unlikely to be conversant with the different disciplinary discourses writers should be using. Koutsantoni also reported that some PhD supervisors were "more or less forcing" students to pay "small fortunes" to commercial proofreaders despite the fact that the students' drafts had already been proofread by their peers (presumably at little or no cost) "and were hardly in need of further editing" (p. 15).

We shall now go on to make connections between proofreading and three areas of the second language writing literature: appropriation of student writing, error correction, and studies of error gravity. The literature on appropriation of student writing (e.g. Reid, 1994) centres around the debate about whether student writers cede responsibility and ownership of their texts to (well-intentioned) writing teachers who help with editing and improvement. Reid describes how in her work as a writing teacher in the early 1980s, even correcting or underlining spelling and syntax errors made her feel she was in danger of appropriating students' work

<sup>3</sup> The British term for dissertation defence.

because error correction establishes the authority of the teacher and leads students to give up ownership of their texts. If students acquiesce in matters of black and white grammar errors, they may transfer that acquiescence to more complex teacher responses about rhetoric, audience, and levels of evidence. (p. 276)

However, as Reid (1994) resisted the temptation to intervene, she felt “fraudulent,” and eventually concluded it was her responsibility to act as “change agent” and to offer “cultural expertise” in the classroom (p. 277). In the same way, if university authorities and faculty are prepared to permit it, well-prepared proofreaders could play a valuable role by acting as members of the audience the writer is trying to address. As Reid points out, many NNS writers may find it hard to anticipate the expectations of a western audience (or at least an audience more schooled in western expectations). Hence, writing teachers (and proofreaders) can be “a liaison between student and discourse communities” (p. 279), acting as “cultural informants,” (p. 282) and enabling writers to understand Anglo-American writing requirements.

A second area of second language writing research which is clearly relevant to a discussion of proofreading concerns error correction and teacher response (e.g. Ferris, 2002, 2003a,b, 2004; Leki, 1990; Zamel, 1985). Much of the correction/response literature recommends that writing teachers correct indirectly by highlighting writers’ errors rather than directly correcting them. In contrast, it may be assumed that proofreaders will often employ direct correction techniques, and there may be a belief on the part of faculty that proofreaders’ practices could encourage writers to avoid careful rereading and proofreading of their own work, knowing that someone can be paid to put things right: We noted above how academics like Scurr (2006) worry that student writers can simply “buy” literacy, accepting the proofreaders’ corrections at the stroke of a key.

A final area of second language writing research with connections to our work concerns studies of judgements by lecturers of written error gravity. Since proofreaders will aim to eradicate most or all surface-level errors, is there evidence that this could positively impact on lecturers’ reading of their texts, and on student writers’ marks? A number of studies of error gravity (e.g. Janopoulos, 1992; Roberts & Cimasko, 2008; Santos, 1988; Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984) have reported marked differences in the way university faculty responded to errors in student writing. Errey’s (2000) study focused on lecturers’ assessments and evaluations of student writing in five different disciplines: sociology, law, hotel management, business, and computing, these five fields being most popular with NNS at Errey’s institution. Errey also found notable differences in what lecturers penalize student writers for. Hence, while the business lecturer did not penalize student writers for language errors, the law lecturer did, judging the student essay he assessed to be worth a “B” grade as far as content knowledge went, but only worth a “C” overall “because of misuse of vocabulary, poor paragraphing and layout inappropriate to the genre” (p. 161). Overall, then, Errey found that lecturers

were consistent in marking for content, but in regard to language error show[ed] a range of consistency in their marking behaviour. So-called mechanics of writing, small points of style and punctuation and aspects of layout appeared in some cases to have a marked effect on assessment. (pp. 162–163).

Given the inconsistency among lecturers, then, it seems that proofreading may make a difference in lecturers’ evaluations of student writing, and indeed to the marks assigned. Thus, once again, ethical issues arise in connection with proofreading, although it should also be said that Errey’s (2000) study also raises questions about the place of language in faculty’s marking schemes, about how effectively faculty in her (and every) institution disseminate these marking schemes to student writers, and the consistency with which such schemes are applied.

We close this section by reiterating that there is another set of literature relating to proofreaders working on nonnative academics’ texts (as opposed to student writing). For reasons of relevance and space we do not engage with this line of research now, but refer to those aspects which have relevance to our own research findings when discussing our results.

## Method

### *Participants*

To recruit informants, we asked proofreaders both on and off campus who were known to us to take part in the study. In his role as PhD supervisor, the first author knew of a number of doctoral students who proofread colleagues’ work.

The proofreading service offered by the student resource centre that the third author runs was an additional point of contact with a number of potential informants. Many of the proofreaders known to the authors, then, operate on a volunteer basis at least some of the time. We also contacted proofreaders who advertised on notice boards around the university (the majority of whom, unlike the proofreaders known to us, apparently proofread mainly or exclusively for payment), and eventually secured the cooperation of 16 informants. Our informants were self-selecting, and we cannot make any claims about how closely they represent UK proofreaders of student writing in general. Indeed, we would have liked more representation of those proofreaders who never advertise, and who proofread only for friends, family, and relatives. However, this group is obviously difficult to contact, although it would be highly desirable to persuade such proofreaders to take part in subsequent studies.

#### *Data sources*

We chose the qualitative interview as a vehicle for our research because it is ideally suited to exploring people's "knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, [and] experiences" (Mason, 2002, p. 63). Since these views may be unpredictable and nonstandardized, to provide informants ample opportunity to voice their beliefs, practices, and experiences, our interview format was semistructured (see, e.g., Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hermanowicz, 2002). Interviews were divided into two parts to avoid fatiguing interviewee and interviewer and thereby potentially discouraging reflexive, in-depth responses. The complete schedule can be found in Appendix. Part I was chiefly concerned with proofreading practices and featured five prompt cards which asked informants to discuss proofreading terminology, the types of texts they proofread, the types of writers they work with, the linguistic proficiency of the writers, and the nature of the interventions informants make while proofreading. The interview also covered informants' practices before, during, and after the proofreading process (e.g. how writers made contact with the proofreader, the content of any preliminary discussion between writer and proofreader, the format used by the proofreader to work on the text (e.g., paper/electronic), how the work was returned to the writer, etc.). Proofreading fees were also discussed. Part II switched the focus to informants' proofreading experiences, good and bad. It also addressed the nature of the proofreader's role, the skills and qualities required for proofreading, and the type of guidance informants believed universities should provide to proofreaders and writers who consult them, closing by eliciting data about informants' practices.

Our interview schedule was informed by our own experience of proofreaders and proofreading as well as by the literature. Hence, for instance, it had come to our attention that informants used various terms to describe their work and we wished to investigate this further. Ethical issues also loom large in debates about proofreading, as we have seen; we therefore asked a series of questions relating to these.

Our schedule was also informed by the literature on related areas of second language writing pedagogy and practice. For instance, with the writing centre and error correction and commentary literature in mind, we asked informants whether they felt their feedback was formative, in order to get a sense of how they saw their role in relation to that of the writing centre tutor, who is said to be less concerned with improving the writing than improving the writer (North, 1984). We also asked informants whether they corrected every error in writers' texts, comparing their role to EFL/ESL writing teachers and writing centre tutors, who are normally advised to correct selectively (Ferris, 2003a,b, 2004; Harris & Silva, 1993). The interview schedule was piloted and analysed jointly by all three researchers, and modified as a result. Interviews lasted between 2 and 3 hours, and were transcribed and coded.

#### *Data analyses*

In developing our coding framework, we found Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Grant-Davie (1992), and Miles and Huberman (1994) extremely useful. To begin to identify broad themes emerging from the interview data, we worked on the same script independently, coming together to compare and debate responses. As a result of our discussions, we drew up a list of themes and subthemes, and repeated this process, working on several different interviews. Informed by this, the first author drafted a start list (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of codes which included definitions and examples of each code. All three authors coded the same script independently using the list then met to compare their codes and debate problem areas, for instance where the provisional codes did not capture the essence of the data, or where these codes were subject to different interpretations in their application. Codes, definitions, and examples were refined, and new codes were created as necessary. This process was repeated on three different interview scripts, and the final list

consisted of 58 codes, comprising 42 codes which arose directly from the questions in the interview schedule and 16 *emergent* codes.

Interrater reliability was a key concern throughout, as reflected in the prolonged trialling and refining of codes described above. We took the decision to retain the high number of overall codes to do justice to the complexity of the data, and to use multiple codes as necessary. There were frequently parts of a transcript that had to be double-, triple-, or even quadruple-coded. Two of us coded the data set, allowing the third to focus on data retrieval and cross-checking. In practice we achieved a reliability score of 74%, which we considered to be satisfactory, given the complexity of the coding scheme.

We also developed a number of strategies to capture the richness of the data during the writing-up stage, the most significant of which was to create “coding relationships,” linking closely related codes which were then always analysed alongside one another. For instance, we noticed that data coded as PRDOUBTS, describing “Doubts, grey areas, and/or anxieties about anything relating to proofreading,” was also often coded as ETHICS, a code describing the informants’ views on ethical issues impinging upon proofreading. Writing up the findings categorised under each code separately would have risked the loss of subtle distinctions in meaning, and therefore the two were linked in a coding relationship and analysed alongside each other.

## Results

### *Proofreaders’ profiles*

Table 1 provides an overview of informants’ academic background, qualifications, work experience, and experiences of writing. It also shows whether informants proofread for payment and/or free of charge.

Proofreaders generally fell into one of the following three groups:

- (1) *Professional proofreaders*: These informants are in proofreading for the long haul; proofreading is a business rather than a hobby, not something they do occasionally, and there is no sense in which their time as proofreaders may soon be coming to an end. This label does not necessarily imply that these informants have proofreading qualifications (although one of them does); simply that it is (one of) their main job(s) at the time of the study.
- (2) *Part-time or temporary freelance proofreaders*: Unlike the professionals, the proofreading done by this second group of informants is sporadic or likely to be short-term. Steve,<sup>4</sup> for instance, emphasizes that proofreading is simply a means to an end: It is helping to fund his studies, and he hopes to stop proofreading upon completing his PhD and getting a permanent job. And although Stella has a considerable proofreading workload and describes herself as fascinated by the work, she nonetheless sees it merely as a stopgap until she finds “a proper job.”
- (3) Many of the *Volunteer proofreaders* are connected to the third author’s resource centre. Unsurprisingly, bearing in mind their volunteer status, these informants express a desire to help student writers in the way they have been helped by others earlier in their academic careers.

All informants are educated to degree level, with most having one postgraduate qualification or more, as well as experience of writing across a range of academic (and sometimes nonacademic) genres. Some informants work or have worked in academia as lecturers, EAP language tutors, graduate teaching assistants, postdoctoral researchers, or student support officers. Only 2 informants, Anne and Eve, have been professionally trained as proofreaders/editors. Many informants have teaching backgrounds, especially in TEFL.<sup>5</sup> Apart from Chloe and Bill, all informants are native speakers.

<sup>4</sup> All informants’ names are pseudonyms.

<sup>5</sup> An anonymous reviewer was interested to learn that many of our informants had TEFL backgrounds, commenting that he or she suspected that this was not the case in the US, and inviting us to speculate on how (un)typical such a proofreading profile is in the UK. We believe that a good many proofreading professionals and volunteers probably do have some type of background in education: When we were collecting proofreaders’ adverts to invite informants unknown to us to take part in our study, we noticed a number of them advertised themselves as “former teachers” or “former lecturers,” and as people who have considerable experience of “correcting English”. However, we were not able to make contact with that group of proofreaders (apart from those known to us) who never advertise—those who only proofread for family, friends, and relatives. Unlike the professionals and freelancers, we suspect many or most of these do not have the equivalent TEFL background.

Table 1  
Informants' profiles.

	P/R status and current position	Academic background/ qualifications	Previous work experience	Experience of writing
ANNE	Professional <i>Currently:</i> Freelance copy editor and proofreader	BA (humanities); PhD (humanities) Copy-editing/proofreading qualifications Speed typing qualifications TEFL qualifications	TEFL teaching Lecturer Copy editing and publishing	Lots of academic writing experience Written and published articles and reviews
JOANNA	Professional <i>Currently:</i> Proofreader	HND (business studies) PG Diploma (management studies) BA (humanities with English language, ongoing)	Unknown	University writing
TOM	Professional <i>Currently:</i> Proofreader and publisher	BSc (applied biology) BA (economics) PG Diploma (medical statistics) PhD (unfinished)	Industrial science sector	Wide experience of academic and workplace writing; some documents published
ALICE	Part-time freelance & occasional volunteer <i>Currently:</i> EAP lecturer/writing tutor for law students	LLB (law), MA (applied linguistics), MA (sociological research, ongoing) TEFL qualifications	TEFL teaching	Lots of academic writing Diary writing
EVE	Part-time freelance <i>Currently:</i> Study Skills Tutor, helping students with learning difficulties	BA (history and literature) MA (adult education)	Professional copy-editor Lecturer	Lots of academic and nonacademic writing
GILL	Freelance (occasional) <i>Currently:</i> Musician	BA (philosophy and literature) Teaching qualifications	Taught adult literacy and numeracy, job/life skills Lots of experience working with the public, enhancing communication skills	University essay and dissertation writing "Copious amounts" of nonacademic writing
JERRY	Part-time freelance <i>Currently:</i> PhD student	BA (language studies) MA (applied linguistics) PhD (applied linguistics, ongoing) TEFL qualification	TEFL teaching Graduate teaching assistant	Assignments and dissertation for BA/MA; articles; editorship of graduate working papers series
LOUISE	Freelance (occasional) <i>Currently:</i> Part-time literacy/numeracy teacher in higher education	BA (history and literature) Advanced diploma (children's language and literacy) PGCE [UK mainstream education teaching qualification] Proofreading and note-taking courses	Teaching Note-taking for students with disabilities	University essay and dissertation writing; Creative writing

Table 1 (Continued)

	P/R status and current position	Academic background/ qualifications	Previous work experience	Experience of writing
STELLA	Temporary freelance <i>Currently:</i> Proofreader	LLB, LLM (law) Diploma in performing arts	Unknown	Lots of academic writing
STEVE	Part-time freelance <i>Currently:</i> PhD student	BA, MA (politics), PhD (politics, ongoing)	Unknown	Assignments, Dissertation, Articles
ANITA	Volunteer Resource centre <i>Currently:</i> PhD student	BSc nursing MA sociology PhD (sociology, ongoing) Introductory TEFL qualification	TEFL teaching Midwifery teaching	Writing for PhD
BILL	Volunteer/Part-time freelance <i>Currently:</i> PhD student	BA tourism & BA education/ELT (Mexico); Diploma (higher education, Mexico) MA (applied linguistics, Mexico) PhD (applied linguistics/ ELT, ongoing) Teacher training course	TEFL teaching	MA dissertation; articles; reviewer and editorial board member of journal
CHLOE	Volunteer <i>Currently:</i> PhD student	BA (Language & Linguistics, Greece) MSc (Language & Communication Sciences, Greece) PhD (Applied Linguistics/ELT, ongoing) TEFL teaching qualification	Linguistics researcher in Greece TEFL teaching Graduate teaching assistant	Student writing; PhD; abstracts, conference papers, lectures; marking students' essays; journal reviewer
EMMA	Volunteer and occasional freelance Resource centre <i>Currently:</i> Postdoctoral researcher	PhD TEFL qualifications	TEFL teaching Supervised students' essays and research projects	Written and published articles and books Editorial assistantship
KAREN	Volunteer Resource centre <i>Currently:</i> Part-time lecturer/researcher	BA, MA, PhD (sociology)	Teaching and research fellow	PhD thesis Grant applications
RUTH	Volunteer and occasional freelance Resource centre; Voluntary proofreading for friends <i>Currently:</i> Housing Officer/Support Worker	BSc (science) BA (English & European literature) MA (art history) PGCE [UK mainstream education teaching qualification]	Secondary school teacher of English TEFL teaching	University writing

### *Proofreaders' practices, beliefs, and experiences*

#### *Types of texts proofread*

We now focus on the types of text proofreaders have worked on in terms of subject area/discipline, level (e.g. undergraduate, postgraduate), and genre (e.g. student essays, articles for publication). Most though not all of the texts

our informants have proofread were written by NNS.<sup>6</sup> The genre of texts ranges from graduate and undergraduate term papers, master's dissertations, and PhD theses to job application letters, CVs, and research grants. However, with regard to discipline there is considerable variation within the group as to the types of texts they feel comfortable working on. While some informants felt that subject area knowledge was unimportant, and were therefore willing to proofread across the disciplines, others felt they could not do justice to writing from disciplines with which they were unfamiliar.

Tom is an informant who expresses the former view, having proofread “almost everything”: “mathematics, general science, theology, cultural studies, media studies, geography, economics... , car mechanics... , brain surgery, education.” He claims the proofreader merely needs to act as an “intelligent lay person” in order to identify places where the text lacks clarity:

the subject knowledge amazingly rarely comes into it because most doctorates are presented in the style whereby the intelligent lay person... can follow the gist... I don't think it comes down to expertise, expertise is knowing good general English and occasionally telling a student “I don't understand this and if I can't the reader won't either.”

Like Tom, Stella has proofread across the entire academic spectrum, and, like him, she is not deterred by the discipline. Indeed, Stella says lack of subject knowledge can be to a proofreader's advantage, since she feels that there can be no possibility of unethical content interventions:

Sometimes [writers] say, “Do you know anything about my subject area?,” and I say “It's probably better if I don't know, because then there is absolutely no chance of plagiarism because I couldn't possibly correct an idea.”

In contrast, Anne expresses the latter view of proofreading and subject knowledge, proofreading only a limited range of humanities disciplines with which she is familiar (“It would be impossible to do a decent job on maths or physics for me...”). A number of other informants share similar views to Anne about the desirability of specialist knowledge. Because many informants come from a humanities or social science background, it is perhaps unsurprising that, in Louise's words, they are loath to proofread anything “technical.” Like Anne, Karen has struggled to proofread texts outside her field of sociology and as a result has come to the view that subject area knowledge has a “very important” part to play when proofreading:

I proofread... an economics article and there was a lot of mathematical formulae and I found that so difficult... I couldn't tell if they were using the language in the right way or not.

Hence, while Karen says she is willing to consider proofreading a wide range of subject areas, she rules out certain “very different” disciplines like physics.

Two of our PhD student proofreaders, Jerry and Chloe, are also unwilling to proofread outside their own disciplines, although this is not due to a belief that their lack of subject specialist knowledge would prevent them being able to complete the job competently. Rather, in Jerry's case it is because of pressures of time. Since he does not advertise, he is not obliged to take on texts from different fields which he feels would be more difficult and time-consuming. And Chloe wants to stay in her field to read texts that interest her.

### *Fees charged and methods of calculation*

Informants' charges for proofreading varied, with hourly rates ranging from gratis to £33. Table 2 provides an overview of the fees informants charge for their proofreading, while also signalling which informants proofread for

<sup>6</sup> An anonymous reviewer wondered whether the fact that most of these texts were by NNS writers was related to the fact that most proofreader informants had TEFL backgrounds. While it is true, as we report in the previous footnote, that some professionals' adverts highlight their experience of working with NNS, thus conceivably attracting a greater proportion of nonnative writers than would ordinarily be the case, we suspect that the vast majority of those writers seeking proofreaders' help are in any case NNS. In support of this position, we briefly describe the state of play of the volunteer-led proofreading service in the third author's resource centre. This is open to both NS and NNS (and is in a large department featuring sizeable native and non-native cohorts), but it is mainly the NNS who seek proofreaders' help. We also note that those experienced informants like Joanna, Stella, and Tom, who do *not* have TEFL backgrounds, report that nearly all their work is with NNS.

Table 2  
Fees charged.

ALICE	Free/Not less than £30/hour
ANITA	Free
ANNE	£12/hour
BILL	Free
CHLOE	Free
EMMA	£10/hour
EVE	Free/£20/hour
GILL	Less than £5/hour or flat fee of £25/essay
JERRY	Free/£10–£15/hour
JOANNA	£4.90/double-spaced page
KAREN	Free/£5–£10/hour
LOUISE	£8/hour
RUTH	Free/£8/hour
STELLA	£8/hour
STEVE	Free/£10–£15/hour
TOM	£33/hour, sometimes slightly higher for business/industry clients

free. Several issues here are worthy of further discussion, since they illustrate very well some central themes that emerged from our study concerning variation, confusion, and/or uncertainty in relation to proofreading practices.

### Calculating fees

A number of informants highlighted the difficulty of accurately estimating charges. Hence, the perceived benefit in opting to charge an hourly rate rather than a flat fee per page, or according to genre (term paper, thesis, etc.). Indeed, Alice argues that charging per page is “a mug’s game,” because badly written text will take much longer to correct, resulting in under-charging. Alice’s argument is supported by Steve, who now charges by the hour after having his “fingers burned” when charging flat fees (“they got more work out of me than I got payment out of them and after that I learnt my lesson. . .”). In contrast, Joanna, who charges by the page, highlights the advantages of the system: It eliminates uncertainty on the part of the writer as to cost—and the potential for dishonesty on the part of the proofreader (“. . . if it’s done on an hourly rate obviously I could say “it took ten hours” but you’ve absolutely got to take my word for that. . .”). Despite charging by the hour, Anne eliminates the possibility of unscrupulous over-charging by never exceeding her initial estimate of the maximum cost.

### Variation in fees

A number of informants spoke of how their fees may vary because they offer writers more or less substantial levels of intervention. For instance, Eve has two different systems of proofreading she calls “standard” and “gold-level” services. Although the hourly rate is the same, the “gold-level” service is dearer because the level of text improvement is more thorough and takes longer: If writers opt for this service, inelegant (but grammatically accurate) prose is rewritten. As we describe in detail below, Tom is not prepared to intervene at the same level as Eve for ethical reasons, but he is nevertheless prepared to negotiate to some extent with the writer regarding what he proofreads, and thus proofreading featuring heavier interventions will be more expensive because it requires more time:

We tell them we can do the correction of English grammar, references, the format and we will do as much or as little of those actions as they want, the more we do the more we charge.

In relation to checking references, for instance, Tom is prepared to tell writers which authors they have cited in the text are missing from their bibliographies, to format the referencing to conform to the university’s style guide, and to indicate to writers where journal page numbers or volume numbers are missing from bibliographic details, all of which will add to the writer’s costs.

Fees may vary depending on the type of text to be proofread. Anne’s hourly rate is lower for proofreading longer pieces of work (i.e. PhD theses) because she feels students would not be able to afford the higher rate. A number of informants are prepared to negotiate rates, and will reduce their fees on request: Joanna, for instance, will reduce her rate for students experiencing financial hardship. In other cases, however, it is the proofreaders’ *relationship* with the

writer which may affect the rate. Joanna and Stella will consider offering a discounted price to “returning customers,” and Steve and Jerry have proofread free for friends at times.

### *Dissatisfaction and difficulties with fee calculations*

It was noticeable that some informants who are more inexperienced at proofreading on a fee-paying basis have had difficulty finding a system of calculating and charging fees they are content with. Indeed, in Gill’s case, she has not yet come upon a system she is happy with or uses consistently. Gill explains how the first piece she proofread for payment was passed to her by another proofreader who had agreed a flat fee of £25 with the writer. Gill stuck to this fee, but since the job took her “five or six hours,” she only received £4 or £5 an hour. Her second piece of paid work was a dissertation, and although the fee was “left open to negotiation,” Gill told the student the minimum wage is “roughly £5 an hour and . . . I would expect that I should at least get that.” However, this did not happen: Because the student said “she would find it hard to pay a lot of money,” Gill undercharged. In fact Gill revisits this issue several times during interview and is unable to come up with a way of ensuring the proofreader is paid a living wage on the one hand, while sticking to the student writer’s (sometimes limited) budget on the other. She concludes by stressing that she wishes to obtain guidance and advice on fee-paying issues from other proofreaders and the university authorities, feeling it would serve both writers and proofreaders well if such guidelines were published locally: Writers would then know how much they would realistically have to pay, while different proofreaders would be charging similar rates.

Emma is another non-professional informant who has much to say about difficulties regarding fees. In her case, the focus is on the “awkwardness” and even guilt she feels charging writers for her work, especially where larger sums are involved, for instance, for PhD theses. Emma also suspects she has “rounded down” the time involved in order to charge writers less. An example of her sensitivity about the issue can be seen from the following:

The PhD . . . was an enormous amount of time and ended up being a lot of money, more than £400 and that was very, very difficult because I felt dreadful asking for that amount of money.

Given that Emma (notionally) charges £10/hour, it could be argued that £400 is not excessive for more than 40 hours’ work, by UK standards at least. However, the fact that the writer apparently agreed with Emma that it was—Emma reporting that there “was some tension about the question of payment”—is also an indication of another recurrent issue arising in the interviews, that writers typically underestimate the time that proofreading takes, and thus also the costs associated with it.

Other informants report difficulties with getting writers to pay up once a job is complete. Stella’s partner, for instance, who has also worked as a freelance proofreader, had a student who would only pay a quarter of what he owed. Hence, Alice prefers “to deal with people I know” to minimize the risk they will refuse to pay or dispute payment.

### *Terminology to describe proofreading*

*Proofreader* has been used in this article as a default term, and we found that *proofreading* is by far the most commonly used term among informants and student writers. However, there is much less consensus among informants regarding the best term to describe their work. Table 3 summarizes which term or terms informants feel *best describe* the work they do, which term or terms they *use to describe* this work to writers, and which term or terms are *used by writers* to describe this work.

Two particular issues are worthy of further comment, as we shall see below.

### *The “proofreading” term, in particular, is unsatisfactory.*

A number of informants expressed dissatisfaction with the term *proofreading*. Anne explains why this term is not really the best to describe what she actually does, despite using the term herself with writers, and despite writers and supervisors using it:

Proofreading as I understand it is the final thing you do to a manuscript before it goes out either for examination or publication and it’s very, very rare you actually get one in that state.

Like Anne, Anita and Gill make it clear the proofreading term is a pragmatic term of convenience; Gill reports that it is

Table 3  
Terminology used to describe *proofreading*.

	Prompt card options:							Other:								
	Best			Used				W		Best			Used		W	
ALICE	PR			WT	EC	LC	PR		WT	PR						<i>Check this for me; check for mistakes</i>
ANITA						LC	PR						<i>Helping with English</i>	<i>Helping with English</i>		<i>Helping with English</i>
ANNE				WT		LC	PR			PR				<i>Copy editing</i>		
BILL	PR						PR			PR						<i>Read this for me; improve this; see if this makes sense; check it for problems</i>
CHLOE	PR	TI	TE				PR			PR				<i>Read work</i>		<i>Take a quick look; take a look and tell me if it's up to academic standards</i>
EMMA	PR					LC	PR			PR	<i>Reading through writing</i>		<i>Reading through writing</i>	<i>Reading through writing</i>		<i>Reading through writing</i>
EVE		TI	TE	WT		LC	PR			PR	<i>Copy editing; editing</i>		<i>Copy editing; improve your written English</i>	<i>Copy editing; help with writing essays</i>		
GILL	PR	TI			EC		PR			PR						
JERRY					EC	LC		ER	LC							<i>Correction</i>
JOANNA	PR				EC	LC								<i>A service to correct written English</i>		<i>I want my English corrected</i>
KAREN	PR	TI					PR			PR	<i>Correcting English; editing;</i>		<i>Editing</i>	<i>Editing</i>		<i>Correction; English correction</i>
LOUISE	PR						PR			PR						
RUTH	PR						PR			PR	<i>Help with English</i>					Different terms for different work
STELLA	PR				EC		PR			PR						
STEVE			TE				PR			PR	<i>Copy editing</i>		<i>Copy editing;</i>	<i>Copy editing;</i>		<i>Can you look at some work for me?; Can you check my grammar?</i>
TOM	PR						PR			PR	<i>Editing</i>		<i>Editing</i>	<i>Editing</i>		<i>Proofing</i>
Total	11	4	3	3	5	7	14	1	1	1	13					

Note. Other = further terms and phrases volunteered by informants. Best = term which best describes work done; Used = term used to talk about work, e.g. with student writers. W = term student writers use to discuss requests for help with their texts. PR = proofreading; TI = text improvement; TE = text editing; WT = writing tutorial; EC = error correction; LC = language correction.

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usually the term that is used to advertise the help that you're giving, and the term that students themselves recognise as a form of help for their essays. That might not necessarily be the best description of it, but it's a kind of socialised term for it.

Coming up with a wholly suitable alternative, however, is far from straightforward for Gill, as demonstrated by the following exchange:

I: Is there a term that you think best describes what you actually do?

Gill: Oh, good question! I'll have to think about that for a while.

Stella points out that writers may use the proofreading term because this is the term they find on proofreaders' adverts (including her own), which brings us back to Gill's notion of socialization. However, Steve says that the proofreading term for student writers is not well understood: It can mean "a multitude of different things," particularly for NNS. This is perhaps why a number of informants said writers sometimes avoid using any term when requesting help: Bill, for instance, reports that they use expressions like "read this for me," "improve this," "see if it makes sense," and "check it for problems."

#### *Different types of intervention are referred to by different terms*

Alice and Eve identify a number of preferred terms because they work on text in a number of different ways for different writers. In Alice's case, she operates as an in-session EAP tutor (describing this as a "writing tutorial") or as a freelance/volunteer ("proofreading," "language correction," "error correction"). Her work as an EAP tutor is markedly more formative and interpersonal:

I can also engage more with the students about their writing, we can sit down, we can take sections and talk about it, whereas with proofreading it's very much hand over the writing, I do the proofreading, write comments on the text, mark or highlight things, give it back to them and they deal with it.

In Eve's university post, working with students with writing difficulties, the "writing tutorial" role is prominent, with Eve pointing out problem passages and eliciting responses and solutions from writers. To describe her (freelance) work, however, she uses "proofreading," "copy editing," and "improve your written English." We have seen how Eve offers different "levels of service," and these are also known by different terms: While *proofreading* consists of "mark[ing] their typos and mark[ing] for the agreement of nouns and verbs," her "gold-level service" is more accurately described as "editing," involving more substantial revisions ("this is unclear here, do you mean that?").

While Emma says *proofreading* best describes her resource centre work, work for friends is best described as "reading through" writing. Again, the change of terminology reflects a different type of intervention: Whereas her proofreading role involves "making the text perfect [in terms of form]," reading through involves "discussing ideas and saying where things are really unclear so [writers] know where to look again."

#### *(In)appropriate areas of intervention*

We now turn our attention to the changes proofreaders are willing and unwilling to make to writers' texts. Broadly speaking, while correcting grammar and spelling were mostly seen as unproblematic on the one hand, intervening at the levels of factual accuracy and "content" were mostly seen as problematic on the other. However, while a distinction between language-related and content-related interventions was broadly shared, significant variation existed in informants' individual understandings of where the boundaries were to be drawn between the two and their sensitivity to the potential impact of one upon the other. It was clear then that *content* (in terms of the factors comprising and impacting on it) was a contested and unstable term.

With the exception of one informant, proofreaders identified areas of intervention that they felt it was ethically inappropriate to comment on. Steve is typical, mentioning a number of areas which "are not my business" and are "outside my remit," including enhancing the writer's argumentation or the content of the text's introduction or conclusion. Similarly, Ruth sees intervening at the level of structure or argumentation as unethical ("you shouldn't really, I don't think, muck about with the structure. It should just be the student's ideas coming out in the sentences..."). And Chloe talks about how touching content would be unethical and "unfair." Hence, these beliefs echo Stella's, that areas beyond "grammar, syntax, spelling, stylistic errors" are beyond the pale.

However, Eve is an outlier, in that she sees nothing wrong in commenting on students' ideas and their application. She uses her lack of specialized subject knowledge to justify this, her argument being that a nonspecialist spouse or friend the writer may consult would be able to make much the same interventions as she does.

Although we have seen how nearly all informants report mainly limiting themselves to a relatively narrow range of concerns when proofreading student writers' texts, a number of proofreaders speak of how their remit is wider when working on other text types. Chloe is happy to intervene much more in work for publication, suggesting references for the authors to consult, for instance. This is because she "has a different hat on" when doing this kind of proofreading, since student assessment is not an issue.

#### *Ethical uncertainties about what to correct*

Despite most informants' assertions that they shy away from making changes to content and argumentation, it would be inaccurate to give the impression that all informants were clear in their own minds as to when and when not to intervene. In part this reflects an awareness of the difficulty at times in defining and teasing out language-related interventions from those of content, as described above. In other instances, however, informants were also sensitive to a risk of overstepping boundaries through over-involvement. For her part, Gill makes it clear that at times she is "tempted" to intervene in areas she feels are inappropriate, and recounts an incident which she feels "slightly edgy" about, despite her intervention being motivated by a desire "to do the best for the student." She explains how she believed the text in question could be construed as racist:

The study was about hairstyles in black women, and [the writer] was saying how few magazines there were that targeted black hair, and that it wasn't appropriate to have a white woman as editor of a black women's magazine. And I swapped it around and said, "What if you read a comment saying that a black woman should not be editor of a white woman's magazine?" That was the way I addressed it, I didn't actually ask her to change it . . . but it was just too hard to walk away from! [laughs].

Another example of Gill's uncertainty occurs when she considers whether the proofreader should alert the writer to the fact that they have failed to address the assignment question set. Although to do so may be "overstepping the line," she can conceive of circumstances in which she may do this. It is important to emphasize that Gill did not make these comments lightly: She stresses in her interview that she finds it difficult to decide whether to intervene or not in these "grey areas," and that guidelines and the opportunity to discuss these issues with the writer's lecturer would be helpful.

It should also be stressed that it is not only the part-time proofreaders like Gill who express uncertainties; Anne also pointed to a number of grey areas. Like Gill, she deplors the lack of guidance available. Although Anne errs on the side of caution by referring the writers to their supervisor if she is unsure whether or not to intervene, her uncertainty remains:

While there are no guidelines you are left with this constant sense of guilt and looking over your shoulder [thinking] "Should I be doing this?" It ranges through all sorts of things. For example you get two lines in a paragraph and you look at it on the page and you think "Well, that's not a paragraph!" Do you point it out to them?

However, whereas a number of informants (Gill, Anne, Emma) refer to many "grey areas," Tom, Stella, and Joanna's tone is more assured. While for Tom referring the writer back to their supervisor is the default option, ethics always comes into play when proofreading, and there is no agonizing over whether he should intervene or not:

. . .there's not an issue, it simply goes back to telling the student either that there is a deficiency and you rectify it, it might be in referencing or whatever, or go back to your supervisor for advice. So I've never had problems with it although it is always at the back of my mind.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The ethical issue was found to be pervasive throughout the data, and our presentation and discussion of this issue is necessarily brief. However, we focus exclusively on ethical matters in Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (under review).

## Discussion

### *Proofreaders' profiles*

What kind of profile should proofreaders have, in terms of qualifications and experience, and did our informants' profiles meet these criteria? A number of researchers have described what they see as the ideal profile for proofreaders, albeit with reference to working with nonnative academics submitting articles for publication, rather than with student writers. Burrough-Boenisch (2003a), for instance, argues that proofreaders who share the L1 and the culture of the writer are at an advantage, since they are "better able to filter out the linguistic and cultural transfers and cultural myopia from NNS writing" (p. 3). She adds that being a native speaker is not a sufficient qualification for proofreading in itself, since native speakers may be ignorant of the "conventions of scientific English" (p. 4), or may have an imperfect command of grammar. Our informants' profiles meet Burrough-Boenisch's requirements in that they have a wide range of experience of writing at university, while many of them also have a working knowledge of one or more languages as a result of their TESOL backgrounds and displayed awareness during interview of a knowledge of issues associated with transfer and contrastive rhetoric. But our sample of informants was self-selecting, and there may be proofreaders currently operating in our institution who lack this type of profile to the detriment of their work and the writers who consult them.

### *Proofreaders' practices, beliefs, and experiences*

#### *Types of texts proofread*

Most of our informants limited themselves to proofreading in a certain range of disciplines with which they were more familiar. In particular, discipline-specific terminology and generic conventions were identified as potentially problematic for outsiders. This stance accords with findings of corpus-based studies of academic writing which show that different disciplines write in different ways (e.g. Hyland, 2000). It is also in line with James' (1984) case study of the language supervision of a nonnative PhD student, Marcos, in the Sociology of Medicine. James reports having problems correcting vocabulary, since this required subject-specialist knowledge he did not possess. And he learns to be cautious about suggesting "more familiar" lexical alternatives for rare items:

Thus in the phrase "the disarticulation of the old social order" Marcos resisted my attempt to substitute the vivid, more familiar *crumbling* for the more abstract and less common *disarticulation*. The latter, it transpired, had a precision for sociologists that the former lacked. (pp. 109–110)<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, one of the student writers in Weigle and Nelson's (2004) study reports that his writing centre tutor "sometimes got confused" with discipline-specific terminology, as she had no background in economics, the writer's field (p. 210). The informants' stance is also in line with the literature on proofreading academics' text for publication. Burrough-Boenisch (2003a) claims that correctors should be familiar with the "jargon, genre, and journals" of the discipline in question (p. 3). And Mišak, Marušić, & Marušić (2005) are of the same view: They edit a medical journal which publishes in English, *Croatian Medical Journal*, and argue "that the knowledge of scientific methodology and specificities of scientific reporting is a necessary precondition for a successful scientific publication" (p. 122), making this judgement on the basis of their authors' experiences with native speaker, nonspecialist proofreaders who "do not have sufficient knowledge of medicine and the rules of scientific writing" (pp. 128–129) to proofread satisfactorily. Other proofreaders attesting to the importance of relevant disciplinary knowledge include Körner (1994) and informants in Mauranen (1997).

Nonetheless, we note that 2 of the 3 professional informants proofread in any and every discipline, reportedly without difficulty. We discuss below how we plan to investigate proofreaders' practices further by using think-aloud and stimulated recall interviews, and feel that this study will provide a better basis for determining the extent to which disciplinary knowledge is needed when proofreading. For now we are dependent on interview accounts, but we are conscious that the accounts in the literature cited above claim that disciplinary knowledge plays a vital part in

<sup>8</sup> We saw previously how informants from a humanities/social sciences background are often reluctant to proofread "scientific" writing. However, this extract reminds us that the social sciences also use discipline-specific vocabulary that can be problematic for the outsider.

determining proofreaders' competence to read in any given field, and wonder whether in fact proofreading without this knowledge is as straightforward as these professionals claim.

#### *Fees charged and methods of calculation*

We have seen how our informants' charges may vary, depending on how they calculate their fee and how heavily they proofread a text, and that deciding on a system of calculating fees can be problematic for less experienced informants. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, there is little discussion of these issues in the literature, although as Kaplan and Baldauf (2005) point out, the cost for employing a corrector can be considerable, and this is particularly burdensome in less privileged contexts. Similarly, Körner (1994) tells us how she received a request for free editing from a Chinese researcher whose monthly salary was equivalent to Körner's hourly rate. And Li and Flowerdew (2007), in their study of Chinese doctoral students writing for publication, also highlighted issues of cost regarding editorial services.

#### *Terminology to describe proofreading*

Our study found that a number of different terms are used by informants and writers to describe proofreading, in much the same way as many different terms are used to describe the editing of nonnatives' manuscripts for publication. Burrough-Boenisch (2006) uses the terms "language professionals" and "authors' editors," while Lillis and Curry (2006a,b) use the term "literacy brokers," and Bisaillon (2007) uses "professional editors." Our informants agree with Turner and Scott (2007) and Turner (in press) that there is a lack of understanding or consensus about the meaning of the *proofreading* term, with lecturers, language tutors, and composition textbook writers all using it in various ways (Harris, 1987).

#### *(In)appropriate areas of intervention*

All except one of our proofreaders report that they tend to avoid commenting on content (variously understood) and factual inaccuracies in writers' texts, in line with proofreaders of manuscripts for publication. Burrough-Boenisch (2003b: pp. 228–229), for instance, says her role "is usually primarily linguistic," rather than involving making a judgement on the "scientific merit" of the piece. Similarly, the interventions by revisers in Ventola and Mauranen's (1991) study constituted "a lexicogrammatical language check-up" (p. 460), with the main areas of intervention relating to article use (14% of all corrections), lexical choice (13%), syntactic structure (12%), use of prepositions (11%), punctuation (8%), and orthography (6%), rather than to more substantive changes (p. 460). And the proofreaders in Lillis and Curry's (2006a) study were said to focus mainly on "sentence-level revisions," grammatical and lexical mistakes, rather than "knowledge content and claims" or "discipline-specific discourse" (p. 14).

#### *Ethical uncertainties about what to correct*

Like our proofreader informants, some writing centre tutors report experiencing ethical dilemmas when interacting with nonnatives. Although traditional writing centre pedagogy stresses that tutors should enable writers to recognize and resolve the shortcomings of their text for themselves, such an approach may be less effective with non-natives: As Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002) argue, these writers may lack the linguistic proficiency to *negotiate* the rewriting of a text, and may look to the tutor simply to rewrite their text for them. How far, then, should proofreaders go in correcting a text? While some of our professional proofreaders signalled that they did not experience these ethical uncertainties, the fact that a number of informants, experienced and inexperienced, continually revisited these matters during interviews suggests the need for the drawing up of clear proofreading guidelines. As a reviewer pointed out, drawing on the writing centre literature in our discussion of a proofreader's role only gets us so far, since proofreaders are not (necessarily) writing tutors. But this again underscores the importance of defining the proofreader's role on an institutional level.

Returning to Reid's (1994) study of appropriation and the ethics of intervention, we saw how Reid came to believe that writing teachers could act as "change agents" and offer "cultural expertise" in the classroom (p. 277), enabling writers to understand Anglo-American writing requirements. There are, of course, two potential problems here (in addition to the fact that some universities/lecturers may wish to debar proofreading on an official basis altogether). Firstly, as we discussed above, writing teachers (and proofreaders) may lack the discipline-specific knowledge to be able to comment as fully or as knowledgeably as they would like. And secondly, as Reid (1994) acknowledges, some student writers may be happy to cede responsibility and ownership of their text to the teacher, being concerned

primarily with achieving a good grade, rather than retaining authorship. The solution in both cases, then, is to signal which passages of the student's text readers *may* find problematic, while not actually rewriting the parts in question. By adopting this strategy, Reid minimizes the risk of teacher appropriation, striving to ensure a “dialogue” rather than a “monologue” in the teacher response-revision cycle:

...students must be taught to authentically engage in choice making and problem solving, and to accept responsibility for their own writing. The teacher then becomes the respondent instead of the initiator in the response conversation, and, rather than a monologue, response becomes a dialogue in which teacher and student negotiate meaning. ... (p. 289)

For our purposes, such behaviour transfers responsibility to put things right from the proofreader onto the writer (perhaps after discussing the relevant issues with their supervisor). Indeed, our informants shifted responsibility in this way by *commenting on*, rather than *correcting*, the student text. For instance, Tom reports that he corrects language errors, but that any content-related issues take the form of queries or comments, putting the onus on the writer, in conjunction with their supervisor, to resolve the issue.

Our proofreaders, then, employ both direct and indirect intervention techniques, and it is encouraging to note that, like Owtram and Hargreaves (2008), they strive to build an element of reflection and dialogue into their proofreading practice, by making commenting, rather than merely correcting, an integral part of the process, often placing responsibility for nongrammatical and syntactic revisions on the writer. We feel such practices are particularly well advised given Cohen (1987) and Radecki and Swales' (1988) findings that student writers may fail to reflect and act upon teachers' corrections and feedback unless obliged to do so. We also note that research by Chandler (2003) indicates that students may make fewer errors when they are obliged to reflect on and amend their writing in response to feedback, rather than merely reading and taking note of it. In this way, our informants address the ethical issues that invariably arise during the act of proofreading, although it is apparent that some proofreaders are prepared to intervene more than others.

### *Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research*

We are tempted to sum up the findings of this study in a word: “variation.” We identified variation in our proofreader informants' practices, variation in proofreading terminology, variation in fees, and variation (and much uncertainty) regarding the ethical (in)appropriacy of textual interventions. These disparities leave students potentially at risk in a number of ways, not least of unanticipated financial costs, but also of their work being unduly compromised, and most seriously of accusations of academic cheating. At the same time, many of our proofreader informants also felt vulnerable to unfair criticism, doing a job that they see widely regarded as necessary and yet, at the same time, somewhat disparaged. Not surprisingly, many expressed a heart-felt wish that universities develop a clear policy with regard to their work. In this context, we are currently working on a set of proposed proofreading guidelines for discussion within the university. Our reasoning here is that some amount of proofreading regulation and agreement on a common set of practices would be preferable to the situation at present: Where anyone can be a proofreader and do as much or as little to a text as they see fit; where proofreaders may feel they lack clarity as to their role; and where students, recruited with an understanding that their language skills are fit for the purpose, or that their related support needs will be met, may be left vulnerable in the ways described.

It may well be that proofreaders *can* perform a service for student writers equally as valuable as that provided for NNS academics on texts prior to submission to journals. Research shows us that student writers often struggle to work out and produce the kind of writing required of them (e.g. Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Casanave, 2002; Lillis, 2001; Spack, 1997), and are particularly concerned with ensuring their texts are error-free at the sentence level (Powers & Nelson, 1995). Furthermore, there is evidence in the literature that NNS lack access to social networks of knowledgeable writers, Dong (1998) finding that nearly half of the postgraduate students surveyed felt they had no one to turn to for help except their supervisor. For NNS students, by implication, there will always be a gap between their competence in English and their earnest desire to produce “error-free” writing (a gap that can also exist for native speaker writers), and there is reason to believe that proofreaders can go some way towards helping writers to bridge this gap. However, while our research has not set out to challenge the legitimacy of proofreading practices per se, we believe our dialogue with proofreaders highlights a number of ensuing concerns that have remained unaddressed for too long. These include how big the gap in writing proficiency can afford to be; who can and should help students to

bridge the gap; what form such help can legitimately take; what type of student texts may be proofread, and why; how this information can be communicated to all parties involved; and how the level of eventual assistance from third parties can be made transparent to those entrusted with assessment of student work. Lecturers, supervisors, EAP practitioners, and university policy makers have a shared responsibility to engage with these questions; all need to consider where they stand on the proofreading issue.

The proofreading research discussed here involved interviewing 16 informants about their profiles, beliefs, practices, and experiences. We have only indirectly accounted for the views of other parties involved in the act of proofreading: lecturers, student writers, and other university staff (e.g. language tutors). We therefore intend to continue our research by investigating writers' and lecturers' attitudes towards proofreaders and proofreading using a similar interview-based approach. However, we will also supplement these interviews by questioning informants about samples of proofread texts to canvass views about (un)acceptable levels of proofreading intervention.

Bisaillon (2007) has conducted an innovative cognitive study which identifies a range of strategies and sub-strategies that commercial proofreaders use to work on texts. She notes that proofreaders make some corrections more or less automatically, whereas others may cause proofreaders to pause for reflection or to consult sources in an effort to come up with a suitable alteration. Based on her analysis, Bisaillon (2007) drew up three proofreading profiles: (a) speed editors, (b) moderate editors, and (c) perfectionist editors. She also found the behaviour and strategy use of experienced and inexperienced proofreaders varied, with experienced subjects correcting a larger proportion of errors automatically. In contrast to Bisaillon's approach, where proofreaders worked on different texts, we intend to study the way proofreaders intervene in the same text by using think-aloud protocols, where proofreaders describe the changes they are making to writers' texts while proofreading; and by using stimulated recall data, where proofreaders are questioned about their reasons for making the changes soon afterwards. This will take us beyond the *reported* behaviour of interview data and lead to more reliable accounts of practices and motivations.

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## Appendix

### Semi-structured interview schedule

#### Interview 1

- Prompt card
- A**
1. **I'd like to ask you first of all some questions about how you would describe the type of help you provide.**
    - 1.1 What term or terms do you think best describes the service you provide?  
Follow-up: Could you say a little bit about why you chose this term/these terms?  
*NB Use the term chosen by the interviewee for the rest of the interview*
    - 1.2 What term or terms do you use to describe your [proofreading] service to others?  
Follow-up: Could you say a little about why you use this term or terms?
    - 1.3 What term or terms are generally used by the students who seek your help?  
Follow-up: Could you say a little about why you think they use this term or terms?
  2. **Could you tell me how you became a [proofreader]?**
  3. **I'd like to ask you something about the circumstances in which you have [proofread] texts.**
- B**
- 3.1 For what reason(s) have you [proofread] other people's texts?  
*For this project we are specifically interested in the types of help (whether voluntary or paid) that entail some level of written alteration to a "work in progress" (i.e. work that will go on to be assessed, or which may be published). Thinking now about those areas of your work that fit this category...*
- C**
4. **I'd like to ask you some questions about the type of student who comes to you for [proofreading].**
    - 4.1 What texts have you worked on?
    - 4.2 What texts would you be willing to work on?

D

- 4.3 (If not already answered) Do you work only on student texts? Are the students always at the University of Essex?
- 4.4 How many scripts do you work on, for example over a month or a year?
- 4.5 Do you have ‘returning customers’ (i.e. students who ask your help on more than one piece of work)? If so, do you do anything differently with these returning customers than you would do with new customers?
- 5. What levels of English language proficiency have you dealt with?**
- 6. I’d like to ask a few questions about the broad procedures you adopt as a [proofreader].**
- 6.1 What do you explain to a student during your preliminary discussion?  
(e.g. the scope of your help; the time scale)
- 6.2 Is there any information you ask of the student?
- 6.3 What do you tell students about the kind of service you offer?
- 6.4 [If not answered during 6.3] Do you tell them what kind of changes you will make to their text?
- 6.5 In what format do you receive the script to be [proofread]?
- 6.6 What format do you use to work on the text?
- 6.7 What contact do you then maintain (e.g. how many face-to face meetings; at what stage in the process)?
- 6.8 Do you ever make contact with the student’s lecturer before or during the [proofreading] process?
- 6.9 Are there any circumstances in which you would decline to [correct] a text?
- 7. I’d like to ask you about possible forms of communication and follow-up between you, the student, and academic lecturers.**
- 7.1 In your experience, how do students get in touch with [proofreaders] such as yourself?
- 7.2 Post-[proofreading] do you find out how well the essay did [Why/not]?
- 7.3 Do you ever make contact with the student’s lecturer after the [proofreading] process?
- 7.4 Do you ever discuss with a student departmental policies on acknowledgement of help given?
- 7.5 Do you meet up with the student when returning their work, or once they’ve received their text back [Why/not]?
- 7.6 Do students ever contact you after you have given the corrected text back [If yes, why]?
- 7.7 Post-[proofreading] do you ever obtain a copy of markers’ comments [Why/not]?
- 7.8 Has a lecturer ever approached you before, during or after the [proofreading] event? If so, why?
- 7.9 Have you ever been contacted by a member of University staff who wanted you to proofread a student’s work? If so, why? What happened?
- 8. Now I’d like to ask you about the process you go through once the text is in front of you.**
- 8.1 (a) **If respondent regularly [proofreads]:** Please describe the process you went through when you proofread your most recent assignment. Was this process typical of the process you normally go through when you proofread a text?
- 8.1 (b) **To be used if the respondent indicates that they only [proofread] sporadically:** Please describe the process you go through when you [proofread] a student assignment.
- 9. I’d like to ask you something about the time [proofreading] takes, and how you calculate your costs.**
- 9.1 When calculating a fee, what factors do you take into account?
- 9.2 [If not already established]. Do you have a notional rate/fee (e.g. price per page or hourly rate)?
- 9.3 Do you prefer to see a piece of work before determining a rate/fee [Why/could you say more about that]?
- 9.4 Do you ever feel the need to alter your rate/fee once you’ve started working on a piece [Why/could you say more about that]?
- 10. I’d like to ask you a few questions about what you look at and what changes you suggest when [proofreading].**
- 10.1 What sort of issues would you consider it appropriate to address in a student’s text?  
Follow-up: How would you note the error (e.g., edit, comment in margin, or discuss in person?)
- 10.2 Do you attempt to correct every error? [Why not?]
- 10.3 Do you alter the type of [proofreading] you do, depending on proficiency of the student?  
If you proofread a NS or near-NS text, do you suggest different types of changes?
- 10.4 Do you adapt the type of [proofreading] you do depending on what the students says s/he wants?
- 10.5 Finally, have you anything you’d like to add or comment on?

End of 1st Interview  
Interview 2

E

- 11. I’d like to ask you about any problems you may have experienced when [proofreading].**
- 11.1 Do you ever have doubts as to what kind of help you should give? For example, do you think there are some grey areas where you are uncertain whether to intervene, help, advise?
- 11.2 Are there any problems in an essay that you would definitely not touch on?
- 11.3 Do you find that ethical issues ever arise (concerning the type of help that students seek from you)?
- 11.4 Are student’s expectations ever problematic in other ways?  
[If not mentioned already], Have you ever had dissatisfied students complain to you because of a low grade they received from their lecturer after you had proofread the text?
- 11.6 Do you think there is a danger that students can become overreliant on a proofreading service?

- 12. I'd like to ask some questions about how you give students feedback and correction.**
- 12.1 How do you register your comments and corrections?
- 12.2 Do you ever indicate the location and type of errors rather than correct them? If yes, under what circumstances?
- 12.3 If yes, do you leave the student to make a correction or do you negotiate a "corrected" version?
- 12.4 Do you ever refer students to example texts, for example to illustrate a comment that you have made?  
[Why/not?]
- 13. I'd like to ask you about your personal experiences.**
- 13.1 Could you describe a particularly happy/unhappy [proofreading] experience? What made these experiences pleasant/unpleasant? Why?
- 13.2 Can you describe a particularly satisfied/dissatisfied student "customer"? Why did the student feel this way?
- 13.3 What are some of the things you like most and least about [proofreading]? Why?
- 14. I'd like to ask some more questions on your view of the value of the [proofreading] process.**
- 14.1 How do you see the [proofreader's] role in relation to:
- a) the student writer
- b) other forms of support available to the student writer (e.g. lecturers, supervisors, language tutors, peers, other friends)
- 14.2 How do you think lecturers see your role in relation to their own as supervisors and tutors?
- 14.3 How do you think students see your role in relation to their own as the writer of the text?
- 14.4 Do you see your work as having pedagogic or formative value? For instance, do you think students gain a better understanding of good writing from your corrections [If yes, in what way]?
- 14.5 Do you make them aware of how they could become effective proofreaders of their own work [If yes, how]?
- 14.6 To what extent has your understanding or interpretation of a [proofreader's] role changed over time?
- 15. I'd like to ask your opinion on the skills required of a [proofreader].**
- 15.1 What skills do you think a [proofreader] should possess?
- 15.2 What experience do you think is useful [Why]?
- 15.3 What other qualities/attributes do you think are required?
- 15.4 What support and guidance do you think would be useful to [proofreaders]?
- 15.5 Do you ever exchange ideas on [proofreading] with other practitioners?
- 15.6 Have you ever collaborated on a text with another [proofreader]?
- 15.7 What do you perceive as the university's attitude to the type of help you provide?
- 16. I'd like to ask you about guidance for [proofreaders].**
- 16.1 Do you think the university authorities should provide more guidance to [proofreaders]?  
What sort of guidance?
- 16.2 Would you like to see a forum where [proofreaders] exchange ideas & experiences?
- 16.3 Do you think a training course would be useful or is necessary for proofreaders?  
If so could you say a little bit about the kind of training that would be appropriate?
- 16.4 Would you be interested or not in receiving such training?  
Follow up: What sorts of things would you want the course to focus on? Why?
- 16.5 Would you be interested in giving input on such a training course?  
Follow up: What sorts of things would you focus on? Why?
- 17. We are trying to build up a profile of [proofreaders] across the university.**
- 17.1 Could you tell me something about your own academic background and qualifications?
- 17.2 Could you tell me about any training which you consider to be relevant to this type of [proofreading] work?
- 17.3 Could you tell me about your own experience of writing within a formal or academic context?
18. **Finally, have you anything you'd like add or comment on?**

---

Interview prompt cards

**PROMPT CARD A**

- 
- |                    |                       |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| • Proofreading     | • Text editing        |
| • Error correction | • Language correction |
| • Text improvement | • Other               |
| • Writing tutorial |                       |
- 

**1.1 What term or terms do you think best describes the service you provide?**

**1.2 What term or terms do you use to describe to others the service you provide?**

**1.3 What term or terms are generally used by the students who seek your help?**

**PROMPT CARD B**

3.1 For what reason(s) have you proofread other people's texts?

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- As a favour to a fellow student
- As a favour to a friend
- To help your own student(s)
- As part of a service offered by the university and/or a university department
- On a fee-paying basis
- Other

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## PROMPT CARD C

### 4.1 What type of texts have you worked on?

---

Texts from . . .

- all subject areas/disciplines (e.g. philosophy, physics, history of art, etc.)
- from several subject areas
- in a specific subject area
- undergraduate term assignments
- postgraduate term assignments
- undergraduate dissertations
- postgraduate (MA/MSc) dissertations
- MPhil/PhD level student texts
- articles, chapters, or books which students are trying to publish

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### 4.2 What texts would you be willing to work on?

## PROMPT CARD D

### 5. What levels of English language proficiency have you dealt with?

---

5. As proficient as, or nearly as proficient as, a native speaker. Problems are generally linked to academic style and/or are the type of errors a fairly proficient native speaker writer might make.
4. Generally very good level of English, but with occasional nonnative speaker errors or turns of phrase.
3. A fairly good level of English, that is, the text displays a good range of sentence structure and vocabulary, generally used appropriately. However, there are regular language errors, for instance grammar, vocabulary, turns of phrase, punctuation.
2. A limited ability in English. The writer makes frequent grammar and vocabulary mistakes, or uses a limited range of sentence structures and vocabulary
1. Very limited ability in English. The text is error-laden, making the meaning often impenetrable to the reader.

---

## PROMPT CARD E

### Part a

#### 10.1 What sort of issues would you consider it appropriate to address in a student's text?

*Prompt: How would you note the error (e.g. edit, comment in margin, or discuss in person)? If you would specifically intervene in one way but not another, please specify.*

---

#### *Language and style*

- spelling errors
- vocabulary errors (i.e. incorrect or imprecise vocab.)
- specific grammar errors (e.g. punctuation)
- ungrammatical sentence structures
- over-long but accurate sentence structure
- over-short but accurate sentence structure
- inelegant though accurate sentences
- academic register (i.e. appropriateness of language, formality/informality, 1st/3rd person etc.)
- other

---

## PROMPT CARD E

### Part b

What sort of issues would you consider it appropriate to address in a student's text?

*Prompt: How would you note the error (e.g. edit, comment in margin, or discuss in person)? If you would specifically intervene in one way but not another, please specify.*

---

**Academic conventions**

**(use, and presentation of...)**

**General**

- use of sub-headings

**Referencing conventions**

- use of referencing and bibliographic style/scheme (e.g. appropriateness of scheme used; (in)consistency of use, etc.)
- quotes
- in-text references/bibliography
- clarity of reference in relation to citation (e.g. positioning of acknowledgement)
- suspected plagiarism (accidental or otherwise)
- other

**Other formatting conventions**

- page layout (e.g. title, margins, font style/size, line spacing, paragraph breaks, page numbering)
- footnotes
- appendixes
- word count/text length
- other

---

**PROMPT CARD E**

**Part c**

What sort of issues would you consider it appropriate to address in a student's text?

*Prompt: How would you note the error (e.g. edit, comment in margin, or discuss in person)? If you would specifically intervene in one way but not another, please specify.*

---

**Ideas and their application**

**Quality of ideas**

- veracity
- relevance
- current validity of ideas
- sophistication
- other

**Problems in flow of ideas**

**(cohesion)**

- between sentences
- between paragraphs
- other

**Organisation of ideas (coherence)**

- into paragraphs
- within a paragraph
- repetition of information
- illogical ordering of points
- other

---

**PROMPT CARD E**

**Part d**

What sort of issues would you consider it appropriate to address in a student's text?

*Prompt: How would you note the error (e.g. edit, comment in margin, or discuss in person)? If you would specifically intervene in one way but not another, please specify.*

---

**Argumentation**

**(student's reasoning in support of position)**

**Conventions in argumentation**

- addressing the question set
- content of introduction
- content of conclusion
- other

**Logic in argumentation**

- poor exemplification (failure to expand on points/statements)

- irrelevant point or series of points
- factual inaccuracy
- failure to synthesise information from several texts
- other

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