

## Problematising Proofreading

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### Abstract

*In academic writing pedagogy, proofreading is usually seen as the last stage, after a piece of writing has been drafted and re-drafted several times. Often the advice is to wait a couple of days before re-reading, so that mistakes or infelicitous expressions can be more easily spotted. The assumption is that this is ultimately a speedy process, easily and efficiently dispatched. However, what seems to be happening, as the academic market offers readily available commercial proofreaders is that much more is being packed into the term, and the procedure. All sorts of ethical, as well as professional, issues arise. The aim of this paper is to try to unpack some of those and open them up to wider discussion. Building on our presentation at the EATAW conference in Bochum (2007) and feedback received there, along with other comments featuring on mailbases such as EATAW and BALEAP, we here identify and problematise some of the issues surrounding proofreading.*

### Introduction

In academic writing pedagogy, proofreading is usually seen as the last stage, after a piece of writing has been drafted and re-drafted several times. Often, the advice is to wait a couple of days before re-reading so that mistakes or infelicitous expressions can be more easily spotted. The assumption is that this is ultimately a speedy process, easily and efficiently dispatched. However, what seems to be happening, as the academic market offers readily available commercial proofreaders, is that much more is being packed into the term, and the procedure. All sorts of ethical, as well as professional, issues arise. The aim of this paper is to try to unpack some of those and to open them up to wider discussion. We also intend briefly to suggest how the primary focus of that discussion might inform the teaching of academic writing.

Building on our presentation at the EATAW conference in Bochum (2007) and the feedback received there, along with other comments featuring on mailbases, such as the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW: [www.eataw.org](http://www.eataw.org)) and the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP: [www.baleap.org.uk](http://www.baleap.org.uk)), we here identify and problematise some of the issues surrounding proofreading.

### Proofreading in academic publishing and in higher education

In academic publishing, reading the proofs is a routine procedure, a process of giving a final dusting down, as it were, before an article or a chapter is published. Indeed, the guidelines for *Zeitschrift Schreiben* highlight the importance of this procedure where they state:

Papers must be error-free. It is the author's responsibility to proofread for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and clarity of expression.

In making it clear that potential contributors are responsible for their own proofreading, the journal is in effect freeing itself from such a responsibility. However, with the spread of English as a global language, expectations and practices around this issue may vary widely; see, for example, the discussion in Flowerdew (2000) where the extensive help provided by the editing processes of a specific journal is shown to have helped a Chinese academic gain publication.

In the higher education context, proofreading often seems to be similarly treated as a largely routine practice and tends to be viewed as barely worthy of academic discussion, with students being advised by subject teachers to proofread, or find someone to proofread, the final draft of an assignment or dissertation. However, we are engaging with the issue of proofreading here because it seems both to be implicated in issues of the <taken-for-granted> in academic culture, and to be an area of increasing concern and diversity of practice in contemporary higher education.

The *Zeitschrift-Schreiben* guidelines quoted above are also helpful to the discussion here because they spell out the normative, for example, that published articles should be <error-free>. They further spell out areas of language use where errors might be likely to occur. Finally, they enjoin that shibboleth of academic writing, but not only academic writing, <clarity of expression>. The historically and culturally embedded nature of a discourse of transparency for writing, along with the problems that such expectations pose for students, has been discussed by Lillis (1999), Turner (1999) and Lillis and Turner (2001). Such formulations then present a cultural norm as if it were unquestionable.

The example below illustrates the assumption that proofreading is a simple procedure of meeting apparently unproblematic norms. In advertising his services to students, a proofreader promises to:

- Revise texts into well-written English
- Convey your ideas succinctly
- Copy edit your text for clarity
- Proof-read grammar, etc.
- Correct the use of English idioms
- Address individual needs
- Reflect appropriate academic standards
- Follow the tone or style given

Such notices are proliferating in UK institutions of higher education and are indicative of a new and burgeoning field of practice, with implications also for the identity and role of the writing teacher. Should the writing teacher ignore them, assuming they do not relate to her/his role at all? Should s/he sabotage them (e.g. by removing them from noticeboards), thinking thereby to protect students from possibly unscrupulous practitioners? The fact is, what is promised does relate to aspects of writing pedagogy. However, what is potentially damaging to the professionalism of the writing practitioner, and to the student, is the implied simplicity of the process. Simply listing a number of different tasks, and suggesting they can all be taken care of on a one-off basis, presumably also for a suitable fee, greatly under-represents the complexity of each of the tasks. In addition, it ignores the subtleties of how each aspect inter-relates in the often considerably arduous and time-consuming process of writing development. Students easily fall prey to such a tantalising conceptualisation of <proofreading> as a catch-all means of solving their writing problems. Writing in effect dissolves as an intellectual problem intricately involved in the construction of meaning and becomes a merely technical process, one which can either be bought or done by oneself, but at any rate, something which is executed simply and effectively.

### **Why the proliferation of proofreading?**

The proliferation of proofreading can be related to the expansion of higher education. In the UK, this expansion is often referred to as the <massification> and <internationalisation> or <globalisation> of the universities. The increase in <home> student numbers denoted by <massification> is usually linked to the official <widening access> agenda. Scott (1995) describes the increase as representing a move away from a highly exclusive system, in which the participation rate of 18–20-year-olds was still only 15 per cent in the mid-eighties to a more open system in which over 30 per cent of that age cohort had gained access by the mid-nineties. Similarly, <internationalisation> and <globalisation> are often used to describe the growth in the number of students from an increasingly wide range of countries. In 2006, these students (EU and Non-EU) constituted 61% of the total student population (Universities UK, 2007).

One response to the massification and internationalisation of the university has been to provide writing

support mainly, but not exclusively, for students whose first language is other than English. Getting their work proofread is seen by many students, and by their subject teachers, as a corollary of <support>. At the same time, institutional audits by the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) of courses offered by universities and <league tables> such as those compiled by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* as well as official policies initiated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) continue to put pressure on universities to teach <generic> – or <core> – skills. For example the UK Research Council's Joint Skills Statement includes communication skills such as being able to:

- Write clearly and in a style appropriate to purpose, e.g. progress reports, published documents, thesis
- Construct coherent arguments and articulate ideas clearly to a range of audiences, formally and informally through a variety of techniques

Such descriptions clearly go beyond the correction of grammar and spelling but tend to get identified as proofreading.

### **Proofreading: an elasticated concept?**

In a paper entitled «<Proofreading> or what you will», Scott (2003) conveyed the notion that proofreading is a term which is used in very different, even confusing ways. In a similar vein, Turner (forthcoming) refers to the <conceptual elasticity> of <proofreading>. Issues concerning proofreading have been raised also on professional mailbases such as the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW: [www.eataw.org](http://www.eataw.org)) and the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP: [www.baleap.org.uk](http://www.baleap.org.uk)). A recent discussion on the BALEAP Institutional Members' discussion list attracted over 40 postings, including a long one from Macaulay, Harwood and Austin who have been carrying out research for a future publication at the University of Essex. ([www.baleap.org.uk](http://www.baleap.org.uk), 16 October, 2007). Most of these postings echoed Scott's (2003) conclusion that <proofreading> is a term used with confusing and contradictory meanings, ranging from polishing or tidying the text to translation. One posting in particular suggested that the writing centre should not deliver a proofreading service because it was difficult to draw a boundary between what was proofreading and what was re-writing the text.

Other issues which we identified in the mailbase discussions were:

- who should do the proofreading?
- Should language /writing teachers proofread?
- If they do does it reduce their status in the university?
- What are the limits and the nature of the proofreader role?
- Does proofreading prevent students from learning?
- Why do some supervisors not want students to have their work proofread?
- Is proofreading unethical?
- Is it inequitable since students usually have to pay?

### **The proofreading/plagiarism boundary**

Proofreading may seem to be a simple and effective response to widespread concerns about language and writing which tend to be linked to changes in the student population and a perceived drop in standards. However, it can also be associated with plagiarism, a current obsession in higher education. Ethical questions around who is ultimately doing the writing easily arise. Is proofreading compromising academic integrity? This ethical issue is raised also by the Australian academic, Knight (1999), from his perspective as a supervisor of what he terms NESB (Non English-Speaking Background) students:

It is often the case that the NESB student may not be capable of editing and polishing the text of the final draft to bring it to submission standard. Who then is responsible for this task? And in performing it, is an ethical boundary crossed which signifies that the final product is no longer solely the student's own work? If the supervisor assumes this responsibility, not only is he or she taking on a very onerous and time-consuming task, normally one well beyond that required with research students from English speaking backgrounds, but the supervisor may be guilty, at least in part, of writing the thesis for the student (97–98)

### **A social practice perspective**

In raising these issues regarding proofreading, we are not seeking to provide recipes for practice. We would, however, like to take a step back from the immediate situation of supervisors, language/writing teachers,

and proofreaders in order to situate the issues around proofreading in a wider social practice perspective. Here, we draw mainly on the New Literacy Studies as outlined, for example, by Street (1993), Kress (1993, 1997) and in Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic's edited collection (2000). From this perspective, the boundaries of a text are social not merely linguistic (Kress, 1993), and the theoretical focus widens to include the perception of literacy events (e.g. reading a student assignment) as involving sociocultural values, beliefs and power relations. This perspective brings to the fore social identities (e.g. MA student; supervisor; examiner) and the social relations that mark the interactions of individuals in particular contexts. Proofreading involves a complexity of social relations:

- between subject tutors and students;
- between subject tutors and writing teachers;
- between students and proofreaders;
- and between proofreaders and both subject and writing tutors.

Students sometimes attribute an impossible <expert> identity to a proofreader, as in the email below that a proofreader forwarded to us:

Could you quickly proofread my 5000 word essay in one hour just linguistic issues only?

This assumption of speed in association with proofreading is one which occurs frequently. As Orr and Blythman (1999) wryly put it in the title of a paper: <Have you got ten minutes? Can you just sort my dissertation out?>

Proofreading is also embroiled in hierarchies of official institutional categorisations (i.e. identities) ascribed to students and the different expectations then held of their writing. MA students are sometimes told: <We will not penalise you for language errors provided your meaning is clear.> However, this glib statement is seldom found reassuring, and in effect, is unlikely to function in the straightforward manner implied. PhD students, on the other hand, are advised that it is essential to produce error-free English since the thesis should be of publishable quality.

#### **Proofreading as an affective issue**

Such ascribed identities, and the expectations associated with them, come with anxieties for both students and staff. We know of cases where students have taken their first drafts of just a part of an assignment to a

proofreader, and of others booking the services of a proofreader before arriving in the UK. These students do not want to be seen as <weak> or <remedial>. Subject tutors who advise students to seek the help of a proofreader are not immune from anxiety. The less experienced, in particular, are afraid that a student's lack of success will reflect badly on them as teachers and often, therefore, do a lot of the correcting of grammar and spelling themselves.

For writing/language teachers, there may be anxiety around their status in the institution. For example, a posting on the BALEAP discussion list stated emphatically that writing teachers should not do proofreading as this would not enable their work to be more valued. This anxiety reaches into the question of what knowledge is valued in the university and who is considered to have that knowledge.

In the identification of <proofreading> with <tidying up the English> only, proofreaders, and also writing/language teachers, are largely excluded from the task of helping students to contribute to knowledge making. That role is considered to be the preserve of the subject teacher. So a proofreader asked:

I think there is a much better translation of Habermas than the one the subject tutor mentioned, but dare I say that?

#### **Discourses around English**

This issue of proofreading is ultimately entwined with particular discourses around English. The dominant discourse around proofreading is that any native speaker can do it. On the one hand, this can lead to problems when a proofreader is not familiar with the disciplinary discourse and changes something, e.g. the use of <I> to a more distant, conventionally academic formulation. In this actual case, however, the student was working with critical discourse analysis, and the use of <I>, in making the agency explicit, was significant. Such difficulties of proofreading are however minimised, implying an easy separation between form and content, when subject teachers ask students to have their work proofread.

We hope the issues we have raised and the lens we have used could lead to a rethinking of proofreading, a questioning of the discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, around it, and especially the notion of written language as transparent. As Scott (2005) argues, we need to ask ourselves what our criteria are and where they come from since, like students, we speak/write in and from a place (Blommaert 2005). Instead of trying

to separate proofreading from editing,, we need to think of academic writing predominantly as a cultural and historical practice, which is always undergoing change.

However, we would also argue that our social practice perspective is relevant not only in research and theory but also in the teaching of academic writing. As Ivanic (1997: 335) puts it: <Theory and research are only as good as their practical value>, and so we conclude with a brief indication of how we plan to give this paper, and the ideas in it, a <practical value>.

- We intend to make our paper available to our postgraduate students for a discussion in which we hope we will learn from them and they from us.
- We aim also to allow time in class for students to discuss in groups, and to write about, their linguistic and educational histories.
- We intend to include, particularly at the beginning of their course, ethnographic forms of writing that invite students to act as researchers of their own and their fellow students' responses to aspects of the teaching and learning on the course (for example to assessment criteria and feedback). Our aim will be to encourage a consideration of the link between what is said or observed and cultural and historical meanings in their similarity to and/or difference from those of the students' prior educational experience

These suggestions rest on a changed perception of the social relation between teachers and students. Students and teachers are viewed as contributors to their own and to one another's learning – a learning that is based on new understandings. Perhaps, then, <proofreading> in higher education might actually have only the meaning it has in publishing – a final checking of technical details.

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