## The proofreading of student writing: differing perspectives, consensual policies

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- Defining 'proofreading'
- Current study
- Implications (esp. for policymaking)

## 'Proofreading' defined

Proofreading defined as

'third-party interventions (entailing written alteration) on assessed work in progress' (Harwood et al., 2009: 166)

Narrower definitions exist (e.g., by CIEP (2020: 4): 'a process of identifying typographical, linguistic...or positional errors or omissions..., and making corrections')





- How far do university content lecturers, English language tutors, and students feel it is ethically appropriate for proofreaders to intervene in students' writing?
- Are the views of the three parties (lecturers, English language tutors, and students) on the ethical acceptability of various proofreading interventions equivalent or not?
- Why do lecturers, tutors, and students feel the way they do about the ethics of the various proofreading interventions?



#### **Participants:**

■122 participants: 32 lecturers, 34 English for Academic Purposes tutors, 56 students

#### **Methods:**

- **Questionnaire**, displaying 20 authentic proofreaders' lighter-heavier touch interventions for participants to agree/disagree with
- **Follow-up interviews** with 87 of the participants who completed the questionnaire, explaining their reasons for approving/disapproving of the interventions in the questionnaire

## Light-touch vs. heavier-touch proofreading

Categories of proofreading interventions featuring in questionnaire, drawing upon categories in Harwood (2018, 2019), Kruger & Bevan-Dye (2010), and Mossop (2007):

- Minor Copyediting
- Major Copyediting
- Structural Editing
  - Content Editing
  - Indirect Editing
- Non-intervention

## Minor copyediting

Moving apostrophes:

Writer's original sentence	Proofread version
error correction has	error correction has
important and significant	important and significant
effects on second	effects on second
language student's	language student's
writing.	students' writing.

## Major copyediting

More extensive rewriting (or suggested rewrite):

#### Writer's original sentence

A large number of short articles had been read by students in the control group and the teacher of the control group gave comprehensive corrections on students' article and demanded for 'incorporating' by same aspects.

#### **Proofread version**

A large number of short articles had been read by students in the control group and the teacher of the control group gave comprehensive corrections on students' article and demanded for 'incorporating' by same aspects.<sup>1</sup>

#### Proofreader's Comment:

1. Do you mean 'demanded the students incorporated such amendments in the same respects in further/other work'?

### Content editing

Pointing to flaws in the writer's argumentation:

Writer's original text	Proofread version
As a result, students in	As a result, students in
experimental group	experimental group
developed their	developed their
'grammatical and	'grammatical and
orthographic' abilities	orthographic' abilities
much more than students	much more than students
in control group.	in control group. 1.
	Proofreader's Comment:
	<sup>1.</sup> how do you know?

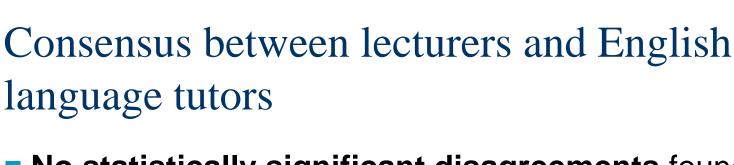
#### Example item from the questionnaire (content editing)

#### Writer's original sentence Proofread version ...more students should be enrolled in ...more students should be enrolled in the experiment in order to test the the experiment. hypothesis more effectively. Commentary: The proofreader has inserted 'in order to test the hypothesis more fully' (an addition of eight words) into the writer's text. Your views: The proofreader's intervention is acceptable in my opinion. a. agree strongly b. agree c. unsure/it depends d. disagree e. disagree strongly Please explain your answer briefly.



#### What did I find out?





No statistically significant disagreements found between lecturers and English language tutors

So lecturers and tutors held broadly similar views as to which interventions were ethical and which were off-limits

# Quantitative results: Consensus No significant differences between lecturers, tutors, and students regarding the

ethical acceptability of Minor Copyediting



#### Quantitative results: Lack of consensus

- Students were more permissive regarding a wider range of proofreading interventions than either lecturers or tutors
- Students were more permissive regarding the ethics of Major Copyediting than tutors, and of Content Editing than either lecturers or tutors.

## Why were some forms of proofreading OK?

Participants frequently referred to assessment criteria and the impact proofreading would have on grades. However, in most cases, lecturers reported that linguistic correctness wasn't their priority, and so if a text had been proofread for linguistic accuracy, they found this unproblematic.



Andrea (lecturer): I'm an engineer..., actually what I want to know is, "Do you understand the concepts we're talking about, do you understand how they fit with these other things...?" If you look at many of our learning objectives it doesn't say anything at all about, "Can you write very well in English?" So actually, we shouldn't be assessing you on that anyway. So, from that perspective, what I would describe as proofreading, the spelling, punctuation, grammar, that kind of thing, shouldn't be making a difference anyway.

## Debarring proofreading of content

In general, there was much less sympathy for the idea that proofreaders should be permitted to directly comment on content...



## The proofreader suggests content changes Writer's priorinal sentence Proofread version

writer's original sentence	LLOOTESO AGIZNOT
There are some limitation in this experiment firstly, subjects may not been	Proofreader's Comment:
chosen that random; secondly, more	You might want to add more detail about these limitations. For example, why is a random sample important and why should more students have been enrolled in this experiment?

#### Commentary:

The proofreader advises the writer to add more details about the study she is reviewing and critiquing.

#### Your views:

The proofreader's intervention is ethically acceptable in my opinion.

- a. agree strongly
- b. agree
- c. unsure/it depends
- d. disagree
- e. disagree strongly

Please explain you	ır answer briefly.
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Andrea (lecturer): that probably would have been disagree super-strongly, if there was that category [laughs]! Because again this is getting into..., it's content, it's not sentence structure, it's not punctuation or grammar, it's saying, "Okay, here's what you've said and what I'm suggesting you do is add some more things, and actually I've even gone further than that and said you might want to answer these questions."

## More about content-level proofreading

However, it would be inaccurate to give the impression that participants wholly frowned upon content-level interventions. Quite a number of participants were more tolerant towards interventions of this nature, providing the proofreader didn't specify what the writer should do...

### The proofreader highlights content issues

Writer's original text	Proofread version
group developed their 'grammatical and	As a result, students in experimental group developed their 'grammatical and orthographic' abilities much more than students in control group. <sup>1</sup>
	Proofreader's Comment:  1 how do you know?

#### Commentary:

In this example, the proofreader questions the claim the writer puts forward, asking what evidence the writer has for her claim.

#### Your views:

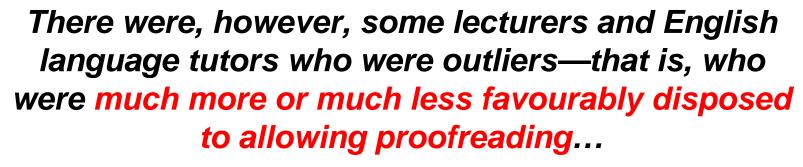
The proofreader's intervention is ethically acceptable in my opinion.

- a\_agree strongly
- b. agree
- c. unsure/it depends
- d. disagree
- e. disagree strongly

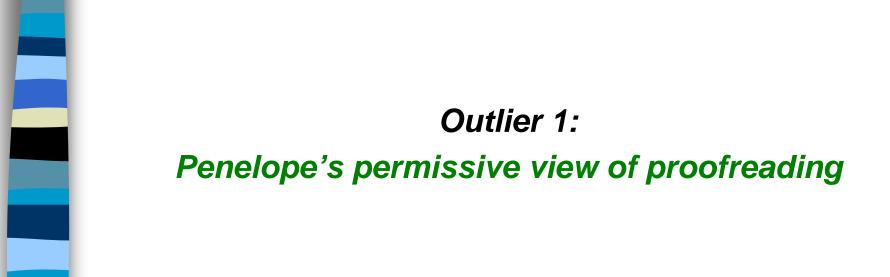
Please explain your answer briefly.



Amy (student): ...the proofreader says [reading] 'How do you know?'. That's quite useful. Because then it just makes the student think about where they're getting their information from, rather than just ignoring it. It's just a question, so.... For me that puts the student back in the focal point and encourages them, so they can either choose to ignore it or they can take it up and extend it a bit further, which I think is quite a useful thing to do.



Here are examples of two <u>lecturers</u>' views...





**Nigel:** But then if a proofreader was to improve the register of a student's text?

**Penelope:** I wouldn't have any problem with that, if so long as the ideas came from the student in the first place.

**Nigel:** But isn't the register part of the assessment criteria?

Penelope: Yeah. But if the student realises that they don't have the skill without some help, then they go and get the help. But that's no different to a middle class student asking, talking about their assessment with their parents...And if we penalise some sorts of interaction with one's wider networks and we don't penalise other sorts, then we're perpetuating disadvantage.



## Outlier 2: Fiona's zero tolerance view of proofreading



**Fiona:** So we ask the students to write a letter to a client and we assess them on things like grammar, syntax, punctuation, the content, the way the whole letter is structured. And so from my perspective, if somebody else had proofread that or had any involvement in that, that would hugely affect the grade.... And therefore, it isn't the student's work and therefore the mark they're getting isn't actually the true mark for them and their work.



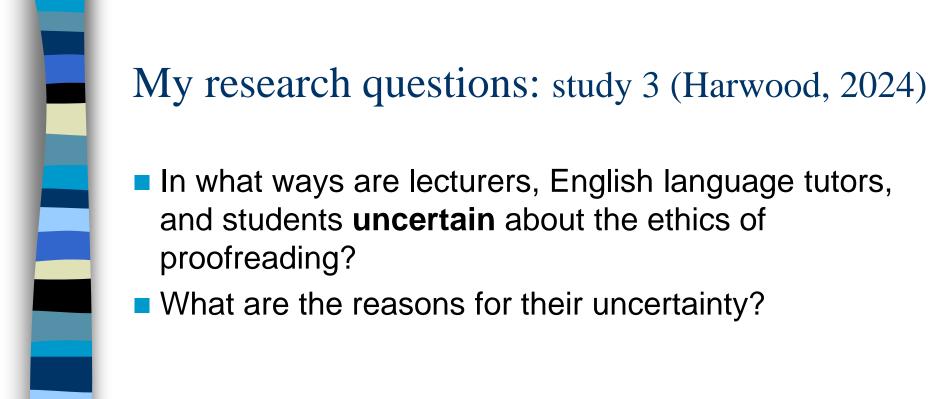
To what extent do university content lecturers, English language tutors, and students feel the proofreading of student writing is educative? Why/Why not?



- Encourages reflection and learning (self-study of recurring errors proofreader has highlighted)
- Helps make writers aware of recurring errors (language, style)
- Teaches writers language, academic writing conventions
   (e.g., citations), language learning strategies (consult Academic Phrasebank)
- Offers individualised learning opportunities, complementing other support provision (one-to-one help)
- Features **educative self-correction techniques** (indirect correction)



- A proofreader is not a language tutor (proofreader may not explain corrections; too late in the writing process)
- Proofreading may not be educative because of how it is delivered and how students respond to it (student pays proofreader to make errors disappear, not to learn)





- *Terminology and proofreading boundaries*
- Disciplinary differences in assessment criteria
- Frequency of interventions
- Corrections vs. comments
- Writer-proofreader relationship
- *Institutional proofreading policy*



#### *Implications*



- Although the vast majority of participants were favorably disposed to proofreading, there was less consensus (and uncertainties) about how far proofreaders should be permitted to go
- The safest option for university policymakers looking to authorize some form of proofreading would be to:
  - -permit only a **lighter-touch version of proofreading** which eschews content interventions
  - -regulate proofreading by taking it in-house
  - -allow departments to **permit or prohibit proofreading from assignment to assignment**, depending on assessors' aims, outcomes, and assessment criteria



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**Harwood, N.** (2022). 'Teaching the writer to fish so they can fish for the rest of their lives': lecturer, English language tutor, and student views on the educative role of proofreading. *English for Specific Purposes* 68: 116-130.

**Harwood, N.** (2023). Lecturer, language tutor, and student perspectives on the ethics of the proofreading of student writing. *Written Communication* 40: 651-719.

**Harwood, N.** (forthcoming, 2024). 'It's a minefield': uncertainty about the ethics of the proofreading of student writing. In N. Harwood (ed.), *Proofreading and Editing in Student and Research Publication Contexts: Expectations, Responsibilities, Policies.* Routledge.

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#### Thank you!

#### Latest publications (open access):

**Harwood, N.** (2022). 'Teaching the writer to fish so they can fish for the rest of their lives': lecturer, English language tutor, and student views on the educative role of proofreading. *English for Specific Purposes* 68: 116-130.

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