Cleaner, helper, teacher? The role of proofreaders of student writing
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As part of a larger interview-based study of the beliefs, practices and experiences of 16 proofreaders of student writing in a university setting, this article reports informants’ conceptualisations of their role. ‘Proofreading’ is defined for the purposes of this research as ‘third-party interventions (that entail some level of written alteration) on assessed work in progress’. Informants’ descriptions were grouped using five metaphors to describe the proofreader’s role: helper, cleaner, leveller, mediator and/or teacher. Although some informants did not identify with the proofreader-as-teacher metaphor, it turned out that proofreaders adopt a number of strategies to ensure their feedback is formative. The implications of the study are discussed, and further issues for research identified.

Keywords: proofreading; academic writing; non-native writer; feedback; academic support

Introduction
There has been much discussion in recent years of university students’ experiences of writing (e.g. Angelova and Riazantseva 1999; Beaufort 2004; Casanave 2002; Dysthe 2002; Harwood and Petrić unpublished; Krase 2007; Leki 2007; Lillis 2001; Pecorari 2003, 2008; Spack 1997; Sternglass 1997). This literature explores, amongst other issues, lecturers’ task requirements and students’ understanding of these requirements and of their audience, various disciplinary and institutional norms associated with writing which vary in their stability, and which may be understood or valued differently by students and faculty, students’ beliefs about plagiarism, students’ and lecturers’ sometimes differing conceptions of appropriate supervisor and supervisee relationships, and students’ literature searching and writing processes. However, one area which remains largely unexplored is the ‘proofreading’ of student writing. In our UK context, proofreaders are sometimes connected to an institution’s English for Academic Purposes provision, targeted principally at non-native English-speaking students. Alternatively, proofreading services are sometimes offered within a department, staffed by volunteers or officially sanctioned proofreaders. In other institutions, proofreading may only operate unofficially on a freelance, fee-paying basis, with proofreaders obtaining work by advertising on campus notice boards or through word of mouth.

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The authors have each had cause to consider the proofreading issue in their institutional roles. The first author is a lecturer working predominantly with non-native postgraduate students, many of whom, particularly at the doctoral level, produce writing he judges to be short of the standard required, and which requires proofreading of some description. The second author is an English for Academic Purposes tutor whose unit offers a variety of pre- and in-sessional English language support programmes, and who is frequently asked to help remedy problematic student writing by both the writers and their lecturers. The third author is a student support officer in our university’s sociology department, running a volunteer-led student resource centre which offers a proofreading service for writers seeking help with term papers. Our respective experiences of ‘proofreading’ led us to believe that the term itself and some of the practices associated with it were potentially problematic, with different proofreaders at times carrying out quite different types of interventions in its name. Indeed, a lively, at times heated, email discussion on proofreading by members of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (see http://www.baleap.org.uk) that took place during the period of the study appeared to confirm this issue was worthy of research. It was clear that English for Academic Purposes teachers’ opinions on proofreading varied widely. Some discussants felt proofreading should be one of the services offered as part of their remit; others that English for Academic Purposes teachers could accept proofreading work unofficially, as freelancers; while others still felt they should have no truck with proofreading, and should be at pains to stress that proofreading was not something their unit did or condoned.

This shared concern gave rise to a study of 16 proofreaders working with student writers at our university, focusing on informants’ beliefs, practices and experiences. We chose to retain the term ‘proofreading’ in the study, as the most widely used for the practices we wished to explore. However, we defined it for our purposes as third-party interventions (that entail some level of written alteration) on assessed work in progress, in order to distinguish our specific interest in the proofreading of student work from the more traditional, restricted definition of proofreading for publication, i.e. ‘a process of identifying typographical, linguistic … or positional errors or omissions’ (Society for Editors and Proofreaders 2005, 4).

The present article, which considers how proofreaders understand their role alongside others party to the proofreading process, is the third in a series reporting our findings. Our first article (Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay 2009) offers an overview of our results, focusing on proofreaders’ profiles, the types of texts they were (un)willing to work on, the types of changes they made to writers’ texts, how much (if anything) they charged for their work, and the terminology they used to describe their work (‘proofreading’, ‘editing’ and ‘error correction’ being some of the terms used to describe individuals’ interventions, although ‘proofreading’ was the most popular). Our second article (Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay 2010) focuses on the ethics of proofreading. Informants talked about ethics in relation to three areas: (i) the writers’ text and the types of interventions which are (in)appropriate (for instance, some proofreaders declined to work on texts by students of low proficiency because of ethical concerns, feeling they would need to make an unacceptably large number of changes to the writing); (ii) the relationship between proofreader, writer and the writer’s lecturer/supervisor (for instance, some writers were reported to have requested that proofreaders ‘ghostwrite’ texts for them without their supervisors’ knowledge in ways which were clearly unethical); and (iii) the wider university context (it was felt, for
instance, that universities needed to provide proofreading guidelines on ethical grey areas so that all parties knew where they stood). Guidelines which describe and delimit the boundaries of appropriate proofreading interventions in our institution have been to date notable by their absence, giving rise to the scope for proofreaders to have quite different understandings of their role, which is the focus of the present article (although partly in response to the study our university has now encouragingly made such clarification a priority). Here, we report on how informants saw their role in comparison to other sources of support: how did proofreaders feel their work fitted alongside that of writers' academic supervisors, for example? And to what extent did they see their work as part of a learning process for writers?

It was noticeable throughout the study that informants made regular use of figurative descriptions and metaphors as a means of grappling with the various interpretations of their role. These metaphors provide insights not simply into how proofreaders rationalised their role, but also into their perception of why student writers initially turn to them for help. We report on the range of metaphors to which proofreaders referred, and focus on one of these in particular, that of ‘teacher’, since it highlights the formative dimension of proofreading, and it was apparent that our informants engaged in specific proofreading practices which have formative potential.

Accounts of proofreading and views of the proofreading role

Accounts of proofreading of student writing are at present notable for their absence, two exceptions being Owtram and Hargreaves (2008) and Buell and Park (2008). Owtram and Hargreaves (2008) discuss the proofreading system implemented at the European University Institute in Florence. The aim is to ensure the process is formative, with students playing an active part in reshaping their text, rather than relying on the proofreader to do so. Correction is done by hand rather than electronically, so that students cannot simply accept all the changes the proofreader may have proposed at the click of a mouse. All students are then required to attend a face-to-face tutorial to discuss the tutor’s interventions. The formative intention of this meeting is apparent from the guidelines provided, which tell students that the aim of the tutorial is to:

1. clarify any doubts or questions with the correction or problem areas that have emerged in the text;
2. develop strategies for learning from your errors;
3. provide exercises and/or discuss areas for further language revision;
4. assist in setting up a plan for the next phase of the writing process (http://www.eui.eu/LINGUE/Correction%20Service/Guidelines.shtml).

For their part, Buell and Park (2008) describe how the first author, an American doctoral student, ‘edited’ her co-author’s non-native doctoral thesis. Rather than assuming ‘unquestioned authority when suggesting changes to texts’, Buell ‘often … tried to offer possible interpretations for the ways sentences were worded, so [Park] could … see the rationale for the change and decide whether or not to change the sentence herself’ (209). While minor grammatical inaccuracies were corrected without explanation, the editing process is portrayed primarily as one of negotiation. It is noteworthy that Buell’s practices are contrasted favourably with reportedly more conventional editing/proofreading practices of student writing, Park claiming that the ‘interactive conversations’ she had with Buell led to reflection and learning:
In the process of [Buell’s] editing some of my chapter drafts, she usually asked me what I meant by this or that sentence, and we would also often discuss broader aspects of my writing. While involved in these interactive conversations over the text, I often found myself thinking more about the clarity of the writing itself and not just about small errors in language or usage. I felt that this kind of intimate exchange about editing was very different from the case of a paid professional editor, which is often unidirectional (i.e., authoritative editors correct the text, and writers adopt those corrections with little question). (210)

Discussions relating to proofreaders’ roles can also be found in literature on English for Academic Purposes writing consultations, US writing centres, and in accounts of the role of the proofreader of academic text for publication (as opposed to student writing). While the contexts under discussion in these different sets of literature obviously differ, they can all be usefully related to the current study.

Woodward-Kron (2007) and Woodward-Kron and Jamieson (2007) describe one-to-one writing consultations with graduate students from various fields which involve attention to language, as well as to other concerns. The writing consultation dynamic is said to be a formative one, since the tutor’s requests for clarification lead writers to recognise ‘gaps in reasoning and cohesion in their texts’ (Woodward-Kron and Jamieson 2007, 58). However, the interaction between tutor and writer means that the consultation dynamic is not always one-way and top-down, with directives from the tutor being accepted and acted upon by the writer. Woodward-Kron (2007) stresses that, although sometimes the student accepted her comments and suggestions for changes, at other times the changes were negotiated as a result of challenges or requests for further clarification by the writer, and revisions to the draft co-constructed between writer and writing tutor.

The US writing centre literature sometimes contrasts the differing treatment of the writing centre tutor and the proofreader, seeing the latter’s role as typically markedly less formative than that described by Owtram and Hargreaves. In general, where proofreaders are said to prescribe, writing centre tutors are said to elicit; proofreaders identify problems and supply corrections, while writing centre tutors enable the writer to do this for him/herself. As Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002), Cogie, Strain, and Lorinskas (1999), Gillespie and Lerner (2000), and Harris and Silva (1993) explain, writing centre tutors are not looking to get the writer to correct every error. Global, rather than local, errors take priority, i.e. those errors which impede understanding of the writer’s message rather than those which do not. The difference, then, is that proofreading services apparently do not constitute ‘a learning experience’ (Harris and Silva 1993, 531). In contrast, the writing centre experience is said to be squarely formative:

\[\text{tutors are expected to help [student writers] with strategies that will make them effective, independent writers … tutors are supposed to be educators, not personal editors. (Harris and Silva 1993, 531)}\]

Hence Cogie, Strain, and Lorinskas (1999) get writers to self-edit, describing how the writing centre tutor uses minimal marking, the tutor merely indicating the presence of an error with a cross in the margin, rather than locating and correcting it, which is the writer’s job. Other obvious differences between writing centre tutors and proofreaders, which again underscore the formative focus of the former, include that writing centre tutors and tutees invariably meet to discuss the text, whereas proofreaders may not engage in a post-proofreading discussion.
There are now a number of studies of proofreading writing for publication, as opposed to student writing (e.g. Bisaillon 2007; Burrough-Boenisch 2003, 2006; Körner 1994; Lillis and Curry 2006a, b; Shashok 2001; Ventola and Mauranen 1991). For instance, Shashok (2001) claims proofreaders who work with journal and book manuscripts ‘help authors to produce a piece of writing that will effectively communicate their message to the target audience’ (115). This role, according to Shashok, extends some way beyond merely correcting grammar, with part of the proofreader’s role being to get authors to reflect on their rhetorical purpose and the nature of their audience. Indeed, Shashok lists a number of possible additional roles proofreaders may play, including that of ‘educating’ authors. This may include teaching authors writing and editing skills, how to cite appropriately, how the peer review process works, how to choose an appropriate target journal, and making authors aware of journal impact factors and their importance. Shashok judges the proofreader’s aim should be to ensure the text ‘is given a respectful reading’ by the appropriate gatekeepers (e.g. journal editors, reviewers) at the level of content, rather than being distracted by the text’s deficiencies on both formal and content levels.

In an article describing how proofreaders of manuscripts for publication can register their corrections, Burrough-Boenisch (2006) reports how Word’s ‘comment’ facility is used by many of her informants to explain their proposed changes to authors. Indeed, the justification given by a native speaker working in Spain involves not only explanation, but the desire to ensure the comments are formative:

I want [authors] to understand why I am asking them for clarification or suggesting a substantial edit in some places, and this sometimes means I need to provide them with a few lines of reasoning about readers and texts or [ask them to] think about the specific content. In these cases it is important for them to understand why I think the text needs editing, because this will motivate them to think about what they are trying to say, produce a better piece of text, and perhaps remember the point when they write their next paper. (39)

It is clear, then, that the literature shows there is a range of possible proofreading roles, which are top-down and formative to a greater or lesser extent. We now turn to our own study to see how our proofreaders’ conceptualisations of their roles compare.

Method
We utilised the qualitative semi-structured interview for our research because of its suitability for investigating people’s beliefs and experiences (Mason 2002). The interview schedule contained a number of questions directly and indirectly related to proofreaders’ roles. For instance, we asked proofreaders what kind of interventions they were prepared to make to writers’ texts, and the technique which would be used (e.g. by supplying the correct version themselves, or merely indicating the nature of the problem by means of a comment). We also asked whether informants saw proofreading as formative, and whether they tried to make writers aware of how they could become better proofreaders of their own work. Questions indirectly relating to the issue of roles included those which elicited informants’ preferred terminology to describe the act we have called ‘proofreading’. As informants discussed a prompt card containing a list of the various labels we have encountered (‘proofreading’, ‘error correction’, ‘text editing’, ‘text improvement’, ‘writing tutorial’, etc.), they articulated their understandings of their role. Other interview questions eliciting relevant data
focused on the degree of contact informants had with writers’ lecturers, informants’ (un)happy proofreading experiences, and on things they liked most and least about proofreading. The interview schedule was piloted, analysed, and accordingly revised, and interviews were transcribed and coded, drawing on techniques from Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Grant-Davie (1992) and Miles and Huberman (1994).

Informants were recruited by approaching proofreaders known to us, as well as contacting those who advertise their availability for proofreading on the notice boards of our institution. Our subjects broadly fall into three different groups, namely (i) professionals, for whom proofreading is a business, and not something they do occasionally; (ii) part-time/temporary freelancers, for whom proofreading is sporadic or short-term (e.g. PhD students who use proofreading to help fund their studies, or graduates proofreading until they find permanent employment); and (iii) volunteers, many of whom work in the third author’s student resource centre, situated in her department, which offers proofreading free of charge on term papers. Our interview schedule can be found in its entirety in Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (2009), together with fuller descriptions and illustrations of data analysis procedures and inter-rater reliability data. A more detailed account of our proofreaders’ profiles is also included.

Findings

Metaphors describing the proofreading role

We found that informants regularly made use of figurative descriptions and metaphors when grappling with the nature of their role. We grouped these descriptions under five different metaphors – helper, cleaner, leveller, mediator and teacher – describing and discussing them in turn, although we stress that proofreaders often saw themselves as fulfilling two or more roles simultaneously.

The proofreader as helper

Informants identified an element of care or mentoring in the proofreading role, and some of them located their activities within the range of informal support systems which give to university life a sense of academic community. For instance, neither Chloe nor Emma (all informants’ names are pseudonyms) describe what they do as a ‘service’: they are ‘helpers’, volunteers who assist struggling writers in the same way they were helped earlier in their academic careers. As Emma puts it:

I hadn’t actually thought of it as a ‘service’ [laughs] because I’m not being paid, so I imagine it more of a solidarity kind of thing … I had the experience of being in Germany for a year and struggling with written language … and I still find myself volunteering in all sorts of situations because people helped me so much in that year.

Similarly, Anita talks about the proofreader ‘reducing a feeling of isolation and helplessness’ on the part of the writer, while Gill describes how proofreaders may be writers’ ‘last port of call’:

I’d see myself … as a big mattress [laughs] for [writers] to land on, and bounce back up again! And especially [for] students where English is their second language, that must be quite comforting to know that there is somebody available for them to just double-check whether what they’re doing is accurate or not.
Indeed, Gill believes some writers look upon her as a mother figure; she provides the emotional support these writers lack.

While it is unsurprising that Chloe, Emma and Gill construct their role as helpers, given that much or all of their work is voluntary and free of charge, Tom, a professional proofreader, also spoke of this aspect of the role. Proofreaders can help those writers who are short of time, and can give them ‘reassurance’ or a ‘push’ to finish their thesis. There is, therefore, a sense that the proofreader can ‘share the burden’ for the student (and the PhD supervisor):

[O]ften … [writers] haven’t got the time to finish it in so far as rereading it to make sure it is correct, to make sure headings are as they should be, references tie up.

The proofreader as cleaner

As well as providing comfort to writers, Gill says her role is to ‘tidy up’ the writer’s text: indeed, she feels writers may see her as ‘a kind of equivalent of the cleaning lady! … We just dust around and clean up … leaving a nice shiny essay!’ The ‘polisher’ metaphor is also used, and Stella, Jerry and Louise speak of their role as ‘error correctors’. Here is Louise explaining how a proofreader may detect the ‘fairly common’ errors writers are too close to their own text to see:

When you look at your own work I think it’s quite hard to be aware of mistakes, because I think you tend to have in your mind what you’re expecting to see there, and so you tend to miss things, so I suppose that’s what I generally see my role as being, to find those fairly common errors.

In contrast, Anita is sensitive of the discouragement correction can cause writers (cf. Hyland 1998; Hyland and Hyland 2001; Semke 1984), and bears this in mind when deciding on her level of intervention:

every time you write something down that’s a mistake, you are actually deflating somebody’s confidence and their power to experiment, a little bit, even if it’s only a pinprick.

Hence she corrects selectively, and does not foreground the cleaning role as prominently as the informants described above. It is important to note that Anita is in agreement with the informants above in believing writers largely see her role as that of cleaner, stating that writers want proofreaders to make their text ‘perfect’. The difficulty for Anita, however, is that she believes that when a proofreader does perform a comprehensive error correction, students are likely to be ‘devastated’ because they overestimate their writing ability.

The proofreader as leveller

Informants using this metaphor saw proofreaders as compensating for shortcomings of the university system. Proofreading helps lessen the disadvantage experienced by non-natives and writers from less privileged backgrounds. Hence Steve feels his proofreading role is ‘ethical’:

particularly a university like Essex, it has a lot of foreign students, it purposely attracts them and it judges everyone on roughly the same criteria, and I think as a proofreader
you help to level the playing field a little, obviously for people who don’t speak English as their first language … I’m helping them to say what they want to say more clearly and I’m helping them to level the playing field with their English counterparts on the same course.

Similarly, Stella speaks of putting non-native writers ‘on an equal footing’ with native writers, so that markers can assess their work at the level of content, rather than being distracted by faulty grammar:

whilst the academic is only supposed to be marking the ideas, the concept, and the argument, they can’t help but be clouded by a very eloquent piece, they might give it a slightly higher mark than the ideas deserved or for a good idea. [For a] piece badly written they might give it a lower mark than it deserves and so I guess it’s about putting that student on an equal footing with native speakers.

The proofreader as mediator
All informants recognised a triangle of sorts that existed between themselves, the student writer and the lecturer; there was a recurrent sense of theirs being a mediating role, bridging a gap between the student and supervisor – or at least between the writer’s text and the supervisor. Like the helper metaphor, this conceptualisation of proofreading reminds us that writing is a social act: writers are writing for an audience and attempting to satisfy their lecturer’s requirements. The metaphor also highlights the informal support role of proofreading. Hence Alice describes how her role may involve acting as an intermediary between student writer and lecturer:

the proofreader has to fill the gap, very often … I will say to them ‘Well let’s go together and speak to your lecturer’, or ‘Have you thought about emailing them to tell them about this problem?’ Don’t sit and suffer in silence, contact somebody.

Throughout his interview, Tom explains how writers are referred to their supervisors in the feedback he provides. In general, while Tom will correct grammar mistakes, the need to make more substantive changes is merely indicated. The writer is then expected to consult their supervisor and make a decision about these. Tom, therefore, sees the role of proofreader and supervisor as a ‘symbiotic’ relationship, ‘a joint process’.

The proofreader as teacher
Informants varied to the extent to which they claimed proofreading ideally had a formative role. For some, teaching was the province of language tutors and lecturers/supervisors; for others, though, there was a sense in which it was exactly this aspect of advancing student learning (as an aim at least) that gave proofreading its legitimacy. For instance, Chloe speaks of her wish to make the writer ‘autonomous’:

for me there is no point in just proofreading if I don’t give comments that could help the student … improve … Because you need to help or encourage the person to be autonomous. And, as long as they need someone to proofread the work, the student is not autonomous.

Gill also feels the proofreader’s role has formative value: ideally, writers should be helped to spot their own errors. Hence, although time constraints and the perception (not least by writers) that her role is primarily an error corrector limit her interventions,
Gill’s personality and her desire ‘to help’ means that she occasionally gives ‘quick lessons’ about grammar:

I might give [writers] a quick lesson and say ‘Here’s an example of when to use an apostrophe, and where’ … But it’s difficult, because you’ve only got so much time, and you could spend hours filling that role of helping somebody learn to improve their written English … But it’s hard not to slide into that … it depends on the kind of person you are – the way I am, I would want to help them, so that the next time they could improve the way they use the apostrophe.

Louise holds similar views, in that while she also feels proofreading can serve a pedagogic, formative role, she argues that in the case of non-native writers, any beneficial effect may be less than one would wish for, since there may be so much wrong with a non-native’s writing they will learn little.

In contrast, other informants distance themselves from the idea that proofreading is formative. Anita says her role is not a ‘didactic’ one, while Jerry does not feel his proofreading is formative, partly because he claims writers are not necessarily expecting to become better writers as a result, and also because of the time constraints writers are operating under. Jerry believes writers tend to give their work to proofreaders at the last minute before a submission deadline, and are likely to spend very little time reflecting on the proofreaders’ amendments when their work is returned before handing it in. Or, as Stella put it, ‘people pay a proofreader to make mistakes go away, not necessarily to learn from them’.

**Proofreading as formative**

Although we have seen how some informants did not identify with the proofreader-as-teacher metaphor (even when they were directly asked about the extent to which proofreading is formative), it turned out that even these proofreaders may adopt a number of strategies to attempt to impart learning through their feedback.

**Comments and corrections**

In theory, of course, all proofreading feedback could be formative, presenting learners with an opportunity to reflect on and research the language further. Yet we know that feedback is sometimes not fully exploited by student writers (e.g. Cohen 1987; Leki 2007; Radecki and Swales 1988), who may only give it a cursory look, and/or fail to record/act upon it. In our case, student writers certainly could incorporate proofreaders’ suggestions with only a limited amount of reflection, particularly if the interventions were made using Word’s track changes format, where a click of the mouse can produce revised text. However, we have seen how proofreaders like Tom used a commentary as well as a correction strategy, sometimes for ethical reasons, and sometimes because they were unable to supply a correction even if they felt it was ethically unproblematic. The commentary strategy could in itself be viewed as formative, in that it forces writers to reflect, and perhaps also to consult their supervisors, before revising their text.

**Summary comments**

Some proofreaders highlighted the writer’s main problems at the end of the text, or, in Stella’s case, in her email reply to the writer with her feedback attached, in the hope
that writers would take the time to work on these areas themselves. As Emma explains:

what I’ve usually tried to do … especially where it’s someone for whom English is not a first language, [is] to try … and make say three points that are ongoing issues that they might be able to solve if they sat down with a grammar book, and that if they are going to take nothing else from the current changes made to the essay those might be good things to look at, because obviously that saves a lot of time really when you’re learning a language if you think of the broader question.

Emma hopes the writer’s text will ‘hopefully not need proofreading for that particular issue next time’.

Karen adopts the same strategy with writers whose work she sees on a regular basis (e.g. doctoral students who submit their thesis to her chapter by chapter). This enables her to:

build a picture of what somebody does wrong frequently and you give them a list … If you read somebody’s work a lot you say, ‘Hey, you always split infinitives or you always start sentences with the word “but”’. You point out something which you pick up often. It makes it easier to spot the same sort of problems and then you point it out to them so they don’t need to come back and ask you again … then they’d realise.

(‘We do not discuss the veracity or otherwise of the proofreaders’ advice in this article. However, we are aware that giving academic writers the impression that the presence of ‘informal features’, such as starting a sentence with ‘but’ and splitting infinitives, is indisputably ‘wrong’ can be questioned [cf. Chang and Swales 1999].)

Sometimes these summary comments are not about language, but about academic conventions: Ruth describes how she may write a note about referencing, ‘just in case they didn’t understand the way it’s generally done’. Ruth also includes advice about composing and editing strategies in her comments, including the well-known strategy of speaking aloud which is normally associated with writing centres:

that is one of the things I always say to people, ‘Do you read … can you read this out aloud yourself?’ … I feel that if people did that more, surely they’d see the glaring errors in it. And I think perhaps some people don’t read it enough.

Direct versus indirect interventions

The literature on correcting second language writing differentiates between direct and indirect techniques, the former meaning that the teacher supplies the writer with the correction while the latter involves highlighting the error in some way, leaving the writer to supply the correction (e.g. Ferris and Hedgcock 2005). While indirect correction techniques were acknowledged to have formative potential, they were sometimes avoided. For instance, Emma feels the indirect technique will be too challenging for non-natives. Hence, for native speakers she may correct a problem the first time but only signal its presence subsequently, leaving it to the writer to remedy, but with non-natives she will use direct correction, supplying the answer herself. Karen and Jerry also prefer direct corrections. Karen feels that indirect corrections on areas like spelling (via underlining) are not acceptable because students are paying her, and therefore ‘to do the job properly I should put the [correct] spelling in’. As a former English as a foreign language teacher, Jerry appreciates the potential benefits of using indirect
correction, but opts for a direct approach whenever possible for three reasons: (i) writers expect it; (ii) indirect correction would mean more work for writers; and (iii) writers are generally short of time to properly respond to indirect correction.

Post-proofreading meetings

Many of our informants never meet the writers of the texts they work on, sending the work back via email or dropping it off for writers to collect at the third author’s resource centre. However, it was clear there were formative opportunities for writers who took the initiative to reflect upon their proofreader’s work, since even informants who do not build post-proofreading meetings into their practice mentioned that some writers make contact with them to clarify or to seek explanations for suggested modifications.

Other proofreaders do meet writers, including Gill, who describes how these meetings make it possible for her to give what are in effect one-to-one tutorials to address problem areas. Like Gill, Eve also holds post-proofreading meetings with writers, enabling both parties to clarify unclear passages, a practice likely to have more of a formative impact on the writer than a text which is returned as a track changes document, because the writer is obliged to make their intended meaning explicit before the text is rewritten:

when I would come to a place that I thought ‘I don’t know what you mean’, which was quite often, I would put my symbol for unclear and either leave it or say ‘Is this what you mean?’ And then when I would meet with them, we would go through it and at that point we could discuss ‘Did you mean this or did you mean that?’ and then I would write the phrase that expressed what they meant to say.

Some of the proofreaders who do not meet writers post-proofreading acknowledged that this may mean a formative opportunity is lost. As Ruth commented:

that would be probably ideal, to negotiate. If you were teaching you’d do that, I reckon, because you’d have the person in and chat through a few things with them.

And Karen adds:

With students, the whole point is improving their work and they probably need a bit of follow up otherwise it’s just putting a little plaster on the problem.

However, Karen adds that the proofreader is expected to improve the text rather than the writer, and that in any case the time issue would prevent post-proofreading meetings. Anne also has a policy of not meeting writers post-proofreading, again partly for reasons connected with time, but also with ethics: she feels her comments and corrections go as far as her role will allow.

Uncertainties and changing understandings of the proofreading role

We have made it clear elsewhere (Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay 2009, 2010) that it would be inaccurate to give the impression that all informants were clear in their own minds as to the precise nature and limits of their role. Interviews with those informants who only proofread sporadically were particularly marked by frequent
expressions of uncertainty, but Anne, one of the most experienced and regular proofreaders, also went into great detail about her areas of concern. These uncertainties were normally associated with ethical issues. We limit ourselves here to pointing out that a number of informants stated that the experience of being interviewed had an impact on their views of the role of proofreading, encouraging them to confront issues that they may not have previously considered.

For instance, in relation to the formative dimension of proofreading, Ruth spoke of how she had previously associated proofreading student writing with ‘making a text perfect’, but now feels that it should serve the function of ‘encouraging people to think through their own work better’:

if I was writing a novel, or writing research, then somebody would proofread it … ready for publication. Well, that is just a very serious thing and you’d have to pay them loads of money and they’d do it really perfectly, but proofreading essays in the university isn’t really that … it’s more about encouraging people to think through their own work better, I suppose … whereas before I was thinking, ‘Yes, every single mistake should be marked’, I don’t think that now, because the poor students are going to get [their writing] back and think, ‘Oh no! Nothing here is any good, because [the proofreader has] marked over every single sentence’, whereas to just go through it and get some of the more glaring errors is probably enough actually. So I have changed my view in that way.

Discussion

Our informants used a range of figurative descriptions which we have grouped under five metaphors – helper, cleaner, leveller, mediator and/or teacher – to describe the role of the proofreader. Similar roles are highlighted in the literature on proofreading for publication, on writing centres, and on commenting on and correcting non-native writing.

The role of helper overlaps with the role Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002) found that writing centre tutors fulfil, by acting as ‘cultural counsellors’ to writers who were afraid to approach their lecturers. Writers may view the tutor as a less threatening but knowledgeable figure who is able to provide insight into what the lecturer may expect. Writing centre researchers also recommend that writers should be referred back to lecturers and markers where tutors cannot second-guess writing task requirements (e.g. North 1984), a role akin to that of mediator. Proofreaders may also play the role of mediator and refer writers back to their lecturers/supervisors when they are unsure of the (in)appropriacy of specific disciplinary terminology (Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (2009). The techniques our proofreaders used to perform the cleaning role can be linked with advice in the second language writing correction literature (e.g. Ferris 2003a, b, 2004). And the levelling role has something in common with Burrough-Boenisch’s (2006) and Lillis and Curry’s (2006a, b) accounts of how proofreaders of manuscripts for publication can ensure that journal editors and reviewers are not distracted by non-natives writers’ language mistakes, resulting in what Shashok (2001) calls ‘a respectful reading’ by the appropriate gatekeepers at the level of content.

Perhaps most notably though, the metaphor of the proofreader as teacher connects with the formative role often ascribed to the writing centre or English for Academic Purposes tutor. However, the question of how far this help can extend is linked with ethical concerns, and we have seen that this is why the proofreaders in our study may prefer at times to comment rather than correct (‘ask your supervisor’), even when they
could eradicate the errors in question themselves. One finds a similar wariness about intervening too directly in the writing centre literature, for instance in North’s work. North (1984, 1994) argues that writing centres should not be places where writers can drop in to ‘clean up’ or ‘fix’ the errors in their texts. Rather, North (1984) declares that a writing centre exists ‘to produce better writers, not better writing’ (438). Although the student’s immediate concern will be the success or failure of the text they are currently working on, writing centres must prioritise the enhancement of the writer’s composing process, rather than simply cleaning up errors, and thus enhancing the product. Writers should also visit the centre over an extended period to maximise its formative potential. Proofreaders working on texts for publication, like Burrough-Boenisch (2006), Körner (1994), and Shashok (2001), also speak of their feedback having a formative role.

Nonetheless, some of our informants clearly saw any formative role the proofreader may play as secondary, since many writers reportedly view the proofreader simply as a cleaner, and are working to tight deadlines which discourage reflection and careful rewriting. While we can make connections between student proofreaders’ beliefs and practices and literature in all of the above areas, then, it remains the case that the kind of proofreader we are focused on here occupies a distinct role and position as a ‘shaper’ (Burrough-Boenisch 2003) of student writing.

Conclusion and issues for further research

While it is evident that proofreaders can play more than one role in their relationship with writers, acting for instance as both cleaner and teacher, and seeking to improve the writer as well as their writing, it is also evident that different informants place greater or lesser priority on these various roles. Given the lack of institutional guidance on appropriate proofreading roles in our institution, this is hardly surprising, and we believe there is the need for the university to attempt to formulate policy in this area. In the context of proofreading for publication, the Society for Editors and Proofreaders’ Code of Practice (2005) defines proofreading as ‘a process of identifying typographical, linguistic, coding or positional errors or omissions on a printed or electronic proof, and marking corrections’ (4). Judging by the range of practices we found among our informants in the rather different context of proofreading student writing, no such stable definition exists. In Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (2010), we argue that this definitional problem should be addressed by the development of guidelines to support all parties to the proofreading process within the university setting, and identify some key objectives. Amongst these must be to delineate the acceptable role(s) of the proofreader, to make explicit the relationship between proofreaders, English for Academic Purposes teachers and lecturers, and to clarify the help to writers that each party should provide. Policy decisions must also be taken on whether English for Academic Purposes units should be offering proofreading at all, or whether proofreading is more appropriately carried out at departmental level. Finally, we are mindful that our research focused on a self-selecting and conscientious group of informants, a very small sample of the range of people offering to ‘proofread’ on UK campuses. In this light, we feel consideration must also be given to the extent to which universities can or should seek to regulate who proofreads and how they go about this. Options such as the regulation of advertisement practices might usefully be explored; likewise, the development of training opportunities and the merits and demerits of establishing a register of proofreaders, and so on. At the root of all of these
questions is the need for debate and exchange, bringing a greater degree of openness and clarity to what has to date clearly been an under-researched aspect of academic life, characterised by assumption and ambiguity.

On the issue of future research, we acknowledge that we have only investigated understandings of the proofreader’s role from the perspective of proofreaders themselves: investigating lecturers’ and student writers’ views would provide a fuller picture of issues for consideration for universities who wish to decide on a proofreading policy. While we can do no more than speculate as to student writers’ views on an appropriate proofreader role, some of our informants have been in contact with writers who believed proofreading would make their texts ‘perfect’ and that interventions would guarantee high grades, while other writers were happy for proofreaders to intervene to an inappropriate degree or even take over the authorship of the text to ensure this occurred (Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay 2010). Although our proofreaders’ experience is that most writers are not of this view, the evidence of such a range of attitudes underscores the need for a consistent university proofreading policy and related guidelines, and for their wide dissemination to all parties involved in the act of writing, proofreading and assessing student texts.

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